

Jailed Belarus Activist, Girlfriend Moved to House Arrest

By [AFP](#)

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Sofia Sapega and Roman Protasevich. [Screenshot Youtube](#)

Belarus investigators said Friday that dissident journalist Roman Protasevich, who was dramatically detained after his plane was forced to land in Minsk, has been moved to house arrest.

Protasevich, 26, was arrested in May along with his Russian girlfriend Sofia Sapega, 23, when Belarusian authorities scrambled a fighter jet to intercept their Ryanair flight from Greece to Lithuania as it passed over Belarus.

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They are accused of helping to coordinate historic anti-government protests last year, which erupted after strongman President Alexander Lukashenko claimed a sixth term in an August

vote the opposition and Western leaders said was rigged.

On Friday, the Belarusian Investigative Committee said in a statement on its Telegram channel that it had moved both Protasevich and Sapega to house arrest.

The committee said it had "found it possible" to do so because the pair had given "consistent confessions," are cooperating with investigators and had appealed their pre-trial detention.

After their arrests, 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.

Earlier on Friday, an advisor to exiled opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya said that he had spoken with Protasevich's parents, who told him their son had been moved to house arrest

"But it's not freedom. It is a prison of different type. KGB people live in the same room with him," tweeted Franak Viacorka, referring to Belarus's national intelligence agency.

Sapega's lawyer Alexander Filanovich said on his Telegram channel that he expected her case to be "resolved positively in the near future."

'Held hostage'

Tikhanovskaya described the development as "good news" but added on her Telegram channel that the pair is "still being held hostage."

The 38-year-old opponent of Lukashenko was forced into exile in EU member state Lithuania shortly after last year's anti-government protests began.

Most of the moustachioed strongman's opponents are now either in jail or have fled the country.

Amnesty International said in a statement on Friday that the decision to move Protasevich and Sapega to house arrest "looks like a cynical ploy" to lift international sanctions.

"Over the past year, the world has watched in horror as Alexander Lukashenko's government crushed peaceful dissent with unspeakable cruelty — these transfers to house arrest change nothing," the rights group said.

On Friday, the Belarusian prosecutor's office announced that arrested opposition figure Maria Kolesnikova and Maxim Znak, a lawyer for arrested opposition figure Viktor Babaryko, had been charged with "conspiracy to seize power."

The European Union and the United States have imposed waves of sanctions on Lukashenko and his allies over the crackdown on the protests that saw thousands detained.

In response to Protasevich and Sapega's arrests, Brussels banned Belarusian state carrier Belavia from operating flights to airports in the 27-nation bloc and discouraged EU-based airlines from flying over Belarus.

Earlier this week, the EU, U.S., Britain and Canada announced fresh sanctions on the ex-Soviet country over the arrests.

In a statement on Friday, the Belarusian foreign ministry said the goal of the penalties was "to disintegrate and undermine a sovereign and independent state."

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