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LET THE WORLD HEAR



STORIES FROM THE
VICTIMS OF THE
BELARUSIAN
DICTATORSHIP
IN 2020



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A SPECIAL THANK YOU

Stockholm Free World Forum and KAS Nordic Countries Project would especially like to thank all the Belarusian volunteers who have worked tirelessly with interviews and translations for this project. Without their efforts, this book would have never been published in the first place.

This anthology is dedicated to the brave and courageous people who fiercely fight for democratic changes and freedom in Belarus.

Some names in this book have been changed for confidentiality purposes.

FOREWORD

GUNNAR HÖKMARK

It is a battle between fear and courage. And the world must hear what it is about since it is happening like so many times before and will happen again.

In this book, Stockholm Free World Forum together with KAS Nordic Countries Project present a number of stories and testimonials from the brave people of Belarus who are standing up for the most fundamental rights of democracy, the right to vote for the leaders of your country. That has, in an obvious way, been denied them.

The election fraud of the Lukashenka regime goes beyond the kind of election fraud that has happened far too many times in the world. After having jailed, persecuted and forced opposition leaders to flee the country, as well as hindered meetings and censored the media, the regime still lost yet it pronounced victory.

The reason is very simple. Dictators are by nature not very courageous. They never dare to face the results of democratic elections because they know that they've stolen the power from the people. They don't dare to face democracy because they know that the results of it will be disastrous for them.

That's why they are dictators.

So, they hide behind fraud, censorship, police brutality, torture and violence. Violence is the language of any dictatorship – and so it is the case in Belarus. Not because the autocrats are courageous, but because they fear students and pensioners demonstrating, women challenging them, and the citizens speaking up and voting.

Anyone who needs to defend their power by violence – in Belarus' case the extreme and reckless police brutality – by banning opposition and by censorship is a scared person, fearing the people's will. That's what Lukashenka is disclosing himself as, as he fights the people with cruelty.

Thanks to the courage of ordinary citizens, he is not succeeding. For every day that goes by he is proving that he has no legitimacy to be in power, and every day this is becoming more evident not least to his own supporters.

We must give voice to the people of Belarus in this battle for freedom. Whatever political views they have, they are just standing up for democracy and defending the democracy that belongs to all of us. The more persistent they are, the stronger the message to all other despots in power. They are fighting our battle.

The least we can do now is to stand behind them. Let the world hear. Let the world hear that they are beaten, harassed and tortured. That they are jailed and threatened. All the individual testimonials in this book remind us that the evilness of a dictatorship can happen to any of us. Old and young. Women and men.

There is no other way than democracy. That's what the world must tell the regime, with full clarity. The European Union must support national dialogue and a transfer of power, but also punish those who violate human rights. Criminals are criminals, even when dressed as officials. In this book we can see how brutality has been used against young and old, men and women, reckless and without conscience. A brutality of cowards not daring to face democracy, freedom of speech and the will of the people.

Let the world hear. Let it not be unknown what is happening in the streets of Minsk and other European cities, in the cellars and cells hidden from the public. The stories and testimonials are many, each one worth hearing. Stockholm Free World Forum and KAS Nordic Countries Project are proud to make it possible for the world to hear what the victims of a dictatorship have to tell us.

Read, let others read and let us support those with the courage to stand up for democracy. Let the world hear.

Gunnar Hökmark

Chairman, Stockholm Free World Forum

FOREWORD

GABRIELLE BAUMANN

The reaction of the Belarusian authorities to the peaceful mass protests following the presidential elections has been extremely alarming. The election result has been falsified by the Aliaksandr Lukashenka regime. No country in the EU has recognized it nor given Lukashenka legitimacy for his presidency.

In October, the European Council reacted by imposing restrictive measures against 60 individuals identified as responsible for repression against peaceful demonstrators, opposition members and journalists. EU leaders once more condemned the unacceptable violence by Belarusian authorities against peaceful protesters, as well as intimidation, arbitrary arrests and detentions.

The European Council fully supported the democratic right of the Belarusian people to elect their president through new free and fair elections without external interference. They called on the Belarusian authorities to end violence and repression, release all detainees and political prisoners, respect media freedom and civil society, and to start an inclusive national dialogue.

Non-violent demonstrations have continued since the elections in August across the country, even though almost all leaders of the protest movement have been arrested in Belarus or forced to leave the country. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the winner of the presidential elections in Belarus according to independent sources, coordinates further activities and international cooperation from her exile in Lithuania.

Belarusians have together emerged as key voices of dissent and an inspiration for many around the world. Often holding flowers, Belarusian men and women have become symbols of the peaceful nature of protests, marching together every week despite the violence used by law enforcement officials. These officials have arrested and detained more than 17,000 protesters, taking their fingerprints and photos before releasing them. It is of high importance to document what happened to these people during the days, weeks and months of confinement as it is also a source for future trials against the perpetrators.

This book, “Let the world hear”, presented by the Stockholm Free World Forum together with KAS Nordic Countries Project, shows that officials have systematically and deliberately subjected individuals to ill-treatment while in detention. In many cases, this was reported to be of such severe nature that it would amount to torture in various forms. Journalists, civil society activists and human rights defenders have also been prevented from carrying out their work, often being subjected to physical attacks, arbitrary arrests and judicial harassment by the Belarusian authorities.

Under international human rights law, a transparent and

independent investigation of all allegations of torture and ill-treatment must be carried out. The Konrad Adenauer Foundation demands the protection of human rights as a core element of the rule of law and a necessary condition for a functioning democracy. The dignity of the human being is for us the centre and the origin of all reflections.

Gabriele Baumann

Head of the KAS Office Nordic Countries

INTRODUCTION

On 9 August 2020, the Belarusian dictator Aliaksandr Lukashenka, who has ruled the country for 26 years, claimed victory in the national election. It was after a long and hard fight against freedom and democracy. The authorities silenced and imprisoned oppositional candidates, shut down the nation's internet and forced election workers to deliberately change the numbers in electoral registers, as well as hide and burn ballots.

The people of Belarus reacted to the injustice by holding peaceful demonstrations and meetings. The regime responded in the most gruesome way. Thousands upon thousands were detained. In the detention centres and jails, people were beaten, tortured, raped, humiliated, as well as denied food and water, medical attention and the opportunity to speak to a lawyer. Some were arrested for attending a demonstration. Some for wearing something white – the colour of the opposition. And some had simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The Belarusians' struggle for freedom and an open society is indeed significant in itself as well as in a wider European context. When the Berlin Wall came down in November 1989 and the peoples of Eastern and Central Europe regained individual freedom and national sovereignty, liberties that had been denied them for so many decades, Aliaksandr Lukas-

henka refused to establish a genuine democracy in Belarus. He was then known as Europe's last dictator and his regime was becoming increasingly authoritarian.

The peaceful revolution in 2020 should therefore be seen as the logical consequence of the peaceful events in the early 1990s. In the beginning of the democratic transformation after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Lukashenka, in the eyes of many Belarusians, appeared to offer stability and an organized nation balancing between Russia and the European Union. His ruling meant a sort of security in a turbulent neighbourhood.

Election fraud and detentions of regime critics, however, took its toll, gradually undermining the people's trust. It was not a sustainable situation in a country with so many well educated and able people. The issue was consequently not about *if* but *when* people would take to the streets and demand the rights that constitute an open and modern society. Belarusian born Nadzeya Charapan, Ph.D. candidate, makes a strong point in her contribution, showing the impact of the mistakes made during the COVID-19 pandemic. In her view, the government's lack of seriousness meeting the challenge finally opened the eyes of the Belarusians. It created the historical butterfly effect of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and laid the foundation for her successful campaign.

The peaceful demonstrations, powered by the enormous and broad attendance not least by the female portion of the population, bear the message of a bright future for Belarus if the country is given the opportunity to independently establish a free society. Since the last unfree and unfair elections, the world has seen an opposition that is incredibly peaceful,

mature and representative. An opposition that has not let itself be provoked by the regime's violence.

