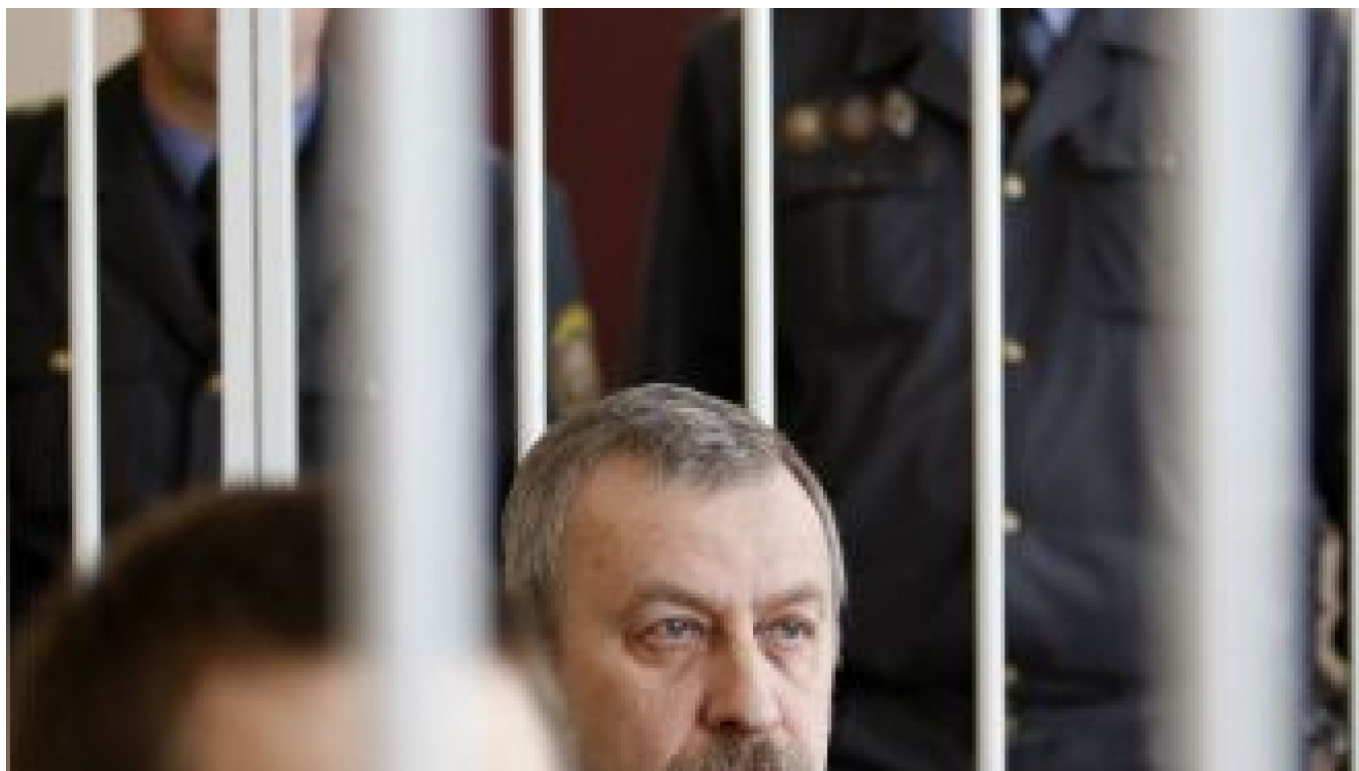


Lukashenko Opponent Goes on Trial

April 27, 2011



Sannikov sitting in a defendant's cage Wednesday in a Minsk court. **Vasily Fedosenko**

MINSK — One of President Alexander Lukashenko's main political opponents went on trial in Belarus on Wednesday on a charge linked to demonstrations last December against the leader's re-election.

Andrei Sannikov, a former deputy foreign minister and co-founder of the Charter 97 rights group, faces up to 15 years' jail if he is convicted of organizing mass disturbances.

Sannikov, 57, was one of seven presidential candidates arrested on Dec. 19 during a mass rally in Minsk against Lukashenko's re-election that day for a fourth term in power.

Several of those have been released, pending trial, but Sannikov and two other presidential contenders have been held in prison since their arrest.

Earlier Wednesday, a close aide of Sannikov, Dmitry Bondarenko, was jailed for two years for organizing actions that "violated public order," the human rights group Vesna 96 said. Bondarenko, who helped organize Sannikov's election campaign, was also arrested at the December rally.

The police crackdown on the Minsk demonstration, in which hundreds of opposition activists and dissidents were rounded up, was condemned by rights groups and Western governments.

The opposition said Lukashenko's re-election was fraudulent. Western monitors described it as "flawed."

The United States and the European Union have since blacklisted Lukashenko because of the crackdown, imposing sanctions including a travel ban on him and 150 of his closest associates in power.

Sannikov heard the charge read against him on Wednesday as he sat in a metal cage in the courtroom with four police officers.

The Charter 97 leader is the most senior of the anti-Lukashenko activists to go on trial on charges arising from the rally. Seven others, tried previously, were given jail sentences from two to four years.

Separately, Belarus authorities initiated a court action aimed at closing down the biggest opposition newspaper, Narodnaya Volya, and a smaller opposition weekly, Nasha Niva, the state news agency BelTA said.

Narodnaya Volya deputy editor Svetlana Kalinkina said the newspaper had recently received warnings over an article it had run criticizing state television, and over the publication of a statement by an unregistered opposition group.

"It is obvious that there is a general campaign in the country to shut mouths," she said.

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