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Lukashenko Defends 'Legal' Plane Diversion to Belarus, Kremlin Backs Him

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The Athens-to-Vilnius flight was forced to make a landing in Minsk. **Mindaugas Kulbis / AP / TASS**

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko said Wednesday that he had acted "legally" in diverting a Ryanair flight with a dissident on board and slammed the West for "crossing red lines."

The Athens-to-Vilnius flight carrying a wanted opposition activist Roman Protasevich was forced to make a landing in Minsk on Sunday over a supposed bomb scare, prompting several EU carriers to stop flights over Belarus.

"Don't blame me. I was acting legally to protect my people. That's how it will continue to be," Lukashenko said in an address to parliament, according to the state-run Belta news agency.

The Kremlin said it saw no reason not to trust his statements, in which he claimed the flight was ordered to be grounded following a bomb threat that was sent from Switzerland.

"If this is not the case, then, probably, someone will refute it. There are no refutations yet,"

Russian President Vladimir Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters after Lukashenko's speech.

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The 66-year-old Belarusian leader, who has ruled over the ex-Soviet nation for more than two decades, decried "our detractors from outside and inside" for "crossing red lines" and "waging hybrid warfare" against Belarus.

"This is no longer an information war, it is a hybrid modern war," Lukashenko said.

"We know who benefits from demonizing Belarus," he said without elaborating. "Before you make any sudden rash moves, remember that Belarus is the center of Europe and if something breaks out here, it's another world war."

The strongman leader accused his unnamed adversaries of "searching for new vulnerabilities" and using Belarus as a "testing ground" for future attacks against its close ally Russia.

His first public comments on the forced diversion came ahead of a UN Security Council meeting behind closed doors set for later Wednesday. Russia has dismissed Western outrage, despite Protasevich's girlfriend and Russian citizen Sofiya Sapega's arrest aboard the same flight, and is expected to oppose a collective statement on the incident.

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The European Union said it was eyeing fresh sanctions on Lukashenko's regime after the plane incident.

European leaders have also demanded the release of Protasevich, who was arrested by Belarus authorities when the plane landed in Minsk. Protasevich faces up to 15 years in jail on charges of organizing mass unrest.

Lukashenko and his allies are under European and U.S. sanctions over the violent crackdown on post-election protests that gripped the nation last year.

Lukashenko's election challenger Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, who fled to EU member Lithuania shortly after the August 2020 poll, announced a fresh wave of protests Wednesday.

AFP contributed reporting.

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