Vasil Navumau and Olga Matveieva are co-authors of a comparative study between the events in Belarus and the Euromaidan in Ukraine. Their contribution is a comprehensive analysis of similarities and differences, showing how the Belarusian cause fits into the post-Soviet context and contemporary neighbouring relations.

The Belarusians, through their restrained but determined opposition, have written a new chapter in the history of the human struggle for freedom and democracy. In this respect, their struggle should be a model for our time.

In the middle of August, Stockholm Free World Forum got in touch with Nadzeya Charapan. Thanks to her, as well as a group of tireless Belarusian volunteers, we were able to connect with several people who had become victims of the crackdown. Their stories have not left anyone unmoved. Some had been detained for attending a peaceful protest, using their fundamental right to express disapproval of the regime's oppression. Others had been detained during an evening walk or while visiting the convenience store. The treatment they received in avtozaks, detention centres and jails must be considered a gross violation of human rights.

23-year-old Stanislaw told us how the riot police beat him to the state of unconsciousness, ignoring his plea for medicine. He and his friend were arrested for carrying medical supplies in their bags.

22-year-old Pavel told us how he was sentenced to 72 hours in jail without seeing his protocols or there even being a court. There were 36 other people sharing a cell with him which was designed for five.

20-year-old Darya told us that even though she was forced to go through hell in the detention centre, the authorities didn't manage to break her down and she is now determined not to leave things as they are.

These stories were initially published on Stockholm Free World Forum's blog, Säkerhetsrådet. We called the project "Let The World Hear" as a reminder that when freedom and democracy is being trampled, one can never stay silent. When ordinary men and women dare to raise their voices against oppressive despots, when they open up about the tremendous physical and mental suffering they were forced to go through, the global community, especially the actors who stand behind the notion of a free world, must listen.

In this anthology we have gathered eleven stories of the people who spoke up. We have also included expert commentary on the social, political and economic status of Belarus, as well as what led to the crackdown. The world must know what happened.

Margareta Barabash and Olof Ehrenkrona

DARYA, 20: “YOU SEE THE BLOOD, HEAR THE GROANS, THE SCREAMS...”

This is the story of 20-year-old student Darya Skorokhod from Minsk. She was detained on 11 August 2020.

The beginning: “I seemed smart as I ran in the other direction.”

The story starts on 11 August, about 4 p.m. We gathered in the office at work and collectively decided to go to our friend’s home, followed by a walk to the centre of Minsk to see what was happening in the city. We had all heard about the protests, but no one could know for sure since the internet had been shut down. We created a group chat to figure out who was coming and when to gather.

At 7:30 p.m. we left the building. We knew that the demonstrations usually started around 8 p.m., but we wanted to walk around in order to understand what was going on in the country as there was no internet. As we walked towards a coworker’s home we noticed a small bus arriving by a park literally next to his house. About 12 people jumped out and

headed towards us. It was obvious that they were going for us, we were the only big group around – about 10 people. We got scared and started to run away, because everyone here runs from the OMON¹, as to not be caught. Nobody knew that we would be caught for this.

We ran in different directions. Many ran to the right, I ran to the left. It seemed logical not to run with the rest of the crowd. They seized four of us; because “I seemed smart as I ran in the other direction”, they thought I was the coordinator and thus had something to hide. They took my boyfriend because “he was tall and muscular”. Another girl was taken because of a white ribbon on her bag. Yet another girl because she is a professional karatist and she was carrying her workout bag with her, containing bandaids and teeth protection. The rest either managed to run away or, as for the underaged girls, were searched but had nothing specific on them and thus were allowed to leave.

We were put on the bus. I immediately asked the reasons for the arrest. They said, “unlock your phones and we will explain”. We refused to do so so they started to threaten us with violence unless we gave them the passwords. On my phone they found a clip of my dog dancing to Victor Tsoy’s song *Peremen*². A normal, funny video. They said they would take me immediately.

My boyfriend wasn’t even allowed to sit down in the bus –

1 A special police force used as either riot police or paramilitary force.

2 *Peremen*, meaning Change, is a song from the 1980s that became a protest anthem in the post-Soviet world.

he was immediately laid on the floor. He had also received a text from a friend, warning that there were avtozaks³ in the city centre. Some of our phones were collected after they found images and videos taken during the protests. They said, “that’s it, we’re taking all of you”.

The bus took us to the avtozak. I didn’t know that there were cages in avtozaks, but there really are 1.5 x 1.5m caged cells in which they would put up to five people. I was with two other girls. They put us all in the wagon, kept us in there for 15 minutes then kicked us out. Apparently it wasn’t even the OMON who had caught us; it was some unknown men in dark clothes who didn’t even state who they were. We were again forced to give the passwords to our phones; they wrote them down and then collected our phones. We don’t know where they are until this day. We returned to the avtozak where we then spent the next five hours: me, two girls and one guy. They said that they would drive around until the avtozak was full of people. So from 7:45 p.m. until midnight we drove around to different protests, collecting people. One guy who lit a cigarette in the avtozak was severely beaten. At one point they thought that we seemed so small and innocent, and that we should be released, but we ended up driving around for five hours until we arrived at the RUVD⁴. At that point I thought that it wouldn’t get any worse and we would be taken to a more civil place; that we would be given a sentence and it would be over, but we were taken to the RUVD.

3 Wagon for transportation of prisoners.

4 *Regional Department of Internal Affairs*

The stairs of death

They told us to walk up the stairs to the fourth floor of the building. Later we found out that they were called “the stairs of death” because on every other stair there was a person in uniform with a stick meant to beat you as you walked past. Girls are not beaten, only guys. They beat every single part of your body. Sometimes you can jump away, sometimes not. Girls were terribly insulted. They would call us everything, from street whores to revolutionaries to coordinators. While climbing the stairs, I saw guys on the floor being beaten by the police and the OMON. You see the blood, hear the groans, the screams. I didn’t know this could even happen in an administrative building.

They brought us to an auditorium and threw us on the floor. I was then lifted and seated in a chair. We then spent the next 13 hours in the auditorium, sitting in one single position. You had to put your arms in front of you and bow your head down; this was how we had to sit for 13 hours. I was allowed to leave once for a check-up in the middle of the night – I was unlucky, because there was a queue so I had to return. Since I had a pink jacket I was referred to as “Rosey” and that’s now my jail name (smiles).

Between 2 a.m. and 6 a.m. new protestors arrived. They were beaten, some of them almost to death. There was a 20-year-old guy who was there because of a molotov cocktail, but I still think that it’s wrong to almost beat people to death because of something like that. I later found out that he passed away in the Intensive Care Unit the following morning because of a shattered skull.

The OMON acted really inadequately. We were not allowed to look at them, but we could still see that they had awful mood swings. One moment they would brutally beat you and the next moment they would ask you if you were okay. It seemed to be the normal scheme and it was absolutely terrifying. From 2 a.m. until 6 a.m. we were forced to listen to the guys being beaten. Girls were not physically touched, just frightened and insulted.

“All right, you girls are probably here by mistake, sign this protocol and leave”

At 8 a.m. it was time for my check-up. I walked into a small room where there were three women. They immediately started to insult me, humiliate me, asking why the fuck they had to work for my sake at 8 in the morning. Being a young and naive 20-year-old, I answered, “I’ve been here unlawfully since 7 in the evening”. For that I was punched several times and I realized it was better to stay quiet. After that we were recorded on tape, where they explained who I was, why I was here and so on. And then I got to return to the auditorium, without any explanation.

At 1 p.m. they came in and said, “all right, you girls are probably here by mistake. Sign this protocol and leave”. We were not allowed to read the protocol so I said that I was innocent and therefore wouldn’t sign it. Some girls, who were terrified, signed it and were allowed to leave; those few who didn’t had to stay.

