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‘A Prison of Survival’: Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Ales Bialiatski on Life Behind Bars in Belarus

By Moscow Times Reporter

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Nobel Peace Prize laureate Ales Bialiatski. **REUTERS / Gwladys Fouche**

AMSTERDAM — Ales Bialiatski spent decades documenting political repression in Belarus and defending its victims. He would eventually become one of them — twice.

The founder of the Viasna Human Rights Center, Bialiatski, 63, was first imprisoned in 2011 and spent nearly three years behind bars. A decade later, as President Alexander Lukashenko cracked down on society in response to mass protests against his disputed 2020 re-election, he was arrested again and sentenced to 10 years in prison alongside his Viasna colleagues.

While in detention, Bialiatski learned that he had been awarded the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize alongside Russia’s Memorial and Ukraine’s Center for Civil Liberties.

In late 2025, after serving nearly half of his sentence, Bialiatski was released alongside 122

other political prisoners in a deal that saw the U.S. lift sanctions on Belarusian potash producer Belaruskali.

Yet at least 889 more political prisoners remained behind bars in Belarus as of last month, according to Viasna.

In an interview with The Moscow Times, Bialiatski discussed life in Belarusian prisons, receiving the Nobel Peace Prize behind bars and the challenges facing Belarusian society both inside and outside the country.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

The Moscow Times: How have you been recovering and returning to ordinary life after imprisonment?

Ales Bialiatski: When you get out, it is an enormous shock. It is as if a train had hit you and dragged along the tracks for four and a half years, and then suddenly you come loose, and you look around you and think: 'Where am I? What happened to me? What is going on?' You begin to get reaccustomed to ordinary life. You have not held a phone in your hands for all that time and you begin to learn how to use one. You begin to remember what the internet is, what social media is. You begin to get used to the metro, to buses. You are not used to crowds. Your conversations were usually very short and you had to make sure no one from the prison administration was listening.

I have been out of the colony for eight months now, but I cannot say that I have forgotten everything. A significant part of me is still stuck there. However, the fact that I know what I should do next as a human rights defender helps me to find myself.

I was thrown out of the colony without documents, and my passport was later invalidated. They simply put me into a vehicle, handcuffed and blindfolded. I was then taken from eastern Belarus to western Belarus and then across the border to Lithuania. There were 10 of us in our group. We understood nothing. Then, suddenly, you find yourself free. It is, of course, an indescribable feeling.

MT: Could you describe the conditions you faced in prison and what daily life is like for Belarusian political prisoners?

AB: The conditions in prison were very harsh. The Belarusian prison system has largely grown out of the Soviet prisons. The main goal is to destroy you, your personality, your sense of self-worth. Everything in prison is aimed at making people obsess about survival: what we are going to eat, how not to end up in the punishment cell, how not to be punished. It is a constant race. A prison of survival, you could say. But there are also many horrible things happening in Russian prisons. Some prisoners were transferred to Belarus from Russia. Both political prisoners and Ukrainian prisoners of war described horrible things there, absolute atrocities.

This was my second imprisonment term. So perhaps I was better prepared than people jailed for the first time. But nevertheless, I still had to drink this bitter cup. And four and a half years in prison is, of course, not a short time. The second time, I was sentenced to 10 years. I served almost half of it. I was released together with a large group of Belarusian political prisoners in

exchange for the lifting of sanctions against Belaruskali, and we bitterly joked about how much each of us was worth.

There were several stages, so to speak, to this imprisonment, because it was quite a long period of time. I spent almost two years in a pre-trial detention center. It was an old prison in Minsk, built under the Russian Empire. There was a special atmosphere to it and its own problems — we did not have enough air, it was very overcrowded, we practically never went for walks and were in a constant state of immobility. We both slept, went to the toilet and ate in a very small space. In addition, during the last year, after Russia's war against Ukraine began, I was kept in isolation. They put me next to the death row inmates. There was close to no communication with anyone. I could watch only Russian and Belarusian television. With the exception of meeting with my lawyer, I was in a state of complete isolation.

There were two of us in the cell. There was no possibility of exchanging information or anything else, unlike, for example, other cells where there were more people and where prisoners passed information along special threads that they threw between cells. The only people we could talk to were those sentenced to death. Nearby there was a punishment cell, where people were held for short periods of time. So we had the punishment cell, then the shower, and then the death row inmates.

When I was moved to the penal colony, there were about 1,000 people in the colony and approximately 20 to 50 political prisoners. Some people were brought from other colonies, some were released and some were transferred, so the number of political prisoners there was constantly moving. Fifteen years ago, I was the only political prisoner in the colony.

