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Belarus pardons 31 Ukrainians after deal with Trump



Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko has pardoned 31 Ukrainians jailed in Belarus on criminal offences, it was reported, the latest step in Minsk's effort to thaw relations with the West.

They were released "as a gesture of goodwill", in accordance with agreements reached between Lukashenko and U.S. President Donald Trump at Ukraine's request, Belarusian state agency Belta said, citing Lukashenko's spokesperson, Natalia Eismont. Those freed were handed over to Kyiv, according to the report.

Earlier this week, Lukashenko pardoned two **jailed Catholic** priests at the request of the Vatican.

Belarus, Russia's close and dependent ally, has allowed the Kremlin to **use its territory** to send troops and tanks into Ukraine, and later to place nuclear weapons there.

Moscow and Kyiv have also conducted prisoner swaps on Belarusian land.

Lukashenko, who has ruled Belarus with an iron fist for over 30 years, has recently tried to repair relations with the West.

Weeks after a phone call with Trump in August, he pardoned **51 political prisoners** under a U.S.-brokered deal that saw some sanctions lifted from the country's national airline, Belavia.

Minsk and Washington are set to hold talks in December

Trump later announced that lawyer John Cole, who helped broker the deal, would be appointed U.S. Special Envoy to Belarus and work to release more prisoners.

There are 1,257 political prisoners behind bars in Belarus, according to prominent human rights centre Viasna.

They include Ales Bialiatski, the centre's

founder, who has received the Nobel Peace Prize for his activism.

According to Belarusian authorities, Minsk and Washington are set to hold further talks in December.

Lukashenko is seeking to reduce his total dependence on the Kremlin - Valery Karbalevich

"Belarus is open to dialogue," Lukashenko's press service said in a statement Saturday. "Negotiations with various countries, chiefly the U.S., are now actively ongoing."

Valery Karbalevich, a Belarusian political scientist and commentator, said Minsk is attempting to return to its own policy of manoeuvring between Moscow and the West.

"Lukashenko is seeking to reduce his total dependence on the Kremlin. Therefore, he is willing to trade political prisoners like commodities, hoping for an easing of Western sanctions," Karbalevich told The Associated Press.

"Trump is giving Lukashenko a chance to thaw relations with the U.S., which also paves the way for the easing of European sanctions," he said, adding these had "hit Belarus much harder" than those imposed by the U.S.