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# *Latvia and the Issue of the Release of Political Prisoners in Belarus*

By Dr. Einars Semanis



The second half of 2024 and the current year 2025 have been marked by new events and discussions surrounding the fate of political prisoners in Belarus. Especially pertinent are developments related to the foreign policy activities of the United States of America. In general, US foreign policy is characterised by the strongly expressed dimension of realism and pragmatism. This essential feature is clearly visible in the United States' relations with authoritarian political regimes. At the same time, addressing the issue of the release of political prisoners in Belarus points to a connection between the humanitarian dimension of US foreign policy and the realistic and pragmatic position of the US administration. A particularly large amount of attention has been drawn to the telephone conversation initiated by the President Donald Trump with Lukashenka on 15 August of this year and relevant posts made by President Trump on his platform "Truth Social".<sup>i</sup> In this communication, President Trump clearly stated that the US expects 1,300 political prisoners in Belarus to be released. In political, media and analytical circles, the question is widely discussed of what the Lukashenka regime expects from the US administration and what Lukashenka's possible next steps could be.<sup>ii</sup> Hypotheses have been mainly put forward in connection with the summit of the presidents of Russia, Ukraine and the US in Minsk proposed by Lukashenka. Lukashenka's previously known desire for a lifting of sanctions, especially on the export of potassium salt, "in exchange" for the release of political prisoners, is often mentioned. Analysts note that such a "bargaining" option could be, for example, enacted if the scenario of a meeting between Trump and Lukashenka comes to pass.<sup>iii</sup>

A significant episode was the 21 June visit of the US President's Special Envoy for Ukraine, Keith Kellogg, to Minsk, which was centred on his meeting with Belarusian dictator Lukashenka and KGB Chairman Ivan Tertel. Kellogg mainly linked his visit to President Trump's efforts to end Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Issues related to bilateral relations between the US and Belarus were also discussed. At the same time, a very important result of the visit was the release of 14 political prisoners.<sup>iv</sup>

In this regard, it is important to underline that Latvia is grateful to the United States for securing the release of 14 political prisoners, including two citizens of Latvia. The President of Latvia Edgars Rinkēvičs on the 21 June stated: "I would like to express my deep gratitude to President Donald Trump and the US administration for effective leadership in securing the release of foreign nationals, among them two Latvian citizens, Jurijs Ganišs and Dmitrijs Mihailovs, from Belarusian prison".<sup>v</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia underlined: "Thanks to the leadership of the United States, US President Donald Trump and the US President's Special Envoy Keith Kellogg, 14 citizens of various countries imprisoned in Belarus were released today, including two Latvian citizens - Jurijs Ganišs and Dmitrijs Mikhailovs. It is gratifying that among those released is also Siarhei Tsikhanouski, the husband of Belarusian opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. The Lukashenka regime still holds more than 1,000 political prisoners in captivity and instrumentalises migrants at the borders with Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. To change this, international pressure on Belarus must continue".<sup>vi</sup>

However, at the same time, hypotheses and suspicions began to be raised that the release of the 14 political prisoners on 21 June could be related to possible US pressure on Latvia and Lithuania to lift sanctions on the export of potassium salt through Latvian and

Lithuanian ports.

So, on 25 June, Latvian media quickly took up the question: “Could the flow of Belarusian cargo be restored through Latvian ports?” This question arose because of a statement on the platform X by the Ukrainian independent media outlet “Ukraine Front Line”, which stated that the United States had promised this to the leader of Belarus, Aliaksandr Lukashenka. The Belarusian dictator was promised access to the ports of Riga, Ventspils, and Klaipeda in Lithuania, and US pressure on the relevant structures in Latvia and Lithuania had already begun, “Ukraine Front Line” reported.<sup>vii</sup>

Authoritative Latvian media quickly conducted research, and the information could not be confirmed. Thus, Deputy Speaker of the Saeima (Latvian Parliament) and Representative of the Saeima Foreign Affairs Committee Zanda Kalniņa-Lukaševica, responding to a media question, indicated that this was “specifically speculative” news and that attempts were being made to create loud headlines during the NATO summit. In turn, Advisor to the Latvian Minister of Transport Edgars Klētnieks said that no such official information had been received. Representatives of the free ports of Riga and Ventspils also did not confirm the news.<sup>viii</sup>

