

THE FREEDOM RELAY

The March of Belarus

August–December 2020

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MINSK AUTUMN

The Belarus uprising of 2020 marks a turning point of universal significance. Although it erupted on the 40th anniversary of August 80, under the banner of social solidarity, it seems to be a phenomenon of a different order. This is no longer the action of a declared opposition, seeking an effective way to confront the monopoly on power, undertaken in order to attract the passive. This is a movement of society itself, flowing like lava with no controlled direction. This element surprisingly contradicts the image of “Eastern inertia”, which is how Belarus has been seen for years – as something lost to the West, because deeply infected by the East.

This record of the experiences of the Belarusian people for almost five months at the end

of 2020 is drawn from a variety of eyewitness accounts which appeared at the time in a number of media outlets, chiefly via the internet. The majority come from the capital, but also from other locations in Belarus. The picture they give contradicts the misconceptions held by many significant representatives of elites in years past. There were some disturbing theories proclaimed on the Polish side, not necessarily dominated by party logic, in which a local despot appeared as an adequate head for a “collective farm state”. The conclusion being that he was in his proper place.

The opinions of often rational people revealed a deep disregard for a silent society. They would not presume to return to those visions today. For suddenly, from a position of apparent ossification, there stirred a march

– a great exodus from the dead East. Contemporary geopolitical concepts, frequently given to reducing perceptions of this region to a game between two dictators – the Belarusian and the Russian – actually served to invalidate grassroots self-determination.

The Belarusian people opposed such objectification en masse – a long succession of fraudulent elections seem to be coming to an end. The bandit-president, without the mask of “warmth” which was finally removed from his face during the period described below, is unable to cajole the nation any longer. Immediately after brazen falsifications in the Stalinist mould – as during the “referendum” of 1946 in a conquered Poland when results opposite to the real ones were announced – it transpired that the cordons had snapped. It was

clear in the very first weeks after 9 August 2020 that the combination of violence and lies typical of autocrats would not silence Belarus.

Meanwhile, the KARTA Center initiated the gathering of testimonies immediately after the beginning of the Belarusian revolt – convinced that here was the third act of a radical breakthrough in the East. We were the first to reconstruct the events of August 80, with its far-reaching consequences disturbing the cohesion of the Soviet bloc, in detail, day by day, twenty years after the events (*The Days of Solidarity*, 2000). In support of the Ukrainians, we covered the Maidan of 2013/14, which wrested Ukraine from the post-Soviet zone, a year after their victory (*The Fire of Maidan*, 2015). Now, publishing this account of the Belarus autumn of 2020, we remain convinced that it will precipitate democratic revolt throughout the remaining autocratic areas of the East, in accordance with the logic of the process

so far. The fourth act is likely to affect Russia directly.

The lack of any political dynamic in response to events during the final Minsk months might seem alarming; no opposition leadership appears to be developing. The whole thing seems to be suspended between the social presence on the streets and the brutal violence used against the protestors. However, the pathological abuse of the latter neither halts nor turns back the process leading to a new democratic order. It is clear, furthermore, that a breakthrough cannot be finally achieved within Belarus alone, that greater pressure is necessary on the part of international powers.

A declaration of European affiliation was made manifest on the streets of Minsk. The European Union must respond, recognising this society as pro-democratic, and the degenerate who dominates it as a criminal. If he were brought to trial at the International Court

of Justice in the Hague, there would be plenty of witnesses to systemically committed abuses.

Belarus has turned towards the West, and its first step, therefore, is towards Poland. This time, the duty of the Republic is to stand firmly in support of its independent existence. Exactly one hundred years after the Second Polish Republic adopted the Treaty of Riga – the treaty by which the Bolsheviks eliminated an independent Belarus – the Third Republic, by supporting the latter now, can contribute to weakening the Post-Soviet world.

WARSAW, 18 MARCH 2021

Zbigniew Gluza



PHOTO: VASILY FEDOSENKO / REUTERS / FORUM

1

MARCH OF TRUTH

SVIATLANA TSIKHANOUSKAYA

(opposition candidate standing against Aliaksandr Lukashenka in the presidential elections):

For 26 years, we have been living in a country where everything is forbidden. Thinking is forbidden, speaking, protesting, standing, applauding anyone other than Lukashenka.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown us that we can bring about miracles as a civil society. [...] Meanwhile, the state did nothing, it left us to the mercy of fate, falsifying the statistics on infections and fatal cases. [...] People were dying while Lukashenka declared that nothing was happening, that the weakest were dying. [...]

We will not be silent. We felt that we were human beings. All for one and one for all. The whole nation stood up to fight for its rights. [1]

ANDREI LENKIN (chief of staff for presidential candidate Valery Tsepkala):

During the epidemic, I felt the cynicism and crassness of these authorities who did not fulfill their obligations but left people to cope alone. I felt anger and a desire to act, though if someone had told me only a few months ago that I would be involved in a struggle for freedom I'd have thought they were mad. [1]

SVIATLANA TSIKHANOUSKAYA:

We don't wish to live in fear and falsehood. We want the right to life, the right to free elections. We are a peaceful nation. Those who take us for cowards are wrong. Today Belarus has woken up. We are no longer the opposition, because we are the majority. [1]

VIKTAR BABARYKA (opposition candidate to Aliaksandr Lukashenka, detained 18 June):

Until 2015, Aliaksandr Lukashenka had the electoral advantage. Today he does not [...] His unlawful activities, political pressure and intimidation are on a scale reminiscent of carpet bombing. [...]

You can put Babaryka in prison, but the Belarusian nation will not budge. What we are experiencing now is not intimidation of me, but the intimidation of an entire society. [12]

VALER KARBALEVICH (political analyst, coordinator of "Strategia" Analytical Centre):

Sviatlana Tikhanouskaya, the main rival to the incumbent president, could get more votes than him. Because everyone who has had enough of the current government supports her. She is a sort of anti-Lukashenka. [1]

SVIATLANA TSIKHANOUSKAYA:

If I had to assess the chances of winning, I would put it at 97 per cent. I believe in our victory, we need change which will bring freedom to Belarus and everyone who lives here.

[...]

I'm very much afraid that Lukashenka will use force, and bring in the army... On the other hand, I believe in human decency, even from him. To bring out the military and roll out the big guns there has to be an army against which to use them. But we are defenceless. We will defend our votes, our rights, but in a peaceful manner. [1]

← ← On the previous page:
Minsk, 16 August 2020.



PHOTO: NATALIA FEDOSENKO / TASS / FORUM

← Minsk, 29 August 2020.
Women's protest participant.

MARIA (graduate of the Department of International Relations, BUP):

Before the elections, I registered as an independent observer. On 9 August, between three and four in the afternoon, turnout was at 100 per cent. [18]

ALIAKSANDR BROVKO (engineer):

When they announced the voting results, I heard the number 80. Something exploded in my head! I'd seen how many people were going to vote with white ribbons round their wrists [a sign of voting for Tsikhanouskaya]. And the queues! Everyone was full of hope, and then this slap in the face!

I met up with my daughter. She very much wanted to join the peaceful protest, but she is so slight – 49 kilos, a computer scientist, an intelligent girl. I said to her: "I will go now with your mum, and you stay home, please, on the sidelines." [...]

I prepared myself as well as you can for being beaten up. I'm tough, I've had a long life, I've seen a lot. I understood that they would be violent, but I didn't know how terrible it would be. [10]

VITALII MAROKKO (logistics specialist):

After they'd closed the voting stations, at 20:00 my son and I went to the school to see the final proceedings. [...]

We knew about the crowds of people at Stella. Together with a group of indignant people, we moved to the centre of town. We came onto Kalvariyskaya Street and there we met a column of people coming from Pushkinskaya. There were about five hundred of us. On the way

to the bridge, we ran across the OMON (Special Task Police Force). The forces blocked the only road leading to Stella. The column of people stopped. There were many girls among us, we did not undertake any rebellious or radical action. I tried to keep my son behind me. [1]

EKATERINA (age 34):

This is a peaceful demonstration. We want change. We are all outraged. Our votes have been stolen. It was like spitting in someone's face. One person is not going to tell us how to live. I came out today with flowers because I don't want any bloodshed. I want peace, change, and freedom. [1]

MARIA:

We set off as a group in the direction of Stella. People we met on the way told us the militia was there using force. We went anyway, because we couldn't stop ourselves. Despite all the intimidation and torture which met me, I didn't regret being part of the demonstration for one second. I had never seen such beautiful brave Belarusians. I cried several times with sheer emotion. We were a Nation. [18]

VALERIA IANITSKAYA (student director):

It was getting dark, it must have been about eight in the evening. I took a taxi to the centre, to Stella. I felt it was my duty to be there. There were a lot of people there already, many of them had banners. [...]

I stand there and I'm thinking: everybody has to come out on the street. I wasn't afraid. I have that kind of personality, I'm not afraid to be first. I ran out into the street.



PHOTO: JĘDRZEJ NOWICKI / AGENCJA GAZETA

← Minsk, 9 August 2020. Police and OMON units breaking up spontaneous opposition demonstrations which took place after the results of the presidential election polls were announced.

At some point, I turned my head and realized that there was a massive crowd behind me, and that I was standing with the men in the front line.

Somebody kept saying: “We’ve got to go into battle!” Everyone was calling him a provocateur. We didn’t want any aggression. We’d come to stand in the street and to shout that we were against falsehood.

They started it. Frankly – I felt rage. But I understood that I mustn’t show it. People began to bring glass bottles. That’s to say, they were ready to throw them at the OMON. The protestors maintained that they didn’t want violence. They saw off the people who’d brought them and the bottles were smashed inside trash cans. [1]

ALIAKSANDR STSEPANENKA:

The notion of non-violent protest is a priority.

During the action, I witnessed one man beginning to drag a paving slab from some steps leading to the second floor of the trade centre. He didn’t hide his intentions – he wanted to throw it at the cops. The operation was thwarted. Not by the cops, but by other people taking part in the action who were clearly not inclined towards using violence. The radical, failing to gain support for his actions, was forced to leave the protest. [10]

NINA PRIVALOVA (pensioner):

When I and some other women were coming nearer, the crowd was suddenly attacked by the militia. [...] We saw them beating a boy on the pavement. We started to struggle with the *siloviki* [law enforcers], shouting: “Don’t touch our children!”

A huge puddle of blood was forming around the boy. It started to rain. We ran up to him, shouting at the militia to leave him alone. We didn’t manage to save him: he was thrown into the patrol van. His backpack and flag were left lying in blood on the asphalt.

Lots of the women pensioners tried talking to the militia, but it was useless. Some officers approached our group and sprayed us with gas from close up. I’d just taken a deep breath and shouted: “What are you doing?” The gas hit me in the eyes, the nose, my mouth.

[...] Another lot of vans turned up. People started running away. I didn’t run. I got up, held up my head and thought: “Lord, please, stop this violence.” At that moment I was caught. [9]

ALEXEI KUDIN (former European and World champion kickboxer):

We saw that some minivans had stopped in the avenues close by with some OMON guys in black uniforms. They gave the order and started thundering on the riot shields and beating people up on the square. They simply clubbed them and started dragging them into the vans. They chased the people standing with flags and banners in our direction. People in our group started to shout that we should get out of there, but I thought: why should we, if we’re just standing talking, no one was shouting anything or chanting. We decided to stay where we were, since we weren’t breaking any laws...

It turned out that everyone was standing behind me, and the soldiers, shoving people aside, came straight at me and stood there, combat ready. I didn’t know what to do. There’s OMON all around. Run away? They



PHOTO: VALERY SHARIFULIN / PAP / ITAR-TASS

← Minsk, 10 August 2020.
Police units.

caught anyone who ran. They came even closer, a metre and a half away. Several people next to me raised their arms and started to say that we were just standing here, we weren't doing anything illegal. I took a step towards the officers, raised my arms and said: "Boys, are you going to beat me up? What for?" A soldier from the second row – over the heads of the first lot – sprayed gas into my face. [7]

VITALII MAROKKO:

Running, I noticed yellow drops on my clothes. I felt a pain in my hand, I lifted it up and saw a piece of bloody meat. I felt worse all the time, I stopped and fell to my knees. [...]

