

Key Belarus Opposition Figure Charged With Graft and Fraud

By [AFP](#)

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Viktor Babaryko was the head of Belgazprombank bank before entering politics. **Natalia Fedoseenko / TASS**

Belarus authorities said Tuesday that opposition politician Viktor Babaryko — who until his arrest had intended to run against President Alexander Lukashenko in the August election — was charged with corruption and money laundering.

For over three months Belarus has been gripped by historic protests against the re-election of strongman leader Lukashenko, 66, who secured a sixth term in power after jailing several of his political opponents.

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"The KGB investigations directorate has completed the preliminary investigation into the

criminal case against top executives of Belgazprombank," the Belarusian KGB, which retained its Soviet-era name, said in a statement on Tuesday.

Babaryko — who was head of Belgazprombank bank before entering politics — is accused of receiving bribes and "laundering funds obtained by criminal means," the statement added.

Several other senior executives of Belgazprombank — the Belarusian branch of a bank belonging to Russian energy giant Gazprom — are also being prosecuted.

According to the KGB, "all the defendants have admitted their guilt in the crimes of which they are accused, with the exception of Viktor Babaryko."

Babaryko, 57, was arrested last June, two months ahead of the presidential race.

He has since remained in police custody.

Belarus authorities accused Babaryko of being responsible for fraud and money laundering of an amount exceeding \$60 million.

The head of his presidential election campaign, Maria Kolesnikova, later joined the team of Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, the wife of another imprisoned opponent of Lukashenko, who took her husband's place in the polls and quickly gained popularity.

Tikhanovskaya was forced into exile in EU member Lithuania several days after the election, while Kolesnikova, who also became a major opposition figure, was arrested in September for "harming national security."

Lukashenko's opponents believe Tikhanovskaya was the true winner of the election and continue taking to the streets of the capital Minsk every weekend demanding the president's resignation.

Lukashenko, who has the firm backing of Moscow, has refused to step down and instead has suggested reforms to the constitution to placate the opposition.

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