

# Lukashenka's Political Manoeuvre: Decoding the Significance of Prisoner Releases

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## Executive Summary

The recent pardoning of 115 prisoners by the Lukashenka regime raises important questions regarding the regime's intentions and the potential role of the international community in advocating for further releases. While Lukashenka may attempt to use amnesties as a tool to regain his legitimacy, the international community should remain vigilant, ensuring that genuine progress is made toward ending repression and restoring human rights in Belarus. The path forward requires multilateral efforts that address not only the release of prisoners but also broader systemic changes in Belarus to prevent ongoing political persecutions. The upcoming Polish EU Presidency offers a critical opportunity to align global efforts in holding the Lukashenka regime accountable for repressions and safeguarding the rights of Belarusians.

## Introduction

Since 2020 post-electoral protests in Belarus, at least 30,000 individuals have been detained and over 300,000 forced into exile by the autocratic regime of Aliaksandr Lukashenka. According to the Human Rights Center Viasna, there are currently 1324 political prisoners in Belarus. Many of them are held incommunicado and are often subjected to torture and other forms of violence.

Therefore, the Belarusian regime's unexpected pardoning of 115 political prisoners in July-September this year raises several questions: What goals does Lukashenka pursue with this policy and what can the international community do to ensure the release of the rest of political prisoners?

There have been four waves of surprise amnesties in Belarus since the 3d of July 2024. The most recent release of 37 prisoners took place on the 16th of September. The three other waves happened on the 4th of September (30 people), 16th of August (30 people) and the 3d of July (18 people).

## Lukashenka's Tactics for Political Control and Diplomatic Leverage

These series of releases serve several strategic objectives for the Lukashenka regime, targeting both domestic and international audiences.

### **1. Image Management Before the 2025 Elections:**

Lukashenka is attempting to lower social tensions ahead of the 2025 elections, which, despite being tightly controlled, serve as a political tool to signal his power and claim legitimacy. The regime carefully stages amnesties around symbolic dates, such as the so-called Day of National Unity (September 17), introduced in 2021 to promote a sense of reconciliation after the 2020 protests. This aligns the release of prisoners with regime-sponsored narratives of national stability and unity. By releasing a portion of political prisoners, Lukashenka seeks to project an image of "softening" and "de-escalation" of the 2020 crisis, aiming to appear more lenient without truly reducing repressions. However, this tactic is primarily symbolic, as key political prisoners, such as Maria Kalesnikava, Viktor Babaryka, Siarhei Tsikhanouski, Ales Bialiatski and many others remain imprisoned. New arrests continue, maintaining what some analysts describe as a "revolving door" of political imprisonment in Belarus.

### **2. Maintaining Control While Deflecting Criticism:**

Those pardoned are often required to express public gratitude and admit fault, reinforcing the narrative that Lukashenka is acting out of generosity rather than necessity. This helps to maintain Lukashenka's image as an unchallenged ruler while avoiding any perception of weakness, which could embolden Belarusian democratic movement. Such acts serve to manipulate both domestic and international perceptions, showing controlled "liberalization" to relieve pressure from critics abroad.

### **3. Testing the Waters for Dialogue with the West:**

Lukashenka is also using these releases as part of a broader strategy to signal his willingness to restart dialogue with Western powers and potentially reduce sanctions. By creating an image of gradual liberalization, he hopes to open a path for negotiations, leveraging his prior role as a mediator during the Minsk Agreements in 2014-2015 to remind the West of his geopolitical relevance, especially in the context of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war.

This aspect is becoming increasingly relevant for the Belarusian regime as Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is set to present his "plan for victory" to U.S. President Joe Biden during his current visit to the U.S. If potential peace negotiations between Russia, Ukraine, and the West gain traction, they could reshape the geopolitical landscape. In anticipation of this, Lukashenka is testing the waters, gauging whether there is still an opportunity to improve relations with the West amid shifting dynamics, and once again propose Minsk as a "neutral" venue for negotiations between Ukraine, Russia, and Western countries.

## **Balancing Pressure and Diplomacy: Navigating Approaches to Release Belarusian Political Prisoners**

It remains to be seen whether the Lukashenka regime will be ready to make any serious concessions and if the EU will be able to develop a coherent policy to secure the release of Belarusian political prisoners. The recent Russia-West prisoner exchange which took place on the 1st of August has highlighted the importance of these questions. The swap deal included a release of German citizen Rico Krieger sentenced to death in Belarus and then pardoned by Lukashenka, but it did not feature any other Belarusian political prisoners.