There was no medical care. The doctors were good people, and they tried to help us as much as they could, but they couldn’t do much. Everything was about just pills. It was impossible to carry out any kind of diagnosis. It was impossible to see a specialist. For example, a surgeon might come once every three months, and there would immediately be a line of 20 or 30 prisoners waiting, so it was very difficult to get in. The same applied to dentistry.

Basically, you just live and live. If you survived, all right. If you did not survive, well, that was your problem. If the pills helped you, good for you. If they didn’t, too bad. Several political prisoners died in other colonies — although not in the one I was being held in — precisely because they did not receive the medical care they needed in time.

There was a lack of nutritious food. Porridge, bread, soup — that was it. Everyone was more or less half-starving. A small example: in 2025, I ate only one apple and even that apple came from an apple tree growing in the colony. They divided the apples among all the prisoners — one apple for each person. That was my apple. No other vitamins, nothing.

In addition to psychological pressure, we were subjected to constant punishments. During the two and a half years I spent in the colony, I endured more than 30 of them. And then you sit there, and you have no idea when it will end.

MT: And throughout that time, you remained largely cut off from the outside world...

AB: There were two news events that particularly shocked me in 2022. The first was the beginning of the war. Though I'd already understood from Russian television, a couple of

months earlier, where things were heading. The only question was when. But when it actually began it was a terrible feeling, because, first of all, sitting in that prison, we could do nothing. We could not even say a word.

These were tectonic changes. It was clear that this war was aimed at restructuring the entire post-Soviet space. I clearly understood then that our imprisonment would now be prolonged, because when a military conflict was underway — and Belarus was fully drawn into it from the very beginning — we, the hundreds of political prisoners, found ourselves in the position of domestic prisoners of war.

The second moment was in October 2022, when the Nobel Prize was announced. I was still sitting in the same cell with my inmate, only the two of us, people with no available information whatsoever. But as it happened, when we were escorted down the corridors, we ran into other political prisoners. Someone told me about the Nobel Peace Prize. At first, I did not believe it. When I entered the office where my lawyer and the investigator were sitting — it was literally on the same day that the prize was announced — the lawyer said: 'Ales, everyone is congratulating me because I am defending a Nobel laureate.'

The prize was awarded to Russian human rights defenders who had been imprisoned and who protested against the war, many of whom had been driven out of the country and forced to leave — there was practically a destruction of civil society taking place there, which had happened earlier to us in Belarus. It was awarded to Ukrainian human rights defenders, our colleagues, who were simply trying to do something in the catastrophe that had descended upon them. Then there was us, who had also experienced our own catastrophe earlier, in 2020 and 2021 when thousands of Belarusians ended up in prison for demanding fair elections and a democratic Belarus. All of us received this prize as a sign that a catastrophe is taking place in our region. It is not a happy prize, not a joyful one. As for me, I believe that this award belongs to the millions of Belarusians who want a democratic Belarus.

Even after receiving the prize, I also thought about how it might affect me. By then, however, I was no longer particularly worried about my own situation. I believed I had already done the most important thing I could do as a human rights defender. Other prisoners reacted differently. Some of them simply did not know what the Nobel Prize was at all. They had been imprisoned for 20 or 30 years, having spent most of their lives in prison. But for many people, it carried real weight. The administration knew about it, even if the officers did not show their reaction; even a neutral position on their part was already some kind of support.

MT: There is a dilemma around the U.S.'s negotiations with Lukashenko. On the one hand, the Trump administration is helping secure the release of political prisoners. On the other hand, many argue that Lukashenko should not be negotiated with because his regime's continues to carry out repressions. How do you see this situation?

AB: That was the first thing I said when I was released: 'It is wonderful that I am free, but I cannot forget for a single minute, not for a single day, that hundreds are still imprisoned, including human rights defenders, journalists and activists.' On the one hand, eight months have passed since my release and two more large groups of political prisoners have been freed since then — several hundred people in total. But around 1,000 political prisoners are still behind bars in Belarus and new people are being detained, arrested, tried and sentenced to

prison almost every day. So I am grateful to the people who fought for me, but the first thing I said — and I said the same thing to [U.S. special envoy for Belarus John] Cole — was that repression needed to stop. Otherwise all these releases would turn into a meaningless carousel.

