

United States Mission to the OSCE



On the Forced Landing of Ryanair Flight 4978 in Minsk on May 23, 2021

As delivered by Deputy Political Counselor Lewis Gitter
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
July 28, 2022

I am delivering this statement on behalf of Canada, the United Kingdom, and my own country, the United States.

On May 23 last year, the Lukashenka regime purposefully concocted a false bomb threat in order to force the pilots of Ryanair Flight 4978 to land in Minsk for the sole purpose of arresting and detaining opposition journalist Raman Pratasevich. Pratasevich remains under house arrest in Belarus and continues to be victimized as a prop in the Lukashenka regime's propaganda efforts. Meanwhile, Sofiya Sapega, who was traveling with Pratasevich on May 23, is serving a six-year prison sentence based on politically-motivated charges.

The Lukashenka regime flagrantly violated international aviation law to repress dissent, silence independent voices, and send an ominous signal to opponents that being outside the borders of Belarus was no guarantee of safety. It was a blatant act of transnational repression. We welcome ICAO's July 19 report on the incident and its condemnation of the Lukashenka regime's unlawful interference and misuse of civil aviation. Following a detailed investigation, the ICAO Council determined that the bomb threat against Ryanair Flight 4978 was "deliberately false and endangered its safety, and furthermore that the threat was communicated to the flight crew upon the instructions of senior government officials of Belarus."

We condemn the Lukashenka regime's continued efforts to brutally repress the exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms and its crackdown on the pro-democracy movement, including its acts of transnational repression targeting members of the democratic opposition, journalists, and civil society located outside of Belarus. We also condemn the Lukashenka regime's facilitation of Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine. The regime must end its support to Russia's invasion and respect Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty in line with its international obligations.

The Lukashenka regime has expressed no remorse for its actions regarding the Ryanair flight and has not cooperated meaningfully with international investigations into the incident. The Lukashenka regime continues to take repressive measures against political opponents, journalists, students, human rights defenders, strikers, civil society activists, and ordinary Belarusians -- both those inside the country and those who have fled the regime's continuing crackdown.

Ahead of the 2nd anniversary of the fraudulent August 9 presidential election in Belarus -- and against the grim backdrop of two years of the Lukashenka regime's violent crackdown against the pro-democracy movement -- we reaffirm our commitment to working with our partners to hold accountable those responsible for its human rights violations and abuses, as well as its acts of transnational repression. The forced diversion of Ryanair Flight 4978 not only violated international law, but endangered the lives of innocent passengers on board the plane that day. We call on Belarus to implement the Moscow Mechanism Expert Mission's recommendation to release all political prisoners immediately, including Pratasevich and Sapega, to stop its repression of the pro-democracy movement in Belarus, and to allow for free and fair elections.

###