Prime Minister Evika Siliņa on 25 June commented on information circulating on the Internet about the US’s promise to Belarus to restore access to ports in Latvia. She noted that there has been no news confirming the information. “And I can say that the Latvian government will decide on Latvian ports,” the Prime Minister said. She stressed that Latvia advocates for maintaining sanctions as a very high priority, including the sanctioning of so-called shadow ships. “And we must stand up so that we economically prevent this war machine from operating in Russia and, by extension, in Belarus,” the Prime Minister said.<sup>ix</sup>

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia stated that it sees no basis for the allegations about the restoration of the relevant cargo flow from Belarus through Latvian ports. The ministry informed the media that “it is necessary to take into account that Belarus still continues to support Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine and implements unconventional threats on the external borders of the European Union and NATO. There are still more than 1,100 political prisoners in Belarusian prisons [...] Also, in communication with the US, Latvia has expressed a firm opinion that the weakening of sectoral sanctions against Belarus without fundamental changes in the behaviour of the Lukashenka regime is unacceptable.”<sup>x</sup>

Thus, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia confirmed that Latvia consistently continues to advocate for increasing pressure on the Lukashenka regime. This was also reflected in Latvia’s positions regarding the 18th package of restrictive measures of the European Union against Russia, which also included EU sanctions against Belarus.<sup>xi</sup> In principle, Latvia’s position is based on the European Council’s 2020 October conclusions on Belarus. On 26 June, Foreign Minister Baiba Braže addressed the UN Human Rights Council on behalf of the NB8 countries about the unacceptable human rights situation in Belarus, demanding that the Belarusian authorities release all political prisoners and end their repression against civil society.<sup>xii</sup> The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus, Nils Muižnieks, stated in his report on 26 June that there are no signs of any improvement in the human rights situation in Belarus.<sup>xiii</sup> On 7 July, the Minister of Foreign Affairs gave an interview to “Radio Liberty” in which she reaffirmed Latvia’s consistent position, including

on the issue of sanctions.<sup>xiv</sup>

At the same time, it should be noted that Latvia's firm position on the issue of the release of political prisoners in Belarus has been consistently implemented during many important events on different political and diplomatic levels.

On 2 July on the margins of the 59<sup>th</sup> Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council, the permanent missions of Latvia and Lithuania organised a discussion titled "Erosion of Freedoms and Political Repression in Belarus". The discussion highlighted different aspects of the issue of political prisoners in Belarus. In an emotionally strong statement, Siarhei Tsikhanouski shared his experience of being imprisoned, described the torture he endured and called for the end of repression. This was echoed by Viktoryia Rudzenkova from the Human Rights Centre "Viasna", with a focus on the fate of individuals subjected to politically motivated persecution and the treatment of political prisoners. Maryia Zharylouskaya, from the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions, delved into the issue of violations of workers' rights, including the repression of independent trade unions and the continuation of politically motivated dismissals in Belarus. Journalist Hanna Liubakova discussed the continuous escalation of the suppression of freedom of expression, assembly and association, as well as the issue of transnational repression, undermining the safety and freedom of Belarusians in exile. The discussion highlighted Latvia's priority thematic directions at the UN Security Council, namely, advocating for respect for international law and the protection of human rights.<sup>xv</sup> The Latvian mission in the OCSE plays an important role in raising the issue of the release of political prisoners in Belarus.

Latvia provides a financial contribution to the International Humanitarian Fund for the rehabilitation of political prisoners, as well as to the International Accountability Platform for Belarus, which methodically documents and preserves evidence of human rights violations in Belarus.