Someone phoned for an ambulance, he had loudspeaker on and the voice at the other end said: "Look for help on the spot. We won't be coming to this location." It transpired later, that on 9 to 10 August, they were not allowed to respond to summons coming from Stella. A girl who was in the vicinity decided that they had to get me through the line of "defence" (the OMON) to find an ambulance. They picked me up and brought me out. The officers didn't stop us and let us through without hindrance. There was an ambulance near the public transport stop, the driver got out and said he couldn't take me as he already had three "cases". One of them had intestines spilling out. They sat me on the street and we waited for help. [1]

YURII SHAMSHUR (journalist):

The internal troops advance along Pritycki street in the region of the Kuntsevshchyna metro station without encountering any opposition on the part of the insignificant

number of protesters, the majority of whom are ordinary bystanders. The "defenders of constitutional order", beating their truncheons against their shields, step briskly over the concrete flowerbeds and rubbish bins that have been dragged onto the highway. There are no clusters of people in front of them, a few people are standing near a car, about 60 metres from the road.

"No press!" shouts one of the five law enforcers, approaching a journalist. "What the f*** are you doing here?" the rest of them yell, blows from their truncheons raining down on his head and other parts of his body.

[...] Two of them take him under the arms. He points out his Ministry of Foreign Affairs accreditation, and asks them to call the press spokesman of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MSW). "Don't move or we'll shoot your balls off" – the sound of sniggering. They throw him into the paddy wagon, and there he comes face to face with "comrade ensign", who tosses his weapon from one hand to the other. "Welcome on board our flight" laughs one of the soldiers. "On your knees, baldy! Face to the floor!" he ordered. He switches off the journalist's phone.

Next to him, pressed to the floor, two men are kneeling. Blood is flowing from the head of one of them, forking into streams, running down his face and body. The other one tries to explain that he got caught in a "round-up" after his shift, coming back from the trolleybus park. [...]

"You bastards, what changes do you want? What's wrong with our president, you f*****? We're not going to let you faggots tear our country apart. Why should we lose sleep at night picking you lot up off the streets?" the defender of order screams at the top of his voice. [1]



PHOTO: PAP / EPA

← Minsk, after 10 August 2020.
Woman injured during dispersal
of a demonstration by the police
and OMON.

MARAT (doctor):

The greatest brutality took place on the night of 10/11 August. People were beaten on the streets. There was inhuman screaming. Actual screaming – a mixture of OMON forces shouting and swearing, as they hammered people “from the heart”. They didn’t rest for a second. They vented their fury at not being able to go home, eat a meal as normal, go to bed. At not sleeping properly, not eating properly. [1]

MARIA:

We were heading for home when tear gas and grenades hit us near Mickiewicz Park. We ran into a little side-street. The soldiers found us.

I managed to send two messages: to my boyfriend and my father, but only to say that I’d been caught. I didn’t know where they were taking us. [...]

They told me to switch off my phone. They took down my details. They handed us over to the police – into the van. A moment later I heard: “I’ve fucking had it chasing after you. Couldn’t stay at home, you scum? They should burn you at the stake, send you into space to do your whoring there.” [18]

DARIA CHECHKO:

Three men in balaclavas caught some girls and pulled them towards a van without plates. We surrounded the van and wouldn’t let it through, chanting “Let them go!” At that moment, we were surrounded by a huge number of OMON officers. I suddenly found myself at the front, in a chain of hands, face to face with those people in masks. I’m

quite tall, but I only reached the necks of some of those beasts. I wasn’t afraid. I didn’t shout, I just looked straight into their eyes and thought how to get out of this trap. Then one of them covered my eyes with the black palm of his hand with the words: “What are you staring at?” [1]

ALIAKSANDR BROVKO:

A blue van without number-plates emerged from under the bridge and out of it – like bullets – shot people in black. I had no intention of running away or resisting them.

They loaded me into the van. A man in a black mask, he looked about 20-25, covered my head with my white-red-white flag, swearing away, he asked: “Where’s your Tsikhanouskaya then? How much did they pay you?! Where do you live? In the Belarus Republic?” I answered: “And where do you live?” At that he began to hit me over the head: “I’m going make you eat that flag!” He started shoving it into my mouth. I clenched my teeth and said nothing. I saw his enraged eyes and I realized that talking was useless. [10]



PHOTO: NATALIA FEDOSENKO / PAP/ ITAR-TASS

← Minsk, 9 August 2020. OMON officers detaining a demonstrator.



PHOTO: STRINGER / REUTERS / FORUM

2

MARCH OF SECURITY

VALERIA YANITSKAIA:

I lost my friends in the crowd, I was crying with fear. I went up to some boy and said: “I’m frightened.” He took my hand: “Stand next to me, it’ll be fine.” Just then the grenades began to fly. I think it was the first one that hit me. The boy tried to shield me. I turned round at that moment and it turned out that it was me who was shielding him.

The explosions carried on behind us all the time. It was very loud, I didn’t understand what was happening. I stood there, reeling. They caught hold of my arms and took me somewhere. I could feel the blood running down my body, all over my clothes. I felt no pain. I began to ask if my face was all right. No one told me. I thought: well – I’ve lost half a face. I was wearing contact lenses and I couldn’t see what was happening for the blood. I was crying but I was in an optimistic mood. I was alive, that was the most important thing, the rest didn’t matter. [...] After 5–10 minutes in the hospital they brought a boy who had some punctured organ – so they said. They put him next to me – he wasn’t allowed to lie down. I felt his blood running down me. That boy was moaning in pain, he was clearly worse off than me. [...]

They extracted a shard from me. They hadn’t noticed it straightaway. They thought it was a blue thread. It turned out to be a piece of a grenade – 3 millimetres. The doctor said she’d keep it as a souvenir, she’d never seen anything like it. [1]

NINA PRIVALOVA:

The most terrifying part was in the van. The painter Lena didn’t sit because she couldn’t. She was next to me, half lying. An enormous tall bull of a guy sat opposite

in his balaclava and black overall. She was here and her legs were across the aisle... She might have touched him slightly, or something... She didn’t accost him. She wasn’t swearing, wasn’t doing anything, but might have inadvertently touched him with her leg...

Imagine that animal... the evil in his eyes... He leaps up, throws himself at Lena, presses his massive knee down on her ribcage, grabs her throat with his left hand and with his right beats across the head, the face. I caught hold of him and I said: “What are you doing?” “You’ll get it next, you bitch.” [6]

ALIAKSANDR BROVKO:

The most terribly moment for me was when a sixteen-year-old boy at the RUVD [District Department of Internal Affairs] was being kicked in the stomach and he was shouting and writhing. I was lying on the asphalt and could hardly breathe with anger and powerless rage. After all, I’d gone on the march so that boys like him would not end up in these places, and here I see them “kneading” the boy with their feet. [11]

YURII (product manager):

They added another guy [to the van] with a smashed head. He was shouting that his ten-year-old child had been left behind in the street. He begged them to let him go because he had to get the child. The child was alone and grenades were exploding...

The commandos fired gas at us twice. They put on gas masks and fired it to make us shut up and do nothing. Then the guy began to cry: “What about my child, what’s

← ← On the previous page:
Minsk, 18 October 2020.



PHOTO: TUT.BY / REUTERS / FORUM

← Minsk, 23 September 2020. Road blocks by the security forces on the day of Lukashenka's inauguration.

happened to him!” The special forces decided to attack us with gas a third time. The man calmed down, didn’t make a fuss, but after 10 minutes the people next to him realized that he was too quiet. He sat there like he was dead. They began to shout: “What have you done?”, the *siloviki* shone a torch at him. He sat there, his pupils didn’t react.

They opened the door, they were talking via radio. Then we saw the militia, armed, with rubber bullets, some even with AK-74 assault rifles. One of them had slung a machine gun over his shoulder, was walking like a warrior – so proud. We stood there about 10 minutes, the ambulance didn’t come. They made a “brilliant” decision: they took him to the middle of the road, lay him down on the asphalt and left him there. And drove off. [10]

PAVEL DOROSHKO (director of a technical department):

A worm. I crawl over people. They hit me on the back and legs. I push myself off hands, feet, heads. I crawl to the end of the van. Underneath me a wheezing voice is begging for help, someone is suffocating. I’m breathing hard. [...] I try to calm down. It’s hot.

They carry on packing people in for 15 minutes, constantly beating someone. The man lying beneath is still choking. He begs for air. Pleading for help. I shout: “Help!” The guy says he has asthma. He breathes. They shove in more people. The doors close. [...]

Anyone who lifts their head or moves gets beaten. We drive for about 15 minutes, then we stop. We’re transferred to another van. They “get us up” by beating us with truncheons. They hit hard. My turn. I try to get up quickly. My hands are tied behind my back. Blows. I run

to the exit. Blows. I run out. Blows. I see only legs. Blows. Run into the bus. Blows. I fall down. Blows. [...] I crawl along the cabin. I crawl defending myself from the blows. I’m breathing heavily.

[...] I’m struck twice at the same time – from both sides – on the head. I run on. They hit. And hit. And hit. I run into a concrete enclosure: “On your knees! Heads down! Down, bitches!” [...]

They throw me to the ground. I lie there till six in the morning. An eternity. I’m weak, my head is spinning, I vomit, I’m shaking with cold. Waiting for fresh pain. I hear vehicles drive past. Shouts every 10 minutes. People beaten to the point of despair. [...]

The ambulance came. I was lifted up and pulled inside. Everything hurts. My head, back, hands, fingers, legs, stomach. [5]

IVAN ALEKSANDROVICH:

They stopped me at the station. I was coming back from the protest.

First we drove around town. Or maybe beyond the town limits. I wanted to sit down. There are benches in those militia buses. They told me to lie down on the floor. People could sit down, they said, not me. After a few hours driving, we were lying there piled up, on top of each other. There were girls too. It was impossible to breathe. They beat us, I don’t know with what. I lay face down with my hands tied. They hit us a lot. Not just with truncheons, it seems to me, but with a chain as well. At the Akrestsina detention centre they moved us from cell to cell. They they made us lie down in a gigantic gymnasium. [1]

PASHA:

They undressed the girl they'd brought with the rest of us in front of everyone till she was naked, then they ordered her to stand facing the wall, legs apart... They ordered her to squat... Lower... I can't talk about it...

Then later they asked her: "Well, you slut? Will you take it in the mouth?" Then they cut her hair. With a knife. One of them said: "I prefer them with short hair." [19]

PAVEL KABUSH (age 26):

They hit me hard. Mainly on the head. They yelled, shouted abuse. They told me that if I said I'd prepared Moltov cocktails they'd leave me alone. They forced me to confess to something I hadn't done. They recorded it on a cellphone. Later, they threw me to my knees, turned me to face the chair and carried on beating me. Finally, they painted a cross in red paint on my jacket and said I'd told them enough to rot in jail. [2]

MAKSIM KOROSHIN:

They beat me till I was unconscious, and gave me amnesia to bring me round. Five minutes later, they started beating me again. Then I got an asthma attack, I couldn't breathe. I started to suffocate and that alarmed them – they began to yell at each other. They all ran out of the office and called an ambulance.

I reached hospital in a state of shock. [13]

KATSIARYNA MIARZHINSKAS (reanimatologist):

Many of the victims were afraid to go to state clinics because a rubber bullet in whatever part of the body was proof that this was a criminal matter. We have to report it to the authorities. [...] Most of the bullets were in the back, the back of the legs, or the buttocks. It's easy to see that they were shooting not at people attacking them, but at those who were running away. [...]

Doctors who have worked for years in intensive care, in ambulances, who've seen a lot and are not afraid of things that can bowl over an ordinary human being, with trembling hands and tears in their eyes described extremely serious injuries and damage to internal organs, brain damage, internal bleeding and ruptured organs. Not to speak of many men with rectal fractures – it's clear why... There was also serious damage to the genitals. [...]

Many people with whom I've spoken said that if something were to happen to them they would not seek help, because they had already previously experienced dishonest dealings on the part of the authorities. Once a wounded man greeted me with a truncheon in his hands because he feared they would come not to him, but for him. [1]

MAKSIM (photographer, age 26):

When I was standing at the bus stop in the evening, two boys – maybe fifteen years old – with white wrist bands and t-shirts with national symbols were beaten up by four OMON officers who jumped out of unmarked cars. One of them had a grenade in his hand.

It was unbearable to watch, but it was impossible for me to react. An older man standing next to me tried to



PHOTO: BELAPAN / REUTERS / FORUM

← Minsk, 19 September 2020.
Woman watching over an injured man.

do something to prevent this cruelty but he was beaten too. They threw him to the ground, shouted: “Shut up,” and quickly drove away. [...]

