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Belarus crackdown strains ties with both EU and Russia

Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko's crackdown on the opposition has prompted the EU to consider sanctions. But some members say that could backfire.



A Belarussian detainee arrested during protests gestures from a prison cell at a detention center in Minsk on Dec. 29, 2010. Belarus jailed more than 600 since riot police broke up a rally of about 30,000 people who were attempting to protest alleged fraud in the Dec. 19 presidential elections. (Vasily Fedosenko/Reuters)

By Fred Weir, Correspondent / January 12, 2011 at 11:50 am EST

Moscow

Belarussian strongman President Alexander Lukashenko appears to be accelerating the crackdown on Belarus' beleaguered prodemocracy opposition. There have been more than 600 arrests since riot police broke up a rally of about 30,000 people who were attempting to protest alleged fraud in the Dec. 19 presidential elections that brought Mr. Lukashenko back to power for an unprecedented fourth five-year term.

Russia this week cut off oil supplies to Belarus in a "commercial dispute" – a sure sign of Moscow's displeasure with its wayward former ally – while the European Union is mulling renewed sanctions that would ban travel to Europe for top Belarussian officials.

Authorities in Minsk claim that opposition leaders attempted to stage a coup d'etat on election night, when a small group of demonstrators tried to storm the central election headquarters on Minsk's central square and were beaten back by riot

police. Thirty-one people, including five presidential candidates, have been charged with "incitement to riot," and could face 15 years in prison if convicted.

"Things are very tense, and there is no sign of this campaign against civil society winding down anytime soon," says Yaroslav Romanchuk, who was the presidential candidate for the liberal United Civil Party in last month's election. "It's a general assault on all democratic forces. Nothing like this has ever happened in Belarus before."

Mr. Romanchuk, who was reached by phone in Minsk Wednesday, says his own party leader, Anatoly Lebedchuk, is among those who've been held in prison for the past 3 weeks and face potentially lengthy sentences. "All of our efforts now are aimed at getting him out of jail," he says. "These charges are totally trumped up."

The most poignant example of the current crackdown is 3-year-old Danil Sannikov, whose imprisoned parents are former presidential candidate Andrei Sannikov and independent journalist Irina Khalip. Danil's grandmother, Lyutsina Khalip, has been informed by authorities that she's being investigated to see if she's "competent" to care for the boy. If they decide she is not, he may become a ward of the state.

Reached by telephone in Minsk on Wednesday, Ms. Khalip was near tears. "The police have just searched my flat – for the second time," she said. "There is constant pressure on me, and constant tension. I'm trying to get together documents to establish guardianship over my grandson, but it's very hard. Danil keeps asking where his parents are. What do I tell him?"

Where is the media?

Andrei Bastinets, deputy chair of Belarus' non-governmental Association of Journalists, says that independent media is on the verge of being wiped out.

"We've had 25 journalists arrested, 20 of them beaten, and the majority of them are members of our association," he said by phone. "This is a very serious trial for us. Official media is waging an unrelenting campaign, with constant programming aimed at discrediting all democratic opposition. Almost every day there are fresh searches of media offices, journalists are summoned for interrogation, and many remain in prison. They seize computers, notebooks, everything. How can people go on working?"

Lukashenko, a former collective farm chairman, was honestly elected in 1994, but quickly moved to hollow out the post-Soviet state's fledgling democratic institutions and impose his personal dominance over the media and political process. He's since ruled by a combination of tough police-state controls and economic patronage – heavily subsidized, until recently, by Russia. Periodic elections have been carefully stage-managed to prevent opposition candidates from having any realistic chance, and post-election protests have always been handily crushed by police.

Region disenchanted with Lukashenko

But over the past year Lukashenko's main sponsor, Russia, has grown increasingly disenchanted with Lukashenko's efforts to court the EU at Russia's expense, and his refusal to sell Belarussian energy infrastructure to Russian companies (Belarus is a major transit point for Russian oil and gas exports to Europe). The rift has led to more than one harsh exchange of rhetoric between Moscow and Minsk, and on Tuesday Russian oil producers halted deliveries to Belarussian refineries amid what was officially described as "difficult" price negotiations.

"There is no such thing as a pure commercial dispute between Belarus and Russia," says Mr. Romanchuk, who is an economist. "The Kremlin now has much more leverage over Lukashenko, and we are going to see them pushing Belarus much harder than ever."

Last year Belarus joined a Russia-Belarus-Kazakhstan customs union, and pressure is expected to grow on Lukashenko to join the "Common Economic Space" project, an idea championed by Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin to restore some Soviet-era economic synergies among the former republics of the USSR.

Lukashenko's efforts to escape Russian influence by courting the EU may also be challenged because of the current crackdown. At a meeting Wednesday, the European parliament's foreign affairs committee heard appeals from Belarussian dissidents to drop promises of aid to Belarus and punish Lukashenko's regime for the mass repressions.

Catherine Ashton, the EU's top envoy for foreign and security policy, came out of that meeting warning that Belarussian authorities have "days and even hours to release all those arrested and to try to mend relations with the EU... Otherwise, the most severe sanctions will be imposed."

But some EU members, including Lithuania and Italy, are reportedly opposed to fresh sanctions against Lukashenko out of fear that it will leave Belarussian civil society entirely at his mercy and possibly drive him back into the Kremlin's arms.

"Lukashenko is playing a very risky, but calculated game," says Fyodor Lukyanov, editor of Russia in Global Affairs, a leading Moscow foreign policy journal. "He has apparently decided to show everyone that he's completely in charge, and that there will be no dealing with Belarus without working through him. He's gambling that the Europeans will be less concerned with human rights than with their desire to keep Belarus out of total Russian control..."

"The main political asset of Lukashenko has always been his ability to play East against West, and vice versa. This may work for him again, perhaps better than most people think at the moment. For their part, Russian leaders are very irritated with Lukashenko right now. But their need to keep Belarus in Russia's orbit will probably trump that, though there will be no niceness in the relationship," Mr. Lukyanov says.

"Lukashenko knows what he's doing. (This crackdown) is the calculated use of shock tactics to restore interest in Moscow and Brussels, and make them come to him for a deal."

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