

URGENT ACTION

JOURNALIST FACING TORTURE AFTER ABDUCTION

Exiled Belarusian journalist and government critic, Raman Pratasevich, was unlawfully arrested on 23 May by the Belarusian authorities along with his partner Sofia Sapega, a Russian national. Their Athens-Vilnius flight was diverted and forced to land in Minsk under false pretext. Raman Pratasevich was wanted by the Belarusian authorities on trumped-up “terrorism” charges solely for his journalistic work. If convicted, Raman Pratasevich is facing up to 20 years' imprisonment. A televised “confession” may indicate torture and other ill-treatment.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

Ivan Kubrakou

Prosecutor General of the Republic of Belarus

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Dear Prosecutor General,

I am writing to demand the immediate release of **Raman Pratasevich** and **Sofia Sapega**, arrested on 23 May 2021 after their Athens-Vilnius flight was forcibly diverted by the Belarusian authorities to Minsk under false pretext. Raman 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 Criminal Code. The grounds for Sofia Sapega's arrest have not been disclosed. It appears that they have been detained in retaliation for Raman Pratasevich's critical journalistic work.

There is no evidence that Raman Pratasevich and Sofia Sapega have committed an internationally recognized crime, and their detention is arbitrary. Their arrest was conducted in an unlawful and reckless manner, putting all passengers of the plane at risk when a Belarusian Air Force fighter jet diverted their flight and escorted it to Minsk.

On 24 May, Belarusian state television broadcast Raman Pratasevich's self-incriminating statement in front of a camera with clear bruises on his face. I am concerned that this “confession” may have been extracted by force. Amnesty International has documented widespread use of torture and other ill-treatment in Belarus, violations of the right to a fair trial, and arbitrary prosecution of peaceful protesters and independent journalists in Belarus.

In light of the above, I urge you to:

- **Immediately and unconditionally release Raman Pratasevich, Sofia Sapega and all those who have been arbitrarily detained and imprisoned in Belarus under trumped-up politically motivated charges in retaliation for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly;**
- **Take immediate steps to protect Raman Pratasevich and Sofia Sapega from torture and other ill-treatment, including by launching an effective investigation into credible allegations of torture, and ensuring they have immediate, unimpeded and confidential access to a lawyer of their choice.**

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Raman Pratasevich is a Belarusian journalist, co-founder of the popular NEXTA Telegram channel, which became a key tool for information-sharing, mobilization and coordination of peaceful protests against widely-disputed presidential election results in August 2020. He left NEXTA in September 2020 and has been editing the Belamova Telegram channel since then.

Since 2019, Raman Pratasevich has been living outside Belarus out of fear for his safety. On 5 November 2020, he was charged with "organization of mass disorder", "organization of group actions that severely violate public order" and "inciting hatred towards social groups" (these "groups" being police officers and government officials). On 19 November, he was put on the country's official "List of Terrorists" becoming the first Belarusian citizen included on the list.

On 23 May 2021, Raman Pratasevich was travelling to Vilnius from Athens with his partner Sofia Sapega. When their RyanAir flight was flying over Belarus, it was diverted by Belarusian air traffic controllers and ordered to land in Minsk Airport, ostensibly due to a report of a bomb on board. A fighter jet belonging to the Belarusian Air Forces was deployed "to accompany" the civilian aircraft to Minsk. After landing, Raman Pratasevich and Sofia Sapega were detained by the Belarusian security services, while their Ryanair flight was allowed to proceed to Vilnius, some five hours later. If convicted, Pratasevich is facing up to 20 years' imprisonment. He is also at serious risk of torture and other ill-treatment.

Charges against Sofia Sapega, who is a Russian citizen and a student at the European Humanitarian University in Vilnius, are unknown. As of 25 May, there have been no reports of either of them having been visited by a lawyer.

On 24 May, pro-government media issued a video depicting Raman Pratasevich in a room with his face swollen and with what looks like a bruise on his forehead. In the video, he says that he is being held at SIZO-1 detention centre in Minsk and is "cooperating with the investigators" and "giving confessions related to organization of mass disorders in the city of Minsk". He also says that he is being treated "in a correct and lawful way by the officers". Such video "confessions" extracted under torture and other ill-treatment or duress have been repeatedly used by the Belarusian authorities to intimidate their opponents and discredit detainees.

Torture and other ill-treatment have been widespread in Belarus against detained opponents of Alyaksandr Lukashenka, who claims to have won the August 2020 elections. During the protests that followed the disputed election, over 30,000 people were arbitrarily detained. Scores were sentenced to so-called administrative detention or given hefty fines. Hundreds complained of torture or other ill-treatment. Several hundreds have been prosecuted under politically-motivated criminal charges, and many have been given long prison sentences following unfair trials. The number of individuals prosecuted under criminal charges as part of the authorities' crackdown on peaceful dissent is constantly growing.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: Belarusian, Russian, English.

You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 20 July 2021

Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PREFERRED PRONOUN: Raman Pratasevich (also Roman Protasevich if using Russian spelling, he/him), Sofia Sapega (she/her).