

European powers ban flights to Belarus after president forces down plane carrying opposition journalist

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On Sunday, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko mobilized military planes to force a Ryanair jetliner to land in Minsk as it transited through Belarusian airspace and detained several of its passengers, including 26-year-old journalist Roman Protasevich.

Lukashenko sent a MiG-29 fighter to force the Ryanair flight from Athens to Vilnius, Lithuania to divert to the Minsk airport. There, Protasevich and his girlfriend, Sofia Sapega, were marched off the plane and into detention. “A death sentence awaits me,” Protasevich reportedly told other passengers arrested by Belarusian authorities as their affairs were searched by sniffer dogs. Protasevich, Sapega and three others were ultimately taken away.

The arrest of Protasevich and all those kidnapped from the Ryanair jetliner is a flagrant attack on democratic rights. While Protasevich is a spokesman for a procapitalist, right-wing opposition, the forced kidnapping is directed against all opposition to the oligarchic government of Lukashenko—above all, the growing opposition of workers throughout Belarus.

It should be noted that Lukashenko got the idea for his act of international piracy from the United States and European powers. The United States has repeatedly carried out “extraordinary renditions” throughout Europe, illegally snatching people without due process or trial, and in 2013 forced down the private aircraft of Bolivian President Evo Morales.

The NATO powers have responded to Lukashenko’s blatantly illegal action, however, by escalating their own campaign of threats and military provocations targeting Belarus and its principal international ally, Russia. Last night, a European Union (EU) summit announced the blocking of investments in Belarus and the closing of EU airspace to Belarusian airlines, as well as rerouting EU flights to avoid Belarus and its airspace. In parallel to

these attempts to cut off and isolate the country, NATO is intensifying military threats against Russia.

German Green Party President Robert Habeck has called for NATO to arm the far-right Ukrainian regime, installed in Kiev in 2014 in a NATO-backed putsch, against Russia. Even as the Kiev regime calls for military action to seize Russia’s strategic naval base at Sevastopol in the Crimea, Habeck insisted that Ukrainian demands for NATO weapons and support are “justified” and “difficult to refuse.” Speaking yesterday evening to Deutschlandfunk, he added that NATO membership for Ukraine should “not be taken off the table.”

While EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen called Lukashenko’s actions a “hijacking,” US Secretary of State Antony Blinken declared them “brazen and shocking.” German Chancellor Angela Merkel for her part cynically denounced “the Belarusian authorities’ unprecedented actions.”

The NATO powers’ attempts to use Lukashenko’s act of piracy to justify escalating their threats against Belarus and Russia are shot through with hypocrisy. Even as they denounce the kidnapping of Protasevich, Washington and London are imprisoning WikiLeaks Editor Julian Assange for exposing the truth about NATO war crimes in Iraq, Afghanistan and beyond.

Merkel denounced Lukashenko’s supposedly “unprecedented” action as if she had forgotten the precedent that her own government and its NATO allies set for Lukashenko’s thuggery. In 2013, several EU countries closed their airspace to a plane carrying Bolivian President Evo Morales, forcing it to land in Austria to be searched on suspicions that NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden was aboard.

The NATO powers have long trampled international law underfoot as they developed their own police-state

regimes. Their diverting of Morales' flight followed a decade over which they developed a system of "extraordinary rendition," in which prisoners kept at a network of CIA and European "black sites" were shipped to dictatorships around the world to be tortured. The British police's seizure of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange in 2019 at the Ecuadorian embassy in London and his continuing detention were carried out with contempt for international law.

The hypocrisy of NATO's criticisms of Lukashenko is so blatant that press outlets promoting the anti-Russian campaign have been forced to address it. This was the case of the *New York Times*' bellicose editorial, titled "A State-Sponsored Skyjacking Can't Go Unanswered." While baldly stating that "Deterrence ... has failed," implying that some form of military action should be considered, the *Times* tried to address the crying contradictions undermining its threats against Belarus.

Fearing "Morales would grant Mr. Snowden asylum and had taken him aboard his flight home," it wrote, NATO forced his plane "to land in Austria. When officials determined that Mr. Snowden was not on board, Mr. Morales was allowed to continue. The outcry, especially from Latin America, was fierce. Much of the criticism leveled at the Obama administration at the time was warranted. But there is a difference between denying overflight to a plane and forcing a commercial jetliner to land over a false alarm, accompanied by a warplane."

This is a political travesty. Had US and NATO officials found Snowden aboard Morales' plane, they would have seized and detained him to threaten him with imprisonment or execution for having revealed the mass electronic spying NATO powers have carried out on their own populations. Functioning with the same thuggish methods as Lukashenko, they have unclean hands as they seek to whip up a war fever against him.

Such bellicose propaganda is driven not by concern for democratic rights but by the pursuit of geostrategic advantage in the former Soviet Union and attempts to suppress growing class tensions at home. Over 1.5 million people have died of COVID-19 in the NATO countries due to their refusal to pursue a scientific policy—calling instead to "live with the virus," in the words of French President Emmanuel Macron. Social anger is reaching explosive levels.

It is not to endorse the various right-wing operations linked to Protasevich to state that in the final analysis, he is being targeted by Lukashenko for very similar reasons: to suppress mounting political opposition in the working

class.

Protasevich is a former editor at NEXTA, a social media outlet of the pro-market Belarusian opposition headquartered in Poland, which came to prominence amid mass protests against Lukashenko's theft of the August 2020 presidential elections. The videos NEXTA circulated not only encouraged the protests but also triggered a mass movement of the Belarusian working class, intensified by anger at the European ruling elite's indifference to the spread of COVID-19.

Strikes erupted in mining, automobile, chemical processing, health care and pharmaceutical industries, as well as in schools and universities.

Lukashenko's kidnapping of Protasevich is aimed not only at NEXTA and its work with right-wing, anti-Russian regimes such as those in Poland and Ukraine. Above all, it aims to block the reemergence of the working class into political life in the territory of the former Soviet Union, three decades after the Stalinist bureaucracy dissolved the USSR and restored capitalism in 1991 through the methods of police-state terror.

The Lukashenko regime is working to extort confessions from Protasevich that could justify his execution. Last year's movement of the Belarusian workers was a spontaneous eruption of class anger at police repression, neither expected nor desired by the pro-market opposition. Yet Belarusian authorities released last night a video in which Protasevich was forced to declare: "I am continuing to cooperate with authorities tasked with the investigation, and I am making confessions regarding the organization of mass disturbances in Minsk."

In October, Belarusian courts ruled NEXTA guilty of "extremism," a crime that carries the death penalty. Death row inmates in Belarus are executed at dawn, with a gunshot to the back of the head.

These events again underscore that the only constituency for democratic rights today is the working class, mobilized in an international struggle against capitalist governments that are all veering towards dictatorship and war.



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