

The American Conservative

What To Do About Belarus?

Doug Bandow

June 10, 2021

Planning to get back on a plane as the pandemic ebbs? Have a good flight. Though you don't know where you might end up.

The Belarus government recently skyjacked a flight by Ireland's Ryanair from Greece to Lithuania, kidnapping a young dissident and his girlfriend. Anyone wanted by any government suddenly must worry about his or her ultimate destination after boarding a flight.

The chief victim, Roman Protasevich, turned up on Belarusian television with what appeared to be facial bruises, indicating a beating, confessing various crimes and, in true *1984* fashion, crying while praising his oppressor, Alexander Lukashenko. Protasevich's girlfriend, Sofia Sapega, was also pulled off the grounded plane and showcased on TV. Next up will probably be a show trial appropriate for Joseph Stalin, in which his old revolutionary associates confessed to all sorts of fantastic crimes before the world.

Belarus is one of many ugly dictatorships. Lukashenko, long ago anointed "the last dictator of Europe," is the archetype tinpot despot—brutal, corrupt, malign. And under greater pressure after widespread popular protests over last year's electoral farce.

His country is rated "not free" by the group Freedom House. With virtually no political freedoms, it sits near the very bottom of global tyrannies. Explains Freedom House:

Belarus is an authoritarian state in which elections are openly rigged and civil liberties are severely restricted. After permitting limited displays of dissent as part of a drive to pursue better relations with the European Union (EU) and the United States, the government in 2020 cracked down on a massive antigovernment protest movement, sparked by a fraudulent presidential election, and severely limited fundamental civil liberties.

Lukashenko deserves to be tossed into history's great trash heap, but retains the loyalty of his nation's security forces. He also has the tepid backing of Russia's Vladimir Putin. They actually aren't buddies, despite the recent creepy footage of Lukashenko and his son enjoying a cruise on Putin's yacht. As Freedom House notes, Lukashenko had attempted to maintain distance from Moscow. But now he has nowhere else to turn and Putin is happy to tighten his hold over Russia's small neighbor.

What to do about Belarus? The U.S. has already reinstated sanctions on state companies and plans to target government officials and supporters as well. Minsk retaliated by reducing U.S. diplomatic staff, kicking out U.S. AID, and tightening visa issuance. The European Union so far has focused on aviation, diverting flights from Belarus airspace, closing members' airspace to Belarus, and sanctioning Belavia, Belarus' national airline, and aviation officials.

Despite the usual optimistic assertions that Lukashenko is vulnerable and just a little more effort could deliver Jeffersonian democracy on Moscow's doorstep, Washington and Brussels should step carefully. Anatol Lieven of the Quincy Institute noted the risk in promoting a violent breakdown: "Such a conflict would be very bad for the United States, Europe, and Russia, and an absolute catastrophe for the people of Belarus. Once again, the only place where it would be welcomed would be in Beijing. That alone should be sufficient reason for the Biden administration to observe great caution in its approach to Belarus."

The limits of American power and interest are evident. Until the brazen skyjacking, at least, what went on in Minsk had little security importance to America or Europe. Given geography alone, there is no military solution. Europeans who don't want to defend themselves certainly won't act. Even America's most bellicose neocons have not suggested invading a country on Russia's border. And a domestic uprising seen as fomented by the West would likely trigger military intervention by Moscow—to protect Russian influence, not Lukashenko's rule.

Economic sanctions are of limited use, as past efforts have achieved little. Hitting state companies will impose some cost on the Belarussian state, but may also hurt workers without much weakening Lukashenko. Broad economic restrictions would have more impact but mostly hurt the population, while targeted penalties would do little more than inconvenience regime factotums. The U.S. could impose financial sanctions, but the Trump administration's repeated effort to provoke regime change by starving entire populations—in Iran, Venezuela, and Syria most notably—was both ruthlessly immoral and embarrassingly ineffective. In all of these cases, Washington proved to be more cruel than competent.

Ironically, the best hope comes from Europe, through efforts to play on Lukashenko's fear of being dependent on Putin, a man not known for having many charitable impulses. Amid its public remonstrances, the European Union should undertake a low key diplomatic mission and offer to reverse its recent steps to isolate Belarus in return for concessions by Minsk. The release of Protasevich and Sapega should top any list,

perhaps on generic humanitarian grounds. This could be accompanied by an acknowledgement that the procedures used to intercept the Ryanair flight were, say, “irregular” and that new protocols should be agreed to. Then the Europeans could return to the difficult duty of trying to craft policies to encourage more political openness in Belarus.

