

Belarus Slams EU in Diplomatic Fight

February 29, 2012



EU Envoy to Belarus Maira Moira in tears Tuesday after being ordered out. **Vasily Fedosenko**

MINSK, Belarus — Belarus on Wednesday strongly criticized the EU's coordinated move to recall all of its ambassadors from the increasingly isolated nation, calling it a "path into deadlock."

The EU has opted for an "escalation of tensions," the Foreign Ministry said in a statement, warning the bloc that what it called scare tactics won't work.

The EU announced the withdrawal late Tuesday, hours after Belarus asked the head of the EU's delegation in Minsk, Maira Mora, and the Polish Ambassador Leszek Szarepka to leave and said it was withdrawing its own from Brussels and Warsaw. The tit for tat followed EU sanctions passed Monday on Belarus over repression of the political opposition.

The moves came after the EU Council voted to add 21 names to a list of some 200 Belarusian officials prevented from traveling to EU countries because of human rights violations. The officials also face an asset freeze.

There are 14 ambassadors from EU nations in Belarus, plus a single ambassador representing

the bloc as a whole.

Authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko has led Belarus since 1994, retaining Soviet-style controls over the economy and cracking down on opposition and independent media.

The widening rift will push Lukashenko even closer to his main ally and sponsor Russia, even though the Belarussian leader has accused Moscow of angling to grab his country's assets.

British Foreign Secretary William Hague maintained a tough stance on Wednesday.

"Britain, together with its EU partners, has consistently made clear to Belarus that the EU would continue to impose further sanctions as long as political prisoners remained in place and the repression of civil society continued," Hague said in a statement.

The president of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz, decried Belarus' move on Tuesday, saying, "I consider it a hostile act."

"It is intolerable for us as Europeans to see human rights and citizens' rights in Belarus thus violated. This is the last dictatorship in Europe," German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle said.

Repression of the opposition in Belarus has intensified after the December 2010 presidential election, in which Lukashenko won another term. The fraud-tainted vote was criticized by international observers and sparked massive anti-government protests that were brutally dispersed by police, who arrested about 700 people. Some are still in jail, including two presidential candidates.

Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who is all but certain to reclaim the presidency in his country's presidential election Sunday, was quick to voice support for Belarus, calling the EU sanctions deplorable.

Lukashenko has led Belarus since 1994, retaining Soviet-style controls over the economy and cracking down on opposition and independent media. Despite support from Russia, Lukashenko has accused Moscow of striving to erode Belarus' sovereignty.

The authoritarian president is the focus of increasing dissent at home amid an economic crisis that has gripped the country for most of the past year, in which the ruble's value has fallen by more than a third. As the crisis deepened, Belarus sold full control of the country's natural gas pipeline network to Russia's state gas monopoly.

In the run-up to the 2010 election, the 27-member EU had raised hopes of an easing of repression by offering Belarus substantial economic aid if it held a free and fair election, but the vote was widely viewed as rife with fraud.

In Washington, State Department spokesman Mark Toner said in a statement Tuesday that the United States "stands with our partners and joins them in calling on Belarus to end its repression of civil society and the democratic opposition."

Belarus expelled the U.S. ambassador in 2008 — the embassy is now led by an interim charge d'affaires.

✉(*AP, MT*)

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