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Belarus: first court sentence connected to the opposition's post-election demonstrations

On 17 February in a court in Minsk, the first sentence concerning the clashes during the opposition's post-election demonstrations last 19 December was handed down. A member of Uladzimir Niaklajeu's electoral staff, Vasil Parfienkou, was sentenced to 4 years in a hard-labour colony. The sentence indicates that the Belarusian regime, despite criticism and sanctions from the West, does not intend to alter its policy of repression against its most active opponents and increasing supervision of the public.

Vasil Parfienkou was sentenced on the basis of Article 293 of the Criminal Code, concerning mass public disturbance. This is the start of a series of trials, since prosecutions under this article have been laid against 42 persons who the government says were responsible for acts of vandalism in the aftermath of the opposition's demonstrations in the centre of Minsk last 19 December. According to Belarusian human rights activists, there was no justification for such a harsh sentence, and similar measures should be expected against a substantial portion of the remaining defendants, including several of the candidates who stood against Alyaksandr Lukashenka in the presidential election. As a result, the problem of political prisoners will return to Belarus. Thus the regime has sent a clear signal that any manifestation of opposition will be silenced, regardless of the possible international consequences. Yet it cannot be ruled out that in the short term the Belarusian government will try to exploit the problem of its political prisoners in its relations with the EU, the USA, and Russia (the accused include two citizens of the Russian Federation). <Kam>