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Russia Says EU's Belarus Flight Ban 'Endangers' Passengers

By AFP

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Russia has backed Belarus over what the EU has called a "state hijacking" of a Ryanair flight last Sunday.
Viktor Drachev / TASS

Russia said Friday that Western countries were being irresponsible and endangering passengers by banning flights over Belarus in response to President Alexander Lukashenko's forced grounding of a Ryanair flight.

"What the West has done by introducing a ban on flights through Belarusian airspace for political reasons is completely irresponsible and endangers the safety of passengers," foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova wrote on Facebook.

Belarus sparked international outrage by dispatching a fighter jet Sunday to intercept a Ryanair flight from Athens to Vilnius carrying opposition activist Roman Protasevich, 26.

Protasevich, who helped organize historic demonstrations against Lukashenko's long rule

last year, was arrested along with his Russian girlfriend Sofia Sapega, 23.

Related article: Roman Protasevich: From Teen Activist to Belarus Bugbear

In response to the grounding of the European commercial jet, the European Union banned flights from Belarusian carrier Belavia and urged airlines based in the bloc to avoid flying over the ex-Soviet country.

"Politics in the European Union today is increasingly devoid of common sense," Zakharova wrote in the post.

"It is time for Brussels to learn how to take effective measures to protect citizens against real, not imaginary, threats," she added.

Foreign ministers of the Group of Seven (G7) wealthy nations on Thursday demanded the "immediate and unconditional release" of Protasevich.

Russian President Vladimir Putin is scheduled to meet with Lukashenko later on Friday in the Black Sea resort town of Sochi, in a symbolic show of support for the increasingly isolated Belarusian strongman.

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