

EU Warns Belarus on Return of Sanctions

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BRUSSELS — The European Union warned Belarus on Wednesday that it faced a return of sanctions after its crackdown on protests, while the Minsk government said it hoped that the response would not take ties to a point of no return.

EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton expressed solidarity with opponents of President Alexander Lukashenko who were detained after a disputed Dec. 19 election provoked huge street protests, and she called for their immediate release.

In a statement after meeting Belarussian Foreign Minister Sergei Martynov, Ashton said the EU was looking into "appropriate measures" in response to the government crackdown and aimed to reach a decision by the end of the month.

The 27-member bloc imposed sanctions on Belarus after a disputed ballot in 2006 but suspended them in 2008 to encourage democratic reforms in the country.

EU states have been debating reinstating a visa ban on Lukashenko and other officials. A source who attended a meeting between Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and German Chancellor Angela Merkel on Wednesday said the Italian leader had said he would no longer

oppose this.

Martynov told reporters it was premature to say how Belarus might respond, but stressed Minsk's efforts to maintain balanced ties between its EU neighbors and Russia, and added: "We would hope that in taking their decision the EU would think of not making a decision of no return ... in the relationship between Belarus and the European Union."

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