At 2 p.m. they said we had to transfer to a different place. But since there were no available avtozaks, they told us to

come down to the first floor. We sat on the cold clinker floor, face-down on our knees, waiting for a free avtozak. To my left there was an adult guy who just cried; it seemed like he had broken down mentally by this point.

It's very difficult to stand on your knees after not being allowed to move for 13 hours. I have problems with my knees – I have reactive arthritis, so at one point I told the OMON that I had had surgery a month before; they replied that they didn't give a fuck. I understood that it was pointless to claim your rights here. I realized that if I had to stand like this for 2 hours I wouldn't be able to get up again. Luckily after one hour they allowed us to stand up facing the wall. After that we were put in an avtozak. They didn't say where we were going, but we didn't drive for a very long time, so we thought we were still in Minsk.

Our destination turned out to be a jail, though we still didn't know our exact location. When you looked up you could see the barbed wire. After being forced to stand on our knees for a while, we were put against a wall. In some magical way I ended up next to my boyfriend and we had the opportunity to talk. As a penalty for that, I was forced to do 100 squats and my boyfriend was beaten. After that we were separated to different sides of the fence. We had to stand like that until 6 p.m., when it was court time.

It was difficult to call it a court. We were taken inside the jail, forced to face a wall and wait until the judge called out our name. When I approached the judge she asked, "do you agree with your accusations?" We all asked, "what are the accusations?" At most they would state a paragraph, usually

revolving around participation in unlawful meetings, but for some reason I was accused of organization just because I had created the group chat for my coworkers. Back in the small bus at the beginning they had asked what the name of the chat *Rocket Office* meant. It's the name of our workplace, but they said "no, it is a secret code name for your organization". It was useless to argue with them. When I approached the judge she named the paragraph and asked: "do you agree?" I said no, unless meeting up with your friends counted as organizing an unlawful demonstration. It was known that those who did not agree with their accusation would be brutally beaten in the night so later I said that I agreed.

After court we were returned to the fence where we had to stand until 10 p.m. The guys were forced to lay on the ground. They were cold and asked if they could get up, which was ignored. At some point they were allowed to do push-ups in order to get warm, but many couldn't do it as they were hurt from the treatment in the RUVD. I thought the situation couldn't get any worse. They said we had to wait for our sentence – either 10-15 days in jail or a fine. After a few hours again we were told to go inside and they said everyone had been confined to 72 hours either way, as the court hadn't yet reached a decision.

I was among 40 girls who were put inside a small concrete enclosure with no roof and just a smelly hole in the ground as a toilet. It was, unlucky for us, a very cold day. They told us we had to spend the night there. We weren't allowed any water and we hadn't been fed since we were arrested for the first time. Many girls started to cry. I realized that we had to

come up with something and tried to coordinate the girls to stay calm and work out how to spend the night without freezing. We were trying to place our shoes and jackets on the floor so that everyone could lay down. I was lucky enough to have a jacket, some girls only had shorts and t-shirts.

In the enclosure next to ours were housed 80 guys. At 2 a.m. the guys were forced out into the yard and we could hear their groans and screams while being brutally beaten and insulted by the OMON. At 4 a.m. we could hear them sing the national anthem of Belarus. We later found out that they were forced to do it on their knees either half naked or naked. No one slept – we only thought about getting through the night alive and hoping that the guys were okay. I thought my boyfriend might be in there, but some people had their entire families detained – husbands, brothers, sisters. We later found out that they were not “our guys”, but the people who had been arrested the day before.

In the morning they took all 40 of us to a jail cell that was 4 x 4m in size. It was still better than the concrete room with no roof, in which you thought to yourself that you will die soon. I remained there until I was released. We were let out just one time, because they initially planned to transfer us to another place.

Here, the OMON officers were better. They even asked us if we were hungry, to which we replied that we hadn't eaten since the beginning of the arrest. They gave us six loaves of bread and some hot tea for 40 people to share, and that saved us. In the cell, I drank water for the first time since the arrest, as there was a tap, even though the water was dirty. At around

11:30 a.m. they said we could leave the room and meet the judge. We were made to sign a protocol which stated that we had confessed to our crimes and if we were caught next time we would get 3-7 years jail time. We had no choice but to sign it – it was our only way out. We asked why us girls were being released, and were told that for the past two days The Women in White had been protesting against the violence of the authorities. We were also told about the supposed arrival of [a delegation from] the European Commission who weren't allowed to cross the border. I think they [the EC] weren't allowed in, because they hadn't released everyone from jail yet.

“If you want to leave, then fuck off right now!”

When we were being released we were not given back our personal belongings. When I asked how I would be able to get home without money, phone or house keys – I couldn't even phone a taxi – they said, “if you want to leave, then fuck off right now!” We were told that if we didn't immediately run upon release, they would catch us again and we would then face up to 7 years in prison. We knew it was true, because we had just signed the protocols. We didn't know where to go, it was past midnight and the metro was already closed. But when the gates were opened we were met with applause from thousands of people. I understood then that the people were backing us. I immediately saw my co-workers who had been with us from the beginning, but had managed not to get arrested. Overall, around 30 friends and acquaintances were there for me. Morally, it helped a lot. I was released on Friday night, 14 August. My boyfriend was released seven

hours after me. He was “lucky” as on Friday morning they were taken to the therapeutic labour dispensary where they had been fed and even given books at one point.

NC: When you were in the cell, was there any solidarity among the girls? Did you support each other?

In the cell we were allowed to talk. Many girls, after having to go through the whole night listening to groans and screams had mentally broken down. They couldn't stop crying and others were comforting them. We shared our stories. I thought that I had been arrested for nothing, but then I heard that one girl had been arrested when she was simply walking out of a grocery store with some cheese. They just took her personal belongings and threw her in jail. She was so sweet in her skirt and white shirt. I thought that if they could arrest her, then I was definitely in here for something real. Those stories were just so absurd.

NC: Have you filed a formal complaint?

Yes. My boyfriend also pressed charges for the beatings. We didn't leave it at this. In jail I was told by some girls that a previously arrested girl had created an Instagram account in order for women in the same situation to connect and file a complaint together. But I think I must have got the name wrong, because I couldn't find it. Though, I'm in contact with other girls who were there with me, so we will definitely file a mutual complaint.

NC: So you all keep in touch?

Yes, some of us do. They said there is a Telegram⁵ chat with literally everyone [that was arrested]. But I couldn't access it, because I don't have my phone and I need my passport in order to get a sim card. My boyfriend and I thought about going back and trying to collect our stuff, but then we found out that some guys tried to do that and they were arrested again. Our lawyer said that we should let our parents go instead of us.

NC: What is your boyfriend's perception of what happened? At some point you were in different jails. Have you discussed your different experiences?

Yes. We were both "lucky". Yes, he was beaten but not that harshly and they didn't have those nightly terrors. He was beaten in the RUVD, but so was everyone, and in between changing of avtozaks. We basically have more or less the same experiences and emotions. I was really worried for him because we weren't told anything. He said he had a great time in jail (laughs). He talked to some guys and even managed to find an IT guy for his start-up. He claims that he hasn't had so many adequate people around him for a long time.

NC: What moment was the hardest for you?

From the beginning, I tried to tell the girls around me that everything would be okay, because I myself believed that. But when we ended up in the concrete enclosure and were told to spend the night there while at the same time talking about those 72 hours, I thought that I wouldn't be able to make

5 A messenger application.

it through physically without food, water or sleep. Emotionally, it was that moment when I thought that no, it will not be okay. I couldn't even fathom that things like this happen. The brutality, to sit through the night and listen to the groans and the national anthem ... it was hard.

NC: When you were in the concrete enclosure, were you allowed to leave at all? For bathroom breaks?

The toilet was just that hole in the ground. We weren't brought water, nothing. When we asked what would happen if it started to rain, they just answered, "you will drown". After that they didn't even come back to check on us.

