

Putin and Lukashenko meet as Belarus intensifies crackdown on opposition

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This weekend, Russian President Vladimir Putin and the president of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, met for talks in Sochi, a town on the Black Sea in southern Russia. The talks had been announced after Belarus hijacked a Ryanair plane carrying the opposition journalist Roman Protasevich and his girlfriend, who is a Russian citizen. Both were detained and charged with criminal offenses. Protasevich, who now faces up to 15 years in prison, runs the NEXTA Telegram channel. With its multimillion following, it has been the main news platform for the opposition protests and strikes that rocked the Lukashenko government last fall.

The incident provoked a public outcry and immediate sanctions by the European Union, which banned all flights from and to Belarus. While many pieces in the Western press suggested that Lukashenko could not have acted without the direct complicity or at least approval from the Kremlin, it remains unclear whether Moscow was involved or even aware of his plans. The Kremlin did not take a clear position on it until over 24 hours later. Putin reportedly spoke about Belarus with US President Joe Biden over the phone, and later apologized for that to Lukashenko. Last Tuesday, the US and Russia announced the date, June 16, for a summit between Biden and Putin.

Much of the exact content of this weekend's talks between Putin and Lukashenko has not been revealed. Despite a bizarre photo-op, showing Putin and Lukashenko enjoying their time together on the Black Sea as if they were the best of friends, the outcome of the talks was far from unequivocal. Putin dismissed the EU's response to the hijack incident as hypocritical, referring to the 2013 hijacking of the plane by Bolivian President Evo Morales as part of the persecution of US whistleblower Edward Snowden, and denounced the sanctions of the Belarusian airspace. The Kremlin has also agreed to allow Belarusian airplanes to use Russian airports and airspace in order to circumvent the EU. Lukashenko apparently

agreed to share some internal information with the Kremlin about the Ryanair incident.

The financial outcome of the talks, a \$500 million credit for Belarus by the Kremlin, has been described by one Russian observer as "not exactly a great achievement." It is the second part of a \$1.5 billion loan that the Kremlin promised Minsk back in September, when the Lukashenko regime was shaken by mass strikes and protests. Belarus, whose economy is closely intertwined with that of Russia, is in dire need of loans in the many billions of dollars.

Russian observers assume that the Kremlin has only very slowly paid out the loan because it expected Lukashenko to take steps toward a constitutional reform and a transition of power. It is unclear when the third part of the \$1.5 billion loan will be paid. Despite Russia's backing for Lukashenko in the face of mass strikes and the intervention of the imperialist powers, tensions between Moscow and Minsk have long been high, and the Kremlin has pressured Lukashenko to make arrangements to leave office this year.

Last week, the Russian *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* published an analysis of the economic fallout of the EU sanctions on the Belarusian economy, which will set in in June. The sanctions, which are expected to hit substantial parts of Belarus' oil industry and manufacturing, would cost the Russian economy, itself in a precarious position, some \$5 billion. The paper quoted a political analyst as saying, "Even if the sanctions will hit only half of Belarus' exports to Europe, it will result in direct losses of about \$3–4 billion. Servicing the existing foreign currency debt will become practically impossible." He suggested that Russia would then pressure Lukashenko to hand over power, as "Russia cannot regularly lend money to pay salaries to employees of enterprises that are idle because of sanctions."

The crisis in Belarus is unfolding amidst growing

international and domestic instability. The imperialist powers, just as Lukashenko and the Kremlin, are concerned above all about the intervention of the working class in the mass protests last fall. Strikes at some major state enterprises almost brought the economy to its knees and the Lukashenko regime along with it. Although the strikes have been suppressed, through a combination of state repression and the political intervention of the opposition, tensions remain high. Inflation in Belarus is at 8.5 percent and 61.8 percent of the population live on less than \$700 a month. Almost 400,000 people live on less than \$250 per month. Only 3.5 percent of the population has an income of between \$1,200 and 1,500 per month, and only another 3.2 percent has more than \$1,500.

These class tensions are the main reason for the Lukashenko regime's violent crackdown on all opposition within the country. The hijacking of the plane and arrest of Roman Protasevich was immediately preceded by an crackdown on major opposition outlets.

While the Western press constantly promotes figures like Protasevich and Svetlana Tikhonovskaya, another leading anti-Lukashenko figure, and decries their persecution, the fact that the Lukashenko government changed the Labor Code last week, targeting the working class, has gone virtually unreported. Employers now have virtually free hand to fire workers. The raising of political slogans during strikes was banned entirely and any workers who encourage others to go on strike can be fired immediately. Workers who have previously been arrested, as were hundreds who participated in protests and strikes in the fall, can be fired solely on that basis. The government is clearly gearing up for an even bloodier repression of further signs of opposition within the working class.

Faced with this growing repression, workers cannot place any confidence in the imperialist powers or the EU. Their struggle against the Lukashenko government must proceed in complete independence from imperialism and the bourgeois opposition in the country, and on a socialist and internationalist basis.

The right-wing character of the pro-EU opposition is revealed most clearly in the political orientation of Protasevich himself. While workers should reject the attempts by Lukashenko to use this as an excuse for his attack on democratic rights and the hijacking of the plane, there is no question that Protasevich has well-documented, long-standing ties to the Ukrainian far right which played a central role in the EU- and US-backed coup in Kiev in 2014.

Andriy Biletsky, the founder of the notorious neo-Nazi Azov Battalion which has backers in the American and Ukrainian state, has confirmed that Protasevich was part of an "anti-terror operation" by the Azov Battalion in East Ukraine during the civil war, a code name for the crackdown on opposition to the Kiev government. Protasevich was reportedly also wounded.

In an interview last September with the Russian blogger Yuri Dud, Protasevich said that he had traveled to Ukraine to "come and have a look" at the Maidan and as well as the civil war in East Ukraine, but insisted that he worked only as a "journalist" and himself didn't participate in combat. At the time, the Lukashenko government, in fact, supported the coup. Its close relations with the Ukrainian government only soured last fall when Kiev shifted toward supporting the anti-Lukashenko opposition. Protasevich's NEXTA channel is being run from Warsaw and receives financial backing of the far-right Polish government of the Law and Justice party (PiS).

These ties underscore the sinister character of the operations of US and EU imperialism in Eastern Europe. During World War II, tens of millions of people, including virtually the entire Jewish population of Belarus, Ukraine and the Baltics, were murdered by the Nazis and their local fascist collaborators. Now, similar forces are being again promoted under the false banner of "human rights" and "democracy." Last Friday, the EU revealed a plan to send \$3 billion to Belarus once a "peaceful transition of power" is secured. The opposition laments that so far the financial and political aid from the imperialist powers has been insufficient, and is planning to resume mass protests.



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