



The Eurasia Center

# Belarus – Hijacking a Dissident

June 2021



Dissident journalist Raman Pratasevich (left) weeps into his hands during a televised interview with Belarusian journalist Marat Markau, broadcasted on the state controlled ONT Channel on Thursday, 3 June 2021 Source: ONT Channel via the [Associated Press](#)

**EURASIA NEWS**

**Morgan Berk**

**The Eurasia Center**

[www.EurasiaCenter.org](http://www.EurasiaCenter.org)

## **Belarus, State-Sponsored Airplane Hijacking and the Detention of Opposition Journalists**

From August 2020 onwards, Belarusian authorities responded to massive, peaceful protests and a revitalized pro-democracy movement with the most repressive crackdown on freedoms of expression, assembly, and association since the former Soviet republic's independence in 1991. Sparked by the results of the flawed presidential election on August 9, in which incumbent President Alexander Lukashenko claimed to receive 80-percent of the vote in securing his sixth consecutive term, hundreds of thousands of demonstrators have taken to the streets to demand their right to free and fair elections. Infamously dubbed the “last dictatorship in Europe,” Belarus' first and only democratically elected president has steadily consolidated power through authoritarian means, legally enforced state control over media, and increasingly silenced forms of dissent since July 1994.



Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko on 28 May 2021.

Source: Sergei Sheleg/ BelTA Pool Photo via the [Associated Press](#)

The results of the August 9 election have been emphatically declared as fraudulent by democratic governments and institutions worldwide – including the United States and the European Union – and emergent Belarusian opposition leader, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, is largely seen as the legitimate leader of the country. Tsikhanouskaya, who forwarded her candidacy as the face of the anti-regime opposition following the arrest of her spouse and former presidential candidate, Siarhei Tsikhanouski, is speculated to have received up to 13 times more votes than were officially reported as Lukashenko’s main opponent. Now operating as the popularly recognized “leader of democratic Belarus,” Tsikhanouskaya leads the opposition from Lithuania, where the Lithuanian Foreign Ministry provides her protection in defiance of Belarusian requests for her extradition on accusations of conspiracy to incite riots, among others.

Using violent and disproportionate force, state authorities have detained over 32,000 demonstrators since August, including nearly 7,000 protestors over the course of a four-day period, and have caused at least four deaths. Subsequent reports of beatings and torture prompted an independent, expert investigation by 17 participating States of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in September 2020, through which the existence of “massive and systemic” human rights violations in Belarus was reported. According to the documentation of various human rights organizations, the Belarusian government opened more than 900 related criminal cases against protestors and opposition leaders by the end of 2020.

At the forefront of Lukashenko’s political repression, however, dissident journalists remain a primary target. The Belarusian Association of Journalists reports the detention of over 400 journalists on administrative charges between August 2020 and March 2021, with arbitrary arrests and beatings, revoked media credentials, raids, fines, and prison sentences making Belarus one of the most dangerous countries for journalists globally. According to veteran Belarusian journalist and Nonresident Fellow of the Atlantic Council, [Hanna Liubakova](#): “Bloggers and independent journalists have long been among (Lukashenko’s) key targets in his campaign to silence all dissent. The Belarus dictator is keen to promote the idea that it is digital technologies and not his own misrule, human rights violations, and mounting poverty that has mobilized Belarusians to protest against him.”

In the latest manifestation of President Alexander Lukashenko’s tightening campaign of political repression, 26-year-old Belarusian opposition journalist, Raman Pratasevich, faces up to twenty years of imprisonment following his detainment on Sunday, May 23. Pratasevich, the founder and former co-editor of the Nexta Telegram channel, and his girlfriend, Russian national Sofia Sapega, were arrested by Belarusian authorities in Minsk after Ryanair Flight FR4978, routed for Vilnius, Lithuania from Athens, Greece, was intercepted by a Belarusian MiG-29 fighter jet. The flight, escorted by the fighter jet, was ordered to reroute its course and land in Minsk.



