

Belarus Opposition Leader Tikhanovsky Sentenced to 18 Years in Prison

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Opposition activist and blogger Sergei Tikhanovsky addresses supporters during a rally in Minsk, May 24, 2020. **TATYANA ZENKOVICH / EPA / TASS**

A Belarusian court has sentenced Sergei Tikhanovsky, an opposition presidential candidate who was jailed ahead of last year's disputed election, to 18 years in a maximum-security prison, Belarusian state media [reported](#) Tuesday.

Tikhanovsky, 43, is a popular YouTube blogger who criticized strongman leader Alexander Lukashenko and helped galvanize last year's protests against his rule. Authorities accused him of using his blog to promote the violent overthrow of the Belarusian government.

Following his arrest in May 2020, his wife, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, ran for president in his stead. Belarus' opposition maintains that she is the rightful winner of the Aug. 9, 2020, election.

The Gomel regional court found Tikhanovsky guilty of organizing of mass riots, inciting social enmity, obstructing the Central Election Commission's work and organizing actions

that grossly violate public order, the Belta news agency reported.

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The court also handed down lengthy sentences to five co-defendants, including Mikola Statkevich, a veteran politician. Dmitry Popov, a Russian citizen who acted as social media manager for Tikhanovsky's YouTube channel Country for Life, was sentenced to 16 years in prison.

The verdicts can be appealed within 10 days.

Tikhanovsky's verdict comes after fellow Lukashenko challenger Viktor Babaryko was [sentenced](#) to 14 years in prison in July.

Lukashenko, who has ruled Belarus since 1994, claimed a sweeping victory in last year's elections, sparking historic street protests that were met with a brutal crackdown.

Tikhanovskaya fled to neighboring Lithuania in the aftermath of the election and has since been visiting Western capitals to rally support and call for stronger Western sanctions on Minsk.

She criticized her husband's imprisonment as an act of "revenge."

"The dictator publicly takes revenge on his strongest opponents," she [tweeted](#) in English following Tuesday's sentencing. "While hiding the political prisoners in closed trials, he hopes to continue repressions in silence. But the whole world watches. We won't stop."

This story is being updated.

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