

Belarus Jails Activist's Russian Girlfriend for 6 Years

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A Belarusian court has sentenced student Sofia Sapega, the Russian girlfriend of a Belarusian dissident journalist, to six years in prison following a closed trial, Belarus' Viasna human rights group [said](#) Friday.

Sapega and her boyfriend, Roman Protasevich, were on a Ryanair flight from Athens to Vilnius in May 2021 when Belarusian authorities forcibly diverted the plane, citing a bomb threat. The couple were detained upon disembarking in Minsk, a move that sparked global outcry and new Western sanctions on Minsk.

Grodno Regional Court found Sapega, 24, guilty on charges of inciting social enmity and discord as well as illegally collecting and disseminating information about the private life of an unnamed person, Viasna said.

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In a video leaked to a pro-Belarusian government social media account last May, Sapega admitted to running a Telegram channel called The Black Book of Belarus, which published the personal data of Belarusian law enforcement officers accused of torturing opposition protesters.

Members of the opposition said her statement appeared to have been made under duress.

The court also ordered Sapega to pay a fine of 175,000 Belarusian rubles (\$50,000).

She is not planning to appeal her sentence, her lawyer [told](#) the BBC, as she intends to seek a pardon from President Alexander Lukashenko.

Should Sapega be pardoned, she will still have to pay the hefty fine.

Though a Russian national, Moscow has been relatively reticent about the fate of Sapega, who has been held under pretrial house arrest in Belarus since June 2021.

In May 2021, Russia's presidential human rights council [asked](#) Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to work toward securing Sapega's release. In December of that year, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said Sapega's case was on the ministry's agenda, "like all cases of Russian citizens arrested abroad."

Protasevich, 27, is the former editor of Nexta, a Telegram channel that played a key role in mobilizing the anti-Lukashenko protests of summer 2020 following the authoritarian leader's widely disputed election victory.

He is yet to go on trial.

Following their detention, Protasevich appeared on Belarusian state television, where he admitted his "guilt" and said he respects Lukashenko and no longer wants to engage in politics.

It is widely believed that the interview was made under duress.

Rights groups estimate that over 1,000 people are political prisoners in Belarus.

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