On 9 May, the leader of the Democratic Forces of Belarus Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya visited Riga. During the visit, she participated in a conference on parliamentary democracy held by the Baltic Assembly, met with the Speaker of the Saeima Daiga Mieriņa, and unveiled an exhibition about political prisoners in Belarus.<sup>xvi</sup> An important role in the process of providing support for the Democratic Forces of Belarus is actively and visibly played by the Parliamentary Cooperation Group in Support of a Democratic Belarus, led by Leila Rasima. As part of the #WeStandBYyou solidarity campaign, Saeima members Jana Simanovska, Antoņina Ņenaševa, Mairita Lūse, Leila Rasima and Juris Viļums have taken on godparenthood of Siarhei Pliashkun, Ala Zuyeva, Yauhen Verkhavodkin, Alla Sokolenka and Ruslan Slutski.<sup>xvii</sup> Alla Sokolenka is a Latvian citizen who is in the custody of the Belarusian regime. She was detained in Belarus on 27 March 2022 for alleged "agent activity". Recently, MP Jurgis Klotiņš has proudly taken up godparenthood over the priest Henrykh (Henadz) Akalatovich; Klotiņš stated that he believes the freedoms of opinion, conscience and religion are fundamental human rights that every country in the world must respect.<sup>xviii</sup>

On 4-5 July 2024, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya had an important regional working visit to Daugavpils and participated in the Conversation Festival "Lampa" in Cēsis. During her visit to Daugavpils, she launched an exhibition by Belarusian artist Volha Yakubouskaya titled "25 Steps to Freedom".<sup>xix</sup> During the Conversation Festival "Lampa" in 2025, there was a

discussion titled “Belarus Behind the Veil of Stereotypes - What is Its True Role and Place in Europe?”, organised by the Office of The Nordic Council of Ministers in Latvia - led by Ambassador Stefan Eriksson. In 2023, Ambassador Eriksson received the Cross of Good Neighbourhood from Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya.

On 9 May 2025, the State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Andžejs Viļumsons, met with Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. During the meeting, the State Secretary reaffirmed Latvia’s support for the Belarusian Democratic Forces.<sup>xx</sup> Active engagement with the diplomatic network of democratic countries, especially in Vilnius and Warsaw, is significant. An important aspect of this dimension of work was the appointment of a very experienced ambassador - Gunta Pastore - as the representative of Latvia to the democratic community of Belarus. The Consulate of Latvia in Vitebsk is essential to provide consular support and maintain communication with the imprisoned persons from Latvia. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is paying special attention to cooperation with the democratic part of the Belarusian diaspora in Latvia - the Association of Belarusians in Latvia “Supolka”, the Belarusian women’s organisation in Latvia “Māra”, the Cultural Association of Belarusians in Latvia “Svitanak”, and the Latvian civil society support organisation for the Democratic Forces of Belarus “FreeBelarus”.

In the Latvian academic area, a special mission is being implemented by the Riga Stradiņš University by offering a study course “Belarus Between the East and the West” for Master Studies Programme students in the Faculty of Social Sciences. The course consolidates the important results of research activities in Latvia. The major role in relation to this is played by the Latvian Institute of International Affairs and its researcher Beate Livdanska. She specialises in the analysis of Belarusian domestic and foreign policy and coordinates essential research cooperation programmes.

Symbolically, on Europe Day, the Latvian Institute of International Affairs, within the framework of the Belarus Research Network on Neighbourhood Policy and in cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, co-hosted a discussion titled “The Role of Belarus in the Political and Security Architecture of Europe: Perspective from the Baltic Region”. In his opening address for the event, the Parliamentary Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Artjoms Uršulskis, highlighted the threats posed by the authoritarian regime of Belarus to Europe’s security, as well as the role of the Belarusian democratic forces in the fight for a free and democratic Belarus that is part of the family of European nations. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, in her speech to participants and political experts from Lithuania, Poland, and Latvia, thanked Latvia for supporting the Democratic Forces of Belarus and expressed the need for a continued unwavering support to Ukraine in its fight against Russia’s war of aggression. She underlined that the defence of Ukraine’s sovereign territories is a vital aspect of security for the region as a whole - including in Belarus’ struggle for a democratic future.<sup>xxi</sup>