NC: The girls were not beaten at all?

Well, it depended on whose hands you ended up in. When I was in the cell I was told that there was a blonde woman that I should be careful of. There was a girl who had been beaten in the avtozak. She had simply asked the OMON how to find her way home. They brought her to the avtozak where they drew on her face and beat her. Apparently they drew on the supposedly violent ones.

NC: What did they draw?

A star or an anarchy A or something. But they would draw whatever. They drew a plus sign on my boyfriend. On another guy they drew a bicycle. He was the singer in a band and when he told that to the OMON they just laughed and beat him extra hard. They just seemed to be bored, to be honest. That girl I mentioned had been brutally beaten. So my boyfriend and I were lucky.

NC: Did you receive medical assistance? Did they take someone who was feeling bad out of the room?

Before the court there was a paramedic who examined us. There were people who were in bad physical shape, some had their knees bent, but they didn't receive any medical assistance, just brought to the side for a short examination and then they just had to stand up for hours and hours like the rest of us. At one point a girl fainted, but they just told us that there are no doctors.

NC: They didn't allow any doctors in jail?

Some people asked for lawyers, some asked for doctors. They just swore at us, saying "well, you're in the wrong place".

NC: When were you able to speak to a lawyer?

My workplace arranged lawyers for all of us. I saw her for the first time when I got out and I was then able to speak to her. In jail, they allowed one lawyer in and it was for some foreign guy. The rest of us were told, "what lawyers? You don't even have any rights!" We asked a few times but they just laughed in our faces.

NC: As a whole, from a sort of moral perspective, did you gain anything positive from this experience?

I understood a lot of things. First of all that I'm stupid and naive (laughs). I couldn't fathom stuff like this existed. I felt stupid because we had created all those group chats. But on a positive note ... you know, I was raised in a strict way and it actually helped me in jail, meaning that there were no tears or shock; instead I immediately tried to coordinate my

actions and do something useful. I got to know many good people that are probably hard to find otherwise. I understood that I have endurance, that I'll be alright in these situations. Though, morally, I've probably aged 10 years. So yeah, that kind of experience, surviving in tough conditions – I've revealed new qualities about myself that I didn't even know I had.

NC: Have you returned to the demonstrations?

I really wanted to and I planned to go with my family. But I'm currently risking jail time if I get caught again. So my parents told me to stay at home while they went. But really, they haven't broken me down to a point where I wouldn't go to a meeting. I still want change. One of the most popular questions they would ask you in the RUVD was, "You want change? Here!" and then they would beat you. I think that most girls [who were in the cell with me] begged their loved ones not to go out into the streets. But they didn't manage to change my mind. We are definitely not leaving things as they currently are.

NC: Regarding your case. I understood that you have filed a complaint. What are the long term actions from your side?

We found out that we had been sentenced to ten days in jail only after we were released. Before that we didn't know anything, the judge hadn't said anything. We have filed a complaint stating that we don't agree with this sentence. As we understand, they have to send us a formal statement outlining what they believe and so on, but according to the protocol that we were forced to sign, if we are arrested again,

these ten days would be added to a sentence of 3-7 years. I was in for three days this time, so next time it could be seven years and seven days. This means that while they won't take action right now, the days can be added on at any given moment.

NC: And this ordinance, it has no set expiration date, or...?

It seems like that, but once again, we weren't told anything.

NC: And the lawyer doesn't say anything?

According to the lawyer, we should write complaints and see what happens. But yes, she said that if they arrest me again, as of right now, it would be 3-7 years plus seven days. But we're doing everything we can in order to correct this. To be honest, I don't want to be on the register, because I could be forced to leave my university. At least they said so in the RUVD. I called the [university] administration and they told me to await an official statement.

NC: Where do you study?

The Belarusian State Economic University. I've just started my third semester in budgeting. Today [17 August] the rector released a statement, saying that no one would be forced to leave and that there will be moral and financial support for those who suffered. So hopefully I'm still a student.

I believe that people must know what's going on. For me these events were a shock – I had no idea stuff like this could even happen. I would like as many people as possible to know, as well as understand that we are fighting.

NC: In all fairness, the scariest part wasn't the bullets or the grenades, even though many people were hurt by them. That part was expected. But what was happening in the RUVD and in jail, the torture and the humiliation, that's what's terrifying. Many people don't understand. When you speak to Swedes they're like, "but everything is all right over there, isn't it? They are releasing people, right?". And you're like, "well they released 500 people on the first night and when it comes to the other 6500 people we still don't know".

I think that most people were released first and foremost because of the women protesting all across the country; secondly because of the supposed arrival of the European Commission; and lastly because they turned the internet back on and all these videos started to circulate online. They understood that the people wouldn't leave it like that.

NC: There are countries who are starting to give more active support. Lithuania is doing a lot right now. I'm not calling for anything, but if there would be a threat...

If there is no power shift we will definitely apply for political asylum in other countries. We still believe that Tsikhanouskaya will be able to do what she is doing. And that everything will be alright.

The story was originally told to Nadia C. and translated by Margareta Barabash.

MAKSIM, 28: “I WILL KEEP TAKING TO THE STREETS UNTIL WE WIN”

This is the story of 28-year-old Maksim from the city of Gomel who was arrested on the 9th August 2020 after brief participation in a spontaneous protest.

It was around 10 p.m. on 9 August. My friend and I went for a walk and then popped into a bar for a pint. We live in the city of Gomel. We walked towards the Circus and then back towards Lenin Square. A lot of people were on the streets and we saw the OMON already arresting people. Actually, these were probably not even OMON officers, but rather regular police officers dressed as the OMON – as they were not particularly fit and struggled to run without catching a breath. One even had a beer belly and people kept laughing at him.

Around the Circus area, people were lining up on the streets, clapping and shouting, and cars were signaling. We joined in, of course. This was exhilarating, such a memorable experience, an atmosphere of a joint celebration. Everything was peaceful and orderly, even though avtozaks were driving up and down and the fake “OMON” were grabbing people from time to time. Just before we got detained, we were stan-

ding on a corner near the bar. We had managed to escape the OMON three times by then. On the fourth attempt they surrounded us, so we realized we were stuck – we could either try to break the circle or surrender. I am not one to give up easily so I ran again. My friend Dima broke through, two girls also ran. I managed to escape two officers, but the third one blocked me and I fell on the pavement hearing “you are finished” behind me, accompanied by swearing.

They grabbed me, forced my hands behind my back and hit me in the stomach with a truncheon. Everything went black for a moment, but I regained my consciousness quickly, and asked them to stop as I got the message. They softened up a bit and dragged me to the avtozak. A couple more guys were thrown in, including Dima. I joked that he had joined in to support me. Out of four officers in the autozak, three were really aggressive. One kept asking, “what the fuck are you doing here?”, “who is the leader?”, “who paid you?” and so on. I responded that it was our own initiative. Even though they were abusive I tried not to provoke these morons further. Another detained guy – a tall one, with curly hair – asked them why we were detained and got punched in the face. The officer next to me said, “don’t show off and you will be ok”. The avtozak circled around the main streets for a bit, until they transferred us to another vehicle. Personal things such as phones and wallets were taken from us at that point. It was a rather long ride to the RUVD.

I was lucky to have arrived on the 9th as officers treated us decently. Those arrested on the 10th and 11th were severely beaten and held face down for hours, with their hands

behind their backs and their legs restrained. I think that the guards became more violent overtime because people kept taking to the streets. The idea was to instill fear. We were searched and our temperature taken [due to COVID-19]. I ended up in the “green” zone and was taken upstairs to the economic crime unit. While walking up I saw a dozen men and women, of different ages – it looked like the authorities were letting them go without a hearing. This would not be the case for for me.

