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Belarus Adds Opposition Telegram Channel Founders to Terror List

By AFP

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Nexta Live has helped coordinate the mass demonstrations that have been ongoing for over three months. **stepannexta / Facebook**

Belarusian authorities on Wednesday added the creators of the Nexta Live opposition Telegram channel, which mobilized protesters during the country's ongoing post-election rallies, to a list of terrorists.

Protests in the ex-Soviet country broke out in early August after strongman leader Alexander Lukashenko won a disputed reelection for a sixth term.

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The opposition believe political novice Svetlana Tikhanovskaya was the true winner of the election and demand Lukashenko's resignation.

Nexta Live — a Telegram channel with more than 1.7 million subscribers — has helped coordinate the mass demonstrations that have been ongoing for over three months.

Nexta founder Stepan Putilo, 22, and 25-year-old Roman Protasevich, who until recently was the channel's editor, appeared on the Belarus KGB list of "individuals involved in terrorist activity" when it was updated Wednesday.

According to the document available online, Putilo and Protasevich were included on the list based on earlier charges of causing mass unrest, an offense that can lead to up to 15 years of imprisonment.

The two bloggers are currently the only Belarusian citizens on the KGB list of some 700 individuals, consisting mostly of nationals of Middle Eastern countries.

"In Belarus terrorism is punishable by life imprisonment or death," Nexta wrote on its Twitter account on Thursday.

Putilo and Protasevich — who currently reside in Poland — are also facing criminal charges for inciting social hatred against government and law enforcement officials.

Both have been added to international wanted lists in Belarus and in Russia, which backs Lukashenko.

The Belarusian Foreign Ministry on Monday summoned the Polish ambassador to Belarus demanding extradition of the two activists.

A Belarus court in October branded the Nexta Live channel as "extremist" and ordered it blocked.

Telegram is a hugely popular social media platform in the former Soviet Union as a messaging service both for private communication and sharing information and news.

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