

By Email

May 26, 2021

The Right Honourable Justin Trudeau, P.C., M.P.
Prime Minister of Canada
Langevin Block
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0A2

Dear Prime Minister:

We are writing you as organizations committed to press freedom to call on your government to take even more robust action against the Government of Belarus after President Alexander Lukashenko's direct order to have a Belarusian military aircraft intercept Ryanair flight FR4978 traveling from Athens, Greece, to Vilnius, Lithuania, this past weekend and force it to land in Belarus' capital, Minsk, in order to illegally arrest and imprison Roman Protasevich, a blogger and activist whose social media channels have criticized the illegitimacy and brutality of the Lukashenko government.

Global Affairs Minister Marc Garneau tweeted Sunday, "The deviation by Belarus and forced landing of a @Ryanair plane in Minsk and arrest of journalist Roman Pratasevich are a serious interference in civil aviation and a clear attack on media freedom. Canada calls on #Belarus to free Mr. Pratasevich."

In your media briefing yesterday, you said, "The behaviour of the Belarus regime is outrageous, illegal and completely unacceptable. This was a clear attack on democracy and on the freedom of the press. We condemn it and call for his immediate release...We also condemn this kind of dangerous interference in civil aviation. Canada has existing sanctions in place against Belarus and we'll be examining further options."

While Minister Garneau's immediate response and your response yesterday are welcome, the Canadian government must do much more. Hijacking a civilian aircraft flying between two EU member countries to arrest Mr. Protasevich is only the latest and most extreme action taken by the Lukashenko government to suppress press freedom and public expression in Belarus.

As documented by Human Rights Watch, Belarusian authorities have arbitrarily detained and beaten journalists, imposed fines and prison sentences on politically motivated charges, revoked their media credentials, and raided their homes and offices.

More than 35,000 Belarusians have been arrested, thousands have been abused and tortured in police custody, and thousands more face criminal charges and long-term prison sentences. At least seven people have died, more than 400 are acknowledged as political prisoners and tens of thousands have fled the country.

We urge your government step up its demand for the immediate release of Roman Protasevich and his travel companion, Sofia Sapega. As the history of the Lukashenko government suggests this is unlikely to happen soon, Canada should openly join the EU in providing maximum attention, legal aid, and material assistance to this latest political prisoner and his coming show trial in which the prosecution may demand the death penalty. Canada should also consult with the other 36 countries in the Media Freedom Coalition to encourage the broadest possible international expression of outrage over the attacks on press freedom in Belarus.

We also call on Canada to join with its international partners in liaising with the International Civil Aviation Organization to launch an international investigation into this incident. This inquiry needs to clarify the exact circumstances of the forced landing, make public all communications on board the plane and with Belarusian air traffic control and establish whether breaches of international conventions have taken place. Particular attention should be paid to the identities and role of three Russian citizens, likely operatives, who debarked the plane in Minsk. Should Kremlin involvement be established, Russia must be held responsible for the incident in its own right.

Finally, Canada should step beyond the sanctions already imposed on Lukashenko and other Belarusian officials to increase the pressure on the

regime. In expanding its sanctions, we encourage you to join the broadened sanctions being planned by the EU and the United States as a template for Canada's next steps.

This is a matter of considerable importance for which Canada must play a more vigorous and assertive role.

Yours sincerely,

James L. Turk
Director
Centre for Free Expression
Ryerson University

Shawn McCarthy
Vice-President
World Press Freedom Canada

M. Philip Tunley
President
Canadian Journalists for Free Expression

Cc: The Hon. Marc Garneau, Minister of Global Affairs
Mr. Erin O'Toole, Leader of the Opposition
Mr. Jagmeet Singh, Leader of the NDP
M. Yves-François Blanchet, Leader of the Bloc Québécois
Ms. Elizabeth May, Green Party Parliamentary Leader
Ms. Annamie Paul, Leader of the Green Party