Minsk airport security use sniffer dogs to check the luggage of the diverted Ryanair flight's passengers following the forced landing. Source: ONLINER.BY via the [Associated Press](#)

Belarusian authorities claimed to have received a bomb threat against the flight as the cause for its forced landing while crossing Belarusian air space, although no explosive materials were found on the plane. Belarusian Transport Ministry official, Artem Sikorsky, stated that the Minsk international airport received the threat in an email from the Palestinian group Hamas, despite rejections of this claim by Hamas spokesperson Farzi Barhoum. President Lukashenko then indicated that the bomb threat came from Switzerland when speaking to a group of officials in Minsk on Wednesday, May 26, though the Swiss Foreign Ministry [released a statement](#) confirming that “the Swiss authorities have no knowledge of a bomb threat on the Ryanair Athens-Vilnius flight.” In an interview with Irish Newstalk radio, Ryanair CEO Michael [O’Leary stated](#) that the apparent “intent of the authorities was to remove a journalist and his traveling companion,” denouncing Belarus’ actions as “state-sponsored hijacking” and further indicating that KGB agents were onboard the flight and offloaded in Minsk, thereby raising questions about possible Russian involvement – although reports remain unconfirmed.



Dissident journalist Raman Pratasevich (26) in Minsk, Belarus on 17 November 2019.

Source. Euroradio via the [Associated Press](#)

Pratasevich fled Belarus in 2019 but had been active in covering the anti-regime protest movement and political repression through the Nexta channel, which receives a following of nearly 2 million Belarusians in a nation with a population of 9.4 million. In November 2020, Pratasevich was charged under Articles 293(1) (“Organization of mass disorders”), 342(1) (“Organization or active participation in group actions that severely violate public order”), and 130(3) (“Incitement of racial, ethnic, religious or other social hatred or enmity”) of the Belarusian Criminal Code. In addition to this, he became the first citizen to be listed on Belarus’ official terrorist list on November 19.

Following his detainment, Pratasevich was displayed in a video broadcast on state-run television on Monday, May 24 stating his cooperation with the investigators and “confessing to organizing mass disorders in the city of Minsk.” The visible bruising of Pratasevich’s face elicited an outpouring of concern by human rights observers, opposition leaders, and his parents, Dzmitry and Natallya, who [told Current Time](#) that the “confession” was the result of the state authorities’ attempt to “justify taking hostage” their son and his girlfriend.

Far more troublesome, however, was the 90-minute, state-televised ‘interview’ aired on the ONT channel’s Nothing Personal program on the evening of Thursday, June 3, wherein Pratasevich reiterated his confession and announced his respect for President Lukashenko. “In many moments,

(Lukashenko) acted like a man with balls of steel,” [Pratasevich expressed](#), urging the opposition movement to “abandon... the street activity we had before.” Instead, he argued the need to “wait until the economic situation worsens... and people take to the street for a bowl of soup, to put it bluntly.” At the conclusion of the broadcast, Pratesevich expressed his hope to “live an ordinary, calm life” before weeping into his hands.

Alleging his contact with coup conspirators and their liaison with opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Pratasevich’s televised appearance included his speculation that the bomb threat had been issued by someone with whom he had personal contact prior to the flight’s departure. To this end, Pratasevich spoke of a recent rift with Franak Viachorka, a political advisor to Tsikhanouskaya, although Viachorka insisted upon the “friendly ties” between them and [told The Associated Press](#) that Pratasevich is being held as “a hostage under pressure.” Speaking to members of the media in Warsaw on the morning of Friday, June 4, Tsikahnouskaya [affirmed that](#) “all such videos are done under pressure,” and that “through using violence you can make a person say whatever you want.” Speculation of the use of physical and psychological torture against Pratasevich has been echoed by observers internationally, including Amnesty International’s Eastern Europe and Central Asia Director, Marie Struthers, [who said](#): “Raman Pratasevich’s forced ‘confession’ on Belarusian state TV was devastating to watch. He was painfully on the edge of breaking down, in tears and with visible wounds on his wrists, as he was forced to incriminate himself and praise his captors. It was televised coercion.”



