News



In this photo provided by Belarusian Presidential Press Service, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, center, speaks as he visits the Berezinsky Biosphere Reserve during a working visit to the Lepel District of the Vitebsk Region , Belarus, Friday, Oct. 31, 2025. (Belarusian Presidential Press Service via AP)

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Two Roman Catholic priests who were imprisoned on what human rights officials said were politically related charges were released from prison Thursday following talks with the Vatican, officials said.

The move, which was confirmed by the Conference of Catholic Bishops in Belarus, comes amid speculation about warming relations between Minsk and the West after a phone call between authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko and U.S. President Donald Trump in August led to the release of some political prisoners.

Fr. Henrykh Akalatovich was sentenced to 11 years in prison after a treason conviction in 2023. He served two years.

The 65-year-old cleric, who criticized the government in his sermons, was accused of spying for Poland and the Vatican — charges he denied as based on "lies, threats, and blackmail."

His arrest was the first time politically driven charges were made against Roman Catholic clergy in Belarus since it became independent after the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union.

Also freed was Fr. Andrzej Yukhnevich, who was serving 13 years in prison after being convicted on child molestation charges in April. He had denied the accusations, and human rights activists said he originally was arrested for "political reasons." Yukhnevich had been detained four times, including for posting a Ukrainian flag on social media.

The release followed a visit to Belarus in October by a papal envoy, Cardinal Claudio Gugerotti, a former Vatican ambassador to Belarus who now heads the Holy See office that handles eastern rite Catholics, according to Belarus' bishops conference.

The bishops said they welcomed "the resumption of dialogue between Belarus and the United States, and the strengthening of contacts with the Vatican."

The immediate whereabouts of the released priests was unknown. Dozens of political prisoners freed this year were taken to Lithuania, often without passports or documents.

Opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya said she welcomed the release of the priests.

"My deepest gratitude to Pope Leo XIV and the Holy See for their principled support," she said. "Many other believers remain behind bars. Repression must end — no one should be punished for their faith."

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Arkatovich and Yukhnevich are among dozens of clergy — Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant — who have been jailed, silenced or forced into exile for protesting the 2020 election that kept Lukashenko in office. Rallies against the vote, which observers say was marred by fraud, triggered a brutal police crackdown, with more than 65,000 arrested and thousands beaten by police.

Clergy who supported the protests and sheltered demonstrators at their churches were particularly targeted by repressions. Belarusian authorities have openly sought to bring the clerics into line, repeatedly summoning them for "preventive" political talks, checking websites and social media, and having security services monitor sermons.

More than 1,200 political prisoners remain behind bars in Belarus, including Nobel Peace Prize laureate Ales Bialiatski, according to the Viasna human rights group. The number includes 29 priests.

While Orthodox Christians make up about 80% of Belarus' population, just under 14% are Catholic and 2% are Protestants.