



Delegation for relations with Belarus

**JOINT STATEMENT BY THE CHAIR OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN
AFFAIRS, MEP David McALLISTER, THE CHAIR OF THE DELEGATION
FOR RELATIONS WITH BELARUS, MEP Robert BIEDRO , AND
THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT’S STANDING RAPPOREUR ON BELARUS,
MEP Petras AUŠTREVIIUS**

**on the diversion of a civilian passenger plane by the Belarusian authorities
and subsequent arrest of independent journalist and blogger Raman
Pratasevich**

Brussels, 23 May 2021 - “Today, Belarusian authorities have diverted a passenger plane flying from Athens to Vilnius, using an alleged bomb threat as a pretext to have it intercepted by the Belarusian air force and oblige it to perform an emergency landing in Minsk. The sole purpose of this horrendous manoeuvre was manifestly to arrest one of the passengers of the plane, Mr Raman Pratasevich, co-founder and former editor-in-chief of the opposition Nexta channel. The state-owned news agency Belta admitted that the whole operation had been carried out by Aliaksandr Lukashenka’s direct order.

The Nexta channel has been a major source of independent information for Belarusian citizens, and Mr Pratasevich has been vocal about the regime’s dire human rights record. He has been living in exile in Poland and Lithuania since 2019 to avoid fabricated criminal charges and may now face death penalty in Belarus.

These latest despicable actions constitute a blatant violation of international law. We condemn in the strongest possible terms the endangering of the lives of the 171 passengers who were on-board of this internal EU flight. This is a shocking escalation that demands a resolute response from the EU.

We call on the Belarusian authorities to release Mr Pratasevich immediately and unconditionally.

As an EU asylee, Mr Pratasevich is protected by article 19 of the European Charter of Fundamental Rights, which categorically states that *'no one may be removed, expelled or extradited to a State where there is a serious risk that he or she would be subjected to the death penalty, torture or other inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment'*.

We urge the President of the European Council, representatives of EU Member States, as well as the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy to address this issue during tomorrow's summit and to proceed with utmost urgency with the fourth package of sanctions against officials who take part in or are complicit of the electoral fraud and subsequent human rights violations in Belarus, including the persecution of independent journalists and bloggers, as well as companies who support A. Lukashenka and his regime.

We also call on the EEAS and national diplomatic representations in Belarus to monitor Mr Pratasevich's situation, to offer him any support that he may need and to work together to secure his swift release."

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