

Russian Mercenaries in Belarus Say They Were 'On Their Way to See Hagia Sophia' – Investigators

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Belarus detained a group of Russian mercenaries last week. ssu.gov.ua

Some of the 33 Russian mercenaries detained in Belarus told investigators they were on their way to Istanbul to see the Hagia Sophia, the head of Belarus' Investigative Committee [told](#) President Alexander Lukashenko.

Belarus authorities detained the men last week for allegedly plotting to destabilize the country ahead of the country's Aug. 9 presidential election. The Kremlin on Friday [said](#) the Russian men were "employees of a private security company" who were staying temporarily in Belarus before traveling onward to Istanbul.

The men gave conflicting testimonies during questioning, with "less than half" saying the group planned to fly from Minsk to Istanbul and the rest naming "completely different destinations," Ivan Noskevich told Lukashenko in the meeting broadcast on the Belarus 1 television channel Saturday.

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Those who named Turkey as their destination cited a number of different reasons for going there, Noskevich said. Some said they were planning to vacation, some said they were going to work as guards and some said they planned to see Istanbul's iconic Hagia Sophia cathedral.

In 2018, two suspects in the attempted poisoning of former spy Sergei Skripal in Britain [told](#) Russian state television they were only visiting the city of Salisbury to see its "world famous" cathedral.

Noskevich said that while the group had purchased flight tickets to Istanbul, they never went to the airport.

"There was no [plan for] Istanbul and could not be," Lukashenko said in response. "It is clear that this group had other goals."

Russians have used Belarus as a transit point to other countries since their own country grounded nearly all international flights in response to the coronavirus pandemic.

Lukashenko is facing the toughest re-election bid of his 26 years in power in the Aug. 9 vote. Protests swept the country after his main election rivals were jailed or barred from running, with people [rallying](#) behind the wife of a jailed opposition candidate.

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