

Russia Defends Belarus Over Plane Diversion

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Ryanair flight FR4978 from Athens-to-Vilnius was diverted to Minsk. **ONLINER.BY / AFP**

Russian officials have [defended](#) Belarus' use of a military jet to divert a passenger plane carrying a dissident, an act Western leaders have called "state terrorism" and that may spark tougher sanctions against Minsk.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told journalists that Belarus had treated the incident with an "absolutely reasonable approach."

"A representative of the Belarusian foreign ministry... stressed the readiness of the Belarusian authorities to act on the issue in a transparent manner and to follow all international rules," Lavrov said during a press conference following a meeting with his Greek counterpart.

"I think this is an absolutely reasonable approach."

He called on the global community to "soberly assess the situation".

The remarks came after Belarus state media claimed that its authorities had no other choice

but pull Ryanair flight FR4978 from its Athens-to-Vilnius route and arrest opposition journalist Roman Protasevich. Belarus authorities said the plane had to make an emergency landing in Minsk following a bomb scare.

State Duma deputy Leonid Kalashnikov, who chairs the Duma's committee on post-Soviet affairs, said earlier Monday that Belarus has the right to choose "those methods that it considers feasible and necessary" to combat threats to its national security.

"It's an independent state. If they see a threat to their security, then they must fight this threat," Russia's state-run RIA Novosti news agency quoted Kalashnikov as saying.

Russia's Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova expressed "[shock](#)" at what she called Western hypocrisy over its muted reactions to past plane diversions.

"The internet remembers all cases of violent abductions, forced landings and illegal arrests made by 'peace officers and guardians of morality,'" Zakharova wrote on Facebook, referring to Western democracies.

Related article: [Global Outrage as Belarus Diverts Flight, Arrests Opposition Activist](#)

The Kremlin [declined](#) to comment on the incident and forwarded all questions over whether Belarus violated international norms to international aviation authorities. President Vladimir Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters that Moscow has no information about Russian citizens allegedly detained with Protasevich.

Ireland, where Ryanair is based, described the forced diversion a "state-sponsored" act of "aviation piracy."

A semi-official presidential channel on messaging app Telegram said that while Lukashenko could be criticized for forcing the jet to land, it was the right decision.

"How should the state react to terrorist plans? Who knows what ideas those who reported a bomb threat and especially those who might have been among the passengers have?" the channel said late Sunday.

"And now imagine that this plane is being intentionally directed toward your home. Would the state be guilty if it did not protect you?"

The bomb threat turned out to be false.

Belarusian state television claimed authorities did not initially know the anti-Lukashenko blogger was on the flight.

It also said his girlfriend drew the attention of Belarusian law enforcement to him when she sent his picture to another blogger.

Protasevich, 26, is a Belarusian journalist and activist.

Together with co-founder Stepan Putilo he until recently ran the Nexta Telegram channel

that galvanized and directed huge protests against Lukashenko's disputed re-election to a sixth term in August 2020.

Last year, Protasevich and Putilo were accused by Belarusian authorities of a number of crimes including organizing mass riots.

AFP contributed reporting.

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