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Belarus 'Pardons' Dissident Blogger Protasevich

May 22, 2023



Roman Protasevich **BelTa**

Belarusian authorities have pardoned dissident journalist Roman Protasevich, the state-run Belta news agency reported Monday.

“I have signed all the documents about my pardon literally just now. This is, of course, simply wonderful news,” Belta quoted Protasevich as saying.

Protasevich, 27, was arrested in 2021 when Belarusian authorities forced his EU-bound plane to land in Minsk, an incident that sparked outrage in the West and prompted fresh sanctions on Lukashenko's regime.

He was sentenced to eight years in prison on multiple charges earlier this month.

Belarusian authorities accused Protasevich, the former editor-in-chief of the flagship opposition Telegram channel Nexta, of committing more than 1,500 criminal offenses.

Following his arrest, Protasevich made a number of public appearances in which he

apologized for his actions against the regime and confirmed he works in close cooperation with Belarusian authorities.

The journalist's parents later said their son was speaking under duress.

"I'm asking everyone to please read between the lines and filter the information shown on state channels. You have to understand that he is a hostage," said his mother Natalya Protasevich.

A court in the Belarusian capital Minsk on May 3 found Protasevich guilty of organizing mass riots, public calls for acts of terrorism, leading an extremist group and defaming Lukashenko.

Protasevich's former colleagues Stepan Putilo and Yan Rudik were also sentenced to 20 years and 19 years in absentia respectively.

The authorities didn't extend the pardon to the two other Nexta journalists, both of whom remain in exile.

Protasevich's ex-girlfriend who was arrested alongside him, Russian national Sofia Sapega, is serving a six-year prison sentence.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/05/22/belarus-pardons-dissident-blogger-roman-protasevich-a81231