

*Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment;
Working Group on arbitrary detention;
Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and
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Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while
countering terrorism;
Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus*

**Submission on
Arbitrary detention, credible risk of torture and risk to life of a Belarusian
journalist and blogger Raman Pratasevich and his partner Sofia Sapega**

On May 23, 2021, a commercial Ryanair flight from Athens, Greece, to Vilnius, Lithuania, was forced to land in Minsk when it was crossing the air space of Belarus. In Minsk two passengers of that flight – a Belarusian journalist and blogger, Raman Pratasevich, and his girlfriend, Sofia Sapega, were detained.

Raman is a journalist and blogger, a co-founder of telegram channel NEXTA and a chief editor of a telegram channel Belarus of the Brain (Belarus Golovnogo Mozga). Both channels report the situation in Belarus, especially human rights violations and repressions of dissidents. The channels became popular and widely read in Belarus since the beginning of the violent crackdown which has been ongoing since August 2020.

In November 2020 it became known that Raman, who was not living in Belarus at the time, was facing criminal prosecution. According to the information published by the Investigative Committee of Belarus, a state body for investigation, Raman is facing charges under Part 1 of Art. 293 of the Criminal Code (organization of mass riots punished with up to 15 years of imprisonment), Part 1 of Art. 342 of the Criminal Code (organization or active participation in group actions that grossly violate public order punished with up to three years of imprisonment) and Part 3 of Art. 130 of the Criminal Code (incitement to social discord punished with up to twelve years of imprisonment). The blogger was also included in the national database of terrorists and put on an international wanted list by the government of Belarus. A request for his extradition was sent by the Belarusian authorities to the government of Poland. The accusations are politically motivated and were brought within the general governmental attack against civil society institutions, independent media and human rights organisations taking place in Belarus since August 2020.

Since his detention on May 23, 2021, Raman has not been visited by any independent body, including an independent lawyer. On May 24, 2021 the Belarusian state authorities published a 30-seconds video with Raman, in which he states that he is in pre-trial detention center No 1 in Minsk, that his state of health is good, that state representatives treat him politely and act within legal framework and that he is giving confessions regarding his role in the organisation of mass riots. At this video while his face is covered with powder, the bruises at the face and neck are obvious and his nose could be broken. Raman's father, Dzmitry Pratasevich stated that his son is nervous at this video and is not speaking with his own words. On May 25, 2020, Raman's lawyer stated that she had visited the Investigative Committee, the KGB (Committee

of State Security) premises and the Pre-trial detention center No 1, but she had not been allowed to meet with her client.

On May 25, 2021, Raman's girlfriend, Sofia Sapega, a student at European Humanities University was arrested for two months upon suspicion of her organisation of mass riots in August 2020. She was placed in the pre-trial detention center of the KGB. Sofia's mother has stated that Sofia left the territory of Belarus on August 11, 2020 and could therefore not be involved in any riots. In the evening on May 25, 2021, the Belarusian state authorities published a video in which Sofia Sapega confesses that she is an administrator of the telegram channel 'Black Book of Belarus' that publishes information about the involvement of Belarusian law enforcement agents in acts of repression and human rights violations. On May 26, 2021, Sofia was indicted under Part 1 of Art. 293 of the Criminal Code (organization of mass riots punished with up to 15 years of imprisonment), Part 1 of Art. 342 of the Criminal Code (organization or active participation in group actions that grossly violate public order punished with up to three years of imprisonment).

The context in which their arbitrary detention happened allegedly in flagrant violation of the norms of international air law, and the ongoing human rights crisis in Belarus create a scenario in which there is a credible and imminent risk for their life and well-being, particularly in the case of Raman Pratasevich, but also in the case of Sofia Sapega, even if her detention seems to be exclusively linked to the fact that she was accompanying Raman. Torture and ill-treatment have been widespread and systematic since the beginning of the crisis and in this context the likelihood of acts of torture against them in order to extract a confession or to punish them is highly probable.

Moreover, there are serious concerns regarding the state of health of Raman. According to his mother he has a heart disease, and the denial of timely and effective medical assistance is another serious and systematic problem of the closed institutions in Belarus that was demonstrated once against by the recent death in custody of political prisoner Vitold Ashurak on May 21, 2021, in the penitentiary colony No 17 in Shklov.

We call on the UN Special Rapporteurs:

- to issue an urgent communication addressed to the Belarusian authorities expressing concern for the arbitrary detention of Raman Pratasevich and Sofia Sapega, reminding the absolute nature of the prohibition of torture and requesting that Belarusian authorities provide objective information about the detention and the judicial actions against Raman Pratasevich and Sofia Sapega;
- to issue a joint public statement expressing the concern of the UN Special Procedures for the various human rights violations in connection with this case; urging the Belarusian authorities to provide immediate and unimpeded access of independent lawyers and doctors to Raman Pratasevich and Sofia Sapega; calling on Belarusian authorities to ensure that independent national and international mechanisms, including UN representatives can visit Raman and Sofia to ensure their well-being; demanding the immediate release of Raman Pratasevich and Sofia Sapega and the halt of politically-motivated criminal prosecution and other grave human rights violations in the country.