

## **Joint call to make respect for press freedom a cornerstone of all demands towards Belarus**

The hijacking of a plane and kidnapping of editor and blogger Raman Pratasevich is viewed by the free expression, press freedom and journalists' community as the outrageous climax of a broader campaign against media freedom in Belarus that drastically intensified after the August 2020 election.

### **Joint call to make respect for press freedom a cornerstone of all demands towards Belarus**

The undersigned organisations are calling for the international community to make respect for press freedom a cornerstone of all demands it voices towards Lukashenka's regime. The hijacking is yet another step in a massive attack on press freedom and should not be treated as a separate incident. Any response from the international community must be seen within the broader context and addressed as such.

Before his arrest, Raman Pratasevich was already on the wanted list for the role his media outlets played in the coverage of Belarus protests. The Telegram channel NEXTA, where he was editor-in-chief, was particularly instrumental in inspiring and maintaining the protest movement. For this, Belarusian courts added NEXTA to a list of banned "extremist materials," while Pratasevich himself was labeled an "individual involved in extremist activity". The case of Raman Pratasevich is unfortunately only one incident in the pattern of unspeakable repercussions against the media by the Belarusian authorities.

Since [August 2020](#), there have been more than 550 instances of journalists being arbitrarily detained and they have spent more than 3, 000 days in jail collectively. In an attempt to silence all independent reporting, journalists have frequently been held under administrative arrest for a period of 15-30 days. At the time of writing, 28 journalists and media actors are imprisoned or under some form of detention or arrest, including two TV journalists, Daria Chultsova and Katsiaryna Andreyeva, who were sentenced in February to two years in prison for "organizing activities that violate public order". On 25 May, seven people, including writer and prominent politician Pavel Seviarynets, blogger Zmitser Kazlou, and editor Iryna Shchasnaya, were sentenced to 4 to 7 years imprisonment.

As emphasized by the UN special rapporteur on Belarus and in the OSCE rapporteur's [report](#) under the Moscow Mechanism, the crackdown against media workers and human rights defenders also constitutes gender-based violence. Sexual violence, including threats of rape, have been reported against these groups – especially in detention centers. There is limited evidence that the authorities intend to launch investigations into these reports. Whilst women have been at the forefront of the protests, there is systematic repression of female opposition leaders, as well as biased, sexist news coverage of their actions. Further, there is a continued trend of threats and deprivation of custodial rights as a way of silencing women protesters.

In the midst of the fallout from the hijacking of the Ryanair flight, on 24 May Lukashenka simultaneously signed new amendments to the Mass Media Law that enable further repression of independent media, and all but outlaw their activities. When the amendments come into effect, the Information Ministry will be authorized to shut down media outlets without a court order. Amendments also include a ban for news media to report live from unauthorized mass gatherings and extends the right to block and censor websites to local prosecutors. Furthermore, authorities have voiced plans to introduce 'foreign agent' laws copied from Russia and to punish anyone subscribing to informational resources they label 'extremist', in a misuse of vague anti-extremism clauses that has been growing in frequency in Belarus. Pro-government media have also been echoing such labeling in an escalating smear campaign against independent media and opposition voices.

To suppress the free flow of information further, over 20 websites have been blocked, with the biggest portal *Tut.by* under criminal investigation after their offices and homes of some staff were raided on the morning of

18 May. Their leadership and several staff remain in detention pending trial.

Responding to the events outlined above, therefore, requires a strong commitment to defend the space for media freedom in Belarus. Belarus' media sector faces an existential threat at a time when news about the grave human rights violations being committed by the Belarusian state is absolutely critical, both for the public's right to know and to contribute to international efforts to document crimes and hold the regime accountable.

Therefore, in addition to urging the **immediate and unconditional release of all detained or imprisoned journalists and media actors**, we urge the international community to **make respect for press freedom conditional in all its demands towards Lukashenka's administration**. We call on all states to ensure that business does not continue as usual and to exert their influence to **cut the economic lifeline of the regime's authoritarian leadership**.

At the same time, we also stress that comprehensive economic sanctions on any country can cause enormous hardship to civilians who are often not responsible for the actions their government takes. The international community has begun imposing sanctions on Belarus over its outrageous act. It must ensure that any additional sanctions it considers imposing are targeted specifically on Belarusian officials and their financial interests, or private entities that actively collaborate with regime officials and their repressive measures, while insulating Belarusian people from any harmful effects. **Foreign businesses entering into relationships with Belarusian corporations should undertake enhanced due diligence to ensure that they are not supporting government officials or their actions** – in particular, restrictions on individual freedoms, including the right to free expression.

Finally, we also urge **increased support to independent media and threatened journalists in Belarus, including through the streamlining of humanitarian and relocation requests**, so that they can continue their work safely and effectively. People need access to reliable information, especially during situations of crisis.

In addition, other concrete actions that can be taken by the international community include:

- Call on Belarusian officials to ensure the safety and protection of those exercising their rights to free expression, association and assembly, including those who have been detained, arrested, or charged;
- Further call for accountability for all those responsible for violations of the rights of journalists, activists, cultural figures and others subjected to excessive force, reprisals, torture and ill-treatment;
- Provide support to international accountability efforts, such as the monitoring and investigatory work of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights mandated in HRC resolution 46/20 and the recently announced International Accountability Platform for Belarus;
- Call on European countries neighboring Belarus as well as other supportive governments to improve the asylum procedures for Belarusian journalists, media workers and other dissidents to be able to quickly get to a safe place in the case of immediate danger
- and speak out on further developments related to efforts to criminalize the activities of the above-mentioned groups, including through local CSOs and journalists.

## Signed:

IFEX

ARTICLE 19

European Federation of Journalists (EFJ)

Free Press Unlimited (FPU)

Index on Censorship

Reporters Without Borders (RSF)

South East Europe Media Organisation (SEEMO)

PEN America

International Media Support (IMS)