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Belarus Opposition Leader Tsikhanouski Freed From Jail

By AFP

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Siarhei Tsikhanouski **@Tsihanouskaya / X**

Belarus's top jailed opposition leader Siarhei Tsikhanouski was freed alongside over a dozen other political prisoners on Saturday in a surprise release hailed as a "symbol of hope."

His wife Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who took the mantle of the opposition after his jailing, said the United States helped broker the deal and thanked U.S. President Donald Trump.

Tsikhanouski, 46, had been imprisoned for more than five years.

He planned to run against incumbent Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko in the August 2020 presidential election, but was arrested and detained weeks before the vote.

Sviatlana — a political novice at the time of his arrest — took his place in the polls.

She posted a video on Saturday of her embracing Tsikhanouski after his release with the

caption: "FREE."

"It's hard to describe the joy in my heart," she said in a post on X.

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Thirteen others were released, including Radio Liberty journalist Ihar Karnei, who was arrested in 2023 and jailed for participating in an "extremist" organization.

They have now been transferred from Belarus to Lithuania, where they are receiving "proper care," Lithuanian Foreign Minister Kestutis Budrys said.

The announcement came just hours after Lukashenko met U.S. special envoy Keith Kellogg in Minsk, the highest profile visit of a U.S. official to the authoritarian state in years.

Belarus, ruled by Lukashenko since 1994, has outlawed all genuine opposition parties and is the only European country to retain the death penalty as a punishment.

The eastern European country still holds over 1,000 political prisoners in its jails, according to Viasna.

Swedish-Belarusian citizen Galina Krasnyanskaya, arrested in 2023 for allegedly supporting Ukraine, was also freed, Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson said.

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'Sincerest joy'

The release comes amid a broader warming of relations between the United States and Belarus's chief ally Russia under Trump.

Since taking office, the Republican has engaged in direct talks with Vladimir Putin, ending his predecessor's policy of isolating the Russian president.

Tikhanovsky was for years held incommunicado, and in 2023 his wife was told that he had "died."

In a video published by Viasna on Saturday, he appeared almost unrecognizable, his head shaven and face emaciated.

Tsikhanouski was sentenced in 2021 to 18 years in prison for "organizing riots" and "inciting hatred" and then to 18 months extra for "insubordination."

A charismatic activist, Tsikhanouski drew the ire of authorities for describing Lukashenko as a "cockroach," and his campaign slogan was "Stop the cockroach."

Lukashenko claimed a landslide victory in the 2020 election, a result that sparked massive opposition protests, which authorities violently suppressed.

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The Belarusian autocrat claimed a record seventh term in elections earlier this year that observers blasted as a farce.

Fellow Belarusian political activists and foreign politicians welcomed the release.

Poland's foreign minister Radoslaw Sikorski said the "free world" needed Tikhanovsky.

"My sincerest joy goes out to you, Tsikhanouskaya and your entire family," he wrote on X.

Former Belarusian culture minister Pavel Latushko, who supported the 2020 protests against Lukashenko, said all those released had been jailed illegally and hailed Tsikhanouski's release as an "important moment."

European Union chief Ursula von der Leyen hailed Tsikhanouski's release and called for Belarus to free its other political prisoners.

"This is fantastic news and a powerful symbol of hope for all the political prisoners suffering under the brutal Lukashenko regime," she said on X.

Germany's Foreign Minister Johann Wadephul said Tsikhanouski's release was "fantastically good news."

"At the same time, we must not forget the many other prisoners in Belarus. Lukashenko must finally release them," he said on X.

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