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Belarus Releases U.S. National Jailed Amid Opposition Crackdown

By AFP

May 01, 2025



Yuras Zyankovich. **screenshot / Belarusian state TV**

Belarusian authorities said Thursday that they freed an opposition figure and naturalized U.S. citizen jailed for allegedly trying to "seize power" from President Alexander Lukashenko.

Yuras Zyankovich, 47, was arrested in April 2021 during a crackdown on opposition activists protesting against Lukashenko's rule.

He was sentenced to 11 years in prison for "organizing a conspiracy to seize power by unconstitutional means," a charge rights groups said was linked to his opposition work.

Belarusian law enforcement authorities arrested tens of thousands of people in the wake of the 2020 elections that saw Lukashenko return to power. Hundreds of them were subjected to physical abuse while in police custody.

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Zyankovich, a Minsk-born politician who later became a naturalized U.S. citizen, was a prominent member of the now-banned Belarusian Popular Front party, which is opposed to Lukashenko.

"At the request of the U.S. presidential administration, U.S. citizen Yuras Zyankovich has been released," Lukashenko's press secretary told the Russian state news agency RIA Novosti.

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio confirmed on Wednesday that Belarus had released a "wrongfully detained" U.S. citizen, without naming him.

There are at least 1,200 political prisoners still behind bars in Belarusian jails, according to the human rights monitor Viasna.

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