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## **BELARUSIAN COURT REJECTS ISRAELI BLOGGER'S APPEAL AGAINST EXTRADITION TO AZERBAIJAN**

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Alexander Lapshin is wanted in Azerbaijan following visits he made to the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh as well as his criticism of President Ilham Aliyev's regime.

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The Minsk District Court rejected Israeli blogger Alexander Lapshin's appeal against the Belarussian Ministry of Justice's decision to extradite him to Azerbaijan on Thursday. Lapshin is wanted in Azerbaijan following visits he made to the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh, to which Baku claims sovereignty but is under Armenian control, as well as his criticism of President Ilham Aliyev's regime.

A senior official in Jerusalem stated that Israel is continuing to cooperate with Russia, of which Lapshin is also a citizen, in order to thwart the extradition, though they were pessimistic over the chances of success.

Lapshin, 40, who splits his time between Israel and some other places, was arrested on December 15 in Minsk, the capital of Belarus following a request by Azerbaijani authorities who demanded his extradition. The arrest took place a day after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's visit to Baku.

Ten days ago, Lapshin was notified by Belarusian officials that a decision has been made to extradite him to Azerbaijan and that he may appeal the decision. His attorney filed an appeal, which was rejected on Thursday. Following the court's decision, the attorney filed an appeal with Belarus's Supreme Court, which is slated to review the case on February 4, and decide the case within three days thereafter. The Israeli official said that if Lapshin's appeal is rejected by the Supreme Court, he may be extradited at any given moment. "Lapshin's attorney estimates that the Azerbaijani plane that is supposed to take him to his trial in Baku already landed in Minsk," the official said.

Israel is holding intensive diplomatic discussions with Belarus, Russia and Azerbaijan in an attempt to thwart the extradition. Last week, the Israeli Foreign Ministry was more optimistic due to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's statement that Russia opposes the extradition. Russia has many ways to apply pressure on both Belarus and Azerbaijan, and foreign ministry officials thought that Lavrov's statement would lead to a breakthrough and the eventual release of the blogger.

Despite this, the Azerbaijani response to Lavrov's statements was extremely cool. Azerbaijan's

Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov said that Lapshin broke Azerbaijani law at that the extradition request filed with Belarus was in accordance with all international conventions. "I believe that Russia authorities would have taken similar steps if a man had committed similar offenses against Russia and crossed the border illegally," he said.

Senior officials in Jerusalem stated that since Lavrov made his statement, Israel's Ambassador to Moscow Gary Koren met with Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov and asked that Russia continue applying pressure to thwart the extradition. The Russian pressure has yet to produce results thus far. On Thursday, after the court ruling, Ambassador Koren contacted Ryabkov again regarding this matter. The Israeli officials said they were pessimistic over the chances of success and expressed fear that the blogger will be extradited.

Last week, Israel gave Azerbaijan a proposal to end the crisis, which included a letter by the blogger in which he apologized for visiting the Nagorno-Karabakh region and for his criticism of the regime, as well as a letter by his mother in which she pleaded for the Azerbaijanis to forgive her son. Israel asked that Azerbaijan rescind the extradition but, according to a senior Israeli official, refused the Israeli proposal and said that they were determined to go through with the extradition.

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