The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Belarus Dissident Blogger Roman Protasevich Pleads Guilty

February 16, 2023



Roman Protasevich **Video grab / Belta**

A Belarusian dissident journalist whose dramatic arrest in 2021 made international headlines after his plane was forced by the authorities to land in Minsk has pleaded guilty to an array of charges against him on the first day of his trial in the Belarusian capital.

Roman Protasevich, 27, was the former editor of Nexta, a Telegram channel that played a key role in mobilizing the protests against authoritarian Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko following his widely disputed election victory in 2020.

Having fled Belarus, Protasevich was on a Ryanair flight from Athens to Vilnius with his then-girlfriend Sofia Sapega in May 2021 that was forced to land in Minsk after the Belarusian authorities informed the pilot there was a bomb on board. Upon arrival, Protasevich was arrested.

The EU subsequently termed the forced landing of the Ryanair flight a “hijacking” and an act of “piracy.”

Following his detention, Protasevich publicly appeared to have changed his mind about the status quo in Belarus, saying in a televised interview widely seen as made under duress that he respected Lukashenko, admitted his "guilt," and no longer wanted to engage in politics.

Related article: Diverted Ryanair Flight Investigation Concludes Belarus 'Unlawful'

In total, Protasevich stands accused of committing 1,586 criminal offenses including setting up a terrorist organization, conspiracy to seize power, organizing riots, and insulting the president of Belarus.

Two former Nexta colleagues, Stepan Putilo and Yan Rudik, are being tried alongside Protasevich in absentia, according to Belarusian state-run news outlet BELTA.

Since the unrest of 2020, Protasevich and Putilo have been placed on a list of extremists by the Belarusian authorities, while Nexta has been labeled a terrorist organization.

"I'm ready for any outcome morally and psychologically. Nothing depends on me," Protasevich told journalists before the court hearing.

Protasevich concluded a pre-trial cooperation agreement with the authorities and complied with it in full, allowing him to live under house arrest while awaiting trial, according to Belarusian human rights group Vyasna.

When asked about the fate of his former colleagues on Thursday, Protasevich said that he "understood everything about these people a long time ago."

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/02/16/belarus-dissident-blogger-roman-protasevich-pleads-guilty-a80244