



By: TA | AP Insight

# Belarus frees political prisoners as US lifts sanctions on its national airline



Belarus freed 52 political prisoners on Thursday as part of a deal brokered by the United States, which lifted some sanctions on the country's national airline.

It was another sign of a possible rapprochement between Washington and Minsk, a close ally of Russia that has faced Western isolation for years.

U.S. President Donald Trump and Belarus' Alexander Lukashenko spoke on the phone last month, and the American leader even suggested a face-to-face meeting could be in the works.

That would be a big win for Lukashenko, who has **ruled** his nation of 9.5 million with an iron fist for more than three decades.

Belarus has been repeatedly **sanctioned** by Western countries both for its crackdown on human rights and allowing Moscow to use its territory in the invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

But more recently, Lukashenko has sought to mend ties with the West in the hopes of easing the sanctions.

He has regularly **released** prisoners as a way to win favor, including freeing Siarhei Tsikhanouski, a key dissident and the husband of exiled opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, in June.

The concession from the U.S. came a day after Poland **denounced** an incursion of Russian drones into its territory — saying some came from Belarus — in what Western officials called an act of aggression. NATO jets were scrambled and shot some of the drones down.

Trump, whose country is the major military power in NATO, offered an ambiguous initial response to the incursion, posting on his Truth Social platform: "What's with Russia violating Poland's airspace with drones? Here we go!"

## Sanctions on Belavia eased

Trump envoy John Coale announced the lifting

of sanctions at a meeting with Lukashenko in Minsk on Thursday.

Some sanctions on Belarus national carrier, Belavia, were relaxed in light of prisoner releases so far, according to a U.S. official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss private diplomatic conversations.

That will allow the airline to repair and buy parts for its planes, including Boeing aircraft.

The airline was sanctioned by the European Union, the U.S., and others after Belarusian flight controllers ordered a commercial jet traveling from Greece to Lithuania to land in Minsk. Once the plane landed, authorities arrested Raman Pratasevich, a dissident journalist who was on board.

Lukashenko, who has relied on Russia's loans and cheap energy to keep Belarus' economy afloat, called the move "very important."

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Tsikhanouskaya, Belarus' opposition leader in exile, warned that the easing of sanctions could allow Moscow, whose aviation industry has been sanctioned, to get airplane parts through Belavia.

"We understand that this is part of the deal," she told The Associated Press. "But lifting sanctions without systemic changes in the country could open loopholes that both the Lukashenko regime and Russia will use to circumvent the sanctions."

That could also create new opportunities for Belarus in its relationship with Russia. Minsk will be able to resell the parts to Moscow "at a very favorable price," said independent analyst Valery Karbalevich, and it makes "the Kremlin's leash" on Belarus "a little longer."

## One prisoner released refuses to go to Lithuania

One of the prisoners released Thursday, veteran opposition activist Mikalai Statkevich, refused to cross into Lithuania and tried to return to Belarus, but was blocked by the border guards, Anatol Lyabedzka, a key activist on Tsikhanouskaya's team, told AP in a phone interview from a Lithuanian border crossing where the prisoners were handed over.

Lyabedzka said that Statkevich was standing in the no-man's land between Lithuania and Belarus. "Statkevich is showing courage and strength of character," the activist said. "He decided not to let Lukashenko kick him out of the country and is resisting a forced deportation."

Statkevich's refusal recalled a similar one by Maria Kolesnikova, a key leader in the mass **protests** that rocked Belarus in 2020.

She became a symbol of Belarusian resistance after the authorities tried to deport her in September 2020. Driven to the Ukrainian border, she briefly broke away from security forces, tore up her passport, and walked back into Belarus. She was convicted a year later on charges including conspiracy to seize power and sentenced to 11 years in prison.

The other 51 freed prisoners have crossed into Lithuania, Lyabedzka said.

Statkevich, one of Lukashenko's most prominent and charismatic opponents, attempted to run for president in 2010, but was arrested, convicted on charges of organizing mass riots and sentenced to six years.

Amnesty International recognized him as a prisoner of conscience, and in 2015 he was released under pressure from the U.S.

Statkevich was arrested again before the 2020 elections, found guilty once more of organizing mass riots, and sentenced to another 14 years. He has been held incommunicado since February 2023.

Also among those released were Ihar Losik, a journalist for U.S. government-funded broadcaster Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, as well other journalists and bloggers, party and union leaders, and 14 foreigners.

**It's very cruel that I served my entire three-year sentence, and now I've been deported - Larysa Shchyarakova**

Franak Viachorka, Tsikhanouskaya's senior advisor, told AP that while most of the released Belarusians are in "normal physical and psychological condition," some need urgent medical care.

Elena Ramanauskienė — a Lithuanian who was detained in Belarus while visiting, convicted of espionage and sentenced to six years — burst into tears after stepping from the bus that brought her and some of the others back, and thanked those who made her release possible.

But some Belarusians viewed their release differently. "It's very cruel that I served my entire three-year sentence, and now I've been deported," said Larysa Shchyarakova, a 52-year-old journalist who was almost done serving her 3 1/2-year prison term in her hometown of Gomel.

"I have no home, no relatives here — nothing," Shchyarakova told reporters in Vilnius. "What's more, my mother died while I was in prison, so now I can't even go to her grave."

Almost 1,200 political prisoners remain behind bars in Belarus, according to human rights group Viasna, and Trump has said he wants to win the release of more.

## Warming ties?

There have been signs of Trump seeking a thaw with Lukashenko — much as he has with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

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month, Trump hinted he was working on a deal to win the release of hundreds of prisoners held in Belarus after holding a “wonderful talk” with Lukashenko.



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Trump announced in a social media posting following the call — his first publicized engagement with Belarussian leader during his second term — that the purpose of the conversation was to thank Lukashenko for the June prisoner release.

But the U.S. leader said the two also talked about the potential release of many more being held in Belarus.

Trump also added: “I look forward to meeting President Lukashenko in the future.”

That would be a remarkable turnaround for a leader who has been widely shunned for his relentless **repression** of the opposition and independent media, especially after tens of thousands of people poured into the streets to protest his reelection in August 2020, in a vote widely seen as rigged.

In the ensuing crackdown, tens of thousands were detained. Prominent opposition figures either fled the country or were imprisoned.

Lukashenko has since extended his rule for a seventh term in another election that the opposition called a farce.