

Belarus Dissident Blogger Roman Protasevich Sentenced to 8 Years in Prison

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Roman Protasevich pictured during a 2021 interview on Belarusian state television following his arrest.

Telegram@ZheltYESlivy / Reuters TV / File Photo

A court in Belarus has sentenced a dissident journalist to eight years in prison on an array of charges that include plotting a coup, state media in the authoritarian state and close Russian ally [reported](#) Wednesday.

Roman Protasevich, 27, had been the editor of a Telegram channel that was key in rallying protests against President Alexander Lukashenko following his widely disputed election victory in 2020.

He was arrested in 2021 when Belarusian authorities forced his EU-bound plane to land in Minsk, an incident that sparked sanctions on Lukashenko's regime.

The Minsk District Court on Wednesday found Protasevich guilty of organizing mass riots,

public calls for acts of terrorism, leading an extremist group and defaming Lukashenko, according to state-run news agency Belta.

Protasevich stood accused of committing more than 1,500 criminal offenses.

The court sentenced two of his former colleagues Stepan Putilo and Yan Rudik to 20 years and 19 years in prison in absentia, respectively.

The three were accused of publishing materials on the opposition Telegram channel Nexta “in the execution of the conspiracy to seize power.”

Following the anti-Lukashenko protests of 2020, Protasevich and Putilo were placed on a list of extremists by the Belarusian authorities, while Nexta was labeled a terrorist organization.

"The Belarus regime again shows its disregard for justice by sentencing 3 journalists in a fake trial on #PressFreedomDay," exiled opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya [tweeted](#) in response to the three men's sentences.

Protasevich appeared to have adopted a pro-government stance after his detention, telling state television in an interview widely [believed](#) to have been made under duress that he respected Lukashenko, admitted his “guilt” and no longer wanted to engage in politics.

Most Belarusian opposition activists fled the country following Lukashenko's brutal crackdown on protesters in 2020.

Earlier this year, Belarus [sentenced](#) Tikhanovskaya, who claimed victory in the 2020 election, to 15 years in prison in absentia.

The rights group Viasna lists almost 1,500 political prisoners currently held in Belarus.

Lukashenko, who has been in power for nearly three decades, is a key ally of Russian leader Vladimir Putin and allowed the Kremlin to launch its full-scale offensive in Ukraine from his territory.

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