

Poland Says EU's Path to Closer Ties With Russia Is Via Ukraine

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WARSAW — A strengthening of ties between the European Union and former Soviet republics such as Ukraine could also help the 27-nation bloc clinch deals on closer relations with Russia, Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski said Thursday.

Warsaw is hosting a meeting of EU leaders with those of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine on Thursday and Friday under the Eastern Partnership accord. The pact offers the post-Soviet states as much as 1.9 billion euros (\$2.6 billion) from 2010 to 2013 to help fight corruption, build up infrastructure and for other projects.

Poland, which holds the EU's rotating six-month presidency, hopes that the bloc will complete negotiations on free trade and association agreements with Ukraine by the end of the year when Warsaw hands the baton over to Denmark.

"I would want an agreement on partnership and cooperation with Russia," Sikorski told a panel.

"I hope that once Russia sees how Ukraine flourishes as a result of opening to the world's largest market, then Russia itself will change its mind and also apply to become economically integrated with us."

Sikorski also expressed disappointment that Belarussian Foreign Minister Sergei Martynov — who was invited despite the authoritarianism of President Alexander Lukashenko's regime — refused to join the summit.

"It's another step in Belarus' self-isolation," Sikorski said.

He criticized Lukashenko for falsifying elections last year and said the EU would withhold any financial help until Lukashenko shows steps toward democratic reform.

Lukashenko "has an interesting idea for keeping power: taking democratic standards from the East and money from the West. This we cannot accept," Sikorski said.

(Reuters, AP)

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