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Lukashenko Rival in Court as Belarus Sees New Crackdown

By AFP

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Several senior executives of Belgazprombank are being prosecuted alongside Babaryko. **Tatyana Zenkovich / EPA / TASS**

A leading opposition figure went on trial Wednesday in Belarus, where authorities are pursuing a series of criminal cases against activists and journalists following months of anti-government protests last year.

Viktor Babaryko had planned to run against strongman leader Alexander Lukashenko but was arrested in June ahead of elections and charged with bribery and money laundering.

Lukashenko has ruled Belarus with an iron fist for two decades and claimed a landslide victory in polls in August, sparking huge protests that swept the country for months.

Babaryko was accused by KGB security services of receiving bribes and "laundering funds obtained by criminal means" when he was head of Belgazprombank, the Belarusian branch of

a bank belonging to Russian energy giant Gazprom.

"Darkness, malice and lies cannot last forever. The dawn will come and light up the vastness of our Belarus," 57-year-old Babaryko said through his lawyers on the eve of the trial.

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The hearing opened in the capital Minsk at a courthouse cordoned off by police and closed to independent journalists.

Babaryko appeared in court behind white bars in a cage for defendants. He was photographed joining his hands to form the heart symbol popular at protests last year.

The charges against him were seen as part of a broader authoritarian sweep to clear Lukashenko's path to a sixth term, and several other Belgazprombank senior executives are also being prosecuted.

Journalists face jail time

All defendants admitted their guilt except for Babaryko, the KGB said. He will not be permitted to appeal the ruling.

The trial comes a day after police raided the homes and offices of dozens of journalists, rights activists and trade union members.

The Council of Europe, an international rights body, and Amnesty International hit out at the searches, which investigators said were part of a probe into the financing of opposition protests.

In a separate trial Wednesday, prosecutors requested that two journalists be jailed for two years on charges of organizing protests.

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Katerina Bakhvalova, 27, and Daria Chultsova, 23, were detained in November while covering a rally that drew people angry at the killing of an anti-government protester.

The request for jail time follows a trend of journalists becoming entangled with authorities in the ex-Soviet country where police detained journalists 477 times last year.

Babaryko was among the several opposition figures who were arrested or fled the country ahead of the last year's election.

Lukashenko's main opponent in the elections was Svetlana Tikhanovskaya — the wife of another imprisoned opposition figure — who took her husband's place in the polls and quickly gained popularity.

Tikhanovskaya was forced into exile in European Union member Lithuania several days after

the election as large-scale protests against Lukashenko's rule engulfed the country of some 10 million.

Several Western leaders have refused to recognize the Belarus election results while the EU has imposed sanctions on Lukashenko and his allies.

Lukashenko weathered the mass protests and earlier this month rolled back on promises to dilute presidential powers and reform the constitution this year.

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