I was afraid. [...] I’ve seen a lot in my life, but never anything like this. [1]

RAMAN SHABANOVICH:

My daughter and I were stopped by the militia in my truck with the white-red-white flag [right across the tarpaulin]. The truck was confiscated and I was threatened. I managed to run away – we were saved by a column of protesters.

The truck vanished. I started to look for it. Two days later people told me where it was parked. I went to pick it up. Two men came running from a black car with a Russian number-plate and began beating me up. I lost consciousness. When I came round in their car and we were already driving. [...] One was behind the wheel, and the other one on top of me. [...] I managed to get away. They didn’t chase me, because they knew that people had started gathering. [11]

JAUHIEN:

They hit us with their fists and kicked us, in the head too. They went through our personal things. People even got it for having the “wrong kind” of phone case. After a few minutes of all this we were “invited to get in the minibus”.

They crammed us in so that we were lying on top of each other. I was at the bottom, so I was lying in a pool of blood of which there was so much that I could feel it in my eyes and lips. At the other end – I was beaten last,

when they’d already managed to cut the hair of the comrades on top of me, cut open their shorts and threaten to rape them with a truncheon or a grenade.

The minibus stopped and we were led out. They greeted us with blows to the stomach and face. Again the same questions, blows, and then the order to run to the militia vehicle. [...]

How wrong I was when I thought we’d get to sit down... They took us inside one by one, threw us onto the floor, and closed the door with the words: “No one will hear you here.”

Then began the most brutal beating that we have ever experienced. I had to concentrate very hard not to lose consciousness under dozens of kicks, blows with truncheons and fists. When the beating was over, they began to abuse us in the most vulgar fashion – then came crawling to the other end of the vehicle within five seconds (with injuries to the legs and stomach). Otherwise the “carousel” would be repeated.

Then they got to my shorts and began poking with the truncheon.

I could not believe that they would really thrust the truncheon into my anus, though I did wonder how I would walk later with a ruptured bowel. They pulled me out of the van, again blow after blow. [11]

VOLGA KARACH (director, International Centre for Civil Initiatives “Our House”):

It’s a taboo subject. It concerns mainly men. After detention, not only men and women were raped, but also children. We’re talking about teenagers – boys, girls. They weren’t raped in the usual way, but with police truncheons, bottles,

or sticks. There are cases of cervical ruptures, rectal ruptures, many teenagers have been disabled as a result. [1]

PROGRAMMER (age 30):

The OMON officers ordered me to unlock my phone. I refused. They called their supervisor. He started to threaten me, saying he'd shove his baton up my arse. I was lying on the floor of the military vehicle, and he ripped through my shorts and underpants with a knife. He asked his "colleagues" for a condom. I lay face down on the floor, but I could see him put the condom on the rubber truncheon. He put it into my anus. Then he pulled it out and again asked for the password. Then he started to beat me – with his fists, his feet. I got it in the face, the ribs, the teeth – the two front ones were knocked out. [3]

ELENA BONDARENKA (mother of Roman):

Some unknown individuals began to remove the white-red-white ribbons from the railings outside our house. Roman wrote in a local chat: "I'm going out." Outside, these unknown people beat him up and took him away, soon after that, he died in hospital. He was 31 years old.

[...] [In hospital] I held his hand, stroked him, begged him to hold on. He said it was a good hospital, with good doctors. He said: "I'm strong, I'll get through it and everything will be fine." He had big bruises on his wrists, his neck was livid, his face was swollen, he was covered in wounds; his eyes were swollen with wounds, his ear lobes were covered in blood, his jaw was broken. The doctor said he needed another operation, but his condition had to stabilize first. [...]

After the referral, I was told that Roman had a one in a thousand chance, and everything depended on his strength and God. They said he'd been in a coma for some time before he was brought to hospital and that he'd received no help in that time. If he'd been brought sooner, they could have saved him, but that didn't happen.

The doctor said: "The worst thing is that he has a damaged brainstem which is responsible for all bodily functions, from the most important like the heartbeat and breathing, to the sense of smell or taste." He said that Roman had been beaten on the same spot for a long time, brutally, deliberately. [14]

ELENA GERMAN (partner of Aleksander Taraikovski):

I thought that if I came to the morgue and described who I was looking for they'd let me in. That was not the case. They didn't let me in and told me to go to the Investigative Committee. [...] They interrogated Sasha's father and me for three hours, but in the end we returned to the morgue. Sasha's father wanted to look at the wounds. [...] We were not shown the whole body, only the rib cage. How can that be? It's his son! [3]

Wife of DZIANIS KUZNIATSOU:

Ordinarily, my husband would be away for work for a few days at a time. We knew he wouldn't be around. We couldn't even imagine such a thing happening to him. They called us from the hospital... [...]

At the hospital, we were told that he'd managed to tell the doctors that he'd been beaten by the police. The police said he'd fallen from an upper bunk in a cell although

→ → On the next page:
Minsk, 9 August 2020. Injured
protestor Yevgeny Zaichkin
surrounded by officers suppressing
the protests.

that was impossible, given his particular injuries.

Yesterday, he underwent a third operation. He was on a life support machine and in a critical condition. The doctors gave no prognosis. Today he died.

I don't know what to say. Even if they'd detained him, why beat him up. What for? Who? The police? His fellow prisoners? [11]

MARIA:

I was in the paddy-wagon, kneeling with my face to the seat. They were poking me in the face with a truncheon. The men were sitting on the floor: sweaty, broken. [...] We drove around town a long time. They kept picking up more people from the street and cramming them in. [...] One of the girls was with her husband. The militia man asked her if she'd gone to the square "with an idea" or with the crowd. She said she'd gone with her husband. He asked which one he was. She showed him. Her husband was struck in the face two or three times.

We reached [the detention centre at] Akrestsina street. There began two and a half days of pure hell. When we arrived (around three in the morning) there were already a lot of people. They checked me any old how. The woman asked if I had something in my pockets, checked my shoes, took away the laces.

[...] They shouted at us the whole time, that we were scum and corrupt and that next time we'd know who to vote for.

When they closed the door on us, we were told: "You animals, welcome to the land of tolerance." [18]





PHOTO: VASILY FEDOSENKO / REUTERS / FORUM

3

MARCH OF JUSTICE

JAUHIEN (age 18):

The paddy-wagon opens and they push us out of the van onto the ground and immediately go for us with the truncheons, beating us on the legs, ordering us to run with “mugs down!” They told us to lie down in a star position. [...]

They beat us with truncheons for about five minutes. One truncheon even broke during the beating. They only hit us on the legs and hips. Thanks to that, we’ve sustained no damage to our internal organs, but you can imagine how painful a thousand or two thousand blows are in the same place. [11]

**ANDREI VITUSHKO (doctor,
Centre for the Mother and Child):**

Swearing, shouts, truncheons. They herded us into some building and told us to kneel down. Some hotshot in a uniform said: “Now we’ll teach you to love your fatherland.” Others tried to convince us that we were enemies and scumbags, all with the help of swearing and beating. And we’re kneeling the whole time with our hands behind our backs and our heads down. After this “political reeducation” they herded us to the second floor and told us to kneel down again. Our women were standing next to us and they told us to get undressed and hold our things in our hands. They didn’t tell the women to undress or to kneel down. Some woman came – a nurse, she took down our details, asked about any chronic conditions. Then I thought: interesting situation, I’m a senior physician, a doctor, I’m kneeling naked, my face to the dirty floor – it must be awkward for my female friend. [13]

MARIA:

In the prison, they took us to the third floor. The door was opened and I realized that my life would end in this place. The cell was meant for four people – there were 23 girls in there already [...] including two alcoholics. The stink. It was impossible to breathe. There was nowhere to sleep. There was water on the floor. That damp space was completely airless.

We sat for a while. One of the girls had a panic attack. She began to vomit bile, because we’d had nothing to eat. We asked for a doctor. No reaction. After a while we began to shout and it was just the same. Finally the door opened and a bucket of cold water was thrown over us. [...] The perpetrators knew the girl could die, they took her out for a few minutes so that she could breathe. She begged them for help – “Don’t make us use force.” They locked her up again.

[...] Our one hope was the open window and the “hatch” (through which food is passed). At a certain point, the “hatch” was closed and we started to shout, but after a minute we understood why they’d done it. We heard in the cell opposite that they’d brought in a man and began to beat him. It was horrible. After three or four blows: “Now wipe up your shit. How do you like that rag?” I have no idea exactly what happened. But it was hard to listen. Half the girls had boys in the neighbouring cells, husbands, even fathers. It could have been one of them. [1]

ALIAKSANDR BROVKO:

A “death corridor” formed beside the police van: one officer kicked us out of the “cages” and the rest stood five to six on either side and hit us as we ran through. The most

← ← On the previous page:
Minsk, 16 August 2020.

important thing was not to fall over, or they'd start kicking you. Blows from truncheons didn't seem so terrible after being choked. When the blow is coming, you have to loosen up, then the impact is spread throughout the body. I'd got used to the pain, the suffering.

One of them didn't hit anyone and when those animals in black were leaving (they were like gods over everyone, as though they'd been given *carte blanche*), he allowed us to catch our breath and lower our arms which were completely numb. They wouldn't let us go to the toilet, they said: go in your pants. Many people did.

It had grown dark, and still they kept bringing more and more people. Some man came out. We could see it was some kind of superior officer. He said it was hard to see in the dark and found a solution. "I'll hit you, and you say your name." He ran up and swiped someone in the stomach. You had to shout out your name quickly at that moment.

Then [...] he made an inventory of my things, which they photographed. On the tables in a large room lay a mountain of broken phones. I was lucky enough to have time to switch mine off and hide it in my backpack.

The photographer said: "Tell me honestly, do you support these ideas, or are you doing it for money, or maybe because you're stupid?" He was confused because no one would admit how much they'd been paid. All the officers constantly posed the same question: "How much were you paid?" [...]

They broke people's psyche, they broke those children, anyone who shouted was beaten with fury. Why were the fat ones beaten more than the others? They beat those they didn't like the look of, who looked a bit different. Next to me was a 28-year-old engineer. He kept asking in a calm

voice: "But why are you beating me? Explain to me why?" They called him the "star of the season" and all of them "did" him – they'd spring at him and beat him.

A hundred people were lying outside. There wasn't enough room. Sometimes they made us face the wall, legs a shoulder-width apart. I was falling asleep with exhaustion and stress, but when my legs started to buckle – I'd wake up suddenly. They'd joke: "Learn from him how to sleep standing up."

In the morning we heard a MAZ engine. A police van had arrived. The guards were amazed: "What, only one?" The keenest one said: "I'll get them all in." They started to shove us in like sardines in a tin – they pushed 36–38 people into a van meant for 15 people. The air soon ran out. It was very hard to travel that hour and a half to Zhodzina, but we kept each other's spirits up.

In the prison, when I was searched, the sergeant found a flag in my pocket. He asked what he should do with this "rag". "It's not a rag, it's a flag. Please put it with my personal things, I'll sew it up at home," I answered. The sergeant gave a laugh: "We'll be seeing you again." [...]

They opened a cell, and a voice said: "Chief, we're full!" He says: "Fuck, you've guessed it!" There were nine people in there, very intelligent boys, they shoved in another ten people, and after an hour another ten. As a result, there were twenty-nine of us to ten bunks. We slept on the floor, the table, the benches, taking it in turns. There was mutual help, a good atmosphere. [10]

ALEKSANDRA KVITKEVICH (journalist, Tut.by):

The detainees were dispersed among the cells, together with women who'd been put in for alcohol abuse. Then



PHOTO: CELESTINO ARCELAVIN / ZUMA PRESS / FORUM

← Minsk, 11 August 2020.
Police arresting a participant at an anti-Lukashenko protest.

a homeless woman was thrown in whom they'd picked up at the station. They threw her into the cell like a sack of potatoes. [...] She had all kinds of fleas. You could even see them crawling on her clothes, they were falling off her.

[...] They also brought an alcoholic, a woman, who had a kind of epileptic fit. She fell onto the floor and cracked her head, there was a lot of blood. The other women pressed the alarm button so that the guards would call a doctor. They came and started to give us instructions as to how to help. They didn't even come into the cell. [3]

ALIAKSANDR BROVKO:

I saw a boy. His left leg was all blue, and the right was unnaturally twisted. He also needed the lavatory. I said to the guard: "Let me carry him." I lifted the boy and carried him. The guard waited for us patiently. On my way, a woman of around sixty was standing in the corridor in a work apron, with a mop and watched us with such disdain, as though we weren't even human. "I'm not cleaning up after protestors!" It was very offensive.

