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Minsk Extends House Arrest for Detained Russian Girlfriend of Dissident Blogger

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Sofia Sapega **sapega_sofia / instagram**

Belarus has extended the house arrest of a Russian student who was detained when Minsk ordered the forced landing of a Ryanair flight to arrest a dissident blogger, the BBC's Russian service has reported.

Russian citizen Sofia Sapega, 23, was arrested alongside her boyfriend, Belarusian opposition blogger Roman Protasevich, in May. The pair were traveling together from Athens to Lithuania, where they lived in exile.

Authorities in Minsk have extended Sapega's house arrest until Dec. 25, her mother Anna Dudich told the BBC.

Sapega faces three criminal charges: organizing violations of public order, inciting hatred and organizing mass unrest, each of which carry maximum sentences ranging from three to 15 years in prison.

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Protasevich founded the independent Nexta telegram channel, which Belarus' strongman leader Alexander Lukashenko says played a key role in organizing the mass street protests that rocked the country last summer.

The Ryanair jet's forced landing in May thrust the embattled Lukashenko into a fresh international scandal, drawing condemnation from dozens of Western leaders and resulting in airspace bans from most major Western carriers.

While the Kremlin has previously said Russian President Vladimir Putin raised Sapega's case with Lukashenko, there has been little sign of sustained pressure from Minsk's key backer Moscow.

Protests erupted across Belarus last summer after Lukashenko claimed victory in a presidential election widely condemned by critics at home and abroad as fraudulent. Western countries slapped rounds of sanctions on Belarus, including its key industries, over the Lukashenko regime's brutal crackdown on the protests.

All opposition leaders were arrested or fled the country before the vote while thousands of Belarusians have fled to countries like Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine following the election.

Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, who ran against Lukashenko after her husband was jailed while mounting a presidential campaign, claims to be the true winner and now lives in exile.

Russia has become an even more crucial backer of Belarus and Lukashenko in the year since his disputed reelection and the regime's aggressive crackdown against its critics.

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