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Belarus Charges Dissident Blogger's Russian Girlfriend With 'Inciting Hatred'

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Sofia Sapega, 23, was detained with her boyfriend, Belarusian opposition blogger Roman Protasevich, after Minsk forced their Greece-Lithuania flight to land on its soil. **sapega_sofia_ / instagram**

Belarus has formally charged the Russian girlfriend of a dissident Belarusian blogger more than six months after authorities forced down a commercial jet flying over Belarusian air space to detain the pair.

Belarus' strongman leader Alexander Lukashenko triggered a barrage of international criticism and new rounds of sanctions against his embattled country after authorities forced a Ryanair jet flying from Greece to Lithuania to land in Minsk on May 23, alleging they had received an imminent bomb threat.

Related article: Belarus to Try Russian Citizen Detained on Diverted Flight

Prosecutors have now filed formal charges against Sofia Sapega, 23, who is currently under house arrest, the head of Belarus' Investigative Committee told the state-run Belta news

agency.

“Final charges have been brought under a number of articles of the Criminal Code,” Investigative Committee chairman Dmitry Gora said. “Among them are incitement of social hostility and discord, breaches of information security and handling of personal data, and threats against law enforcement officers. In the near future, the case will be presented for review.”

Authorities allege Sapega ran a Telegram channel which published the personal information of Belarusian security services personnel.

The charges carry a maximum sentence of up to six years in prison.

Sapega’s boyfriend, Roman Protasevich, 26, founded the Nexta Telegram channel, which became the main independent news source during the mass protests that swept Belarus last summer following Lukashenko’s highly disputed victory in the country’s presidential elections.

Authorities have accused Protasevich of organizing mass riots — a charge which carries a 15-year maximum sentence — and he is also being held under house arrest.

Since their detentions, both Protasevich and Sapega have made a number of statements apparently confessing to their involvement in organizing the protests.

Supporters and human rights advocates say their video statements were likely recorded under duress in order to secure better detention conditions for the pair, pointing to similar tactics used with other high-profile political prisoners in Belarus.

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