

New European Group Aims to Aid Democracy Struggles

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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WARSAW — When democratic uprisings broke out across the Arab world two years ago, the European Union bureaucracy was slow to provide funding and other help that was needed urgently. The result was anger among democracy advocates and soul-searching among political leaders.

Now a new EU-backed institution is coming to life that aims to get funding fast to democracy struggles in countries like Syria and Belarus when it can have the most impact, avoiding these kinds of delays.

The European Endowment for Democracy (EED) is a new Brussels-based foundation that will start to operate this summer under the leadership of a Polish diplomat, Jerzy Pomianowski, who described its mission in an interview.

"There is a gap to be filled, and here is the answer," Pomianowski said Monday from his office

at the Foreign Ministry in Warsaw, where he holds the position of undersecretary of state.

He said the endowment, which so far has raised 18 million euros (\$23 million) from various European countries, would focus on giving grants to democracy activists and groups with fewer "strings attached" than the more rigid requirements of established EU programs.

The primary beneficiaries will be in countries where EU members want to see democracy, human rights and stability flourish. They include Belarus, Syria, Libya, Egypt and a number of other nations in Eastern Europe, North Africa and the Middle East.

Pomianowski said examples of the endowment's streamlined operations would involve financing unregistered groups and accepting applications in Arabic and Russian — in contrast with EU grants, which now only accept them in English or French. It will also handle applications as they come in, rather than waiting for set deadlines.

"We are going to provide financing rather quickly, within weeks rather than months," he said.

"In the European neighborhood, this kind of support is specifically missing when the needs are extremely urgent," he said, describing the criticism the EU came under when it did not get funds faster to democratic groups fighting in the revolts that broke out across the Arab world in 2011.

He acknowledges there are risks to the endowment's streamlined approach, the main one being that with less vetting of where funding goes, there is a risk of "money disappearing and nothing happening."

But he said the risk-taking is critical and is what will set the new endowment apart from the more established EU instruments supporting democracy and human rights.

"Being less risk adverse is a defining factor of the EED," he said. "If you are too afraid of losing money, you may miss an enormously important opportunity to provide really genuine and valid support."

The endowment is the brainchild of Polish Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski and was inspired by the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy, which distributes U.S. government funding to democracy movements across the world. Sikorski came up with the idea in early 2011, soon after elections in Belarus that kept authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko in power — and that were widely condemned as rigged.

It's no coincidence that the idea for the group arose in Poland, where the government today is filled with opponents of the country's former communist regime — people like Sikorski and Pomianowski, who remember the difference outside help made during the country's darkest period of repression in the 1980s, which preceded the eventual collapse of communism in 1989.

Pomianowski himself was a student opposition activist in the 1980s who worked to publish underground materials during martial law, a harsh crackdown imposed on the Solidarity movement starting in 1981. His group received disassembled copying machines smuggled in from Sweden and Denmark. Those were reassembled and then used to print underground authors and satirical and intellectual tracts.

He also recalls the help provided by the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy, which helped support political prisoners and their families and gave other crucial support.

Of the 18 million euros raised so far for the European Endowment for Democracy, 5 million comes from Poland, with other major donors including Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands and Switzerland. But ex-communist EU members are also chipping in, including Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Lithuania and Estonia.

"We went ourselves through this transition process," he said. "And for us it's so natural that when someone wants to be democratic, you have to help. You cannot stay indifferent."

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