The Belarusian authorities want sanctions to be lifted. Their main goal is to maintain the current system of violence and repression inside the country while at the same time restoring normal trade with European countries. The European governments' position, however, has remained fairly firm. The sanctions were imposed because of Belarus' significant economic and military support for Russia's war against Ukraine. Belarus supplies weapons, and many Belarusian enterprises — including penal colonies — contribute to the war effort. In the colony where I was held, for example, prisoners made crates for shells and painted shell casings, which were then sent to a Belarusian factory and from there to Russia. We all understood perfectly well where this work was ultimately going. As long as Belarus continues to support Russia's war and repression, there is no reason to soften the European Union's position toward Belarus.

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MT: While you were in prison, you had very limited access to information about what was happening outside Belarus. How did you see the Belarusian democratic movement abroad when you were finally released?

AB: We knew that hundreds of thousands of Belarusians had been forced to leave Belarus, because some were afraid of direct repression, while others simply felt that they did not have enough air, enough freedom. But we knew little about what was happening abroad. When I was released, I had to fill all these gaps very quickly and it is all a process that is still continuing now.

On the one hand, the situation is rather sad, because in reality somewhere between half a million and a million people left out of a population of 9 million. Talking about comparison, just imagine if 15 million people would have left Russia. But what I saw as well was a Belarusian society that was very active and well structured. I saw dozens of newly created civic organizations and initiatives, including human rights organizations that didn't exist before.

In Viasna, the majority of people started working after 2020. At that time, I had seen some of them once or twice, when they were still acting as volunteers. Now they have worked for four or five years nonstop, and they have truly become human rights defenders. The same situation exists in cultural life, as well as in civic and youth organizations. Many people have already studied and graduated from universities in Poland, Lithuania and elsewhere in Europe. In short, this Belarusian youth and the political part of Belarusian society that left the country is highly active and driven, although of course exile remains a major blow to anyone's existence.

All in all, I was surprised that for the first time, Belarusian migration has turned into a real political force. The Belarusian authorities understand that too. That is why there is such strong criticism, provocation and pressure from the security services against the Belarusian opposition abroad — because it is a real political force. That is very important for the future of

Belarus. This European spirit will matter a great deal to us in five to seven years, because I think the situation in Belarus and Russia will change in the end — if only, let's say, given the age of our dictators.

It is dispiriting that the most active and democratically minded people are leaving. But at the same time, I would say this has not undermined Belarus society's critical attitude toward Lukashenko. His support is still very small. In my colony, I met hundreds of people from different parts of Belarus, and barely any of my inmates had anything positive to say about him.

MT: How do you see Russia's role in Belarus' current repression and in its future? You have already said that Belarus itself has, in a certain sense, become a hostage of the Kremlin's war against Ukraine.

AB: Lukashenko has continuously demonstrated holding strict pro-Russian views, an attitude rooted in his Soviet career, as well as in his 1970s upbringing and education. He and Putin need one another and their many years in power have shown this more than once. Lukashenko has always despised Belarusian independence. He has never valued democracy. What mattered to him was personal power.

Russia adopted many repressive practices from Belarus — practices that did not exist in Russia, for example, in the late 1990s. But Lukashenko also learned from Russia. In 2020, when a peaceful revolution was unfolding in Belarus, Lukashenko would not have remained in power without the moral and practical support of the Russian security services. Especially, as we understand now, when the military maps concerning Ukraine were already on the table. Russia could not allow Belarus to leave its sphere of influence.

As long as nothing changes in Russia, it is difficult for us to change the situation in Belarus. But at the same time, I always tell Belarusians: 'Do not wait for something to change in the Kremlin.' Russia's neighbors have shown more than once that it is possible to leave its sphere of influence. So a great deal depends on people, on the Belarusian people, and I believe in them. Nevertheless, despite the very difficult and tragic situation now, which is still not improving anywhere in our region, despite the war going on for a fifth year now, despite the endless bombardments in Ukraine, I think we still have good chances. This bad time must be lived through, but not simply waited out while sitting quietly. Everyone, at their own level, must do something and these collective efforts will have an effect.

The political authorities, and especially Belarusian society, are not Russia. The mood among Belarusians is nevertheless anti-war. No one there wants to get involved in this war. There is no such imperial ambition. Of course, Russian propagandists do their best to fool Belarusians too. It works on a part of society, but a small part.

Pro-European sentiment is very strong in Belarus, especially among young people. The year 2020 in Belarus showed very clearly that people want to live normally. So Belarusians need to strive for it, we need to move toward the European Union.

I would very much like to see democratic change in Russia, because for us Russia is always either a threat or a partner. What happens between us next depends largely on the kind of government there is in Russia and what happens in Belarus.

Bialiatski recently spoke about his fight for human rights in Belarus at a Freedom Lecture at Amsterdam's De Balie, which is available to watch on De Balie's website.

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