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Belarus Pardons Russian Woman Pulled Off EU Flight

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Sofia Sapega. **t.me/kozhemiakoofficial**

Belarus has pardoned Sofia Sapega, the Russian ex-girlfriend of Belarusian dissident journalist Roman Protasevich, the state-run Belta news agency reported Wednesday.

Sapega and her then-boyfriend Protasevich were detained in May 2021 when their Ryanair flight from Athens to Vilnius was forcibly diverted in Minsk, with Belarusian authorities citing a bomb threat.

The 25-year-old law student was sentenced to six years in Belarusian prison in May 2022.

Following her pardoning by Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, Sapega was handed over to a Russian delegation headed by the governor of Russia's Far East Primorye region, Oleg Kozhemyako.

"Our fellow citizen Sofia Sapega received a unique chance to start life anew. She was released after my appeal to the President of the Republic of Belarus," Kozhemyako wrote on his

personal Telegram channel.

In a video published by Kozhemyako, Sapega is shown greeting and speaking with Kozhemyako as she steps out of prison.

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"I think this step means a lot to you," Kozhemyako can be seen saying to Sapega.

Sapega is then seen thanking Lukashenko "for this gift, not only for me, but for my whole family ... for giving me a second chance."

Sapega and Protasevich's May 2021 detention took place as Belarus carried out a sweeping crackdown on opposition activists following the authoritarian country's disputed 2020 presidential election.

Their arrests sparked global outcry and new Western sanctions on Minsk.

Following their detention, Protasevich admitted his "guilt" and said he respected Lukashenko and no longer wanted to engage in politics in a televised interview widely believed to have been made under duress.

Protasevich, the former editor of the opposition Telegram channel Nexta, was sentenced to eight years in prison on multiple charges, but was pardoned in May 2023.

Sapega was found guilty of charges of inciting social enmity and discord, as well as illegally collecting and disseminating information about the private life of an unnamed person.

Previously, Russia's presidential human rights council asked Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to work toward securing Sapega's release.

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