The officers in the room were laughing and making rude jokes. “Process them as terrorists”, one said. The officer drawing up my protocol made a few grammar mistakes and I pointed them out. He asked me a few questions; I answered them honestly and the records more or less reflected that. They also took my fingerprints. There were a couple more officers there, one young one who must have graduated recently. I could see sympathy in his eyes even though he had chosen to be a part of the system. “How was your night out guys, did you enjoy that pint?” another one asked. They weren’t abusive or threatening so I joined in and joked around with them, making sarcastic comments.

NC: What happened after processing?

They took us to an assembly hall where there were about 25 people, a mix of men and women. We were silent at first, then we started to chat in order to pass the time. We must have been there for five hours or so. Eight guards were watching our group, like we were dangerous criminals. We asked them questions – why were we detained, what happens next? They didn’t give us much information. From time to time

someone was called upstairs to hear what they were accused of – usually “participation in unauthorized activities” or “resisting arrest”. I personally didn’t admit to resisting. After all, they were the ones who had loaded us into the avtozak.

They searched me, took my shoelaces, gave me a mattress and took me to a prison cell. It was a single cell with two beds. Another guy was in there. It turned out that he was on the opposition leader Siarhei Tsikhanouski’s team and was sentenced to five days in prison on some made-up charge. He had health issues with one of his legs. They let him go however; he didn’t stay for the full sentence. I was soon joined by another guy – he hadn’t even participated in any rallies, he was in a sauna with his friends and was trying to catch a taxi when the OMON arrested him.

The conditions in the cell were strange, a bright light was constantly on so you didn’t know whether it was day or night. The food was terrible, but I ate it anyway. They also allowed a food parcel from my family which I shared with my cellmate.

The next day they took us to another detention centre in order to wait for the court hearing. The officers were clearly better educated and quite reasonable over there, so we managed to talk to them. I asked a lieutenant colonel who they were serving; the people of Belarus or Lukashenka. His excuse was a long police career, good salary, nearing retirement and bank loans to pay. There was another one who had ended up in the police force instead of the army. He was sympathetic to us and even showed us some videos of detentions on his phone. The conditions were fine, they brought in another food parcel from my parents and toilet breaks were allowed.

My sentence was read eventually. None of the facts were correct – the time and the place of detention were wrong, plus allegedly I had cursed and resisted. The judge kept asking me why I was out on the street and if it had appeared suspicious that there were so many people outside. I was playing dumb. Overall I was quite calm. I only worried for my mom as I hadn't managed to text her before the transfer, though as it turned out she found out my location herself. Since I didn't confess anything, they sentenced me to 15 days in detention. My friend Dima got seven, and we ended up in the same cell. When we went out for a smoke – the guards would let us do so – a guy wearing a face covering came over and started to ask questions, “Why were you doing this?”, “What didn't you like?”, clearly trying to provoke us. But the guard told him to get lost.

Later, we were transferred to a different detention centre. The young officer who had earlier showed us videos on his phone even wished us good luck.

Upon arrival, they told us to run, with our hands above our heads, and face the wall – like in the movies. Clearly, a military division was running the show here. They put us in a cell, a big one with 50 other people. Oxygen was scarce. While chatting, it turned out one of the group was supposed to get married that weekend. We started cheering and joking that it was quite the bachelor party he had arranged. An officer came and ordered us to calm down.

A lot of detainees in that prison were transferred from the city of Zhlobin. Apparently over there detainees had gotten aggressive and started to throw pavement slabs at the police.

In Gomel things were more quiet. There, they had detained 152 people on the night of the 9th.

NC: How long were you there in total?

6 days out of the 15 that I was sentenced to – they let me go early as there was no more space left in the detention centre. They held us in a basement cell – I was told that this was actually decent conditions. At least we had somewhere to lie down. In other places, they had to sleep standing as there was no space. Also, the mass protests carried on and this probably helped too.

NC: Did they feed you?

Yes, with some delays though. From the 6 a.m. rise, they didn't feed us until midday, and sometimes lunch was combined with dinner. But they did allow food parcels from families so we had lots of food. Fruit, nuts, sweets – a whole feast.

NC: How did you pass the time?

Talking and sharing stories of the detentions. Many hadn't even been participating in any rallies when the OMON arrested them – they were on their way home, going to the grocery store, walking a girl home. There were even funny ones – someone had moonshine in a plastic bottle on him when he got detained and he managed to drink it in the avtozak. He was soon singing songs and inviting others to join in “for the ride”. There was one guy in the cell that didn't even live in Belarus; he was studying in Berlin and had come over to see his parents for the holidays. He got detained while walking with a girl.

NC: Was this your first detention?

Yes. It was cool in a way – experiencing “life”, something you would have only seen in movies or a video game. It becomes part of your history. It’s only cool for a day or two though, then it becomes boring, despite you meeting great people and time passed in conversations. Overall, the guards made it clear that if we didn’t cause trouble we would be ok. They didn’t let us outside for walks at first. As time passed they softened up a bit and would let us out for a smoke sometimes. I smoked a cigarette on my first day and on the last although I am not a smoker.

At one point they called me up for an interview, asked what I had on my phone, why I was out, what I did for a living and so on. I took it that they were going to let me out, so I packed up my things and waited, but they didn’t release me until days later. By next Saturday they let all of us out. On the first day a man had gotten really ill, his face turned blue – it turned out that he was having an epileptic seizure. We started to make noise and rang the bell. The guards came running, shook him up and managed to revive him. He was taken to the hospital and I haven’t seen him since. This was apparently his first seizure, he had no prior health issues. So we nearly had a dead man on day one.

NC: What did you learn from yourself from this experience?

I thought I’d be more scared and intimidated, that the masculine part of me would somehow be lost ... because of this whole repressive system; the uncertainty – waiting and not knowing what will happen. I surprised myself by my lack of fear, staying true to myself, by being daring but not respon-

ding to provocation. I was worried for my mother, how she would take it, but I was not scared for myself. I did feel a rush of adrenaline and anger though, so this probably helped me to display courage.

NC: Do you feel connected to the events of the past few weeks, to the transformation of civil society in Belarus? Do you see yourself playing a part in this?

Yes, absolutely. I signed a paper on being released that I will not participate in rallies under threat of further detention and even criminal charges. Despite all those threats, they let me out on Saturday and on Sunday I was back out on the street with everyone else. Also, I'm more active on social media, sharing news of what is going on, as well as my own opinion. For example, when they started forcing people at state-run companies to go to pro-government rallies, I shared that my parents were forced to go but refused. Any remaining apathy is gone, I can't be indifferent to what is happening. It's not that I was indifferent before, I was angry with the situation, as well as the apathy – my own included. I remember the presidential elections back in 2010, I was 18 back then. Those who are 18 now – I feel this unity with them, this fire inside.

I got angry when I learned about people, women in particular, being beaten and abused, about what was happening in Akrestina⁶. When we were being released, I heard cheering and clapping from the people outside, they were greeting us like heroes. I heard that the people still on the inside were also cheering, making rattling noises with cups and spoons, to the

6 A detention centre, where the most brutal treatment of prisoners during the crackdown occurred.

point where the guards were getting nervous. When I was released, I immediately saw a girl I knew. She ran towards me sobbing, she was so happy to see that I was doing fine. Seeing the women's tears – even though these were tears of joy in this case – is yet another strong trigger for me to take action. All these atrocities, towards women in particular, mean that a point of no return has been reached. All apathy is gone.

NC: Do you believe in victory?

Yes, this is what keeps us going – we need to finish what we've started. Yesterday we even set out driving to Minsk to join the Sunday rally there, but our car broke down on the way. We later learned about all the absurdities that were happening: Lukashenka running around with a gun, the pressure put on teachers, and so on. We need to carry on and I will keep taking to the streets until we win. My parents are supportive as well, only my grandmother believes in the state propaganda. Sadly, it really does work on that one generation.

The story was originally told to Nadia C and translated by Maria Thompson.

