

Belarus Sacks Foreign Minister After Teddy Bear Row

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Martynov is out as foreign minister. **Thierry Roge**

MINSK — Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko sacked his foreign minister weeks after a diplomatic row with Sweden and the European Union over a pro-democracy stunt in which hundreds of teddy bears were air-dropped over the country.

Lukashenko's office on Monday announced the dismissal of Sergei Martynov, who had held the post since 2003, without providing any reasons for the decision. Lukashenko named Vladimir Makei, previously his chief of staff, as the country's new foreign minister.

Earlier this month, Belarus expelled Sweden's ambassador after a plane chartered by a Swedish public relations firm dropped about 800 toy bears over the authoritarian country in July, each carrying a message urging the former Soviet republic to show greater respect for human rights.

Lukashenko sacked two generals, including the head of air defense, and told the incoming border guards chief to use weapons if necessary to shoot down any future foreign intruders

into Belarussian air space.

The move damaged already strained relations between Minsk and the EU, which has long criticized Lukashenko's policies and has imposed travel bans and asset freezes on him and other senior officials.

The EU said in a statement Monday that Makei was one of the targeted officials.

"Mr. Makei is currently subject to EU restrictive measures. In the context of the upcoming review of restrictive measures, in the autumn of this year, the EU will assess his situation," it said.

"The EU confirms its policy of critical engagement towards Belarus and reiterates its firm commitment to strengthening its engagement with the Belarusian people and civil society and to supporting the democratic aspirations of the Belarusian people," the statement said.

In power since 1994, Lukashenko has tolerated little dissent and routinely locked up political opponents, earning the title "Europe's last dictator" from the U.S. administration of George W. Bush.

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