

Sweden Says Belarus Expelled Ambassador

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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STOCKHOLM — Sweden says Belarus expelled its ambassador for “being too supportive of human rights.” Belarus counters that it merely chose not to extend the envoy’s accreditation, calling his activities destructive.

Ambassador Stefan Eriksson was in Sweden on vacation Friday when the decision was announced. The reasons given included that the diplomat had met with opposition activists in Minsk and that Sweden had provided a university there with books about human rights, Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt said.

President Alexander Lukashenko’s regime has “expelled the Swedish ambassador to Belarus for being too supportive of human rights,” Bildt said. He called it “a serious violation against the norms for relations between states.”

Bildt said that Sweden, in turn, won’t allow the incoming Belarussian ambassador in and that

two Belarussian diplomats also have been asked to leave the Nordic country, their residency permits having been revoked.

The Swedish minister called Belarus “an erratic and increasingly unreliable dictatorship that is afraid of its own future.”

Belarus disputed Sweden’s characterization of what happened.

“The Belarussian side did not expel the Swedish ambassador. The decision was made not to extend his accreditation,” said Andrei Savinykh, a spokesman for the Foreign Ministry in Minsk.

“Eriksson worked in Minsk for about seven years. That’s a long time. During that time, all of his activities were aimed not at the strengthening of Belarussian–Swedish relations but at their destruction,” he said.

The expulsion comes weeks after a pair of Swedish activists were reported to have used a light plane to drop hundreds of teddy bears into Belarussian territory with messages urging Lukashenko to show greater respect for human rights.

The 800 toy bears were dropped near the town of Ivenets from a light aircraft chartered by a Swedish public relations firm that crossed into Belarussian air space from Lithuania on July 4, the day after Belarus marked independence day.

Lukashenko fired two generals following the incident. Bildt, however, said there was no word that the teddy bears were linked to the expulsion.

“That has not been mentioned in this context whatsoever,” he said, but he added that “it might have had an impact on the general atmosphere.”

Lukashenko told his new border guards chief on Thursday to use weapons to stop any more unlawful air intrusions by foreigners.

On Friday, EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton issued a statement saying she had received the news of the Swedish ambassador’s removal “with great concern” and added that the Political and Security Committee in Brussels would consider “appropriate EU measures.” She did not say what those might be.

Lukashenko has ruled Belarus, a nation of 10 million, since 1994, repressing opposition groups and independent news media while preserving a quasi–Soviet economy, with about 80 percent of industry in state hands. He has earned the nickname in the West of “Europe’s last dictator.”

✉(AP, Reuters)

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