Absent any movement on Lukashenko’s part, Washington and Brussels have cause to strike harder against the latest episode of air piracy. Law professor Alan Riley warns:

These actions by Lukashenko are not merely a breach of international flight rules. The effect is to undermine the rules-based international order, so that even the commonly accepted rules of global travel can be set aside at the whim of an autocrat. The risk of this act becoming a precedent is high—future flights could be hijacked and passengers held hostage for long periods.

Grounding Belavia, seizing its assets, and otherwise targeting the Belarussian state—such as the sale of sovereign debt—are possibilities. The EU appears to be moving in this direction, and the U.S. should assist. However, lest doing so make Lukashenko a permanent Russian dependent, the allies should include an off-ramp. He won’t relinquish power, but he might be willing to disgorge his prisoners and take other limited steps to forestall or reverse such penalties.

Although the latest incident is all about Belarus, the issue implicates far more culprits. In fact, the U.S. and friendly countries, despite their recent sanctimonious outbursts, have little credibility to complain about official air piracy.

In 2013, Washington engineered a conspiracy of three European nations to force down the plane carrying Bolivian President Evo Morales so it could be searched. The U.S. believed that Edward Snowden, living in exile in Russia after exposing NSA surveillance, might be on-board. In 2010, the U.S. forced an Air Mexico flight from France to Mexico to divert to Canada, where a passenger was arrested and later transferred to America. In 1985, U.S. warplanes intercepted an Egyptian Air flight bound for Tunisia carrying terrorists who had hijacked the Italian vessel Achille Lauro; the flight was diverted to a NATO airbase in Italy.

In 2016, Ukraine ordered a Belavia flight from Kyiv to Minsk to return, after which an Armenian critic of the Ukrainian government, Armen Martirosyan, was briefly detained and then released. Kyiv never explained the incident. In 1956, France intercepted a plane from Morocco to Tunisia over Algeria and forced it to land. Ben Bella, a leader of the Algerian resistance to French colonial rule, and later Algeria’s first president, was seized and imprisoned for six years in France. In 1954, Israel sent warplanes to grab a Syrian flight to Egypt, apparently in hopes of acquiring hostages to trade for Israeli soldiers captured by Damascus. There are plenty of other examples. One of the stranger cases was an apparent failed attempt last year by Ukraine’s government to arrange a flight of Russian mercenaries from Belarus to Turkey that could be forced down over Ukrainian airspace, allowing the passengers’ arrest.

None of these prior actions justify Lukashenko's repression or piracy. However, they expose as sanctimonious cant the uproar directed at Belarus. Gideon Rachman of the *Financial Times* cited:

The unfortunate precedent set by the U.S. through its policies of drone strikes and "extraordinary renditions," during its "war on terror." The Americans can point out that this kind of treatment was reserved for those who used or planned actual violence against the U.S. or its allies. But, to invert the old saying, one man's freedom fighter is another man's terrorist. Belarus had placed Protasevich on a terrorist watchlist. Restraint will never be likely in cases of great moment—the capture of violent terrorists or insurgent leaders, for instance. However, the Belarus skyjacking should become the occasion for discussion of rules to cover exceptional cases tied to violence, with sanctions set for violations. And the U.S., along with major European and Asian powers, should acknowledge past improprieties and pledge to lead by example in the future. They also should agree to a common set of penalties for future violations.

Of course, there is a certain callous irony in Washington and Brussels paying more attention to an aircraft diversion and arrest of two people than to a dictator turning an entire nation into an open air prison. However, such are the limitations of attempting to intervene within other nations. In contrast, the brazen skyjacking and kidnapping has impact well outside Belarus' borders and increases the dangers facing Americans and others flying internationally.

The people of Belarus deserve better from their government, and both Washington and Brussels should use their limited leverage to push political reform forward. Diplomacy might have more success attempting to limit official interference with air travel for political advantage and revenge. However, the latter will require U.S. as well as foreign restraint—something difficult for American policymakers used to playing masters of the universe.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the *Cato Institute*. A former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of *Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire*.