

Belarus Frees Jailed Activist

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MINSK — A prominent Belarussian opposition activist was released Sunday.

Dmitry Bondarenko's wife, Olga, said he called to tell her he had been set free. Bondarenko had helped run the election campaign of former opposition presidential candidate Andrei Sannikov, who was freed over the weekend.

Both men were arrested along with about 700 others in December 2010 after police broke up a massive protest rally hours after voting ended in a presidential election that saw incumbent strongman Alexander Lukashenko win a new term.

The demonstrators had been protesting alleged vote fraud.

Sannikov was sentenced to five years in prison, and Bondarenko received a two-year sentence on charges of staging mass riots.

Their release followed a series of new sanctions introduced by the European Union and the United States, which have strongly urged Lukashenko to end repression of the opposition and free political prisoners.

"Lukashenko is sending a clear signal to the West about his desire to improve ties," said Alexander Klaskovsky, an independent Minsk-based political analyst. "Minsk is shifting back to the past policy of bargaining and balancing between the West and the Kremlin."

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