Austria Refuses to Extradite Ex-KGB Officer to Vilnius

July 18, 2011

VILNIUS, Lithuania — Lithuania issued a note of protest Monday and threatened to recall its ambassador in Vienna after Austria refused to extradite a former KGB officer wanted in connection with a deadly demonstration two decades ago.

Lithuanians are angered by an Austrian court's decision on Saturday not to extradite Mikhail Golovatov, a Russian citizen and former commander of an elite Alpha paratrooper squad that took part in a 1991 crackdown on a demonstration in Vilnius, Lithuania's capital.

Fourteen people died and more than 1,000 were wounded in the subsequent clash.

Lithuanian prosecutors had requested European arrest warrants for Golovatov and other suspects as part of a lengthy investigation into the incident, which occurred not long after Lithuania declared independence from the Soviet Union.

"The people of Lithuania and relatives of the victims ... are waiting for a convincing explanation from Austria why the decision was taken and why it was taken so hastily,"

Foreign Minister Audronius Azubalis said.

In Brussels, Austrian Foreign Minister Michael Spindelegger met with Azubalis to discuss the issue.

"[Azubalis] told me that this is an old wound for Lithuania," Spindelegger said, the Austria Press Agency reported. "I understand this ... but even in the case of old wounds, there is no getting around the fact that there are principles in a [legal] process that have to be adhered to."

Spindelegger said Austrian officials asked Lithuanian authorities for proof of Golovatov's culpability but that the results were unsatisfactory.

"This has to be proven. Two deadlines were set to prove this, but the results were not concrete as far as the events involving the person are concerned," Spindelegger said.

In Vilnius, Deputy Foreign Minister Asta Skaisgiryte, while handing the note of protest to Austrian diplomat Josef Sigmund, stressed that the arrest warrant was issued by European Union judicial authorities and that obliges another EU member state to arrest and extradite the suspect.

Golovatov was detained at the Vienna airport on Thursday.

Lithuania's parliamentary committee on foreign affairs met Monday to discuss an appropriate response. A motion by chairman Emanuelis Zingeris to cut diplomatic ties with Austria was voted down.

Meanwhile, a crowd of about 60 protesters assembled outside the Austrian Embassy in Vilnius, shouting "Shame on Austria!"

"It is very wrong to set free a murderer who killed our people and wanted to choke our freedom," said protester Elena Atkociuniene, who witnessed the 1991 crackdown.

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