[...]

We were made to lie on the ground face down, hands clasped behind our heads. It was terribly uncomfortable, but any movement of the head and we'd be beaten. If we shivered with cold – we were also beaten. We were constantly provoked. A boy was lying next to me. His glasses were broken. They came up to him and said "nicely": "What, cops broke your glasses?" "Yes," he said. "Ah, the cops?! Well take this!"

The shouts went on for a long time. People were beaten left and right: those who got angry, those who were groaning, those who were crying. A sixteen-year-old boy

was beaten together with me. He lay there twisted. They ran up and kicked him in the stomach. He shouted and cried. "Why are you crying?" they asked him. "I'm afraid," he replied. "And weren't you afraid on the square?" [10]

DIMA:

We were driven to the place. Head down, hands behind our backs, to the wall at a run. All those people were in masks and they all had their stripes reversed. I said my leg hurt so they beat it with their truncheons. They hit other people too, treated them like animals. My heart was thumping like crazy.

We waited outside for four hours. We were kneeling the whole time, head down, hands behind our backs. You couldn't move, look round, or speak, they'd beat you straightaway. They also hit people for no reason.

I had a white band on my wrist. As soon as one of them spotted it, he started to beat me. Later I managed to rip it off and throw it away.

The moment one of them saw my leg was swollen, he immediately kicked it with his army boot. It hurt like hell. But you couldn't yell or they'd beat you harder. But they beat me on the leg anyway: with truncheons, boots. It really hurt a lot, after kneeling so long. I tried to shift my leg. One of them noticed, grabbed hold of me, put me in a stretched position: legs wide and hands up. That hurt even more – much more. I don't know how, but I stood, and they didn't hit me.

Then they started to summon us inside. Again head down, hands behind your back, at a run. I say: "I can't run." They say: "Faster, you animals, scum" and whack me. I say: "I can't." Two of them get hold of me, I fall over, they hit

me, lift me up, we run, they cram people into the space, kicking them.

Inside, they took away our personal belongings. I didn't have much: cigarettes and some money; they also pulled out the string from my shorts.

I was taken to a cell. Our cell was meant for four people, and there were thirteen of us.

My swollen leg was really hurting, but I endured it. When it became unbearable, I went to the sink, held it under cold water and it felt better. I had a "comrade in misfortune" in my cell, both his legs were twisted, swollen, aching. At one point, he started shouting that he was losing consciousness. We started to bang on the door and asked for a doctor. They said: "Bang one more time and we'll give you all some treatment." We didn't bang any more. [10]

JAHOR MARTSINOVICH (editor-in-chief,
Nasha Niva [Our Field]):

In the night, the cell door opens and in walks Pavel Yuhnievich! I stare at him, I'm in shock, he looks at me, I start laughing and we greet each other warmly. He'd been telling me for two months that he was just waiting to be arrested and I'd joked: "Don't worry, we'll be inside together again."

[...] A few minutes later, Yauhen Afnagel comes into our cell. I start to laugh hysterically, Yuhnievich and Afnagel look at each other in amazement: [...] "We shouldn't be in together."

Aleks looks at us: how can three people in a cell be greeting each other like this. He asks me quietly: "Are they well known?" I explain that they've been organizing the protest movement for twenty years. Aleks: "It's

a shame I didn't hear about them earlier."

[...] After his documents had been checked, Yuhnievich was moved to another cell within 30 minutes. Afnagel paced up and down the cell for the next hour, trying to fathom the situation. He was surprised to find there was hot water. "It's bearable then. In 2000 when I was in, there weren't even benches. We slept with our backs against each other." [5]

MARAT:

We were told in prison that we wouldn't be getting food for three days. No one. Even if you were doing a second stretch. You'd ask, and they'd go, "Ha, ha, ha," and that was it.

A boy, a biker – asked them to stop beating him, he simply demanded they stop. The cop "yapped" at first, but he went out. Then a woman came in and asked which was the one who didn't want to be beaten. She opens the door, he goes out, and they tip an enormous bucket of water on him – I don't know, maybe eight litres. As everybody was sleeping on the floor they leapt to their feet and started to stem the water with some rags. [...]

There was no toilet paper in a cell of eight people, and they refused to supply any. Where there were forty people they gave a roll and a half. But since people weren't eating there wasn't much call for it. Water was from a tap. Lots of people complained that they drank but were always thirsty. Maybe it was the hunger. [6]

MARIA:

There was a girl from Russia in the cell next to ours. We heard her demanding the ambassador. She said she was

being illegally detained. They said to her: “Fuck your Russia and your ambassador!” No one was summoned. There was a woman of about fifty in our cell with her daughter. She’d voluntarily got into the van as she didn’t want to leave her daughter alone. She had diabetes and we were constantly asking for medicine, but they ignored us. Another girl had third degree disabilities, she was on hormones and also asked for medication. She was also refused.

[...] They didn’t give us food. There was only water from the tap and that’s it. We got no toilet paper. Girls got their periods. Their requests were answered with: “Use your shirt.” [1]

ALIONA SHCHERBINSKAYA (journalist, Belsat):

The supervisor was a blonde in a black mask and an MUS [Ministry of Internal Affairs] uniform. They stripped us naked, humiliated us, insulted us, made us do squats. The supervisor snatched away pads from the girls who were on their periods. After the search, I didn’t have time to get dressed properly and was pushed out on the corridor in my bra and trousers still unfastened. There was a row of naked men, hands behind their backs, standing against a bloodstained wall. The whole time, you could hear the shrieks of people being beaten and abused.

There were no hygiene products. One girl tore up her cape and gave girls bits of material for their critical days. For a long time there were no handkerchiefs, we used toilet paper. That finished too. Next a guard would go along the corridor, tearing paper from a roll and giving a piece to each cell. We had a plastic bottle and water so we washed as best we could. The cell really stank, but we stopped noticing it after the third day. [...]

They’d use any pretext to get us out of the cell and line us up against the wall. The woman supervising mocked us all. If our legs weren’t wide enough apart, she’d come up and kick them on the inside of the thigh and say: “Wider, bitch.” One of us, who was on her period, said she couldn’t spread her legs because she was bleeding. The woman hit her on the legs, saying that didn’t stop her spreading her legs. The “homemade” pads fell onto the floor.

She kicked me in the stomach. She’d ordered me to spread my legs wider, with hands behind my back and bending down low. According to her, I hadn’t bent low enough. [20]

KATSIARYNA MALINOVSKAYA:

In prison, straightaway I saw them beating the men. They wanted to beat me too, but one of the policemen shouted that I was pregnant. I turned my face away when they were beating the men, but the officer turned me round so that I would have to see what was going on. It was like a film: Gestapo in black clothes beating the innocent, brutally, without mercy. Savages! I began to tremble like I was in a fever. That alarmed them and they took me to a doctor. [...]

Someone unexpectedly hit me hard in the stomach. I shouted that I was pregnant. Then they shut me in a cell. After three hours, my stomach started to hurt badly and I asked for an ambulance. I said again that I was pregnant. [...] I was examined by a doctor who worked in the commissariat. She said she wasn’t sure if I was pregnant. I told them sharply that if something happened to me, they would be responsible. In the end they called an ambulance.

They took me to the hospital where I was examined by a gynecologist. The doctor confirmed the pregnancy



PHOTO: DMITRI LOVETSKY / AP / EAST NEWS

← Minsk, 15 august 2020.
Woman holding a photograph
of a man beaten by the police.

and expressed concern that I had a cyst. He insisted on urgent hospitalization in order to carry out some essential treatment. I told the police, and the woman in uniform who'd accompanied me said that if I stayed I would be handcuffed to the bed, and afterwards I would still have to go to prison. She had a different proposal: "Come with us to the commissariat. In the morning I'll take you to prison, there will be a hearing, and they'll let you go home." I agreed, because all the time I was thinking about what would happen to my eldest child. I could not imagine lying there chained to a bed. The one thing I begged the police was not to hit me anymore. [8]

ALINA BERESNEVA (photographer, age 20):

There were thirteen girls in the cell to begin with, without water or toilet paper. We all hoped we'd be released the following day, but no. We were simply forced to sign a statement confessing that we had been on the demonstration. We were promised immediate release on signing, but that didn't happen. We were moved to a different cell with twenty girls. [...]

If one of us asked a question or protested they said: "We'll rape you and lock you up for twenty days." We weren't fed, when someone asked for something to eat, the guard so: "No, you bitches. I'll teach you who to vote for."

I felt ill, I was sick and dizzy. The girls asked for a doctor. The woman doctor measured my blood pressure – which was low – and said: "Well, now you'll know where to go and where not." She brought me a validol tablet on an empty stomach. [...] The next day I cried almost the whole time, because I had no strength and no one could help me. [11]

VITALII SHKLIAROV (political consultant):

Four of us in the cell. First I was alone. Then I got a cell mate. But lately they decided to up the pressure. Now there's a "carousel" in my cell: fathers like myself appear and disappear, and young ones too. They still search me regularly. They educate me. There's light, there's the narrow cell five paces wide, there's the short iron bunks, the cold water, the diet, the shower once a week, the endless column of cigarette smoke in a musty torture chamber. The torture by light really is another story. There is absolutely no escape from those fluorescent bulbs. They're left on day and night.

But it's not real light. It's darkness transformed into light – endless, smarting, which lets you neither sleep nor think.

Beyond the prison walls, out there, where day takes turns into night, and light turns into true, honest darkness, there are free people. Sometimes we hear their slogans and car horns as they shout, demanding a different life. [12]

DIMA:

I didn't feel like eating, I drank water, even though it stank terribly. The boys said they were hungry. On the second day, we asked for food. They started to jeer: "Order some. Pizza or hamburgers? I'll just phone Tsikhanouskaya, she'll bring it right over." On the third day, they gave us six loaves, groats and cold tea. That bread – hard as stone and tasteless – seemed the best food on earth to me. We ate four of the loaves, and left two for a "dark hour". And not in vain.

The next day, ten more people were added to our cell. They told us they'd spent two days in open air



PHOTO: NATALIA FEDOSENKO / TASS / FORUM

← Minsk, 13 August 2020.
Police officers guarding the area
around the detention facility
where participants in the mass
protests are being held.

“accommodation” and there were ninety of them. Completely naked. Our cell, where we have water and a lav, seemed like paradise to them. They’d had neither and when they’d asked for a drink they were drenched with cold water. At night, they were cold and hugged each other so as not to freeze. Then it rained and they were dispersed among the cells. We gave them the bread we’d put away.

We couldn’t breathe, there was no air. The stink was terrible.

People’s states of mind began to change. The “just survive” mode turned into terror. Our cell was on the first floor, prisoners were led past it. I heard screams. Men moaning and shouting, especially at night. And the swearing. When you hear women’s cries it’s completely unbearable. They’d say to the women: “You drunken whore, you scum...”

The whole time I was afraid they’d start beating us up again [...] We gave them no reason to. “There’s the bell,” they said, to be rung only if fire broke out or someone died. We weren’t to knock, to accost anyone. We didn’t. [...]

I wanted to sleep the whole time, to stretch out full length. But it was impossible. They could look through the spyhole at any moment. When it opened, we all had to get up, look at the wall, hands behind our backs. Regardless of whether it was night or day. Four men would sit, dozing on the beds, benches, the floor. It was cold on the floor, but impossible to breathe on the bed. Cries and moans reached us from the corridor – another reason why we couldn’t sleep. [10]

ALENA PUKHOVSKAYA (pensioner):

I was sick with fear: I couldn’t feel my heart, my hands were numb. [...] I asked for an ambulance. The officer

supervising complained that I should be taking pictures of my grandchildren, not going to “rallies”. The doctor asked me why I was there, asked me to compare the white-red-white flag with the red and green one and explain the difference, and also about recollections of the 90s and a comparison with present times. I endured all of that intimidation. [1]

DARIA CHECHKO:

We had a court hearing in custody. A few tables and laptops were set up. Next, according to a list, the first group of people was taken from a cell and we had to stand facing the wall until we were summoned to the table. The court was connected by Skype. There was no internet, one of the laptops was linked up via a portable modem, another via the telephone of one of the workers who was responsible for the hearings. Whenever someone phoned him, which was frequent, the hearing was interrupted.[...]

