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Belarus Signals It Could Seize Opponent's Son

By MICHAEL SCHWIRTZ

MINSK, Belarus — Ever since riot police officers crushed a large protest against apparent fraud in presidential elections here last month, the security services — still called the K.G.B. in this authoritarian former Soviet republic — have been rounding up people across the country for even the most tangential affiliation with the opposition.

Now, it seems, they have gone a step further.

The government warned recently that it might seize custody of the 3-year-old son of an opposition presidential candidate who was jailed along with his wife, a journalist. The authorities said that they were investigating the status of the child, who is now living with his grandmother, and that they expected to make a decision by the end of the month.

In 16 years as ruler of Belarus, President Aleksandr G. Lukashenko has often been called Europe's last dictator. But the plight of the child, Danil Sannikov, may represent a new tactic in the government's persecution of the opposition, one that harks back to the Stalin era, when the children of so-called enemies of the people were sent to orphanages after their parents went to the gulag.

"Even in my worst nightmares I could not have conceived that this could happen," said the child's grandmother, Lyutsina Khalip.

Thousands of protesters had filled a large square in central Minsk on the night of Dec. 19, incensed over Mr. Lukashenko's claim of a sweeping victory in elections that independent observers deemed a farce. The police violently broke up the rally, which had been largely peaceful, arresting more than 600 people.

Within 24 hours, seven of the nine opposition candidates for president had been arrested.

Danil's parents, Andrei Sannikov, a leading opposition presidential candidate, and Irina Khalip, a respected investigative journalist, were among those arrested, yanked from their car while Ms. Khalip was giving a telephone interview to a Moscow radio station. Mr. Sannikov was severely beaten and, his lawyer said, his legs were broken.

They are among about two dozen people facing up to 15 years in prison on charges of organizing and participating in the protest. Many are being held at the K.G.B. detention center in Minsk, where they have been denied access to lawyers and contact with family.

Lyutsina Khalip, the grandmother, said she had not heard from her daughter since the day after her arrest, when she received a letter instructing her to take care of Danil.

"She wanted me to tell Danil she really loved him," Ms. Khalip said, fighting back tears.

She said her daughter had received threats about the boy even before the elections. One e-mail from an unknown sender read: "Don't think about yourself, think about your son."

Ms. Khalip said she first had an inkling that the authorities were turning their attention to Danil shortly after his parents were arrested. She said she was at the K.G.B. detention center trying to deliver a parcel of food and clothes to them when she received an urgent phone call that made her rush to her grandson's kindergarten.

There, she was confronted by two women from the government's child welfare service. She said the women were friendly, though they delivered an implicit warning:

"If you don't have the financial means or the physical means, don't worry," she said they told her. "The child won't remain alone."

For Ms. Khalip, whose daughter has frequently run afoul of Belarus's security services over the years, the message was clear.

"This is an effort to put pressure on Irina," she said. "They are capable of squeezing her, and this of course is the most sensitive place."

A representative of the child welfare service could not be reached for comment. Antonina Drugakova, the government social worker overseeing Danil's case, told the Interfax news agency that the K.G.B. notified her about the boy shortly after his parents' arrest.

"We are required to respond if a child is left without the care of his parents," Ms. Drugakova said. She said she hoped Danil would be able to remain in the custody of his grandmother,

but said the government had a responsibility to determine whether she was fit to care for him.

"God forbid that all is not well with the health of the grandmother," she said.

Mr. Sannikov's lawyer, Pavel Sapelko, said that the K.G.B. notified child welfare services on Dec. 23, six days before his client and Ms. Khalip were officially charged with a crime. He questioned whether it was even legally necessary for Danil's grandmother to assume legal custody.

"The law is there to make sure that a child is not left alone at home or left at kindergarten with no one to pick him up," Mr. Sapelko said. "If there is no evidence that the child has been abandoned, then there is no reason to dramatize this."

The families of other opposition candidates have also been subject to intimidation. The 22-year-old son of Grigory Kostusyov, one of the candidates arrested, was sentenced to 15 days in jail for trying to hold a solidarity protest a day after the elections. He was released, but was summoned by the K.G.B. again last week for further questioning.

"The meeting lasted for about two-and-a-half hours, but thank God he was let go," said Mr. Kostusyov, who is one of three former candidates to have been freed on the condition that they not leave Belarus. Four others remain in jail.

"There has been pressure on my family for my entire political career," Mr. Kostusyov said.

In the weeks since the protest, the K.G.B. has fanned out across the country, interrogating anyone with a history of dissent and jailing those suspected of participating in the protest last month, human rights groups say. The police have been raiding the few independent news outlets and human rights groups that still operate, confiscating computers and documents. Many opposition leaders still at large have fled the country or gone into hiding.

Anastasia Loika, who works for the human rights group Vyasna, said there had been lines of people outside the K.G.B. building in Minsk, all of whom had been summoned to be interrogated.

"It's like a conveyer belt," said Ms. Loika, who was herself questioned for nearly five hours. "Every day there are searches across the country, and every day people are interrogated."

Western leaders have roundly condemned the government's actions, and the European

Union signaled last week that it was ready to impose a travel ban on Mr. Lukashenko.

On Saturday, Danil sat playing with a train set in his family's living room, stuffed animals and action figures piled around him. Since the arrests of his parents, a stream of visitors has brought toys, candy and well wishes to the Sannikov home.

Ms. Khalip said the boy did not yet know that his parents had been arrested. She told him they had gone on a business trip, but he seems to sense that something is wrong.

"If mama left on a long trip, why didn't she bring me with her?" Ms. Khalip, 74, said Danil asked her recently. "He cries when I give him a bath because he says, 'Papa doesn't wash my hair like that.'"

Over the past two weeks, Ms. Khalip has completed all of the medical and psychological tests required of her to keep Danil. Even Danil, she said, had to be tested for H.I.V. and syphilis. She said the welfare service should make a decision by the end of the month.