

Belarus Opposition Leader Says Jailed Activist Spoke 'Under Pressure'

By [AFP](#)

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Svetlana Tikhanovskaya. **Mindaugas Kulbis / AP /TASS**

Belarusian opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya on Friday dismissed an interview shown on state television in Belarus with a journalist arrested after his plane was forced to land in Minsk.

"All such videos are shot under pressure. We don't have to pay attention even to these words because they are done after torture... The task of political prisoners is to survive," she told reporters.

"With the help of violence, you can make a person say whatever (you) want," Tikhanovskaya, who ran against Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko in an election last year, said during a visit to Warsaw.

Journalist and activist Roman Protasevich was arrested on May 23 along with his girlfriend

Sofia Sapega when their Ryanair flight from Athens to Vilnius was diverted and intercepted by a fighter jet.

The interview with him was broadcast on Thursday.

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

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At the end of the 1.5-hour interview broadcast by Belarus state-run channel ONT Thursday evening, Protasevich began crying and covered his face with his hands.

The 26-year-old's father, Dmitry Protasevich, told AFP on Thursday that the video was the result of "abuse, torture and threats."

"I know my son very well and I believe that he would never say such things," he told AFP.

"They broke him and forced him to say what was needed," he said, adding it pained him to watch the interview.

"I am very worried."

Belarusian authorities accuse Protasevich of organising mass riots, a charge that could land him in prison for 15 years.

Ahead of the broadcast, 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.

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

Protasevich and Sapega 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 also 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.

In response to the protests, Belarus 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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