

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-0908

May 24, 2021

President Joe Biden
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We write to express our concern over Alexander Lukashenko's reckless actions yesterday in forcing the landing of a passenger airline in Minsk in order to arrest Belarusian activist, Roman Protasevich. Shockingly, Lukashenko and his regime orchestrated a state-sponsored hijacking in order to arrest Protasevich, who was on a Ryanair flight from Athens, Greece to Vilnius, Lithuania. We commend your administration's statements condemning this state-sponsored hijacking as well as calling for Protasevich's immediate release. In an effort to keep passengers and crew safe, we urge you to prohibit all U.S. airlines from entering Belarusian airspace, and encourage our allies and partners to do the same.

Since the Belarusian elections last August, the Belarusian people have been steadfast in their resolve to protest the regime in which Lukashenko illegitimately declared himself the victor. Crucial to this effort has been the NEXTA telegram channel, which Protasevich ran during the protests. NEXTA is one of the few uncensored media sources that inform Belarusians, and the world, of the regime's human rights abuses and provides a platform to organize peaceful demonstrations that still operates even within Belarus' repressive media environment. Due to Lukashenko's well-documented acts of torture and physical threats against leaders of these protests, many dissidents now live in exile throughout Europe. This outrageous abuse of state power sets a precedent that threatens other Belarusian dissidents and international safety and security.

We respectfully urge you to direct the Federal Aviation Administration to issue a rule prohibiting U.S. carriers, aircrafts and operators from entering Belarus' air space, the Minsk Air Control Center (UMMV). The United States has enacted similar prohibitions in the past in order to protect the lives of American citizens, such as the current prohibition on American aircraft from flying through North Korean airspace, or the temporary restriction placed on Ukrainian airspace due to the downing of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 by the Russian military. This measure would be appropriate and justified given the recent actions by Lukashenko, which threatened the safety of approximately 170 passengers on board Ryanair flight 4978. We must protect innocent passengers from despotic regimes and stand in solidarity with dissidents who are being targeted.

This brazen act by Belarusian dictator Lukashenko, who is dismissing yet another election demanding his ouster, demands a serious response. We look forward to working with you on any such options.

Sincerely,

Handwritten signature of Marco Rubio in black ink.

Marco Rubio
U.S. Senator

Handwritten signature of Richard J. Durbin in blue ink.

Richard J. Durbin
U.S. Senator