This omission sparked numerous questions and criticisms from Belarus observers, largely targeting the Belarusian democratic forces for their perceived failure to advocate effectively for the release of Belarusian political prisoners. While this criticism may seem valid at first glance, it's important to recognize that the swap deal was orchestrated solely by the security services of Russia, Germany, and the US, with details kept highly confidential until the final day of the exchange. As a result, the Belarusian democratic forces had no ability to influence the composition of the prisoner lists due to their lack of access to information. Any discussion of including Belarusian political prisoners in the exchange would have had to be initiated by Washington or Berlin, and it is likely that negotiators refrained from introducing additional demands out of concern that it could jeopardize the entire deal.

The issue of political prisoners in Belarus remains a polarizing topic among Belarusian democratic forces. There are two primary views among Belarusian opposition on how to approach the Lukashenka regime:

- **Pressure Over Concessions:** Leaders like Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and her team, Pavel Latushka, most members of the Transitional Cabinet (quasi government in exile) and the ruling coalition in the Coordination Council (quasi parliament in exile) believe that only sustained pressure, not concessions, will force Lukashenka to release more prisoners. They argue that making any concessions, such as recognizing Lukashenka's legitimacy, could strengthen his position and weaken the democratic movement.
- **Negotiation as a Path to Freedom:** On the other side, figures like Andrei Yahorau (ex-speaker of the Coordination Council), former Transitional Cabinet member Volha Harbunova advocate for negotiations with Lukashenka, even if it means making concessions, to expedite the release of prisoners. This group believes that ensuring the safety and freedom of political prisoners should take precedence, even if it involves some compromise.

## **Recommendations for Advancing Efforts to Release Belarusian Political Prisoners**

Despite differing opinions on the best approach to take toward the Lukashenka regime, there is a consensus among the whole Belarusian democratic movement that the EU and the broader international community must prioritize the issue of releasing Belarusian political prisoners. The future work in this area could focus on the following tracks:

### **1. Strategy on the release of political prisoners in Belarus:**

Going forward, the EU and other Western actors will need to consider how best to develop a coherent strategy concerning Belarusian political prisoners, particularly in light of Belarus's increasing alignment with Russia and the Lukashenka regime's ongoing repression. This remains a delicate diplomatic question, balancing the need for strategic concessions without jeopardizing broader negotiations. In the meantime, it is crucial for the EU and its allies to be careful and not to provide Lukashenka with concessions that allow him to maintain his grip on power while offering only minimal reforms or symbolic amnesties in return.

### **2. Strengthening Accountability Mechanisms:**

The international community should provide further support to initiatives like the [International Accountability Platform for Belarus](#), which collects and preserves evidence of human rights violations. Continued activation of the OSCE Moscow Mechanism for rapid investigations into atrocities will ensure that international attention remains on the violations occurring in Belarus, and it can serve as a basis for future accountability efforts.

### **3. Humanitarian Support for Prisoners and Exiles:**

The establishment of the International [Humanitarian Fund in Norway](#) at the initiative of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, aimed at supporting political prisoners and their families, should be backed by the EU and other international actors. This fund provides critical assistance to those who suffer under the regime's repression and sends a clear message that the global community is committed to their welfare.

### **4. International Advocacy and Solidarity:**

The international campaign, [WeStandBYou](#), led by organizations like Libereco and Viasna, which pairs European parliamentarians with Belarusian political prisoners as symbolic godparents, has been highly effective in raising awareness about human rights violations in Belarus. Expanding this initiative can help draw global attention to individual cases, increasing the political cost of continued repression for Lukashenka's regime.

### **5. Leveraging the 2025 Polish EU Presidency:**

The upcoming Polish EU presidency in January-June 2025 offers a crucial opportunity to prioritize the release and rehabilitation of political prisoners on the EU's agenda. Poland's proximity to Belarus and its historical role in supporting democracy movements in Eastern Europe makes it well-positioned to lead a coordinated EU effort on this front. Small, consistent diplomatic steps and high-level attention during the Polish presidency could bring more global focus to the plight of Belarusian political prisoners.

## **Conclusion**

Lukashenka's recent release of political prisoners is a calculated strategy aimed at managing both domestic and international challenges. The EU and its allies can play a key role in ensuring the release of all remaining prisoners by maintaining diplomatic pressure, supporting accountability efforts, and providing humanitarian aid to those affected.

By leveraging the opportunities presented by the 2025 Polish EU presidency, continuing to impose targeted sanctions, and amplifying advocacy campaigns, international community can advance the process of democratisation of Belarus and ensure that the human rights of Belarusians are protected.



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