On 9 August of this year, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia stated: “Five years ago, in protest of the election fraud of 2020, the people of Belarus bravely and clearly voiced support for democracy, freedom, and independence. They were met with repression and disregard for human rights, many were imprisoned. Latvia stands by the people of Belarus on their path towards democracy and demands the immediate release of all 1,180 political prisoners”.<sup>xxii</sup>

It should be emphasised that Latvia's strong position on the issue of the release of political prisoners is linked to its understanding of the nature of Lukashenka's political regime. The Lukashenka regime is strengthening its authoritarian rule through continuous repression, purposefully destroying its political opposition, civil society and independent media. The tragic fate of political prisoners in Belarus is proof of this. The regime is turning the country into a threat to the Belarusian people themselves, a threat to the security of Latvia as a neighbour of Belarus, and a threat to the region and to the whole of Europe.

As a country rooted in European democratic values, Latvia is consistent and firm: all political prisoners in Belarus must be released, immediately and unconditionally.



## ENDNOTES

- <sup>i</sup> See: <https://en.belsat.eu/88348706/trump-spoke-with-lukashenka-and-discussed-the-release-of-1300-prisoners>; <https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/115044463870504970>; <https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/115033133751064517>; <https://pozirk.online/en/news/151557/>.
- <sup>ii</sup> See, for example, the analyses of A. Shraibman, V. Karbalevich, A. Klaskovsky, R. Turarbekova - [https://storage.googleapis.com/crng/belarus-usa-trump-benefits.html?fbclid=IwY2xjawMRW4lleHRuA2FlbQlxMQABHjSksszADDVbTKsa1k5i8\\_Ups4pmwinOXqiyewayhl2jvEXmjdtsr-lQLm\\_aem\\_E9ZE4kcjVIRGhwh7g9s1CA](https://storage.googleapis.com/crng/belarus-usa-trump-benefits.html?fbclid=IwY2xjawMRW4lleHRuA2FlbQlxMQABHjSksszADDVbTKsa1k5i8_Ups4pmwinOXqiyewayhl2jvEXmjdtsr-lQLm_aem_E9ZE4kcjVIRGhwh7g9s1CA); <https://youtu.be/ajq75-63dtl?si=L0SuR8QWfRLGdZaw>; [https://news.zerkalo.io/econoics/106501.html?\\_gl=1\\*1urh1x1\\*\\_ga\\*OTUyOTM3NTY5LjE3NTU1ODM1MzU.\\*\\_ga\\_B8LJ3JQEYwyczE3NTU1ODM1MzUkbzEkZzEkdDE3NTU1ODM1ODEkajE0JGwwJGgw\\*\\_ga\\_QGQLCMX5PSyczE3NTU1ODM1MzUkbzEkZzEkdDE3NTU1ODM1ODEkajE0JGwwJGgw](https://news.zerkalo.io/econoics/106501.html?_gl=1*1urh1x1*_ga*OTUyOTM3NTY5LjE3NTU1ODM1MzU.*_ga_B8LJ3JQEYwyczE3NTU1ODM1MzUkbzEkZzEkdDE3NTU1ODM1ODEkajE0JGwwJGgw*_ga_QGQLCMX5PSyczE3NTU1ODM1MzUkbzEkZzEkdDE3NTU1ODM1ODEkajE0JGwwJGgw); <https://gazetaby.com/post/turarbekova-sejchas-lukashenko-proxodit-bukvalno-po-lezviyu/208086/>; From comments in Latvia, see, for example analysis of U. Jansons - <https://www.tvnet.lv/8308957/trampam-vedi-diktatori-mili-kapec-vins-zvanija-lukashenko>. Lukashenko's reaction - <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/obsenie-s-belorusskimi-zurnalistami-posle-intervyu-mediakorporatsii-kitaa>; <https://eng.belta.by/society/view/eismont-belarus-is-ready-to-host-meeting-between-putin-zelensky-170668-2025/>
- <sup>iii</sup> See, for example, V. Karbalevich's presentation of possible scenarios - <https://www.svaboda.org/a/33506513.html>