STANISLAW, 23: “THEY WERE BEATING US AS WE RAN”

This is the story of 23-year-old Stanislaw from Minsk. He was arrested for carrying medical supplies while walking around in the city.

On 11 August around 11 p.m. my friend, Anastasia, and I were walking around in the city.

Two dark blue tinted minibuses stopped near us and an armed man in a green uniform got out. We asked him if it was safe to keep walking. He answered that it was better to turn around and walk in the opposite direction. We had already turned to walk back when other armed men got off the bus. One of them came up to us and asked Anastasia to show him the content on her phone. At first she refused, but they threatened to detain us. They then asked me to unblock the phone and hand it over, before we were taken onto one of the buses. We did it.

Here, they examined our bags and took all the medical supplies – roller bandage, sanitizer, chlorhexidine. They beat me several times with truncheons. They hit me on the left side of

the head and after that it started to ring in my ears. They also beat me with their fists. Fifteen minutes later they poured white paint inside the bus and asked me to lie in it. I lay in the paint for about five minutes. Then they told me to put my hands behind my back and strapped them.

I continued to lie on the floor of the bus. They cut off the belt of my trousers; they dragged me so hard that they ripped my underwear; they stepped on me and kicked me. My hands swelled up and my fingers became numb.

Near Riga, a shopping centre in Minsk, they took me off the bus and handed me over to armed men with an OMON badge on their uniforms. They put my phone in my backpack and hung it around my neck. I was taken to an avtozak. There was one man already there, lying on the floor. While I was walking they kept beating me with truncheons. Then they poured white paint on my head, and one of the men dragged my head and used it to wipe off the white paint on the truck.

Then I was sent to another avtozak, where there were other people lying on the floor. I was thrown on top of them. All that time they didn't stop beating me. More people were thrown on top of us, we were lying in several layers. I was at the bottom so it was difficult to move or breathe. When the avtozak stopped we were moved to another van. I was told to crawl to the bus on my knees. One of the OMON men grabbed my hair, hit me on the back and threw me into the van. Another OMON man threw me to the front part of the van. He also grabbed me by the hair and cut off a piece of it. When he noticed the white paint he hit me several times with a truncheon.

The van took us to another prison truck which later took us to Akrestina. Every time they moved us to a different truck they would beat us; they also seized our phones. When we arrived at Akrestina we were ordered to get on our knees with our heads down. There were a lot of detained people there already. We stood like that for about three hours; all the time OMON men would beat us with truncheons on our backs and legs. From time to time they would drag one person in front of the rest and just beat him; I was dragged like that at least twice. Then they ordered me to crawl back to the fence and keep standing on my knees with my head down. I had to crawl with my hands strapped behind my back while they kept beating me. When they dragged me up for the last time they stepped on my back and kept beating me with truncheons. I felt like I was fainting, but I didn't ask for help as I realized I wouldn't faint in the position they had left me.

Later they told me and ten other men standing to the left of me to get up and run towards the building. They were beating us as we ran. I started to feel faint again and asked for some ammonia, but they just ignored me. We were told to get undressed and put all our stuff into black bags. I didn't get any bag and was allowed to put my things in my backpack. I asked for ammonia several times but nobody said anything or helped. I was feeling unwell and was doing everything slower than everyone else, which resulted in extra beatings.

After handing in our belongings we were told to go upstairs to the second floor. I fell, I don't remember if I fainted or if it was just out of weakness. I was told to get up and move, otherwise they threatened to beat me. I stood up and walked

upstairs. Before allowing us to enter the cells we were forced to stand facing the wall. I couldn't stand up so I was leaning against the wall, then I fell. They told a man next to me to help me to walk to the cell. They also allowed me to sit down next to the cell while waiting. All the way up to the cell I kept asking for ammonia or any help. I didn't get any.

In the cell the lights were on 24/7. There were 28 people in a cell designed for four people. We got to eat once a day – breakfast.

While this is personally not about me, I did notice that they would discriminate against people who were somehow different. For instance, they would pass insulting remarks and beat people who were overweight or men with long hair.

The story was originally told to Anastacia S and translated by Mary M.

THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT OF SVIATLANA TSIKHANOUSKAYA

Nadzeya Charapan

Over the last 26 years, Aliaksandr Lukashenka has created one of the most resilient authoritarian regimes in the post-Soviet region based on the foregrounding principle of stability, enacted through the social contract and welfare state. With unlimited power and a strong hand over the country, Lukashenka professed himself as a father and the only proprietor of Belarus. Until recently, his stable footing in public and private sectors, as well as “multi-vector foreign policy balancing between the West and Russia, have been central to sustaining anachronistic regime”.⁷ In exchange for loyalty to Lukashenka’s regime, the Belarusians were offered a social contract with sponsored benefits (for example, healthcare and education). As long as the citizens keep themselves away from politics, they are provided for by the benefits of the welfare state. Notwithstanding, his position has been significantly fatigued in the turbulence of 2020, which posed a tangible threat to the regime.

7 Nigel Gould-Davies, ‘Why Belarus must shed itself of Alexander Lukashenko’, *The National Interest*, 7 August 2020.

In this chapter, I will offer an overview of circumstances and mechanisms that led to challenging the overdue status quo of Lukashenka's hegemonic rule, and provide an in-depth look of how the accidental participation of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya has generated a butterfly effect on national and international levels for Belarus.

COVID-19: Deadly Virus for the Social Contract and Welfare State?

The unpredictable tumult of the COVID-19 pandemic and the disastrous mishandling of the virus by Lukashenka have drastically weakened the premise of stability and shattered the idea of a welfare state. When the virus appeared in Belarus, Lukashenka started openly denying that the “corona-psychosis” would harm the country,⁸ advocating bizarre cures like taking a shot of vodka every day, visiting the sauna and driving a tractor.⁹ Besides the absence of counter-pandemic measures, the government had falsified the official statistics of the progression of COVID-19 by publishing significantly reduced numbers. Public outrage over the pandemic has resembled that at the intentional suppression of the Chernobyl disaster and its consequences, which became a “turning point” in the collapse of the Soviet Union.¹⁰ Given the severe consequences of the Chernobyl disaster in Belarus, the state's disregard of the pandemic has encouraged public disquiet.

8 Lukashenka referred to COVID-19 as “corona-psychosis” during a speech.

9 ‘Belarus Dictator Says Vodka Shots, Saunas Combat COVID’, *YouTube*, 25 March 2020.

10 Mark Joseph Stern, ‘Did Chernobyl Cause the Soviet Union To Explode?’, *Slate*, 25 January 2013.

With the increased risk of the virus for the elderly, who traditionally constitute Lukashenka's principal electoral group as direct beneficiaries of the welfare state, the pandemic has demonstrated that the social contract that kept Lukashenka in power for so long is now expiring.

Once the citizens realized that the burden of responsibility for their healthcare would be placed solely on their shoulders, the central premises of the welfare state began to show signs of strain. As a result, a massive mobilization and activism by individuals, businesses and organizations emerged to support medical staff and supply them with personal protective equipment. For example, #Bycovid19 was one of the numerous initiatives launched to provide various types of financial, technical and informational assistance to those fighting the virus.¹¹ While the credibility of state infrastructure has appeared ruined, the role of crowdsourcing platforms and social media (for example, YouTube and Telegram channels) have increased that promoted further civic participation. In response, Lukashenka has systematically persecuted and imprisoned the most popular bloggers, paralyzed the operation of the crowdfunding platforms and placed the channel NEXTA — one of the major sources of information on the protests in Belarus — into a list of extremist media.¹² However, these implementations have led to greater public interest, publicity of the banned resources and silent, peaceful resistance all over the country.