It was hard to hear or see anything. I leaned towards the computer a little and saw the judge. She was wearing a mask which covered neither her nose or her mouth and so I could at least understand something of what she was saying.

She began proceedings, asked me for my personal details, asked if I had children in my care, anyone disabled and so on. Then she moved on to the official report – the same for everyone (a friend had undergone the same a month earlier, only the time and place were different), then the deposition by some witness called Orlov. I couldn’t hear very well.

She read the protocol and asked if I had anything to add. I said that I hadn’t been detained at 15:30–15:40 as

had been recorded – and that I wasn't there in time to shout any slogans. She smiled and continued. At the end, she asked if I'd known that the march was unlawful. I replied that I did. She asked why had I gone. I wanted to express my position as a citizen, since it was currently impossible via other legal means.

Then the court vanished, as the signal was lost. A policeman was summoned to connect it by Skype. When everything was working again, the judge read the sentence: thirteen days. I returned to the cell.

I wasn't at all upset since I knew when I took the decision to go on the march that I could get fifteen days. I accepted the situation completely. I felt an inner strength. Strength and clarity, and also peace and calm. These feelings remained with for almost the entire time of imprisonment. It was clear to me that we were doing all this for a reason. That this fraudulent system could not function any longer. After these hearings, all my doubts vanished. [1]

DIMA:

The court hearing took place on the fourth day. We were almost pleased. We thought that now they'd let us out. They'd probably give us a fine. We were ready to pay, if they would only let us out.

We were summoned to the court one at a time. Again at a run, hands behind backs, head down. You come in and there's the judge, sitting there. You go up to the table and behind you there are two officers. You can't look around, only at the ground. A sentence has already been prepared for everyone. There were ticks marking where we were to sign. There were some who asked to read what was written down – they were beaten. The ones who asked for

a lawyer were beaten too. The judge says to me: "Do you agree with this?" I say: "Yes, what am I supposed to do, obviously I agree." I had no idea what I was agreeing with. I managed to read where and at what time I was detained. It wasn't accurate. There were two witnesses who were supposed to be present when I was detained – they were witnesses for everyone who appeared at court together with me. I was given a pen, I signed quickly and in several places, wherever I was told. That's all. Again, I run back to the wall.

The judge gave some people ten days, others got twelve, others still got twenty-five. He glanced at my leg – it was swollen – and he gave me fifteen days. [10]

MARIA:

They drew up reports. Then they began to summon people to sign them. They shouted at us. They said: "Sign it, pay the fine and go home; if you don't sign, you'll stay inside." Not everyone was permitted to read what was written in the report. They covered it with their hands, shouted, wouldn't explain anything. Many of the girls signed. The protocol was the same for everyone: "From 22:10 to 22:30 I was at Stella, I shouted: 'Free Statkevich', 'Long Live Belarus', 'Stop the cockroaches', I resisted arrest." Despite the fact that some of the girls had been in prison since 18:00. I didn't sign the protocol. I wrote everywhere that I did not agree and I demanded a lawyer. [1]

ALIAKSANDR MINIKH (oncologist):

Dozens of doctors, including myself, were detained in front of the hospital in central Minsk. At the court

hearing, the director of my laboratory at the Republican Clinical Medical Centre, Aliaksandr Ralevich, said that I was the only experienced laparoscopic surgeon and if I was in prison there would be no one to stand in for me. Nevertheless, the judge, Anastasia Akhalova, sentenced me to thirteen days. [1]

ELENA ZDANOVICH:

Innocent, peaceful, quiet and obedient people were tortured, raped, beaten (not only in prison cells, but also in the Regional Department of Internal Affairs [ODSW], I know in about the Moskovsky and central districts of Minsk in particular). Those humiliated were forced to sing the national anthem and shout: “Lukashenka is my president”. I will write more about the nightmarish scenarios that my colleagues and I heard and recorded. I feel as though I have died. Stripped and beaten, they stood before judges who according to fabricated reports gave them sentences of fifteen days. Public prosecutors who came to the ODSW saw hell.

I have one question for them and for the judges: are you human beings? You are supposed to be the social elite! [...] those who remain silent today – farewell, we are no longer together. I will gather my energies for work and I will defend, and defend, and defend. I am writing to all my fellow lawyers who, out of pain and exhaustion, do not have the strength to write or to speak. You need strength to work. We embrace each other and we weep quietly, understanding everything... [5]

MARYNA ZOLATAVA (editor-in-chief, news portal Tut.by):

They locked up our reporter Katarina Borisevich. Katia’s case, unlike many others, is not connected with work during the protest, but with reports on the subject of Roman Bondarenko’s death. [...]

Photographs or films showing their faces provoke particular fury on the part of the authorities, as does material showing acts of violence on the part of law enforcement officers. It’s dangerous to write about the current authorities. Belarus law functions in one direction only, as reflected in the statistics on cases pending. Despite thousands of reports submitted concerning torture and violence on the part of enforcers, not a single case has been brought against them. [3]

DIMA:

When I first came out, I didn’t want any help. Everything was fine after all, my leg was in plaster, I was home. But I felt that things were not right. I was afraid to go out on the street. When I do go out, I look around everywhere, I flinch. I don’t know what I signed. It could have been anything. Maybe something dangerous. Maybe they’ll still come for me. I don’t know what to expect. I realized then: they’d killed me mentally immediately, and then they finished me off. [10]

IHAR IL’ASH (journalist, Belsat):

The day I walked out in freedom, a plump officer led me through empty detention corridors which reminded me of a maze. “Goodbye,” I said, when the door was opened

at the checkpoint beyond which freedom was waiting. “No. See you later.” The functionary corrected me.

SVIATLANA TSIKHANOUSKAYA:

Roman Bondarenko was killed by the regime’s minions. He was the innocent victim of an inhuman system. There is nothing more inhuman than terror towards your own nation. We will not forgive this murder. [...] We will continue the fight, so that those guilty of rape, beating, murder and torture bear the consequences. [1]

→ Minsk, 9 August 2020.
Police detain a protestor.



PHOTO: NATALIA FEDOSENKO / TASS / FORUM



PHOTO: DAVID W. CERNY / REUTERS / FORUM

4

MARCH OF UNITY

ANNA (STUDENT):

Right now, on the one hand we're filled with an unbelievable sense of freedom, on the other, we're struck by the inhuman behaviour of the OMON.

Our men – boyfriends, fathers, and brothers – do everything for us right now. We, the women, cannot leave them in misfortune, and they cannot leave us. We are fighting for our freedom together. [...] During the women's chain of solidarity with the detained and arrested, the men came up to us and said: "Thank you, you are our pride." They brought us food, made tea, brought whole baskets of stuff. We will fight on! [6]

KLIM KHALETSKII (musician):

I saw thousands of beautiful women in white, who – holding flowers in their hands – protested against the violence and lawlessness of the police. Orthodox believers carrying icons walked in the direction of the March of the Amazons. The avenue was pulsating with life, men were getting out of cars with bouquets of roses, traffic policemen were showing the crowd victory signs, passers-by smiled and shared water. Even the MSW workers were shouting: "We're with you!"

[...] Belarusians, do not change! We need exclusively peaceful and mass protests voicing political demands. Otherwise, the wolves will soon show their nature, regardless of the sheep's clothing they wear today. We need a new president and a new system of governance and compliance with the law. We need change, not handouts from a pretender. [5]

DARIA LOSIK (wife of Ihar, administrator of the internet channel "Belarus of the Brain"):

I learnt from Ihar's lawyer, that my husband has decided to go on hunger strike. As a sign of solidarity with my husband I have done the same. I don't know if this will be noticed. I cannot stand on the sidelines when things are so bad for him. I cannot try and lead a normal life. If one of us has a problem, we try to solve it together. That's what we're doing now, everything together, whether it's a hunger strike or something else. We've grown used to this way of life. [1]

NIKITA SOLOVEI (doctor, infectious diseases):

A letter signed by over 450 doctors from Minsk was sent to the Ministry of Health and MSW requesting access for civilian specialists to the detention centre at Akrestsina street in order to evaluate the state of the people being held there. They told us they were doing all that was necessary and that the MSW did not need the help of people outside the system. [14]

ANNA ZLIATKOVSKAYA:

And when we overcome the regime, we'll be happy.

Weirdly happy. [...]

There will be happiness. Ours. But so ordinary, that it hurts.

Walking down the street without looking over your shoulder.

A flag in the hand no longer a crime.

Street marches, for animals / LGBT / lonely men / the divorced / single mothers / orphans / disabled children,

← ← On the previous page: Prague, 16 August 2020. The historic Belarus flag unfurled in the Czech capital during a demonstration in solidarity with the protestors in Belarus.



PHOTO: SERGEI BOBYLEV / TASS / FORUM

← Minsk, 5 September 2020. Protestors at a women's march on Independence Avenue.

are no longer a crime.

Drinking tea with neighbours on the street is no longer a crime.

To be the administrator of a channel won't be a crime.

Music concerts in courtyards won't mean jail. [...]

There'll be happiness in every cup of tea. An ordinary morning: when the news on the Telegram news appears: reforms, aid, new training plans, accounts, courses, free psychologists. Exhibitions. Meetings with writers. Parties. I read books, I watch honest television.

Silence is no longer a symbol of fear. [5]

SIARHEI BASHLYKIEVICH (musician, leader of the band Leibonik):

A significant majority of people in the courtyard are hearing you for the first time. There are some for whom live music is a revelation, because they're used to seeing concerts on TV, and here it transpires that it's possible to play the guitar like this and sing. They're taken aback.

People don't know you, they don't realize something has been organized, they happen to be walking by and decide to stay. [...] Concerts in courtyards are more peaceful: children run about, people feel safe in conversation with the musicians, there's a really warm atmosphere.

Once, some residents told us: "There are cops at the crossing, shh! We'll take you a different way." There were times after concerts when we had to make a run for it. When I was performing at the Novaya Borovaya housing estate, former representatives of the 'anti-public order' forces kept watch for us.

We get to know the people around us better, understand the society we live in better – and realize more

deeply that together we can do more and how very much depends on us. [...] People out there in the courtyards choose who to invite. They're beginning to understand, that the world depends on them. [1]

GRIGORII LAIKOV (musician):

People react with class: they listen, applaud, sing, thank you for your creativity, shake hands, hug each other, take pictures. I'm happy, the people are happy. It's great. When you perform in the courtyards, you can feel the closeness between the artist and the people.

[...] Sometimes some bastard looks out the window and starts tapping out the numbers on their phone like mad, calling the police. [...]

People are constantly stressed, so much emotion inside, pain, tears, the mind's not made of iron, it can't hold out. It's like after a battle or an overdose of negative information, they need to talk together, listen to some music, drink tea, relax, to regain their strength for the following day. I think get-togethers like this are not just to shout for your cause, to express solidarity or political views, it's also a relief. [1]

ALES' PILETSKII (journalist):

It was a Friday evening. I went out on the balcony to have my coffee. Children were running between the trees, digging in the sandpit. Adults were parking their cars, back from work. A peaceful enchanted autumn evening on this estate. Suddenly, a patrol car appears on the road. From the sandpit straightaway you can hear throughout the courtyard: "Long live Belarus! Long live Belarus!"



PHOTO: TUT.BY / REUTERS / FORUM

← Minsk, 20 September 2020.
Belarus flag in front of police units
blocking the road.

The car with its flashing lights disappears round the corner. The children return to their sandcastles. The dogs fall asleep. The first stars sunbathe in the sky. [5]

JAHOR MARTSINOVICH:

After leaving prison, it's still fun to open Facebook. You go onto someone's page, and there's your face. I want to thank everyone for their support, thank you for your solidarity. As the wit said: a police van is just another vehicle. Well, a day is just a day. I wasn't the first, I won't be the last.

For me, the most telling moment was when one of the officers led me out of the house. Sitting in the car, he bellowed like an idiot: "Fuck, I forgot to put my mask on coming out of the house! They'll recognize me!"

If you're in the majority and the truth is with you, don't worry about being recognized.

Along with forty-seven other honest Belarus boys, I spent the first night lying with my face in the grass on the courtyard of the Zawodski district department of internal affairs. No one had eaten a thing that day.

