



## The Forced Landing and Arrest of Raman Pratasevich

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On 23 May, the Belarusian authorities forced a passenger plane registered in Poland to land in Minsk. The plane was in Belarusian airspace, but flying from Athens to Vilnius. Among the passengers was Raman Pratasevich, the co-founder of the opposition news portal Nexta, who was arrested after landing. In Belarus, he is accused of conducting terrorist activities, for which he may face the death penalty.

### Why was the plane forced to land?

According to the official position of the Belarusian authorities, Ryanair FR4978 was forced to make an emergency landing at the airport in Minsk due to information received by the Belarusian security services that there was a bomb on board. The plane was intercepted just before leaving Belarusian airspace and re-directed to Minsk, even though the destination airport in Vilnius was closer. An armed MiG-29 fighter was sent to intercept it, reportedly on direct orders from Alexander Lukashenka. The real reason for forcing the plane to land now appears to be the arrest of Pratasevich, the co-founder of the Nexta portal, one of the main sources of independent information during the mass protests against the rigging of [the presidential elections](#) in 2020.

Belarus' actions violated many norms of international law, including the Chicago Convention on International Civil Aviation and the Montreal Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts Against the Safety of Civil Aviation.

### What is the significance of this incident?

In forcing the passenger plane to make an emergency landing in Minsk and arresting Pratasevich, the Belarusian authorities achieved several goals. It is a strong message to Belarusians living in exile abroad because of political persecution that they are not safe and that Belarusian services will violate international law to bring them back to Belarus to condemn them there. The incident demonstrated the capability and effectiveness of the Belarusian KGB to conduct operations in the EU where Pratasevich was under surveillance, for example, in Greece. It is highly probable that this action was carried out in close

coordination with Russia as a demonstration of Lukashenka's power, backed by unequivocal Russian support. Belarusian-Russian joint special operations will be a significant challenge to the security and counterintelligence services of Western countries.

### What has been the reaction of EU countries?

Most European Union countries and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell strongly condemned the incident, pointing out that it bears hallmarks of state terrorism, and by forcing the plane to land, comprised *de facto* hijacking. Representatives of many EU countries, including Poland, are calling for further sanctions against the Belarusian authorities and the immediate release of Pratasevich. Poland and others have requested this incident be the subject of debate at the European Council meeting that starts today (24 May). In addition, there have been demands to suspend Belarusian state-owned Belavia airlines from flying through EU countries, at least until this incident has been resolved. Moreover, Latvia has already announced that AirBaltic planes will avoid Belarusian airspace.

### What is the significance of Lukashenka's actions for Poland?

The unlawful actions of the Belarusian services are carried out on Lukashenka's command. This incident is a signal to the Belarusian diaspora, which has found refuge mainly in Poland where they are seeking international protection here, that its representatives are under constant operational control and, under favourable circumstances, may be kidnapped and taken to Belarus. It was also

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a demonstration to the Polish authorities that projects conducted in Poland against the Lukashenka regime (e.g., the activity of independent media), Belarusian citizens may be held criminally liable. Poland should be prepared for similar, or even more aggressive, attempts by Belarusian

activities, also on Polish territory. As the plane that was forced to land was registered in Poland, in addition to prosecuting the direct perpetrators of the hijacking, it will be able to pursue claims under the provisions of the Montreal Convention.