11 Sofie Bedford, 'The COVID-19 Pandemic in Belarus: Wither the Social Contract?', *Baltic Worlds*, 16 June 2020.

12 AFP, 'Belarus Labels Opposition Telegram Channel Nexta "Extremist"', *Barron's*, 20 October 2020.

Perhaps these are the reasons why Lukashenka has found himself faced with a unique out-of-control situation; the general frustration over his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic made his position incredibly vulnerable during the 2020 election rally. In these conditions, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, an accidental candidate with no prior political experience, stepped up to push for democratic change. Interestingly, Tsikhanouskaya's failure to comply with Lukashenka's understanding of a potential political rival was one of the major factors of her success that made her participation in the elections possible. Initially, Tsikhanouskaya's consolidating role was seriously underestimated and overlooked by the state.

The right person at the right place and time

Guided solely by the sentiments of love and dedication to her husband, Svitlana Tsikhanouskaya accidentally joined the election rally. As a woman, a stay-at-home-mom and a school teacher with no prior public experience, she was not treated seriously by the regime. Thus, when Viktor Babaryka, Valery Tsapkala and Siarhei Tsikhanouski, males candidates who posed a real challenge and threat to the regime, were barred from the presidential race, her candidacy was registered by the Central Electoral Committee (CEC) as a token of Lukashenka's goodwill. To create an appearance of election legitimacy, Hanna Kanapatskaya, Andrey Dmitriyev, and Siarhei Cheren were also (s)elected to run for the presidential race.

Paradoxically, what differentiated Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya from other candidates was her unflawed image as a politician and dissociation with the existing political opposition in the conventional sense. As Sofie Bedford has stated, “selective repression, which traditionally targets only those who openly express a desire to change the status quo [of the regime], discourages political activism and has contributed to a negative perception of ‘opposition’ as a specific sub-group of the population known for being useless troublemakers”.¹³ Besides, Tsikhanouskaya’s intention to participate in the presidential election campaign “not for the sake of power, but for the sake of restoring justice”¹⁴ with a purpose to “conduct real, fair elections with the participation of all alternative candidates” resonated explicitly with public sentiments.¹⁵ Furthermore, as a representative of middle-class Belarusian women, as a mother and wife, Tsikhanouskaya sounded more convincing than other candidates with elaborate political programmes.

It is interesting to note that similar consequences led Lukashenka to the presidency during his first election in 1994. As a man of the people, a former chief of a kolkhoz who was distancing himself from the “dirty politics”, Lukashenka developed his early election campaign around

13 Sofie Bedford, “‘The Election Game’: Authoritarian Consolidation Processes in Belarus’, *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, 25/4 (2017), 381–405.

14 “Предвыборная программа кандидата в Президенты Республики Беларусь Светланы Тихановской”. At https://tsikhanouskaya2020.by/moya_programma, accessed October 24, 2020

15 “Предвыборная программа кандидата в Президенты Республики Беларусь Светланы Тихановской”.

the fight against falsification of elections and corruption for the sake of the prosperous future of sovereign Belarus.¹⁶

The accidental emergence of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya in the election campaign and her apolitical agenda to serve as a temporary provider of justice and democracy sounded as the promise of change that Belarusians have been waiting for. As philosophy professor Tatiana Shchyttsova remarked, “it is a very ... essential moment: our struggle for democracy is about the reactualisation ... of the previous efforts ... to establish Belarus as a sovereign democratic state”.¹⁷ Thus, both in 1994 and now in 2020, the historical task of the presidency has been the same but technological, social and economic circumstances differ. In the aftermath of the Soviet collapse and the COVID-19 crisis, the weak position of the current governments contributed favourably to the high public acceptance of Lukashenka in 1994 and Tsikhanouskaya in 2020.

Belarusian awakening from political antagonism

From the beginning, it was obvious that Tsikhanouskaya on her own might not be able to capitalize on the popular support or sustain the increasing pressure from the authorities. However, the first beacons of hope appeared when Maryia Kalesnikava (Babaryka’s campaign manager) and Veranika Tsapkala (Tsapkala’s wife) joined in a coalition and supported Tsikhanouskaya’s election campaign. These three women

16 Снежана Иванец, “Техасский рейнджер” Лукашенко. Секреты политтехнологий – 1994’, *Tut.by*, 23 March 2014.

17 Eva Schwarz, “At the Very Core of the Belarusian Uprising is a Moral Trauma”, *Baltic Worlds*, 1 October 2020.

managed to instill hope for democratic change and awaken the Belarusian people from a long political apathy. On the rebound of COVID-19 activism, civic participation in the 2020 elections was exceptionally high. The massive increase in political participation generated by the coalition was unexpected and featured a substantial challenge to Lukashenka. Given the extremely vulnerable position of the regime on the one hand, and the tangible threat of apolitical awakening during the election campaign on the other, the CEC announced unequivocal electoral victory to Lukashenka with 80.1% of the vote.¹⁸ With an 84% election turnout and strong support of Tsikhanouskaya during the campaign, the presented results clearly demonstrated that votes were stolen and the presidential elections were rigged. This, in turn, provoked a strong immediate reaction with mass protests all over Belarus on 9–12 August 2020. In response, the authorities utilized a vicious crackdown combining mass arrests, police brutality, violence, torture and murder. Over these three days, more than 6,000 people were arrested, 250 injured and five killed.¹⁹ Following the previous crackdown scenarios, riot police specifically targeted the leaders of the demonstrations that used to be coordinated by the political opposition and election rivals of Lukashenka. Consequently, this made the former manifestations extremely vulnerable and easily suppressed by the regime. This time, however, the political opposition kept a significantly low profile and none of the ex-candidates made any call for protests during the first days

18 Stephen G.F. Hall, 'Fatigued Authoritarianism in Belarus?', *E-International Relations*, 4 October 2020.

19 'Три дня, которые потрясли Беларусь. Главное о событиях со дня выборов', *Tut.by*, 12 August 2020.

after the election. Many protesters were brutally beaten by the police and accused of mass protest coordination. This is confirmed by victims, who shared their stories for the project “Let the World Hear”.²⁰

The peaceful demonstrations were not purely leaderless: updated information about the protests all over the country was encrypted and transmitted through the Telegram messaging app (and specifically the channel NEXTA, which was later banned by the authorities). This makes it much harder for the authorities to prevent demonstrations or target specific people when those organizing the protests hide behind encryption.²¹ The extreme brutality and violence performed by the riot police and military personnel resulted in a spiral of activity: as protests lead to repression, in response, repression fuels greater protests. As of the time of writing (27 October 2020), the Belarusian protest has reached its 80th day and shows no sign of fizzling out.

The “butterfly effect” of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya would have gathered full strength if the authorities had not exiled her to Lithuania on 11 August 2020. However, the Lithuanian government has provided Tsikhanouskaya a political platform and are among the first countries to recognize her as the legally elected president of Belarus. This is when Tsikhanouskaya’s transition from housewife to global political leader took off. For two months, she managed to parti-

20 ‘Let the World Hear Project’, *Frivärld: Stockholm Free World Forum*, 19 August 2020.

21 Hall, ‘Fatigued Authoritarianism in Belarus?’, *E-International Relations*, 4 August 2020.

cipate in several meetings with high-ranking officials from the European Union, the USA and Canada, as well as with Secretary-General of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly;²² she has also made an impassioned plea during her address to the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs. What is more important, she actively participates in the solidarity movements of the Belarusian diaspora and conducts online meetings with different people in Belarus.

Currently, it might be too early to evaluate the consequences of the butterfly effect generated by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and her role in the further democratic transformations of Belarus. However, during the past six months she has proven to be an embodiment of strength, dedication and bravery that embraces hope for change and encourages Belarusians to continue forward.

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22 Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's Official Website
<https://tsikhanouskaya2020.by/en/>

**OLGA, 35:
“WE HAVE TO CARRY ON,
THERE IS NO TURNING
BACK NOW”**

This is the story of 35-year-old Olga, an oppositional activist from the city of Grodno. She was detained along with her friends and her boyfriend on 9 August 2020.

