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Belarus: Further convictions of opposition activists

On 20 May, one of the Minsk courts concluded the process of sentencing of another group of Belarusian opposition activists, who had been arrested after a post-election opposition demonstration last 19 December in the centre of Minsk.. Among those convicted were two of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's opponents in the December presidential elections, Uladzimir Niaklajeu and Vitaly Rymasheuski. The sentences were much milder in comparison to that handed down to another candidate, Andrei Sannikau. In the opinion of the Belarusian government, varying the severity of the convictions may make it easier to return to dialogue with the EU.

The opposition activists were convicted and sentenced to imprisonment from one to two years suspended. The legal basis for the sentence was Article 342 of the Penal Code, on the organisation of activities which seriously violate public order, which is punishable by imprisonment for up to three years. The very fact of the convictions against more of Lukashenka's rivals for the presidency is a demonstration by the regime of its consistency in punishing its internal opponents, despite its increasingly difficult economic situation and its demand for external credit support. On the other hand, the government has made a clear distinction in its prosecutions against the individual leaders and activists; on 14 May the opposition candidate Andrei Sannikau was sentenced to five years in prison. The regime has avoided handing down harsh sentences against all the opposition activists, so it will be able to return to dialogue with the EU over the next few months. Irrespective of the regime's activities, however, the crisis in relations between the EU and Belarus continues. On 23 May, the EU's Council decided to add a further thirteen representatives of the regime to the list of persons subject to visa sanctions. <Kam>