Together with twenty-seven other honest Belarus boys, I spend the second night in Zhodzín in a cell in which there were twelve beds. The boys, some of whom were beaten up [...], had no means of informing their nearest that they'd been detained and didn't know when their cases would be heard, even though it had been seventy-two hours since they were picked up. I promised to inform twenty-seven families that their relatives were behind bars, but that they believed in a new Belarus, where people on the streets will not be treated like so much rubbish. [5]

ALIAKSANDR STSEPANENKA:

Six computer scientists, two directors of construction firms, a chief accountant and the deputy of a large Belarus holding company, a few businessmen, an ad specialist, a radio technician, a conservator. This is an incomplete list of the people with whom I was imprisoned in Zhodzín. Those who – like me – were charged with taking part in an "unauthorised gathering". Those, whom state propaganda unsuccessfully tries to portray as a handful of people. Those with whom our country's future truly lies. [1]

ALIAKSANDR BROVKO:

When I left prison, I saw a multitude of people by the gate: volunteers, psychologists, doctors, drivers, friends, relatives. They tended wounds, offered hot tea and sandwiches. I switched on my phone to make some calls and soon there was a flood of messages – over two hundred: "You're a hero", "We are proud of you". It turns out my daughter wrote a post about me on social media.

I did what I should have done earlier. Now our children are paying for what we didn't manage to do before. [1]

MAKSIM SHCHERBINA (sales director):

Seventy-two hours of hell. I didn't know where my son was until almost the end. I wanted to believe that he was in prison in Zhodzín. But no, my Herman got a very difficult scenario, at the thought of which we prayed: "Lord, anything but that." First the Oktiabrski district department of internal affairs in Minsk, and then Akrestsina.

Herman was lucky. He didn't take the rap as hard as others who went through that hell. A broken elbow, bruises, big ones, but that'll pass. [...] They found ten rubles in his pocket. They decided this was money he'd been paid for taking part in the march. He had to sign a statement about participation in the disturbances. He spent a night kneeling for ten hours, and then he slept tied to the floor, face down. [...] Then fifteen hours at Akrestsina, kneeling outside. [...]

When they let him out, I held him for it must be five minutes. On the way home, he asked what day it was and what time. I told him. He said: "Great, we'll be in time for Barcelona" [1]

ANDREI (road company employee, removes slogans from bus stops and streets):

In August, everything was calmer – we simply painted over things. From September, the unpleasant situations began. You could be erasing a slogan at a bus stop and the people – passers-by – are making the cuckoo sign at their temples. Someone might stop, approach, take a picture on their phone, say something offensive.

I've got a white-red-white flag at home too, I take it to the centre of town on a Sunday. Do you know what it's like on a working day when someone takes pictures of you, screaming: "Fascist!" They shove the phone right in your face, shouting: "The country needs to know who its heroes are!" and "I'm against violence." Well, I and the other workers are against violence too, we haven't beaten anybody up, but I can't not do my work. Sometimes we even have to call the police. But there are decent people too. They ask me: "You've taken down my flag, can I take it?" "No problem, be my guest." [3]

PAVEL SVERDLOV (editor, Euroradio):

For me, today's March of Unity is not just a protest. For me, the most important thing I saw was people's readiness to react and help.

Everyone everywhere helped journalists today. The authorities blocked the mobile internet network – people let me into their homes to use the wi-fi to send pictures and films to the editorial office. I was told which way to go and which ways to avoid. [...] Society is consciously defending its right to news about what is going on. This is self-organization on a whole new level. [5]

POLINA KORZHENEVSKAYA (student, Belarus State Medical University):

Together with a group of student activists, we went through lecture halls, agitating amongst the students to get them to join us. We entered the halls and said: "Join us" we clapped. 80 per cent of those present in one of the halls came out. The teacher there applauded us, she had tears in her eyes, she said: "Thank you."

Two days later, I was summoned to the vice-dean's office. For ten minutes, he spoke about how he'd served in the army, that a soldier must always obey his commander. Then he looked through my grades and remarked that there were no complaints. He asked: "Do you know what happens when a soldier does not obey the commander?" The he added calmly: "I've got one more issue with you." He placed a document on the table removing me from the institute.

[...] I told my parents about my expulsion. My father was very displeased, because he was worried about me. But my mother was the opposite – she supported me, saying she was proud of me. [17]



PHOTO: JĘDRZEJ NOWICKI / AGENCJA GAZETA

← Minsk, 9 August 2020.
Demonstration.

PAVEL SVERDLOV:

It was a warm evening. Nadezhda Dubovska and I went out on the town, sat on a café terrace. Suddenly, a girl began to shout on the other side of Independence Avenue. She was going along the pavement wrapped in a white-red-white flag. The police swooped down and caught her.

It's terrible to live in a place where the "men in black" can scoop you up at any moment.

Then the professional woke up in me. I went over, found witnesses, people sent me pictures. Later I found that the moment of detention had been caught on camera twice. One was published by NEXT, and the other by Tut.by.

The regime depends on executioners who will suddenly pounce and then melt into the darkness. For now, the executioners are willing to fulfil this role, but it's also a fact, that [...] two films exist. Nothing will be forgotten. [5]

EKATERINA:

When they started to detain people, my husband and I ran in different directions. I happened upon the courtyard of some residential buildings. On one side were police vans, on the other – people were being "scooped up". I looked up automatically – some people up there were shouting: "We're surrounded" and I had the impression they were laughing. Then, in another house, I noticed someone opening the door to the stairwell. I ran over and asked: "May I?" the woman said: "Come in." A few of us hid there. She said: "But please be quiet, we have some residents who could call the police." We hid. Yesterday was one of the worst days of my life – for sure. [3]

ALIAKSANDR PASHKEVICH (historian):

Today the main column of the march was detained in the immediate vicinity of our courtyard. You couldn't call this a progressive place – old Khrushchev supporters, quite a few pensioners and other "ordinary" people. No particular protest activity is noticeable here on an ordinary day. However, there are quite a few white-red-white flags to be seen in windows, wi-fi codes are displayed at ground floor windows, and most important: almost all the entranceways to the yards are open for anyone fleeing. Everywhere doors are open, and someone stands beside them. In some cases, even a granny with coffee. [5]

LIZAVETA BURSOVA (age 81):

I think that, looking at it logically, it's highly improbable for an old lady like me to end up in prison. I'd have to take a whole sack of medicines. They'll give me a fine. My granddaughter lives far away, but she says not to worry, they'd collect the money for me. Everyone from my district will go to court for the hearing.

Relatives too, my eldest son. I don't know if they'll let anyone in, if they'll listen to anyone. I go out for a walk every day, and on my last one, I prepared a speech. [1]

VIKTORIA:

Yesterday at 16:25 the doors of a stranger's apartment closed behind me and didn't open again until this morning. I would say that around two hundred demonstrators were hidden in various apartments. [...]

The atmosphere was hard to bear. At first everyone tried to be silent, in order not to give away their presence. For that



PHOTO: VIKTOR TOLOCHKO / SPUTNIK / EAST NEWS

← Minsk, 13 September 2020.
Protestor being stopped by the police.

reason, we couldn't discuss what to do. Meanwhile we could hear the police the whole time, their footsteps. We saw how the officers were shining their torches looking for protesters.

We realized that this was better than police torture.

When strangers hid me in their apartment, I hesitated, could I trust them. [...] Every hour we thought we'd be able to leave, but the security forces were still waiting. I knew that if I went out they'd load me straight into a police van. [...] Some people had come to the march with their families – had they been detained, had they managed to hide? What should we do? Go out and search for them? [3]

OLGA TESAKOVA (deputy):

The deputies are powerless, they can't do anything about election fraud or violence. They have no influence on people and the security forces are removing white ribbons or the white-red-white flags from the public sphere. I made a conscious decision – I want out of a system that does nothing for people at just the moment when they need it the most. [3]

DIMA:

Throughout those five days in the cell we could hear shouts outside: "Thank you!" We could hear them shouting out the time. This kept our spirits up. But I thought it was a dozen people or so. I had no idea what was going on out there. When I came out and saw hundreds of people, a shiver ran through me. It was such a massive support. I felt joy for the first time. I thought everything had subsided, after all. Or that they'd put everyone inside, absolutely everyone. And here there were all these people! While we were driving along, cars were sounding

their horns the whole time, people were shouting to us on Grushevka [street]. [...]

I couldn't sleep afterwards. I walked and walked to wear myself out somehow. I drank a little vodka to help me sleep. The third night, it started to rain. It seemed to me there were a thousand people standing under my window shouting something. That it wasn't lightning outside, that someone was throwing rocket grenades – that it wasn't thunder, but explosions. [...]

The people from Imen called me [charitable media platform]. They registered me with a doctor at LODE [medical centre] and referred me to a psychologist. They arranged everything and just told me when and where to come. At LODE they put on a new plastercast [on his broken leg], as the old one had been badly done. I'll have to wear it another six weeks, and then there'll be rehabilitation. They'll book me a doctor's appointment, and will help me later too.

I met with a psychologist. She prescribed me two kinds of tablets. One kind for sleep and some sedatives. I take the sleeping tablets at the moment. I feel much better already. I hope I can manage without taking the others. If not, I'll go and see the psychologist again. It's good that people haven't abandoned us. I worry about what will happen next, but the support helps. [10]

ALIAKSANDR BROVKO:

We are always afraid. I was afraid before I was picked up. And then I understand that I could fight against fear. It's like the song: "We didn't know each other before this summer". Many people got to know their neighbours, they came to know each other as people, as a nation – and this is already a victory. [11]



PHOTO: NATALIA FEDOSENKO / TASS / FORUM

5

MARCH OF FREEDOM

OLGA (age 32):

I went with my two-year-old daughter, Nastia. I'm not afraid today, I overcame all my fear right after the elections. I took part in those protests too, with my children. I explain to them that in this way, we fight evil for a better world. I want a better country for them. [2]

VERONIKA LINDORENKO (marketer and lecturer):

I am free. I thank everyone very much for their support and kind words. You're amazing! In short – it was an interesting ten days. No doubt, I'll tell you very soon how it was. Generally speaking – in all the prisons there is a large concentration of intellectuals: a subtle sense of humour and unbelievable solidarity. We are a force! Prison is not terrifying to us; it's great to be building a bright future! [5]

EGOR MALSHEVSKI (technical director, IT company):

It's 10 am. I've been standing for about three minutes by the metro at Pushkin Avenue. An older lady comes up to me and says: "Excuse me for asking, but are you for the whites, or the reds?" "I'm for the people," I say. The older lady: "Will you stand guard?" I carry on standing, but I'm on guard now. The woman pulls out some spray paint and starts to draw a red band across a white background.

While she's doing it, in about a minute, an older man comes out of the subway with a bike and says: "What, do you need someone to watch? I'm going up the steps then."

I don't know how quickly we'll overcome, but whatever happens, there's no turning this back. [5]

ELENA ZDANOVICH (lawyer, mediator):

The first shock passes, when physical pain paralyses your consciousness of lawlessness and sadism. I am a tolerant Belarusian woman, a "soft power" lawyer and mediator, who chooses her words carefully in order to offend no one. Now I am shouting! I beg you, my dear, dear colleagues, my marvelous student colleagues (judges, prosecutors) – do not be silent, carry out your work with honesty! Do not pretend that nothing is happening, that criminals and deadbeats are beating up the police! You see everything, you understand everything!

When I knocked at the door of police headquarters, demanding permission for my colleague to meet with a detainee, I was met with the arrogant response: "Calm down, or you'll end up inside yourself." Provide defence in any way you can, like Dima Laievski, like Maksim Znak and many of my astonishing colleagues, write, speak. May they believe us, see us, count on us! Let our colleagues reply to our complaints, this is the only way we shall wake up! [...] We do not have the right to remain silent! [...] We need strength to work and endure, to see everything clearly. [5]

TATIANA MARTYNOVICH (lawyer):

Volha Karneyava is a cardiologist, the director of the cardiology centre in Shabany. [...] She was at one of the first women's marches. A group of pretty boys in black arrived. The leader of those devils recognized the doctor who'd treated him when he had a heart attack. This "grateful" individual proposed to her that she leave the square safely. To which Volha replied that he also had a choice: either she gets in the police van, or he leaves the square.

← ← On the previous page:
Minsk, 18 October 2020.

His group left the square. All the media wrote that all of a sudden the OMON guys left the women and went. That was thanks to Volha! [...]

