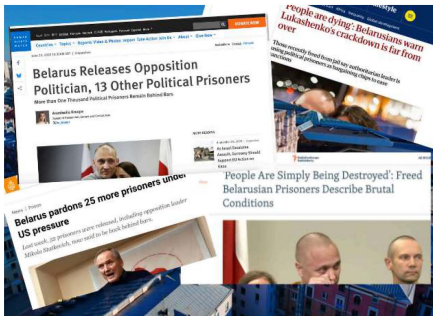


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HUMAN RIGHTS

Belarus Prisoner Release a Diversion, Say Rights Activists

By Ed Holt



Headlines reflecting the release of Belarusian political prisoners. Graphic: IPS

BRATISLAVA, Oct 7 2025 (IPS) - As Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko continues to pardon political prisoners in an apparently increasingly successful attempt to improve diplomatic relations with the US, rights groups have warned the international community must not let itself be 'tricked' into thinking repressions in the country are easing.

Lukashenko, who has ruled Belarus for more than 30 years, last month (SEP) ordered the release of more than 75 prisoners, the majority of them political prisoners, after negotiations with US officials.

But critics have said while the release of any prisoners is welcome, it should not be taken as a sign that the persecution of the regime's opponents is about to stop, and they point out that people are being jailed for their politics in Belarus at a faster rate than any are being released.

"While it is good that prisoners have been released, they should never have been in prison in the first place. There is a risk now that the attention of the international community will be diverted from the continuing repressions in the country. People are still in prison, and still being imprisoned, for exercising their human rights. While Lukashenko is releasing people, he is at the same time arresting more – it's like a revolving door," Maria Guryeva, Senior Campaigner at Amnesty International, told IPS.

The warnings follow the release on September 11 of 52 prisoners—the majority of whom were political prisoners—and the freeing on September 16 of a further 25 prisoners from Belarusian jails.

This came after direct negotiations with US officials and in return for an easing of sanctions on Belarus's national airline, Belavia.

The releases were also followed by confirmation from US officials involved in the negotiations that US President Donald Trump had told Lukashenko that Washington wants to reopen its embassy in Minsk. Trump also spoke to Lukashenko on the phone earlier in the summer and has reportedly even suggested that a meeting between the two could take place in the near future.

Political experts say that much closer ties between Washington and Minsk, not to mention an easing of sanctions, would be a major PR coup for Lukashenko. It could also be attractive to President Donald Trump, as it would underscore his own touted credentials as a master conciliator and a defender of human rights who can free political prisoners.

Rights activists, though, fear that seeing such political gains from his actions will only embolden Lukashenko to use prisoners as "bargaining chips" to extract further political concessions in the future.

"It seems like this is a new tactic [by the Belarusian regime] to use political prisoners as bargaining chips, [and] it seems to be working in that Belarus is getting political favors for releasing prisoners. As long as the regime sees it can use them as bargaining chips, this policy will continue," Anastasiia Kroupe, Assistant Researcher, Europe and Central Asia, at Human Rights Watch, told IPS.

Activists argue that ultimately, any concessions by the US, or other western nations, to the regime will do nothing to improve the dire situation with human rights violations in Belarus, especially given that there remain so many political prisoners in Belarusian jails—the rights group Viasna said that as of September 18 there were 1,184 political prisoners in Belarus—that Lukashenko could release when it is expedient.

They also point out that in some cases the individual releases in September were barely even pardons as such, given that many who were freed were just months or even weeks away from the end of their sentences anyway. The prisoners were, once 'free,' also forcibly deported from the country—one, opposition politician Mikalai Statkevich, refused to leave Belarus after being freed and was soon after re-arrested—to neighboring Lithuania.

"The fact that these prisoners were forcibly exiled is a further form of reprisal against them... for some it is a continuation of their punishment," said Kroupe.

Belarusian rights activists told IPS that the mood among those who had been released was mixed.

While some were glad to be free, others were angry.

"A number of those released are extremely frustrated. Some had literally just a month left to serve and were planning to continue living in Belarus. They had almost fully served their, albeit unjustly imposed, sentences, but instead of freedom, they were punished once again," Enira Bronitskaya, an activist with the Belarusian rights group Human Constanta, whose activities include helping exiled Belarusians, told IPS.

"They were thrown out of their country; many had their passports taken away (torn up), effectively stripped of their citizenship (deprived of documents, expelled from the country, with no intention from the state of their citizenship to provide any support). These actions are unlawful. People have been deprived of everything they had in Belarus, from property to the possibility of visiting the graves of their relatives who died while they were in prison," she added.

Others among the Belarusian community in exile told IPS there were concerns the releases could actually be used as a distraction from an even more intense crackdown on dissent.

"In our community, some are hopeful that the releases are a sign of successful negotiations, but the majority, me included, does not find the news particularly positive. Of course it is a great relief for the people released and their relatives, but we are expecting an intensification of repressions," Maryna Morozova*, who left Belarus for Poland soon after Lukashenko launched a massive crackdown on dissent following disputed elections in 2020, told IPS.

Just days after the 52 prisoners were released, a Belarusian court sentenced prominent independent journalist Ihar Ilyash to four years in prison on charges of extremism over articles and commentaries critical of Lukashenko.

The Belarusian Association of Journalists said the verdict was a sign that the authorities had no intention of softening their clampdown on independent media, pointing out that at least 27 journalists are currently behind bars in the country.

Exiled Belarusian opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya told international media after the September releases that "the regime's repressions are continuing despite Trump's pleas."

Viasna pointed out that just on the same day the 52 prisoners were released, it had recognized eight new political prisoners.

Activists who spoke to IPS said it seemed likely that, given the apparent success of the prisoner releases in easing, to some extent, Belarus's international isolation and sanctions, more prisoners could be freed in the near future.

"Lukashenko is treating political prisoners like political currency, like hostages. Governments should stop this trade-off and force Lukashenko to comply with human rights law and put pressure on him to unconditionally release all political prisoners," added Guryeva.

*NAME HAS BEEN CHANGED FOR SECURITY REASONS

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