

Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsf.org/belarus-two-journalists-released-shortly-31-01-2011,39432.html>

Europe & ex-USSR - Belarus

Repression

Two journalists released shortly before EU imposes sanctions

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The European Union's foreign ministers today banned Ukrainian President Alexander Lukashenko and 157 other Belarusian officials from visiting the EU and extended an existing asset freeze in response to the detention of 37 opposition figures and government critics since a disputed presidential election on 19 December.

The Belarusian authorities had been expecting the sanctions and, in an apparent attempt to head them off, released four of the 37 detainees, including **Natalia Radzina** of *Charter 97* and **Irina Khalip** of *Novaya Gazeta*, at the end of last week. The newly freed journalists are nonetheless still facing a possible 15-year jail sentence of a charge of "participating in riots."



"While welcoming these releases, we are not blind to the fact that the Belarusian authorities are playing for time and are trying to limit the European Union's sanctions," Reporters Without Borders said. "The leading opposition figures freed in the past few days should never have been detained. We call for the release of all of the 37 people facing possible 15-year jail sentences on charges of participating or organizing riots and we call for the withdrawal of these charges."

The press freedom organization added: "The European Union has a crucial role to play and by stripping President Lukashenko and other Belarusian officials of their visas, it has taken a first step. We hope it will not be the last one, and that the targeted leaders will understand the message they are being given. Belarus is an important EU partner and close neighbour. Tolerating such a level of repression would have serious consequences for all of Europe."

Radzina was released on 28 January from a Minsk detention centre run by the Committee for State Security (KGB) but her movements are strictly limited. She has been forced to return to the city where she was born in the west of the country and may not leave it without permission from the police.

Following her release, she said she was shocked both by the manner of her arrest at the *Charter 97* office in the early hours of 20 December and the nature of the charges brought against her. Like the other detainees, she had to give a written undertaking not to reveal any details of the investigation of which she is a target.

Radzina said she was determined to go back to work as soon as possible and thanked all the journalists, politicians and members of the public who expressed their support for her and thereby helped to get her release. She added that she was injured when the police dispersed the 19 December demonstrations and then contracted bronchitis while detained.

The Minsk correspondent of the Moscow-based newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, Khalip was released on the evening of 29 January but was placed under house

arrest and was not allowed to have any contact with the media. She is also the wife of Andrei Sannikua, one of the opposition presidential candidates.



Sergei Vozniak, the editor of the newspaper *Tovarich* and a member of presidential candidate Uladzimir Niakliaieu's campaign staff was also released on 29 January, as was Niakliaieu himself. Vozniak said he and five other detainees spent the first two weeks in a cell meant for two people. The entire detention centre was "overpopulated," he said.



The 37 leading opposition figures and government critics held since the immediate aftermath of the 19 December election included five presidential candidates. Thirty-three of the 37 seven are still held.

More than 600 people were arrested when the security forces used violence to disperse anti-government demonstrations in Minsk on the evening of 19 December, following the announcement that President Lukashenko, who has ruled since 1994, had been reelected with about 80 per cent of the vote. International observers said the election were not democratic.

The EU already imposed sanctions on Belarus' leaders after a 2006 election that was regarded a fraudulent.
