

Pratasievich kidnapped: Lukashenka's brutal game

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On 23 May, the Belarusian government forced a Ryanair plane flying from Athens to Vilnius to land in Minsk, escorted by a MiG-29 fighter, under the pretence that there was a bomb on board. The local security authorities then arrested two of the passengers: Raman Pratasievich, a well-known blogger and anti-regime activist, and the former editor and co-founder of NEXTA, a very successful opposition channel on Telegram, and his partner. In November 2020, he was accused in absentia of participating in the preparation of illegal demonstrations and strikes, for which he is facing a sentence of 12 years' imprisonment. As yet, however, none of the charges brought against him could lead to the imposition of the death sentence. In their official communiqués, the Belarusian authorities are sticking to the story that the actions they took were a standard response to the possibility of a threat to flight safety, and that the decisions to divert the plane to Minsk and escort it with a military fighter were taken by President Lukashenka personally.

Commentary

- The decision to bring the plane to Minsk airport under the false pretext of a threat to the flight's safety confirms that fighting the opposition is now Lukashenka's main goal. It is considered unlikely that possible new sanctions by the EU or the US will mitigate the regime's repression. The special operation that led to Pratasievich's arrest is a demonstration of the strength and efficiency of the Belarusian security apparatus, and serves as a signal to opposition circles abroad that the regime will not give up pursuing them and that they cannot feel safe anywhere, even in the EU.
- Pratasievich most likely came under surveillance by the special services of Belarus and Russia during his stay in Greece, where he was accompanying opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. After the plane landed in Minsk, four Russian citizens (including Pratasievich's partner) left the plane and did not continue on to Vilnius, a strong indication that the Russian services participated in the operation. If true, this would have been another special joint operation by both countries after the KGB and FSB uncovered an alleged attempt on Lukashenka's life in April this year.
- Belarus's hijacking of a civil plane should give a strong push to implementing a fourth package of visa and economic sanctions against the country, which the EU has been discussing for several weeks. One way to strengthen the restrictions could be to close EU airspace to Belarusian civil aircraft. Lukashenka has consciously been violating a succession of 'red lines' by resorting to actions which are close to the definition of international terrorism; in doing so he has ostentatiously demonstrated his lack of willingness to communicate with the West. He hopes that further EU sanctions will not be

too hard on his regime, and that discussions about how far they should extend will be another topic which divides and weakens the West. It is possible that this attitude from Minsk has been inspired by the Kremlin, which wants to see the Belarusian regime continue its repression – and fall into deeper isolation.