The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Explainer: Events Surrounding Belarus Flight 'Hijacking'

The forced landing of a European commercial flight with a dissident on board has caused East-West tensions to flare.

May 25, 2021

The EU has moved to cut air links with Belarus. **Stringer / TASS**

Belarus' interception of a commercial flight Sunday in order to arrest Roman Protasevich, a 26-year-old Lithuania-based dissident blogger has triggered global outrage and condemnation.

Protasevich faces charges of inciting mass rallies in Belarus following last summer's disputed presidential election which triggered an unprecedented wave of protest across the country.

The EU has already hit Belarus with a sweeping travel ban, blocking access to its airspace and urging European airlines to avoid the country.

Here's what's happened so far:

Flight intercepted

- Belarus forced Ryanair flight FR4978, travelling from Athens, Greece to Vilnius, Lithuania, to make an emergency landing at Minsk airport Sunday afternoon, citing a bomb threat.
- Strongman President Alexander Lukashenko deployed a MiG-29 fighter jet to intercept the commercial airline just minutes before it was set to leave Belarusian air space and start its descent into Vilnius.
- Protasevich was detained after the plane landed in Minsk. He faces charges of organizing the mass protests which erupted across the country last year following a disputed presidential election — charges which carry a maximum penalty of 15 years.

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- Protasevich's girlfriend, 23-year-old Sofiya Sapega, a Russian citizen, was also detained in Minsk.
- Lithuanian police said that according to flight manifest details a total of five passengers disembarked the plane in Minsk, Reuters reported. Ryanair boss Michael O'Leary said he believes Belarusian KGB agents were on the flight from Athens and left the plane after its forced landing in Minsk.

Dissident blogger

- Roman Protasevich is a dissident journalist, the former editor of the influential anti-Lukashenko Nexta Telegram channel which has more than 1.2 million subscribers.
- He fled Belarus in 2019 and has since lived in Poland and Lithuania — both EU members and home to many Belarusian dissidents who have fled the country. At the time of his detention he was a resident of Lithuania.
- He was first arrested in 2012, aged just 17, for running two groups on the Russian-based social networking site Vkontakte criticizing Lukashenko.
- Belarus issued a warrant for Protasevich's arrest in November over his work for Nexta, declaring that he was "involved in terrorist activity." Terror offenses can carry the death penalty in Belarus, which still carries out capital punishment.

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- Passengers aboard the diverted flight have described the panic that overcame Protasevich when the pilot announced they were being diverted to Minsk. "He said: 'I know the death penalty awaits me in Belarus,'" fellow passenger Marius Rutkauskas told Lithuanian TV after the plane arrived in Vilnius late Sunday evening.
- In a video posted on Belarusian state TV on Monday evening, Protasevich appeared to "confess" to charges of organizing mass protests last summer — claims which carry a possible 15-year prison sentence.
- "The attitude of employees towards me is as correct as possible and according to the law. I continue cooperating with investigators and am confessing to having organized mass unrest in the city of Minsk," he said in the video. Supporters said the confession was coerced, pointing to marks on his forehead, and similar videos which have been published, including of opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya when she was briefly

detained following last summer's election.
- Protasevich's girlfriend Sofiya Sapega, who was detained alongside him on Sunday, will remain in custody for two months, her lawyer Alexander Filanovich told RBC news website Tuesday. Sapega is being held at a detention center in Minsk on suspicion of "committing crimes" between August and September 2020, according to the statement made by the Russian foreign ministry.

'State Hijacking'

- The reaction from the international community has been swift, with condemnation of Lukashenko's actions coming from across the Western world.
- European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen called the forced landing of the plane a "state hijacking."
- U.S. President Joe Biden called the incident "outrageous," said Protasevich's confession video appeared to have been made under duress and added that Belarus' actions amounted to "shameful assaults on both political dissent and the freedom of the press."
- British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab has pointed the finger at likely Russian involvement in the plot, saying it is "very difficult to believe that this kind of action could have been taken without at least the acquiescence of the authorities in Moscow."
- German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko will pay "a bitter price" for the "heinous" flight diversion.
- Russia defended Belarus' actions. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Minsk had treated the incident with "an entirely reasonable approach."

Flight bans

- EU leaders agreed Monday to cut air links with Belarus, banning state airlines from operating in EU airspace and urging EU-based airlines to avoid flying through Belarus' airspace. Britain and Ukraine announced similar measures.
- Airlines including KLM, Air France, Wizz Air, Air Baltic, Lufthansa and Singapore Airlines had started avoiding Belarusian airspace by Tuesday morning. Belarus' Belavaia cancelled all flights to London and Paris until Oct. 30 in anticipation of the sanctions coming into force.

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- The 27-member bloc also said it would hit Belarus with "targeted economic sanctions" and add more individuals and businesses to a list of sanctioned entities, banning them from travelling to Europe and doing business with European firms.
- The EU already has sanctions in place against 88 figures and seven companies, put in place in response to the crackdown on opposition launched last year ahead of, and after, the disputed August 2020 presidential election.
- Opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya has backed the sanctions against Minsk. In a call with U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan she said she had "called on the U.S. to isolate the regime, pressure it through sanctions, support Belarusians and hold a high-level international conference on resolving the crisis." She also called on the Belarusian opposition to be invited to next months' G7 meeting in Britain.

AFP contributed reporting.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/05/25/explainer-events-surrounding-belarus-flight-hijacking-a74000