

Interpol Clashes with BBC over 2011 Minsk Metro Bombing

On 30 July, BBC showed a controversial documentary about the 2011 terrorist attack in Minsk where 15 people died and over 200 were injured. It questioned the guilt of the two men convicted and subsequently executed for it. The film provoked a strong reaction from the International Criminal Police Organisation (Interpol). Interpol labelled the BBC documentary as based on "biased speculation".

Back in 2011, Interpol publicly endorsed the preliminary results of the investigation which preceded the trial of two convicted young Belarusians. The international organisation was involved in the investigation and dispatched its experts to Minsk where it offered technical assistance. Now some in the Belarusian opposition criticise this international organisation for its failure to condemn the Belarusian regime. Interpol, however, insists that the official investigation was conducted professionally.

Emotions Against Evidence

The full BBC documentary is no longer available online – but a [brief transcript](#) gives a taste of it. The film blames the official investigation and relies primarily on anonymous sources. The author of the documentary John Sweeney describes how doubts about "the guilt of the two men convicted for the bomb have arisen. Now the Belarus KGB is being accused of planting the bomb, rigging a show trial and torturing confessions out of the two suspects".

However, the whole narrative of the BBC report appears to be built on one story told by the mother of one of the bombers. She gives her own, very humane but hardly impartial, version of what happened. According to the BBC journalist, the

campaign to rehabilitate her son launched by Lyubov Kovalyova might even threaten the Secretary General of Interpol who is American.

In addition to Lyubov Kovalyova's story, the report contains a quote from Natalya Kolyada, co-founder of the Belarus Free Theatre. "This was a KGB bomb. There are no facts whatsoever to prove something else." In its previous March report, the BBC covered the topic in the same way by quoting the mother and anonymous sources.

Interpol had to respond to the BBC report because the journalist essentially publicly reduced the organisation to an accomplice of a dictator. It insisted that, the "presumption of innocence of defendants ... was not breached". The [Interpol statement](#) also noted:

It is regrettable that none of the information provided by INTERPOL about the nature and strength of evidence obtained during Belarus's criminal investigation into the Minsk terrorist metro bombing was included by the documentary maker, who preferred instead to rely solely on biased speculation.

Both Belarusian investigators and Interpol draw attention to the publicly available CCTV footage. Criticising the BBC, Interpol asks, "it is not clear whether the journalist making the documentary saw any of the CCTV footage himself, or is relying on second-, third- or possibly fourth-hand information". Interpol officials believe that the CCTV footage explicitly proves at least some episodes concerning the bombing on 11 April.

Moreover, Interpol points to other forensic evidence such as apartment rental records, phone records, clothes, bomb materials, and numerous interviews with eyewitnesses. In other words, they highlight that the defendants' confession (according to the BBC documentary obtained by torture) was by

far not the only basis for conclusions reached by Belarusian investigators.

Some activists and media raised a number of legitimate questions concerning the trial, claiming in particular that the ICTV footage had been edited or that no traces of explosives had been found on the cloths of the bomber. A number of other procedural issues [looked questionable](#). Yet the substantive doubts have not been conclusively confirmed by experts.

The BBC documentary also accuses the Belarusian regime not only of the disappearance of four political opponents in 1999-2000 – something which has been [accepted by many](#) as the regime's crime – but it also puts forward a completely new accusation, much to the surprise of those who follow the situation in Belarus: "More than 30 others, the BBC has been told, were also killed by the death squad".

The journalist implies that these 30 persons were also political opponents of the regime. Neither the source, nor additional details to explain this accusation were provided. Even the most radical opposition groups never accused Lukashenka of killing so many political opponents.

When Belarusian Courts Can Get It Right

The case shows how it is easy to manipulate facts when dealing with a complex investigation in a country with a deplorable record of human rights. The Belarusian government, as always, cared very little about transparency and publicity. The EU foreign affairs chief Catherine Ashton said that both men had not been accorded due legal process. British Europe Minister David Lidington claimed that independent reports had "raised serious and credible concerns over the standard of evidence and fairness" of the process.

Of course, much of this criticism has been linked with the EU's concern about the death penalty in Belarus – the only

European country which still uses it. Yet it is important to avoid explicitly denouncing this serious crime or even ridiculing the Belarusian tragedy. In May, the mother and sister of Uladzislau Kavalyou were invited to Poland where they met the wife of the Polish president and got extensive media coverage. This hardly helps with the goal of struggling with the dictatorship in Belarus or improve ties between two countries.

Some in Belarus and abroad tend to criticise the regime in Belarus without a bit of substantial evidence. This culminated in an action on 16 March when a number of internet activists urged people to bring flowers to the metro bombing place for the two convicted men and show solidarity with them. Several dozen people showed up. A similar action also took place in Moscow.

[Dismissing the entire Belarusian state](#) as a dictatorship is a mechanism that does not help to actually influence what is going on in the country. Such an attitude destroys the very foundations of the state, undermining the future of the Belarusian government after Lukashenka is gone. Some parts of the Belarusian state do function more or less as they should, and according to Interpol the investigation of the 2011 metro bombing proved it.