I turn to you, devils in balaclavas. Of course you're not worthy of my attention at all. But the story with Volha leaves me some hope that there are human beings among you too. That you're not all bandits! Yes, that's what society calls you now. Don't take the sin upon yourselves. Do not count on evil bypassing you and your family. Fate will not forget you; it will "thank" you without fail. [5]

ANDREI ASTAPOVICH (investigator):

I wrote the report on my dismissal while quite emotional during the night shift. I knew that if I submitted it immediately, no one would find out about this decision – they'd sweep the whole thing under the carpet and silence me. When I finished work, I photographed the documents in order to post them on social media and I returned home. [...] At home, I read through it again: "I will not be silent, or take part in the concealment of crimes. I will not carry out criminal orders. I beg you, my friends, to come to your senses" – and I understood that I could have some very serious problems; the text was too emotional and was passing judgement on the entire apparatus of force.

The uniform had always aroused respect and trust, but there came a point when I realized it was impossible to work. When I arrived at some house in order to gather evidence of some crime, for example, if there'd been a murder, no one wanted to be a witness. No one even wanted to open the door to me to answer the standard question if they'd heard anything or not. When I went into a shop for water in uniform, a sales assistant giving

me my change, threw it in my face. I hung my head and went out without a word – I felt guilty of something I had not done and which myself I condemn. A taxi driver refused to take money from some of my colleagues for their ride, saying: "If I'd known who you were, I wouldn't have taken you." [2]

POLICEMAN, in an interview:

If anyone asks if I spoke to you, I'll say no. Officially, I'm still employed by the police force, I haven't received my documents of dismissal yet. I shouldn't be under any threat from a legal point of view, but the law in Belarus is "elastic". And I've already exposed my family. The scale of the violence, the lack of respect on the part of the authorities has crossed all boundaries.

After what followed the presidential elections, I realized that even the work of a patrolman would not keep me in the system. It began two months before the elections, with training. For three hours, soldiers would play the part of demonstrators, they threw firecrackers at us, grenades, and we had to defend ourselves and neutralize them. I avoided these sessions, because I knew that when the real demonstrations began, it wouldn't be soldiers standing in front of me, but our people. [...]

On the busiest days almost everyone in my unit was assigned to the protests. I was sent to work at the detention centre. I saw the arrivals and them being sent to the cells. [...] My task was to accompany them from the cells to the court which had been set up in the same building – the judges arrived and were assigned offices. [...]

They locked one man up simply because he'd turned up at the centre looking for his son. When it turned out



PHOTO: NATALIA FEDOSENKO / PAP/ITAR-TASS

← Minsk, 29 August. Opposition activist Nina Baginska during a women's march.

the son was among the detainees, the father was chucked into the cell with him. Just like the rest, he was treated as responsible for violating the order surrounding mass gatherings. There was a time when an officer who'd illegally detained the man would have been penalized, but now no one reacted.

I started to accompany women to the courtroom. They were confused, they didn't know why this was happening to them. They didn't look like the type who'd go throwing grenades at the police. That was the end for me in that unit. I had to leave, to preserve my humanity. I handed in my identity pass, my badge and stopped coming to work. [1]

ALIAKSANDR AKHREMCHIK
(police lieutenant colonel):

I saw in the media that the people detained had been freed from the prison in Zhodzín. That's 60 kilometres from Minsk. I couldn't remain indifferent. I've got a car and I decided to help people to get back to the city. I drove over early in the morning and saw the people coming out with my own eyes. I saw what state they were in. They looked defeated, they didn't understand what was going on or where they were. It was terrifying. After seeing all this I returned to Minsk, finished work, and made my final decision and on 15 August I submitted a report and all my documents. [...]

They'll dismiss for failing to turn up for work, but in accordance with the regulations you have to wait for the contract to be dissolved. I wrote that I no longer wished to serve. [...] My dismissal is a protest against the actions of the MSW leadership. [1]

ANATOLII KOTOV (diplomat, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, and employee in the president's administrative office):

I was dismissed quite calmly and decently. Nevertheless... I dedicate this to my former colleagues. I don't know how you can sleep! Where there no tortures or murders? Unfortunately, even the UN confirms that this was the case. Citizens of Belarus are not permitted to enter their own country. I have made my choice. I have chosen a path to nowhere. [5]

VERANIKA:

I came to the Freedom March because it's impossible to live in this country any longer. My husband was detained for five days. He was in prison though he hadn't committed a crime, hadn't broken the law. This is not a government for the people. We want to live in our beautiful country, but on condition that we can change something. [1]

IVAN KOLOS (police officer):

After I was filmed turning with a plea to the law enforcers, asking them to cross to the side of the people, I was dismissed. It took my chiefs twenty minutes to get to my house after the moment the recording was released. They came to take away my documents, badge and epaulettes. They dismissed me contrary to regulations. However they were not able to take away my loyalty and fidelity to the nation. That is a service from which they cannot dismiss me.

Friends, we do not serve Lukashenka. A tribunal awaits that man. We serve the Belarusian people. Friends,

do not be afraid that you will be dismissed, do not fear criminal cases. Yes, I have been threatened, they have tried to intimidate me, but the people have supported me. I know that thousands of others apart from me have taken the decision to cross to the side of society. It's not too late. [10]

VIKTORIA BELIASHIN (journalist):

There's no point in drawing hasty conclusions. It's not worth humanizing the enforcers. Lowered shields may look very touching, but all you need do is remember at whom the OMON were shooting – a few days ago – at teenagers, women, peaceful protestors, defenceless people. All you need do is listen to the stories of people who came out after detention during which they experienced regular, savage torture. You need only remember those whose deaths – as a result of abuses carried out by the law enforcers – have been confirmed. You need only remember that some casualties could have been avoided.

Today it has been confirmed that one of the fatal victims died as a result of excessive blood loss. The OMON would not allow her an ambulance. It's enough to look at the martyred faces of the beaten people released from custody. Or remind oneself that tomorrow the funeral will take place of a man who was hit by a stun grenade. Law enforcement officers have not crossed to the side of the people. It is naïve and harmful to voice such opinions. Dictatorships do not fall that easily. [5]

NINA AUHENIA (age 74):

This is my third flag. The OMON took the last two. I go out because I feel I must. I couldn't forgive myself if I did nothing. Till now, I haven't lived in a free country. I'd like my children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren to live to see a free Belarus. I'm not afraid, at least not to the point of giving up. You cannot hand your country over to a criminal. Now a chance for change has appeared. I marvel at all these young people who go out on the street to fight for the future. Today they are the ones educating me. We must listen to them, this is their time. [2]



PHOTO: BELAPAN / REUTERS / FORUM

6

MARCH OF INDEPENDENCE

ZMITSER LUKASHUK (journalist, Euroradio):

At 9:50, I ran into Maria Kalesnikava by chance on Glavna street near the post office. I was going to work, she had come to the post office at Engels to pick up a parcel.

Maria: “How’s it going, Euroradio?” Me: “Working away... And you?” She answered: “The same.” “Maria, let’s meet up, when do you have time?”

We went out onto Marks street, next to our editorial office. Maria: “I don’t make plans for tomorrow. You can see how everything changes. Here’s a parcel from the KGB; no idea what’s inside. But let’s try to meet in the next few days, I’m always happy to see you.” [...] I went to the editorial office and Maria left.

Later, I found out that she got no further than 100 metres down the street – just after 10:00, some unknown perpetrators pushed her into a van and drove off to an unknown destination. This is Belarus today. [5]

IHAR ILASH:

I was picked up in my own kitchen. The officers entered the apartment, apparently using the key belonging to my wife, who’d been arrested. The whole process took no more than three seconds – I was stirring my tea and heard two clicks in the lock and three men in plain clothes burst into the apartment shouting: “Don’t touch anything!”

The ones in uniform used the typical vocabulary of police, showed me their warrant and requisitioned my wife’s belongings. The document had been signed by investigator Ihar Kurylovich, who is pursuing the case against Katsiaryna Andreyeva and Daria Chultsova. On the basis of the warrant, however my things were also taken, including two phones and my work laptop.

Everything took place without witnesses, nor was I permitted to telephone a lawyer or my family. At first, no charges were made against me – they said they were taking me to the commissariat for questioning.

The unit commander who broke into my apartment introduced himself as Ruslan Mikalayevich. His behaviour exceeded the limits of the absurd. When I attempted to protest, first of all he stated that I had been “brainwashed” and next he explained coldly: “We are here to maintain public order and ensure the peace is kept.” “Well, it was pretty peaceful here before you barged into my kitchen...” I replied. At one point he leaned towards me: “There are traitors everywhere,” he said in a conspiratorial tone. “As I suspected,” I replied. “Who?” the man in uniform pricked up his ears. [11]

DARIA LOSIK:

My daughter and I returned from our walk. We came out of the lift into the stairwell and there we were met by police officers. They flashed their identity cards for a second, we didn’t manage to read their surnames. They also showed us the warrant from the deputy prosecutor general that said a search was to be carried out at this address. I refused them entry to the apartment, saying that we would wait for my father who was the owner. The search took place in the presence of my father, Ihar and two witnesses off the street.

They took all our equipment – the laptop, tablet, phones. When they made to take Ihar, I asked where my husband was going. They said: “Don’t worry, he will just write a statement and return.” They even told him to take money for a ticket to get back home.

← ← On the previous page:
Minsk, 25 October 2020.

That evening they telephoned to tell me that my husband had been charged under section 342 and would spend three days in prison.

[...] When Ihar's designated period of detention had expired, in order to detain him for longer, he was charged under article 293, and threatened with restriction of liberty for three to eight years. [14]

PAVEL DOROSHKO (director, technical department):

I was giving my friends a lift home. There were four of us. It was 00:30. [...] In the distance, at the intersection, warning lights were flashing and cars were stopping. I drive up and an armed man in uniform is standing at the intersection. We look at each other. He grabs his gun (like a Winchester) tightly, and points it in my direction. He was shouting something. I couldn't understand. He comes up to me first and points in my face: "Hands up, get out of the car! Get out of the car! Get down! Face to the ground, I said!" I get out at once, I lie down. I do everything calmly, slowly, so that he can see everything.

More people in uniform run up: "Out of the car! Face to the asphalt!" Everyone lies down. He shouts at me: "Open the trunk!" I get up and open it. They rifle about inside. They find nothing. I feel that I'm almost free. [...]

My hands are tied behind my back. They lead me to the police pick-up. I get in, I can't see anything but legs. Immediately the truncheons come down from both sides. [...] I see a lot of people on the floor. Arms, heads, legs. A kick in the back. I fall into the crowd. A truncheon hits me across the shoulders and arms. To me: "Crawl, bitch!" [1]

EKATERINA (wife of Maksim Horoshin, the florist who distributed flowers during the march):

We left the house and got in the car. A few seconds later, some masked men opened the door and pulled us out of the car. They forced my arms behind me and threw my husband to the ground and began to beat him. I saw a pool of blood on the pavement. They put handcuffs on Maksim, pulled a balaclava over his head, shoved him into the van and took him to the police station. [5]

MAKSIM HOROSHIN:

There were around ten of them. They said that allegedly I'd dismantled a water cannon and burnt down the OMON chief's little summer house. They asked me what it was I didn't like about our country? After all, I had everything. Then they began to hit me with their truncheons, repeating: "We'll teach you to love your fatherland, to love the police! How much are they paying you?" [5]

INNA RADVILAITE:

We live next door, we know the shop very well – it's not very big – so I let my son go to the toilet by himself. Explosions began and shooting. In the shopping centre they announced that they were closing and weren't letting anyone inside. People went up to the exit to see what was going on. I went up too and started recording. There were several police officers there. They were running after people, shooting, throwing grenades. People who were coming out with plastic bags with their shopping were arrested immediately and pushed inside the police vans. We realized that if we tried to leave to get home they would arrest us.



PHOTO: NATALIA FEDOSENKO / TASS / FORUM

← Minsk, 13 August 2020.

The store security manager asked the man who had begun to force the door to summon his superior, so that we could work out who they were – they could be thugs? He wanted to explain: everything here is in order, there is no protest, these are just ordinary clients, women and children. But no one listened to him. They forced the door. I understood that they would break in at any moment, and my child was still in the bathroom. I was frightened, everyone began to panic. I ran in the direction of the toilet and I could hear behind me that they had got in. There were vulgar shouts: “Mugs to the floor! Face the wall!” I hid under the counter to see what was going on and to catch hold of my child as soon as I saw him go past. When I was hiding I felt as though it were terrorists holding us and not the police, who were supposed to protect us.

