

Belarus, Eyeing EU, to Free Prisoners

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Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko will free all political activists from jail by early October as part of a drive to mend ties with the European Union, according to a letter written by Bulgaria's foreign minister.

Lukashenko said Thursday that he was pardoning four people jailed for their involvement in protests in December against his rule.

Bulgarian Foreign Minister Nikolai Mladenov had earlier met Lukashenko in Minsk and outlined a series of proposals made by the president in a letter to EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton and foreign ministers of the 27-nation bloc.

According to a copy of the letter, Lukashenko agreed to release at least four prisoners by the end of last week and drop charges against another two. All remaining political activists would be released by the start of October.

Belarussian authorities detained more than 700 people after a huge rally in Minsk protesting Lukashenko's re-election, and about 50 are believed to be still in jail. The Free Belarus Now web site says they include three of the presidential candidates — Andrei Sannikov, Nikolai

Statkevich, and Dmitry Uss — who were given sentences of five to six years.

EU foreign ministers, meanwhile, discussed the situation in Belarus at a meeting in Sopot, Poland, on Saturday.

"In Belarus, we have of course taken notice of some of the developments and of some of the statements that have been made," Ashton said, according to comments carried by Radio Free Europe.

(Reuters, MT)

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