The Moscow Times
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Putin Praises Closer Ties With Belarus in Lukashenko Talks

By Anna Smolchenko for AFP

May 28, 2021



Vladimir Putin and Alexander Lukashenko were holding talks in Sochi on Friday evening. **Mikhail Klimentyev/TASS**

President Vladimir Putin praised Russia's closer ties with Belarus on Friday as he hosted strongman Alexander Lukashenko amid a global outcry following the forced diversion of a European plane.

Observers will watch the negotiations to see how far Russia goes to support Lukashenko's regime after Belarus scrambled a Mig jet to divert a Ryanair jet and arrest an opposition journalist onboard last Sunday.

Following the Ryanair plane's forced diversion, the European Union urged EU-based carriers to avoid Belarusian airspace and promised fresh sanctions against Lukashenko and regime officials.

Putin warmly greeted Lukashenko in Russia's Black Sea resort of Sochi, saying he was "very glad" to see him and the two should go for a swim.

"We've been building the Union State," Putin told Lukashenko at the start of the talks. "We are confidently moving in that direction, that work is already bringing concrete results to our citizens," he added.

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Lukashenko complained that the West was seeking to stir unrest in Belarus.

"An attempt is under way to rock the boat to reach the level of last August," Lukashenko said, referring to the outbreak of protests against his regime following a disputed election.

"It's clear what these Western friends want from us."

The Belarus strongman, who arrived with a briefcase, said he wanted to show Putin "some documents" related to the Ryanair incident and thanked him for his support in the latest standoff with the West.

In carefully worded remarks in front of reporters, Putin said that when then-Bolivian President Evo Morales's plane was grounded in 2013 there was little Western outcry.

"The president was led out of the plane, and nothing, silence," Putin said.

A plane carrying Morales from Moscow was diverted and held up in Vienna for hours amid suspicions fugitive US whistleblower Edward Snowden was on board.

Putin and Lukashenko have met regularly since August, when historic protests broke out against Lukashenko's nearly three-decade rule following a disputed election.

Lukashenko, 66, waged a ruthless crackdown on his opponents and has leaned increasingly on Putin amid condemnation from the West.

Several people died during the unrest in Belarus, thousands were detained, and hundreds reported torture in prison.

Sunday's flight diversion was a dramatic escalation, with EU leaders accusing Minsk of essentially hijacking a European flight to arrest 26-year-old opposition journalist and activist Roman Protasevich.

'Technical reasons'

The overflight ban has led to several cancellations of flights between Russia and Europe, after Russian authorities rejected flight plans that would have skipped Belarusian airspace.

Russia insists the cancellations are purely "technical," but they have raised concerns that Russia could be systematically refusing to let European airlines land if they avoid Belarus.

Moscow hit out at the flight ban as politically motivated and dangerous.

"What the West has done... for political reasons is completely irresponsible and endangers the safety of passengers," said Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova.

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EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said the bloc was monitoring whether this was a broader policy from Russia, but the Kremlin insisted the disruptions were in no way political.

"Aviation authorities will give the necessary explanations, but these are technical reasons," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

Russia's Federal Air Transport Agency said changes of previously approved routes could result in delays in obtaining arrival, departure or transit permits.

Belarus authorities claimed to have received a bomb threat against the Ryanair flight from Athens to Vilnius carrying the dissident.

Minsk said it scrambled a combat jet and demanded the flight land in Minsk based on the message it said was sent from a ProtonMail address by Palestinian Islamist group Hamas.

'Have to be braver'

But Proton Technologies, which is based in Geneva, said the message was sent after the plane had already been diverted.

"We can see the sent time and can confirm it was after the plane was redirected," it said on Twitter.

The Montreal-based International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) Council announced Thursday it was launching an investigation, amid calls for Belarus to be banned from international air agencies.

Protasevich, who helped organize historic demonstrations against Lukashenko's rule last year, was arrested along with Russian girlfriend Sofia Sapega, 23, after the plane landed in Minsk.

Both Protasevich and Sapega have since appeared in confession videos that their supporters said were recorded under duress and are a common tactic of the regime to pressure critics.

Borrell has said proposals are "on the table" to target key sectors of the Belarusian economy including its oil products and potash sectors.

Belarus opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya urged the EU to be "braver" and impose more sanctions against the Minsk regime.

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After meeting Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte in The Hague, Tikhanovskaya said measures being discussed by EU countries to target Belarusian economic sectors did not go far enough.

"Now we have to be stronger, braver, and the European Union has to be stronger, braver in its resolutions and its decisions," the exiled Belarusian opposition chief told reporters.

EU chief Ursula von der Leyen on Friday warned Lukashenko that "it is time to change course", saying: "No amount of repression, brutality or coercion will bring any legitimacy to your authoritarian regime."

The European Commission president also wrote to the opposition offering a three-billion-euro package to support "a democratic Belarus" if Lukashenko steps down.

Estonia called meanwhile for a stop to the "flow of money" to Lukashenko.

Lukashenko has retained his grip on power in ex-Soviet Belarus since 1994 by hounding opponents, jailing and allegedly torturing dissidents, and muzzling independent media.

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