- <sup>iv</sup> Kellogg's visit is still widely discussed and analyzed, recognizing that it was not unexpected. Already during President Trump's first term, there were attempts to "normalize" relations with Belarus. National Security Advisor John Bolton and the Under Secretary of State David Hale visited Minsk in 2019, and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo - in February 2020. Researchers find that in the current period, negotiations between the United States and Belarus have been taking place through diplomatic channels since the summer of 2024, with Christopher W. Smith, a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, and the Belarusian representative to the UN, Valentin Rybakov, playing a central role in them. In any case, the release of US citizens imprisoned in Belarus is one of the successes of US diplomacy. C.W. Smith's visit to Minsk and his meeting with Lukashenko on February 12 of this year were important. In connection with this meeting, on February 15, the NYT published a publication entitled "A Quick, Quiet Trip to Belarus Signals a Turn in U.S. Policy", which had a great influence on subsequent formulations in political, media and research circles. The author of the publication, Andrew Higgins, points out, citing anonymous sources in diplomatic circles, that "after years of the U.S. trying to isolate Russia's closest ally, a meeting with Belarus's president points to better relations, raising hopes of loosening his repression and his embrace of Moscow." See: <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/15/world/europe/belarus-us-prisoners-diplomacy.html>.
- <sup>v</sup> <https://x.com/edgarsrinkevics/status/1936468454816510131>
- <sup>vi</sup> <https://x.com/Arlietas/status/1936469984449900558>
- <sup>vii</sup> See: <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/ekonomika/25.06.2025-vai-ostas-atvers-baltkrievijas-kravam-latvijas-arlietu-ministrija-noraidosa.a604454/>
- <sup>viii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>ix</sup> <https://www.apollo.lv/8275256/silina-komente-interneta-izplatito-informaciju-par-asv-solijumu-baltkrievijai-atjaunot-pieeju-ostam-latvija>
- <sup>x</sup> <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/ekonomika/25.06.2025-vai-ostas-atvers-baltkrievijas-kravam-latvijas-arlietu-ministrija-noraidosa.a604454/>
- <sup>xi</sup> <https://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/article/latvia-18th-package-sanctions-confirms-eus-united-stance-support-ukraine-while-increasing-pressure-russia>
- <sup>xii</sup> <https://www.mfa.gov.lv/lv/media/18296/download?attachment>
- <sup>xiii</sup> [https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/06/no-sign-improvement-belarus-special-rapporteur?utm\\_source=miragenews&utm\\_medium=miragenews&utm\\_campaign=news](https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/06/no-sign-improvement-belarus-special-rapporteur?utm_source=miragenews&utm_medium=miragenews&utm_campaign=news)
- <sup>xiv</sup> <https://www.svoboda.org/a/bayba-brazhe-potentsial-dlya-mira-estj-vsegda-no-rossiya-ne-dvizhetsya-k-miru/33466476.html>
- <sup>xv</sup> See: <https://www2.mfa.gov.lv/en/geneva/news/72484-latvia-and-lithuania-organize-discussion-on-political-repression-and-human-rights-situation-in-belarus>
- <sup>xvi</sup> See: <https://www.saeima.lv/en/news/saeima-news/34661-daiga-mierina-to-the-leader-of-the-belarusian-democratic-movement-we-will-continue-to-defend-democratic-values-in-belarus>
- <sup>xvii</sup> See: <https://spring96.org/en/news/114471>
- <sup>xviii</sup> See: <https://www.libereco.org/en/deutschland/news/westandbyou-3-new-godparents>



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<sup>xix</sup> See: <https://tsikhanouskaya.org/en/news/love-solidarity-and-belarusians-faith-in-themselves-are-something-the-regime-cant-understand-and-fears-sviatlana-tsikhanouskaya-launched-exhibition-25-s.html>

<sup>xx</sup> See: <https://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/article/state-secretary-andzejs-vilumsons-pledges-latvias-support-belarusian-democratic-forces-sviatlana-tsikhanouskaya>

<sup>xxi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xxii</sup> [https://x.com/latvian\\_mfa/status/1954015025267699940?s=46](https://x.com/latvian_mfa/status/1954015025267699940?s=46)



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