



## BELARUS VS FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Roman Protasevitch was coming back from his Greek holidays when a Ryanair plane he was on got hijacked by the Belarusian authorities and he got arrested in Minsk, however bloggers story is far more complicated than just that.

Let's go back for a minute to fall of 2019. Vladimir Chudentsov, a fellow journalist and friend of Roman Protasevitch got arrested on train just as his was about to cross Polish border. Scared that he is next, Roman moves to Poland and applies for asylum in January of 2020. After waiting for months and months without any response he made a decision to move even further; to Vilnius, Lithuania but when he went to department to get his passport and withdraw his asylum application, he was informed that it was rejected, months ago. Without any further explanation, nor a document confirming that, he left. It is now being suggested that the outburst of Covid-19 pandemic and Protasevitch changing his residence address, might have been the reason he never got the documents, although those are only speculations.

In the midst of all that, during the summer of 2020 Lukashenka “won” another rigged presidential election and prolonged his presidency of 27 years which caused the outburst of mass protests, both in Belarus as well as rest of the world. Protasevitch as a very outspoken opponent of the government was thoroughly reporting everything that was happening and encouraging his fellow-countrymen to join the fight. This has put him and his newspaper Nexta on president's radar, so he was even more scared and in need of asylum as was added to Belarus's list of “individuals involved in terrorist activity”.



<https://ichef.bbci.co.uk/news/976/cpsprodpb/5CE8/production/>

Fast forward to May of 2021 Protasevitch was enjoying holidays in Greece with his girlfriend- Sofia Sapega, who is a 23-year-old studying in

Lithuania, where the activist was essentially based. And as the plane was 15 minutes from its destination in Vilnius, the bomb alarm was raised. It is not fully explained what exactly happened but from the scratches of

### Athens to Vilnius flight diverted over Belarus



Note: All times GMT

Source: Flightradar24



[https://i.chef.bbci.co.uk/news/640/cpsprodpb/65E2/production/\\_118628062\\_athens\\_flight\\_diverted\\_2x640-nc.png](https://i.chef.bbci.co.uk/news/640/cpsprodpb/65E2/production/_118628062_athens_flight_diverted_2x640-nc.png)

information we got, the pilot was very reluctant to turn back to Minsk as he was minutes away from touch down. And it wasn't until Belarusian air traffic control forced him using fighter jet to turn around and land in Minsk, that he did so. From the accounts of people traveling with Protasevitch, we also know that when he heard about the crew's decision with panic in his voice, he said that the "death penalty awaits him in Belarus". The bloggers' reaction was appropriate inasmuch as

both he and Sofia Sapega

got arrested the second plane touched Belarusian ground and what's even more terrifying, it is suspected that the couple was carefully tracked and followed by Belarusian KGB agents who got off the plane in Minsk and never came back.

For over 24 hours the whole world held its breath as it was unknown where they were kept, until not very comforting video, of Roman admitting to organizing mass riots, circulated the internet.

It is unknown what will happen with Protasevitch next, but one thing is for sure- nothing can stop Lukashenka. The EU has imposed sanctions on Belarus, most countries are now avoiding flying in its airspace, but the question most of us are now asking, remains the same- is it enough?