

# EU Dangles Aid Offer, But Belarus Snubs Talks

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WARSAW — European Union leaders told Belarus on Friday that it could count on their financial help in fighting its economic crisis if it freed political prisoners and held free elections, but Minsk snubbed talks with them, complaining of discrimination.

Still, Belarus unexpectedly released Dmitry Uss, one of three former presidential candidates serving prison sentences arising from election unrest in December, his wife, Yevgenia, said Saturday.

The EU and the United States have imposed economic sanctions on Belarus and travel bans on its top officials following President Alexander Lukashenko's crackdown on opposition protests against his re-election last December.

Belarus topped the agenda of a two-day summit in Warsaw designed to foster closer ties between the 27-nation EU and six former Soviet republics — Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia.

"We have a clear message for Belarus. There are chances for significant help to modernize Belarus, but this can only be offered to a democratic state," Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk told a news conference. "Let's take into account the financial and economic situation of Belarus today. ... It seems that international aid will be indispensable."

Lukashenko has to find \$3 billion by the end of the year to prop up his heavily indebted economy, already battered by devaluations of the national currency and big rises in prices of staples such as meat, milk and bread.

Poland, current holder of the EU's rotating presidency, has championed the Eastern Partnership program, which offers the six states up to 1.9 billion euros (\$2.6 billion) from 2010 to 2013 to fight corruption, build up infrastructure and start other projects.

But nobody from Belarus was at Friday's summit to hear the offer after Minsk's representative, its ambassador to Warsaw, walked out.

In a statement, the Belarussian Foreign Ministry said: "They [Poland] refused to send an invitation to the Belarussian head of state. Following this, the delegation head named by Belarus was restricted in participation ... in the summit. Under these circumstances participation has become impossible: Partnership cannot be based on discrimination."

The ministry gave no further details, but Polish sources said Belarus was unhappy that its ambassador was not invited to join a dinner on Thursday evening attended by the heads of state and government on grounds of rank.

Lukashenko, speaking to reporters 70 kilometers from Minsk, expressed indignation at the way Belarus had been treated in Warsaw. "They invited everybody at one level, and us at another. ... We sent an ambassador. They said 'No. That's not the right level.' They tried to humiliate him again, so we then refused to take part," he said.

He said Belarus had yet to feel the benefit of the Eastern Partnership with the EU. "We've paid too much attention to European meetings. If they want to throw stones in our vegetable patch, it's only to distract their own people from their own problems," he said.

Belarussian authorities made no comment Saturday about the decision to release Uss, a 41-year-old lawyer and businessman who was sentenced in May to 5 1/2 years in jail for organizing mass disturbances. Two other opposition candidates, Andrei Sannikov, who is a former deputy foreign minister, and Nikolai Statkevich are still in jail on similar charges.

Tusk, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the head of the European Council, Herman van Rompuy, held separate talks in Warsaw on Thursday with representatives of Belarus' embattled political opposition.

"It has to be said that the [Belarussian] regime's treatment of the opposition is entirely unacceptable. The opposition is suffering, and we are considering whether we can support them," Merkel told reporters before Friday's summit.

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