

Belarus TV Broadcasts Interview With Jailed Activist

By [AFP](#)

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Protasevich, 26, and his Russian girlfriend Sofia Sapega, 23, were arrested on May 23 after Belarus scrambled a military jet to divert the Athens-Vilnius Ryanair plane they were traveling on. **AP**

Belarusian journalist Roman Protasevich, who was arrested after his plane was forced to land in Minsk, appeared on state television Thursday evening in an interview that rights campaigners say was conducted under duress.

Looking uncomfortable in the video, Protasevich — the co-founder and former editor of opposition Telegram channel Nexta which coordinated anti-government demonstrations — confessed to calling for protests last year and praised Belarus strongman Alexander Lukashenko.

Ahead of the broadcast by Belarus state-run channel ONT, independent rights group Viasna said that Protasevich must have been coerced into speaking by Belarusian security services because he is facing "unfair, but very serious accusations."

"Everything Protasevich will say was said under duress — at the very least psychological duress," Viasna head Ales Bialiatski told AFP Thursday before the interview was broadcast.

"Whatever he is saying now is pure propaganda, under which there is no truthful basis," Bialiatski added.

Protasevich, 26, and his Russian girlfriend Sofia Sapega, 23, were arrested on May 23 after Belarus scrambled a military jet to divert the Athens-Vilnius Ryanair plane they were traveling on.

They were accused of helping to coordinate historic demonstrations that broke out following Lukashenko's disputed re-election last August.

Immediately after their arrest both Protasevich and Sapega appeared in "confession" videos that their supporters said were recorded under duress and are a common tactic of the regime to pressure critics.

Protasevich's parents said at the time their son looked like he had been beaten in the video.

In response to the arrests, the European Union banned Belarusian state carrier Belavia from operating flights to airports in the bloc and discouraged EU-based airlines from flying over the ex-Soviet country.

Authorities waged a brutal crackdown on the opposition and civil society, detaining and imprisoning thousands of demonstrators and pushing opposition leaders into exile. Several people died in the unrest.

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