

Belarus Softens Charges Against Opposition Leaders

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MINSK — Belarus has softened charges against two former presidential candidates arrested during protests against President Alexander Lukashenko's re-election last December, the Interior Ministry said Wednesday.

Lukashenko secured a fourth term in office in the election dismissed by the opposition and Western observers as fraudulent. Police rounded up hundreds of protesters who took to Minsk's streets over the vote.

Vladimir Neklyayev, a 64-year-old poet, and Vitaly Rymashevsky, leader of the opposition Christian Democratic Party, were among five presidential candidates arrested during the protests.

Both have faced prison terms of up to 15 years on charges of organizing mass unrest.

But the Interior Ministry said the two now faced only lesser charges of organizing activities that disturbed public order, which carry a prison term of up to three years.

The December crackdown triggered Western sanctions against Lukashenko. This, according to analysts, has diminished the possibility of Belarus receiving any financial support from the International Monetary Fund at the time when it is running out of foreign currency reserves.

Dozens of other opposition activists and two other former presidential candidates are also awaiting trial in Belarus.

One Lukashenko challenger, Alex Mikhalevich, fled the country this month after accusing the authorities of torturing him in detention and has since been granted asylum in the Czech Republic.

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