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Political Consultant Detained in Belarus Returns to U.S.

By AFP

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Vitali Shkliarov had been detained in Belarus late July and accused of mobilizing protesters. **Screenshot Youtube**

Prominent American political strategist Vitali Shkliarov has returned to the United States from Belarus where he was detained in late July and accused of mobilising protesters, his lawyer and officials said Wednesday.

Shkliarov was among several prominent figures seized in Belarus amid a crackdown on opponents of strongman president Alexander Lukashenko, whose victory in the Aug. 9 presidential election sparked historic protests.

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A Harvard University fellow who has advised political campaigns in the US, Russia and

Ukraine, Shkliarov was detained in Minsk on July 29 and charged with organizing actions violating public order.

He was released under house arrest earlier this month after meeting with Lukashenko inside the KGB security service prison where he was being held.

In an Oct. 24 phone call with Lukashenko, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo demanded the release of the "wrongfully detained U.S. citizen."

Pompeo on Wednesday welcomed his release.

"After three months of wrongful detention and house arrest, Mr. Shkliarov has been reunited with his family and has arrived in the United States," Pompeo said in a statement.

"As the president and I have made clear, we will not tolerate foreign governments wrongfully detaining U.S. citizens."

Shkliarov's lawyer, Anton Gashinsky, told AFP that the strategist was in Washington.

Gashinsky on Tuesday indicated his client had left Belarus for Ukraine but did not specify how he was able to leave the country while under house arrest.

Shkliarov had been actively commenting on the situation in Belarus ahead of the election.

In an article for Forbes Russia, he said Lukashenko's election campaign was based on "populism and crude force."

Opponents of Lukashenko say the true winner of the polls was Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, a political novice who ran in the election in place of her jailed blogger husband.

She has since taken refuge in EU member Lithuania.

All members of the opposition's Coordination Council — except for Nobel Prize-winning author Svetlana Alexievich — are either in exile or custody.

The group is seeking to oversee the peaceful transition of power and organize new elections.

Alexievich is also currently abroad for health reasons.

The disputed election has sparked unprecedented protests against Lukashenko's 26-year rule, which were met with a violent police crackdown.

On Monday, the opposition announced a nationwide strike as Tikhanovskaya's deadline for Lukashenko to resign and halt violence against protesters was ignored.

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