

Polish Minister Labels Belarus 'Europe's Cuba'

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WARSAW — Belarus is "Europe's Cuba" and its people are yearning for freedom just like the tens of thousands who have taken to the streets in Tunis and Cairo, Poland's foreign minister said Thursday.

Radek Sikorski warned that the same sudden leadership change that hit Tunisia — whose dictator was ousted in January after 23 years in power — could happen in Belarus.

Poland is taking the lead in organizing the European Union to support democratic change in Belarus, a country of 10 million that held widely disputed elections in December that kept strongman President Alexander Lukashenko in power.

Sikorski gave the interview a day after he hosted a donor conference that pledged \$120 million from 40 countries to support democratic change in Belarus.

Poland's leading role has put it in a delicate position with Russia, which so far has not overtly withdrawn its support from Lukashenko's regime.

"It's true that it's an intractable problem," Sikorski said of Lukashenko's hard-handed rule, which has squelched most opposition in the country over the past 16 years.

"All kinds of things have been tried and yet the problem persists. But I think Tunisia and Egypt show how explosive an apparent state of stability can be," he said.

The topic is important to Europe, too, he said.

"This is a moment when Europe has really noticed the aspirations of the Belarussian people to be a European nation," he said, praising the nations at Wednesday's conference, which included the United States, Norway, Switzerland and other European Union nations.

Sikorski was more rueful when it came to Russia, the country that Belarus relies on for cheap energy subsidies. He said he had hoped Russia would align itself with the independent election observers who considered the last presidential vote a sham.

"Unfortunately, that did not come to pass," he said. Instead, Russia declared the results "an internal matter."

But despite that official Russian stance, Sikorski said, "I have not yet met a Russian leader who believes in the declared result."

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