

The information is aggregated from open source online resources and our own practice. In these newsletters, we will update you in brief on everyday human rights violations in numbers and facts.

Summary: Saturday 22 May 2021 to Friday 28 May 2021

Ryanair incident

On 23 May 2021, Ryanair flight FR4978 traveling from Athens, Greece, to Vilnius, Lithuania, was intercepted by a Belarusian military aircraft and forced to land in Minsk National Airport, following a false terrorist threat, allegedly fabricated by Belarusian *de facto* authorities.¹

Belarusian security forces searched the plane, interrogated the 150 passengers and crew, who were mostly European Union citizens, and arrested two passengers – Roman Protasevich and Sofia Sapega. Belarusian law enforcement agencies later shared videos of both Protasevich and Sapega “confessing” to the crimes they are accused of. Many believe that there are signs of coercion and torture in the videos.²

Protasevich is a journalist and civil society activist, most famous for jointly running a major Telegram channel, which is used by peaceful protesters to receive news on the situation in Belarus, as most other media were affected by mass Internet shutdowns.³ In October 2020, Belarusian authorities recognised the channel as “extremist”⁴ and added the channel’s founders, including Protasevich, to a list of individuals involved in terrorist activities,⁵ charging them with “inciting hatred and bias”⁶ and requesting their extradition from Poland.

Belarusian authorities are facing repercussions, for what many actors call a state-sponsored hijacking⁷ and an act of international terrorism, including:⁸

- A ban on crossing Belarusian airspace and flying to and accepting flights from Belarus was introduced by multiple states and individual airlines;⁹

¹ <https://www.ft.com/content/ac60d3bb-af7d-4441-9c43-4ec6d3dc89be>;

<https://www.politico.eu/article/alexander-lukashenko-terrorist-belarus-ryanair-plane-roman-protasevich/>

² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/05/25/belarus-confession-video-forced/>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/23/world/europe/roman-protasevich.html>

⁴ <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-labels-popular-telegram-channel-extremist-/30903288.html>

⁵

<https://meduza.io/en/news/2020/11/19/belarusian-kgb-adds-creators-of-opposition-telegram-channel-nexta-to-terrorism-list>

⁶

<https://meduza.io/en/news/2020/11/05/belarusian-authorities-open-criminal-case-against-creators-of-opposition-telegram-channel-nexta>; <http://mediazona.by/news/2021/02/15/terrorists>

⁷ <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/05/24/business/airlines-belarus-air-space/index.html>

⁸ <https://www.politico.eu/article/alexander-lukashenko-terrorist-belarus-ryanair-plane-roman-protasevich/>

⁹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/05/25/belarus-roman-airlines-updates-europe/>

- Several states have called upon the International Civil Aviation Organization to investigate Belarus's diversion of a European flight and arrest of a dissident on board;¹⁰ and
- The European Union is expected to expedite the process of adopting the fourth package of sanctions against Belarus.¹¹

Political prisoner dies in prison

Belarusian political activist Vitold Ashurak, who was sentenced in January 2021 to five years in prison for participating in peaceful protests, died in prison. The cited cause of death is a heart attack, although the circumstances remain unknown. His body was only given to the family four days after his death, with a bandage on his head. Belarus's Investigative Committee released a video later, on 25 May 2021, purporting to show Ashurak collapsing twice while in his prison cell. Experts note that the prisoner appeared to be very weak from malnutrition and questioned why authorities would leave such a prisoner alone in his cell after the fall.¹²

17 year old commits suicide, following criminal persecution

A 17-year-old Belarusian teenager, who was being investigated for taking part in anti-government protests last year, has taken his own life, having said he cannot bear the pressure being put on him. Dmitry Stakhovsky killed himself within hours of being interrogated by security officials in an investigation into what they called "mass riots". In his last post on social media he notified his followers of his intention to commit suicide and wrote that the Belarusian Investigative Committee is to blame for his death.¹³

Political prisoners

As of 27 May 2021, the total number of political prisoners in Belarus is approximately 423.

¹⁰

<https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20210527-western-nations-call-for-investigation-into-belarus-flight-diversion>

¹¹

<https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20210524-eu-leaders-agree-more-sanctions-on-belarus-over-plan-e-diversion>

¹² <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-political-prisoner-dead-bandaged-head/31273419.html>

¹³

<https://www.straitstimes.com/world/europe/belarus-teenager-investigated-over-protests-kills-himself-rights-group-says>