

EU Expanding its Black List of Belarus Officials

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The European Union will expand its blacklist of Belorussian citizens to include 20 high-ranking officials, an unnamed source told Agence France-Presse, Lenta.ru reported.

The expansion of sanctions may be officially announced at a meeting of EU foreign ministers Monday.

The officials — employees of law enforcement and judicial agencies — were allegedly involved in the detention of Belorussian opposition figures and would no longer be able to enter EU territory if they were added to the blacklist. Their financial assets in EU countries would also be frozen.

President Dmitry Medvedev and Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko released a joint statement Friday rejecting measures of "economic pressure or coercion."

"Such measures create artificial barriers to trade, unreasonable obstacles to economic cooperation, and harm states' legitimate interests of economic security," said the statement,

a copy of which was published on the Kremlin website.

In December, the European Council on Foreign Relations blacklisted 210 Belorussian citizens, including President Lukashenko, two of his sons, and the majority of the country's top leadership.

Belgian publication EUobserver said that Slovenia has tried to stall the latest round of sanctions over the inclusion in the black list of businessman Yuri Chizh, a close associate of Lukashenko with ties to Slovenian businesses.

An unnamed diplomat told the publication that Slovenia's official reason to keep Chizh off a blacklist is that it would harm free market competition.

The diplomat suggested that the real motivation for blocking sanctions is that Slovenian construction firm Riko Group recently won lucrative multi-million dollar bids for real estate projects with a conglomerate owned by Chizh.

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