

Belarussian Opposition Activist Gets 4 Years in Jail

February 17, 2011

The  **Moscow Times**

MINSK — Belarus, in a speedy one-day trial, on Thursday sentenced an opposition activist to four years in a top-security jail for his part in a rally against the re-election of President Alexander Lukashenko last December.

Vasily Parfenkov, 27, was the first to be tried of about 30 people being held after a police crackdown on the Dec. 19 protest in the ex-Soviet republic that has triggered Western sanctions against Lukashenko.

Parfenkov, while acknowledging he took part in the protest, denied involvement in an attack on a government building during the rally that authorities have used to substantiate claims of an attempted coup against Lukashenko, in power since 1994.

Parfenkov was accused of taking part in mass disorder relating to the huge protest on Minsk's Independence Square on the night of Dec. 19, and the prosecution had sought a sentence of six years.

But analysts said the four years handed down was still a heavy sentence and boded ill for four presidential candidates who may face a heavier charge of organizing mass unrest.

"If they are going to deal as harshly as this with a simple activist [like Parfenkov] then it has to be assumed that the next sentences of those who are accused of organizing unrest will be even harsher," said Ales Belyatski, head of the human rights Vesna (Spring) 96 web site.

"It is a bad signal above all for the former presidential candidates," he said. The harshness of the sentence could be seen as a signal of defiance by Lukashenko, other analysts said.

The United States and the European Union, who have called for protesters to be freed, have imposed restrictions on Lukashenko including a travel ban on him and 150 officials.

Three out of the nine candidates who ran against Lukashenko are still being held, including Andrei Sannikov of the "For a European Belarus" movement.

A fourth, Vladimir Neklyayev, a 64-year-old poet and head of the "Tell the Truth" movement for whom Parfenkov worked, is under house arrest, but may go on trial.

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