

Belarusian government moderates charges against opposition activists

Some of the Belarusian opposition activists who were arrested after the post-election demonstration last 19 December have had the charges against them moderated, which significantly reduces the sentences they may face. The decision by the Belarusian public prosecutor's office may be the beginning of Minsk's attempts to improve relations with the EU. It seems that the Belarusian regime is trying to exploit the case of the accused opposition activists to obtain financial support from the West in exchange for their release.

The change in the charges was announced between 30 March and 4 April, and concerns ten activists (from a total of over 40 currently on trial) from various groupings within the Belarusian opposition. Most notably, this move affects Uladzimir Niaklayeu, who was Alyaksandr Lukashenka's main opponent in the recent presidential elections, and is the leader of the Speak The Truth social movement. Previously, these people had been charged under Article 293 of the Criminal Code for organising and participating in mass social disturbances, which is punishable by up to 15 years in prison. The legal qualification of the indictment have been changed to serious disturbance of public order under Article 342 of the Criminal Code, which means that they now face imprisonment for up to three years. Currently this relaxation of the charges does not apply to all the imprisoned opposition activists, and does not meet the expectations of the EU, which is working for the unconditional release of all of the regime's opponents. However, this move may be the beginning of a change in tactics by Minsk, which is trying to return to a dialogue with the West in order to obtain financial credits (for example, from the International Monetary Fund) which it needs to stabilise the endangered state budget. <Kam>