The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
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UN Aviation Body to Meet Over Belarus Plane Diversion

By AFP

May 27, 2021



The consequences of the incident are playing out in Europe's airspace. **Caribb / Flickr (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)**

The UN civil aviation agency will hold an urgent meeting Thursday to discuss Belarus after Western powers on the UN Security Council called for the body to investigate Minsk's diversion of a European flight and arrest of a dissident.

The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) Council will meet as the consequences of the incident play out in Europe's airspace, with a Barcelona-bound flight from Minsk refused access to French airspace, and Poland banning Belarusian carriers on Wednesday.

But a defiant President Alexander Lukashenko said he had "acted lawfully to protect our people," in an address to parliament on Wednesday.

In his first public statement since the Ryanair flight was diverted and opposition journalist

and activist Roman Protasevich and his girlfriend were arrested on Sunday, Lukashenko dismissed the international outcry.

The criticism was nothing more than another attempt by his opponents to undermine his rule, he said, accusing them of waging a "modern, hybrid war" against Belarus and of crossing "boundaries of common sense and human morality."

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

Lukashenko — often dubbed "Europe's last dictator" — is facing some of the strongest international pressure of his nearly 27 years ruling ex-Soviet Belarus.

He and his allies are already under a series of Western sanctions over a brutal crackdown on mass protests that followed his disputed re-election to a sixth term last August.

But he continues to enjoy solid support from Russian President Vladimir Putin, who is hosting the Belarusian leader on Friday.

Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Wednesday there was no reason to doubt Lukashenko's version of events.

Air links cut

The ICAO, of which Belarus is a member state, said on Monday that it was "strongly concerned by the apparent forced landing."

Under the 1944 convention that established the ICAO, every state has sovereignty over the airspace above its territory.

But the text also says signatories must "refrain from resorting to the use of weapons against civil aircraft in flight and that, in the case of interception, the lives of persons on board and the safety of aircraft must not be endangered."

The Athens-to-Vilnius flight was diverted over a supposed bomb scare, with Lukashenko scrambling a MiG-29 fighter jet to accompany the aircraft.

Lukashenko on Wednesday denied that the fighter jet had forced the airliner to land, calling such claims an "absolute lie."

Ukraine, Poland and Lithuania had denied the Ryanair flight permission to land and its only option was to turn to Minsk, he said.

Once the plane landed, Protasevich — the 26-year-old co-founder of opposition Telegram channel Nexta that coordinated protests last year against Lukashenko — and his Russian girlfriend Sofiya Sapega were arrested.

Related article: After Plane Crisis, Is Belarusian President Lukashenko Becoming a Troublesome Partner for Russia?

The ICAO has no power to impose sanctions. But European leaders this week agreed to cut air links with Belarus and told airlines to avoid the country's airspace.

On Wednesday, a Minsk-to-Barcelona passenger flight by Belarusian state carrier Belavia was forced to turn back after being denied entry to French airspace, while Poland banned Belarusian flights from using its airspace.

Opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya said that flight bans should not stop Belarusians from being able to flee the regime.

But she said she supported the EU's actions as "reasonable" and that Belarusians "cannot blame anyone for this except the regime."

'Life in danger'

Protasevich was last seen in a video on Monday in which he admitted to helping to organize mass unrest, a charge that could land him in jail for 15 years.

His father Dmitry said that his son's lawyer was told that the journalist was not in his detention cell.

"We think that he may be in hospital," he told AFP. "We believe his life and health could be in danger."

Sapega, a 23-year-old law student at the European Humanities University (EHU) in Lithuania, appeared in another video on Tuesday saying she worked for a Telegram channel that disclosed information about Belarusian law enforcement.

Her lawyer said she had been remanded in pre-trial detention for two months and Russia confirmed she was being detained as a criminal suspect.

Belarus' opposition says such videos are routinely recorded by security forces, with participants forced to make statements under duress.

Last year's months of protests against Lukashenko, which involved tens of thousands of people, were brutally quashed and thousands were detained.

Several people died in the unrest, with many reporting torture and abuse in custody.

Related article: EU Needs to Formulate Clear Belarus Policy in Wake of Plane Arrest

On Wednesday, dozens of people marched through the streets of Beryozovka east of Minsk for the funeral of Vitold Ashurok, 50, a well-known opposition activist who died Sunday from cardiac arrest in a penal colony in eastern Belarus.

The Belarusian opposition has called for further international action against the regime.

Tikhanovskaya on Wednesday urged the European Parliament to ban both new foreign investments in Belarus and the country's main exports.

The call at the UN for the ICAO investigation echoes an earlier one from NATO. But Russia's support for Minsk means the UN Security Council is unlikely to agree on a collective statement.

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