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Belarus Activist's Girlfriend Held on Suspicion of 'Crimes'

By AFP

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Sofiya Sapega, a Russian citizen, was detained in Minsk on Sunday. **Instagram / sapega_sofia_**

The Russian girlfriend of a Belarusian dissident arrested with him when their plane was diverted to Minsk is being held on suspicion of crimes at the time of protests last year, Moscow said Tuesday.

Sofiya Sapega, a 23-year-old law student at the European Humanities University (EHU) in Lithuania, was detained along with opposition journalist Roman Protasevich, 26, when their Athens-to-Vilnius flight was diverted to Minsk on Sunday.

The diversion, prompted by a supposed bomb scare, provoked a global outcry and Western leaders have been calling for both to be released.

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Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said in a statement Tuesday that Sapega was being held on suspicion of "committing crimes" between August and September 2020.

That period corresponds with the outbreak of mass anti-government protests that rocked ex-Soviet Belarus after a disputed presidential election in August last year.

The charges against Sapega were not specified, but Zakharova said they are covered by several articles of the Belarusian criminal code.

After three days, there will be a ruling on whether to release her or put her in pre-trial detention, the statement added.

Zakharova said a Russian consul met on Monday with Sapega's parents, who live in western Belarus.

Russia is expecting to get permission for a consular meeting with Sapega soon, she said.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said earlier Tuesday that he "hopes that in the near future" Sapega will be released.

Protasevich fled to Europe in 2019 from where he co-ran the Nexta Telegram channels, a key Belarus opposition media that helped mobilize protesters.

In Belarus, he faces charges of organizing mass unrest, an offense punishable by up to 15 years in jail.

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