

Belarus: Freeing political prisoners does not end policy of repression, warns UN expert

UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

4-5 minutes

GENEVA – A UN expert today welcomed the recent releases of prisoners convicted in relation to protests around the 2020 presidential elections but cautioned against excessive optimism about the human rights situation in Belarus.

“Many of those released, including politicians, human rights defenders, journalists, lawyers, trade unionists and civil activists, were convicted without fair trials in retaliation for their professional activities or for their exercise of civil and political rights,” said Nils Muižnieks, Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus.

“The recent releases have been accompanied by expulsions to other countries, while those who were allowed to remain in Belarus upon liberation have been placed under a draconian surveillance regime and prevented from re-entering the professional labour market,” Muižnieks said.

The expert warned that detentions and prosecutions on politically motivated grounds continue along with the releases. “The overall number of people designated by human rights defenders as political prisoners still in detention remains over 1100, which means Belarus continues to rank among the countries with the highest number of political prisoners per capita,” he said.

Over the past year, several waves of releases have occurred for prisoners convicted in connection with the 2020 events. The most recent release, on 13 December 2025, included the Nobel Peace Prize laureate Ales Bialiatski and two major political opposition leaders, Viktor Babaryka and Maryia Kalesnikava, among others. Upon release, they were transferred to Ukraine. Previously, in September 2025, another group of prisoners was [expelled](#) to Lithuania, many without identity documents.

Muižnieks said that while State media presented these releases as “pardons”, the politician Mikalai Statkevich who refused to leave the country, was reportedly [apprehended](#) and placed in detention again. Some other recently released prisoners saw new criminal cases opened against them in absentia. Some of those expelled were either nearing the end of their prison terms or had already served their terms, their imprisonment having been arbitrarily prolonged based on article 411 of the Criminal Code for “malicious disobedience to penitentiary authorities”, a provision repeatedly [criticised](#) by UN experts.

“These people were looking forward to returning to their homes and families. Instead, they were expelled from the country, left without means of subsistence and, in some cases, stripped of identity documents,” Muižnieks said.

“Returning to Belarus for them means facing new criminal charges and imprisonment. Those are not pardons, but forced exile,” he said.

Muižnieks and other UN experts have repeatedly flagged consistent allegations of wide-scale severe ill-treatment in places of detention in Belarus, particularly targeting persons convicted in relation to the 2020 protests. Several political prisoners [lost their lives](#) in detention under unclarified circumstances, while others died shortly upon release.

“While the prisoner releases are certainly a relief, there are no signs from Belarusian authorities of a change in the policy or practice of repression and no declarations to that effect,” Muižnieks said. “Until perpetrators of grave human rights violations are held accountable, all political prisoners are released and all Belarusians in exile can safely return to Belarus and are allowed to speak and work freely, we cannot speak of a normalisation of the situation.”