



[Belarusian Authorities Draw Condemnation for Forcing a Ryanair Commercial Flight to Land in Order to Detain a Dissident](#)

Authorities in Belarus sparked international outrage this week after President Alexander Lukashenko's regime forced a Ryanair passenger flight to land in the country so that it could arrest an opposition activist on board. The Ryanair flight was passing through Belarus' airspace on its way from Athens to Vilnius when officials used a fake bomb threat to divert it to Minsk for an emergency landing. Once on the ground, security agents arrested Roman Protasevich – a Belarusian blogger who played a critical role in last year's mass protests against the incumbent leader. The action has been widely condemned as an egregious human rights violation, with the European Union moving to sanction Belarus and also urging airlines to avoid flying over the country's airspace. The United States and Canada spoke out as well, with U.S. President Biden calling it a "shameful assault on both political dissent and the freedom of the press." The detainment of Protasevich is part of Lukashenko's efforts to brutally suppress opposition forces in the country in the face of large-scale resistance against his regime.

Protasevich is a co-founder of the news channel NEXTA, which helped to broadcast footage of the widespread protests against Lukashenko last year, making him a major target for the despot's ire. NEXTA also played an important role in coordinating the demonstrations and published videos of the police violence that sparked the growth of the movement. In response, Belarusian authorities had placed Protasevich on a "terrorism" watchlist and opened criminal cases against him on bogus charges of inciting hatred and organizing mass riots. Due to this, the channel was based in Poland where its offices could be kept under police protection, away from Belarusian jurisdiction. Protasevich now works for a different Telegram channel based in Lithuania and operates his own popular blog which has only increased the Lukashenko regime's perception of him as a threat to their stability.

In the days since the disturbing incident, several prominent European and global airlines have announced that their flights are currently avoiding Belarusian airspace over concerns regarding a potential similar incident in the future. This includes Austrian Airlines, Finnair, Air France, Lufthansa, and Singapore Airlines, among others. Additionally, Ukraine and Poland are halting all flights to and from Belarus, and the United Kingdom is preventing Belarusian airlines from entering into its airspace. The reaction from diplomatic entities in the international community has been highly condemnatory as well. The United States and many European countries have called the action "air piracy" and a "state-sponsored hijacking." Belarusian opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya urged the U.N. Aviation Agency and the International Civil Aviation Organization to kick the country out as a punitive measure for the heinous move. Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki offered perhaps the most poignant rebuke, denouncing it as a "reprehensible act of state terrorism."

This week's latest incident only worsens the already dire relations between the West and the Lukashenko regime in Belarus. The United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the European Union had already imposed asset freezes and travel bans on a large group of Belarusian officials following last year's sham election which kept the dictator in power. Human rights groups estimate that authorities there have detained over 35,000 people since the outbreak of large-scale protests in 2020 as they ruthlessly aim to crack down on opposition. Lukashenko has ruled the country with an iron fist since the mid-1990s, and his most recent move signals how desperate he is to remain in power and the lengths to which he would go in order to ensure that he does.