

Poland Briefly Detains Belarussian Dissident

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WARSAW — Poland briefly detained and then freed a Belarussian dissident, avoiding a repeat of an embarrassing incident earlier this year when Polish prosecutors unwittingly contributed to the detention of another activist.

Polish prosecutors ordered the detention of Ales Mihalevich at a Warsaw airport on the basis of an Interpol warrant for his arrest lodged by Belarussian authorities, but the foreign ministry intervened to secure his release.

Minsk accuses Mihalevich, a former presidential candidate, of fomenting mass disturbances after last December's disputed election in which President Alexander Lukashenko won another term in power.

"I have received information that the prosecutor's office decided to free Mr. Mihalevich," Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski told reporters Monday, adding that one of his deputies had intervened on the Belarussian's behalf.

Ironically, Sikorski made his remarks while handing an award to the wife of leading human rights activist Ales Belyatsky, whose arrest and subsequent imprisonment on tax evasion charges came after Polish prosecutors unwittingly disclosed the details of a bank account he had in Poland.

The bank account was used to finance the activities of his group Vesna-96, which supports Belarus's opposition.

Poland, which has offered moral and financial help to opponents of Belarus' authoritarian leader Lukashenko, apologized for what it called a "reprehensible mistake," and two prosecutors involved lost their jobs.

Warsaw, which holds the European Union's rotating presidency, has long championed democracy and human rights in former Soviet neighbors such as Belarus.

Mihalevich, who is based in the Czech Republic, was traveling to London when he was detained on Monday, Polish media reported.

Two other candidates who ran against Lukashenko in last year's election remain in jail, though other opponents have been released.

The EU and the United States have imposed economic sanctions on Belarus and travel bans on its top officials following Lukashenko's crackdown on the opposition.

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