Belarusian opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya speaks at a news conference in Vilnius, Lithuania on 25 May 2021, urging the European Union to intensify sanctions and pressure on authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko’s regime. Source: Mindaugas Kulbis of the [Associated Press](#)

The fraudulent results of the August 9 election, in addition to the human rights abuses inflicted and the political repression of the peaceful protest movement, prompted the progressive implementation of restrictive measures and sanctions against Belarus by the EU and the US. A total of 88 individuals and seven Belarusian entities are designated under the renewed EU sanctions regime, while U.S. sanctions were reimposed on nine state-owned companies in April 2021 – including the oil company Belneftkhim, which produces approximately 30% of Belarus’ industrial output. In response to the forced landing of the Ryanair flight and detainment of Raman Pratasevich, the EU pushed through new sanctions with an unusual swiftness on Monday, May 24, [calling on the 27-member bloc](#) to “adopt necessary measures to ban overflight of EU airspace by Belarusian airlines and prevent access to EU airports,” in addition to requested flight bans over Belarusian airspace. Further actions included a request for the International Civil Aviation Organization to investigate the incident.

President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, [characterized the event as](#) “an attack on democracy,” “an attack on freedom of expression,” and “an attack on European sovereignty,” adding that a €3 billion EU investment and economic package for Belarus will remain on hold until Belarus “turns democratic.” US President Joe Biden announced the similar development of further sanctions in close coordination with the EU and allies. The Biden administration also announced plans to address the situation in Belarus with Russian President Vladimir Putin during the anticipated Geneva Summit in Switzerland on June 16.

Following the disturbing broadcast of June 3, the EU moved to bar Belarusian state flag carrier, Belavia, from European airports and finalized the European flight ban over Belarusian airspace. The European air traffic control agency, Eurocontrol, claimed that 400 civilian flights would typically fly over Belarus in a day. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy ordered the termination of air traffic with Belarus on Monday, May 24. Previously, Minsk served as the preferred route of travel between Ukraine and Russia since the cancellation of direct flights between the two nations in 2015.

Despite European moves to ban flights over Belarusian airspace, Russia has forced at least two European airlines to cancel flights to Moscow by failing to approve new flight plans with detours around Belarus. Although Russian airlines have made several flights bypassing Belarus, sources from relevant Russian departments [told Forbes](#) that technical reasons related to fuel efficiency are probable reasons, rather than political motives. Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov [announced](#) the coordination of Belarusian and Russian transport ministries to “organize air transportation” in aims to offset the financial impact of the EU’s flight ban.

As Belarus faces increasing isolation from the West, Lukashenko continues to deepen the nation’s notable dependency on the Russian Federation. Amid the international outrage following the landing of the Ryanair flight, for example, Russian President Vladimir Putin hosted Lukashenko on a Black Sea yacht trip in Sochi on Saturday, May 29. After extensive talks between

the two leaders, Russia announced that a delayed \$500 million loan to Belarus would be released by the end of June, representing the second half of a \$1 billion financial package agreed between Moscow and Minsk in December 2020.

While the situation unfolds in Belarus, observers continue to speculate on the potential influence of Russian aggression on the brazenness of President Lukashenko's political repression. "Over the past two years, (Lukashenko) has witnessed the Kremlin murder a Chechen opposition figure in Berlin in 2019, poison and then arrest Alexander Navalny in 2020 and 2021, and pay no price," [notes](#) director of the Atlantic Council's Eurasia Center, John Herbst. Commenting on the alleged Russian involvement in the Ryanair flight incident, Senior Fellow of the German Marshall Fund's Frontlines of Democracy Initiative, Johnathan Katz, [claims that](#): "If suspicions of Moscow's participation prove correct, it will indicate the deepening involvement of Russia in Belarus' domestic and foreign affairs, including the intelligence services. This should be of immediate concern for the security of the U.S., the Baltic countries, Poland, and all NATO allies."



Pictured: An opposition rally and march drawing in tens of thousands in Minsk on 18 October 2020, protesting the results of the August 9 presidential election. Source: [Associated Press Photo](#)