[...] I called my son loudly. I saw him lying on the ground and someone was shielding him with her body. He heard me and ran over. They began to lead us out of the shop. They took some to the buses, and some – straight out onto the street. I held on tight to my son and went into the street. It’s possible they didn’t take me because I was with a child. On the street, I didn’t know where to go to be safe. People were running and the OMON were shooting at them. There was a lot of gas, our eyes were streaming and it was difficult to breathe. My son was so stressed that the whole way he was shouting: “Mum, I’ll never go to the toilet again, I’m sorry.” [11]

JAN (age 24):

The OMON guy came up to me and ordered me to unlock my phone. I knew there was no point in arguing or running away. He noticed in messenger that I read opposition

channels and followed independent media, that is NEXT, Radio Liberty. He said: “What, you bitch, you don’t like the country you live in? We’ll soon teach you.” [1]

MAKSIM:

I had a protective mask in my backpack and gloves. The others decided that it was the backpack of a protest organizer and began to cross-question me. I denied everything. And three “workers” in black uniforms took me round the corner of the shopping centre, they showed me a grenade and pushed it down my underpants. One of them said: “Now we pull out the pin, you go up in the air, and we say it was a homemade explosive device. They won’t touch us.” They backed up a few metres, then came back and started to beat me up. Then they took me to the van. I had my hands tied behind my back the whole time. [...]

There were eighteen-year-old girls in the van with us. One of them was guilty of telling one of the enforcers that one of the boys felt ill. One of them went up to her, grabbed her by the hair and starting screaming: “Shut up, you whore! Keep your mouth shut.” He cut some of her hair off. He threatened that if she wouldn’t be quiet, she would be taken to a cell of men where she would be raped and then they would drive her out to the forest. [5]

DENIS:

They tried to break into my mobile. They hit me across the head from different directions. They hit me across the hands with a truncheon. They grabbed my nose with their fingers and bent my head backwards. [...] I was marked on the forehead – with the letter “A” (an “active”

case) because I wouldn't unlock my phone. Then they took me to some office and made me lie on the floor. They started to beat me on the legs and buttocks with truncheons. They threw a bulletproof vest over my head in order not to hear my cries. Three or four of them took it in turns to beat me, calling me "the patient". They decided that they would take me outside and pepper spray me in the eyes or rape me with a truncheon. [9]

EGOR FETUKHOV (student,
Belarus Institute of Jurisprudence):

One of them ran up to me, shouting: "Stop, bitch!" He deliberately beat me across the legs. He broke my leg! Carried on hitting me [...] on the legs, the head, even a fist in the face. I remember a woman nearby shouting at them to leave me alone. Then he got me in a choke hold.

My leg will heal; the most important thing is that I didn't lose my sight, because there was a risk. [...]

Now, I'm afraid all the time, like everyone else. I was particularly frightened during the latest marches. I always hesitate, but in the end I decide, "if not me, then who". [1]

SERGEI KURYLENKO (actor):

I wasn't treated brutally. There was nowhere to run – everyone in the theatre was surrounded. I didn't resist, I went peacefully. Two OMON guys had me by the arms. When Vala lunged from behind, one of them started to twist my arm. I said: "Young man, I am the same age as your father. What are you doing?" He probably thought that I was resisting and did not see that Vala was behind. But he relaxed his grip. [...]

People learnt we were being detained while the first act was taking place. The actors carried on, but many of them were in no state to say their lines, they wept and none of the audience could understand a thing. [...]

In accordance with our regulations from Soviet times, a telegram concerning some event is not to be delivered before or during a performance. Not until after the performance – the actors did not break this convention. They learn to forget everything beyond the stage. But it's not easy to leave what is happening now in the wings. It's difficult to perform in such a situation. For that reason, the actors decided to stop the performance. [3]

ALENA PUKHOVSKAYA (pensioner):

My daughter, grandson, and a friend came to visit me. We set off in "vyshyvanki" to the square opposite the shopping centre. We asked a young man to take a photo of us against the background of the white-red-white flag. Suddenly an undercover guy appeared and began filming us. Some people in black with truncheons and what looked like firearms jumped out of a police van. They had masks and balaclavas. I, my friend, the man taking pictures and his girlfriend were shoved into the van. They let my daughter and grandson go.

On the way to the police station I was assured that I would be free to go in fifteen minutes. They made a report that I had taken part in an "illegal rally". They noted what I had with me and put me in the "monkey house". It was cold in there. I was afraid to sit on the concrete bench in case I got ill. I asked the guards for some cardboard. They didn't give me any. I put my coat on, but I was soon stiff with cold. I sat on a plastic water bottle until four in the morning. I wondered what was going to happen to

me. In the night, my daughter came to the police station with warm clothes and food. They told her I was warm enough and didn't need anything. [1]

NATALIA KULIKOVICH (lecturer):

The students went to the ministry of education with a petition. They never got there. As the ones who didn't get to university were joking sadly yesterday, they caught the ones who did. [5]

IHAR ILIASH:

I was accused of taking part in the march of pensioners and students, where, apparently, I was among a group of people shouting: "Long live Belarus!" and waving flags. In actual fact, I wasn't there at all – not even in my capacity as a journalist. I saw the march only from the window of a taxi as the editorial office had given me an assignment in a different place.

[...] I did not come across a single random bystander among those behind bars – everyone sincerely hated Lukashenka's regime and often went on protests. [11]

RAMAN SHABANOVICH:

I was wanted. I had to hide. [...] In the end I was questioned, threatened with legal action for taking part in the protests, that my son had... They threatened the whole family. [...] I was held for eight days under a fabricated pretext – that I'd resisted. [...]

I was summoned again and questioned, again threatened with legal action, which was finally carried out.

The people I was detained with and with whom I went to protests convinced me that I should leave the country on account of my family. I have a large family, five children, four of them minors, they need support. My wife doesn't have a job.

I'm in Vilnius now. [...] They helped me get through quarantine, found me an apartment, I got a visa, now they're organizing the next one. Soon I will be able to work and help my family.

I hope that soon I'll be able to return. That's what we all think. We'll do everything we can to make it happen. [11]

NINA BELINSKAYA (age 21):

Maybe I'll soon manage to earn enough for a decent life so that I'll be able to support organizations which fight for freedom in Belarus. [1]

DMITRII MAZURO (student):

I'm in Vilnius now, in quarantine for ten days on account of Coronavirus. I didn't want to leave till the last minute. I had to. I had a choice: either a legal case, or leaving. [...] I would have been expelled from my institute, which would have meant instant conscription into the army. Both my mum and friends advised me to leave, there wasn't a single person who wanted me to stay, other than me. Mum thinks I did everything right, she's proud of me. [1]

ANIA:

I had to escape – I didn't even manage to pack anything. I left everything and started my life over again. Prison and torture await me in Belarus. [1]



PHOTO: BELAPAN / REUTERS / FORUM

← Minsk, 23 September 2020.
Special forces arresting a protestor
at the opposition demonstration
on the day of Lukashenka's
inauguration.

ANDREI ASTAPOVICH:

The enforcers [*siloviki*] came to my hotel room which had been reserved in someone else's name. They accused me of brawling and swearing in a public place. They found me so quickly because they'd noticed our hired car on the border, but I'd already felt earlier that something wasn't quite right. In Pskov a man immediately came up to me to ask for directions. He didn't take the way I told him and didn't approach anyone else.

They claimed that I had violated the migration rules concerning Coronavirus. But that's not true – I had met all the conditions for a legal stay in Russia. [...]

They came to my cell, returned my things and said I was free to go. They let me out via a side exit, where a minibus was waiting with some masked men. I was stopped again in front of the vehicle, quite brutally this time, they put a black mask on me, strapped me to a – at a guess – 30-kilogram weight and threw me into the vehicle. This time I thought it was the end – that they would drown me. I began to get upset, I demanded a lawyer, I refused to sign anything. [...]

They drove me to the border and dropped me off. They gave my things back. They even told me more or less where I was, which region. They warned me that I would not be welcome in Russia for the next five years.

A moment later I saw an unmarked minibus driving up. I ran away. They couldn't hand me over directly, because the media would know immediately that Russia was openly collaborating with Lukashenka.

[...] Basically, I crossed the whole of Belarus. The worst thing was the realization that if they found me, they'd kill me, bury me and probably no one would ever find me. But I had a moment when I wanted them to find me.

I was soaked through, tired. I'd covered tens of kilometers, often swimming, through lakes, mud, rivers. I was up to the neck in marsh, more than once I thought it was the end. When wild boar attacked me I thought to myself that actually, it was a bit embarrassing to die like this. I ran as fast as I could. That evening I fell down in a glade, onto the grass. My heart was racing, my adrenaline dropped, I was shot through with pain. I felt I had no strength left. [2]

TATSIANA VASIUNINA:

After consulting a lawyer, I decided to apply for a visa – just in case.

All kinds of unpleasantness began to happen around me while the documents were being prepared: detentions, searches, interrogations. Some ordinary young people and students were detained. My parents were told that I had been reprimanded. [...]

I left Belarus. It was not an easy decision. I couldn't believe it was really happening. I became an "undesirable" element in my country, in my institute – I had to leave, packing literally in one day. At first, I didn't expect anyone to help me – I left for "nowhere".

At the border, it turned out that refugees travelling on a visa authorizing them to enter Poland for humanitarian reasons could stay at a hotel for free. As a result, I went through self-isolation near Białystok.

I have absolutely no regrets. I cannot wait till spring when everyone wakes up and gets back in the game. [1]

MAKSIM KOROSHIN:

In Vilnius, I met Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. She saw me and was told: “This is Maksim whom you were so worried about.” We went up to one another, hugged and began to cry. I think all Belarusians are in a similar state today. We’re helpful people, after all, and feel the pain that we have mutually endured for each other.

Many people who’d been beaten have written to me. They are physically and morally wounded, some have been disabled. I was very bitter, but they wrote: “You are like fresh hope that gives us strength.” [13]

SVIATLANA TSIKHANOUSKAYA:

I had to leave. I am safe and I can act, ask for support, shout that people are in prison, are suffering, that everything is being taken away from them.

I’d like to return to Belarus, [...] to negotiate with the representatives of the regime and organize new elections. [2]

ALIAKSANDRA HERASIMENIA

(European and world swimming champion):

The most important thing for me is [...] to return to a free Belarus. Where human rights are respected, citizens taken into account and everyone given an equal opportunity to develop, not only people connected with those in power.

I imagine my return. It will seemingly be an ordinary car journey, but really I’ll be coming home from emigration – to where someone is waiting for me. [19]

ANIA:

We were told that we were quiet, peaceful, that we couldn’t do it. Lukashenka’s election fraud woke us up. [...] We realized that we were an ambitious, creative nation. The awakened spirit of the nation will not fall asleep again. [1]

DARIA:

The fear and exhaustion are ongoing, but above all there is the desire for justice. In spring, we will go out on the streets because we will not submit to violence and lies. [...]

We remember the names of all the repressed and we will name those responsible. [5]

SVIATLANA TSIKHANOUSKAYA:

Democracy is a human right. We want to create a new country, in which a human being will be the highest good. We will win, we will become a democratic Belarus. [1]

FRANTSISHAK VIAHORKA (adviser to Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya):

We are very close to victory and it is very important that repression does not break us. The most important thing is to stick together. What linked us from the beginning was the demand for free elections, [...] which will lead to the victory of democracy. [2]

SVIATLANA TSIKHANOUSKAYA:

Our march to freedom has already been victorious. The state has not yet changed, but society has. [2]

LIST OF SOURCES

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- [3] Tut.by
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SELECTION OF MATERIALS, EDITING Edyta Banaszekiewicz

EDITING (COOPERATION) Agnieszka Knyt

COOPERATION (SELECTION OF MATERIALS, RECORDING,

TRANSLATION) Nataliia Breivo, Yryna Khalip, Zhanna Nogina, Daria

Rusiecka, Krystyna Selivonik, Tomasz Sulima, Piotr Tarasiuk, Anna

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TRANSLATION INTO ENGLISH Anna Zaranko

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Ośrodek KARTA

ul. Narbutta 29, 02-536 Warszawa

(48) 22 848-07-12, ok@karta.org.pl

www.karta.org.pl

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