MB: Tell us how it all started.

It's a long story. I began to participate in the protest movement during the election campaign, when officially authorized support rallies for Tsikhanouskaya were still taking place. I joined the opposition headquarters. Even back then, the police weren't showing their best side. On 9 August we cast our ballots and headed to the city [Grodno] before the results were announced. Due to my residency permit I was assigned to a polling station in a small town in the Grodno region. We had a pretty clear idea already from the lead-up to the election day that the results would be rigged, and that the only way for people to be heard was to take their voices to the streets. We got together with some friends near the central square of Grodno. The initial plan was to head to the square, but the OMON had sealed it off. In the square itself, people

were being thrown into avtozaks, teenagers and elderly included. Even those who sat at the many open air cafes around the square were taken – they had simply been sitting there dining. Our group was being pushed by the OMON into a street located between the two central squares, Sovetskaya and Lenina. It was impossible to avoid being trapped. So we all ended up in the same street, with the exits sealed off, being pushed around between two OMON divisions on either end.

Another OMON division soon arrived and started to detain people. We heard a woman crying for help; she was with two children, a twelve- and a fourteen-year old; she was holding them close and screaming, “these are kids, are you going to shoot us, attack us?” We joined her and held hands, forming a chain. Other people started to join in. There were those who were in the protest march, but also bystanders who just happened to be nearby or were dining outside – this street is full of restaurants, shops and cafes. The OMON then stepped aside, forming their own chain, watching us from a distance and not moving closer. Ten to fifteen minutes passed and more officers showed up in full riot gear – shields, helmets – and started to head our way. Many people ran, but we thought, “let’s not be cowards”. So instead, my boyfriend and I turned around and walked towards OMON officers, making eye contact – and they stepped aside letting us pass. The two of us were among the last ones to be detained, by higher ranking officers who were coordinating the operation from the back. We were thrown in the last empty cell in the avtozak.

They took us to the RUVD, alongside many other people we knew. We decided to throw a party there, with all the friends

gathered (laughs). This was on 9 August. Not many people were beaten up among those in my cell. It was an outdoor cell in the backyard, 5 x 6 metres, holding 30 or so women. Among us there was a journalist from tut.by²³ and two Polish citizens who barely understood what was going on – they had been grabbed on the street somewhere. One woman had been badly beaten by a female OMON officer. She kept losing consciousness and we tried to revive her. She had marks from beatings and a large edema on her head, a chunk of hair was missing, 5 cm or so. We were given no water; we only had what some people had on them when being detained, so we pooled it all together in the middle of the cell for everyone to use. The cell had no toilet; we were taken to the toilet once an hour, two people at a time were allowed to go – I didn't get a chance to go through the night. But in general, at the RUVD they treated us alright, it seemed like the staff themselves weren't sure what was going on.

Meanwhile, new detainees kept arriving, but there was no space left. In the two-storey building, the cells were designed to hold four people but each now had twelve detainees, and those who didn't fit in were kept outside. In our cell there were 30 girls; the cell next to us was for men, they told us they were 21 in total. Until 2 a.m. we just sat there on the bare concrete floor until the officers brought us mats from their fitness hall. The journalist was taken away around 1 a.m.; she had a yellow “press” vest on. The night got really cold, especially between 4 and 6 a.m.; we clung to each other like tinned sardines and tried to cover us with those mats. I

23 A Belarusian online news portal.

had two extra t-shirts and a jumper in my backpack so I gave them to those in light summerwear. There were even girls in evening gowns, as they had been detained during a birthday celebration at a restaurant. Another girl said that her whole family had been taken into custody, including her husband and a five-year-old boy.

MB: Do you know what happened to the child?

Not until the morning when we found out that the child had been taken to the RUVD, where they got in touch with the grandmother to pass him to her. No answers were given to us whatsoever, including why we were detained. There was a sort of balcony upstairs, where the guards walked back and forth. We tried to ask questions but they would just ignore us. Some cell windows in the building itself were facing towards us so we could hear groans and screams of the men held there. One was having an asthma attack, struggling to breathe in a cell with twelve others and no air circulation. These cells – as I later found out – were 2.5 x 2.5 metres. People kept asking for an ambulance. I am not sure whether it arrived or not, but the screams stopped at some point. At 7 a.m. they took us to draw up the detention reports. The RUVD officers in charge had no clue where and when we got detained, so the reports were identical for everyone. No witness accounts, no signatures, no official stamps. It was borderline comical what the records said. I was detained with my boyfriend yet my report said I was arrested at 10 p.m. while his stated 11 p.m. The RUVD officers were tired and grumpy; they had been working for hours, preparing the cells in anticipation of mass detention. They had been pre-warned

so they had released all those previously detained to make room for us.

MB: What happened after the reports were completed?

They took our phones on the grounds that they would serve as a guarantee that we would pay our fines – even though no fines had yet been issued. They just took what was valuable: phones, watches, etc. We were then taken to a new cell, five girls in a cell made for two. One of the girls was detained about lunchtime on the Election Day, she was an observer and attempted to report a violation. She had noticed that one of the ballot boxes that was supposed to be sealed had been opened, and a stack of extra ballots thrown in. Before she managed to file a violation report, OMON came and arrested her. Ironically, the official to whom she was to address the violation report was the perpetrator himself. She was still there in the cell when they let me go.

The court hearing was scheduled for 10 a.m., however the judges arrived at the RUVD in the afternoon. We were seven people at the hearing, but we heard from the staff that the total number detained on that day was 170 to 220, of whom 30 were female. The hearing was box standard too. Nobody was interested in our version of the events and no witnesses were present. My hearing took three minutes in total. I was ordered to pay a fine of 10 “base salaries”, that’s 70 roubles (equivalent to 100 euros). My boyfriend and others were issued similar or higher fines (10 to 15 base salaries). I heard that in other detention centres fines were even higher, 20 to 25, as the judges were tougher there.

MB: When were you released?

In the evening. Later, when speaking to others who were released before me, I found out that there were people gathered at the gate to greet those who came out, cheering and clapping. At some point the RUVD chief came out and said, "This is a non-approved mass gathering". A couple of OMON vehicles arrived and they arrested about 12 people again, including a friend of mine who had been released just minutes before. He didn't even have time to lace his shoes [they had taken the laces away when they arrested him]. This time he got 10 days in detention and a fine of 30 base salaries.

From 10 August and onwards, the beatings became more severe; first by the OMON during detentions and then in the RUVD, as the officers there were getting fed up with the whole situation and started to take it out on people. All of my friends who got arrested after the 10th came out black and blue. We went to the RUVD the next day to pick up the court papers. That's where we saw some of these people being released, with badly bruised legs. But we don't give up so easily and we even joke about it, shades of blue are in trend this season we say, so blue legs are now cool.

During detention, we had supported each other in every way we could. We sang songs, clapped, shouted "Freedom!" and told political anecdotes. Humour helped us to keep up our spirit and not give in to fear. Some girls were crying so we tried to lift the mood. Some of our boys who were in the other cells told us later that they could hear us singing. This helped everyone to survive that night and the next day. Nobody pleaded for mercy, we were all in this together and

even made friends. So we are thankful to the OMON for this great opportunity to meet people (sarcastically), we now attend protest rallies together as a team. Even those bystanders grabbed from restaurants, with no political motivations whatsoever, are now very motivated and don't miss a single rally.

We continue to joke, attend rallies and form female solidarity chains. In about half an hour there is a rally near the Grodno music hall as well as the tobacco factory, to support the workers who plan to strike. We also deliver water and pick up trash. It was my birthday yesterday, and I celebrated it at a rally. There was a concert of a popular band, Trubetzky – their songs have become protest anthems. We also take part in car rallies – we arrange these via the Telegram app and drive around in a convoy, with flags flying high. Every morning we come to the factories to support striking workers. So everyone is doing their part to keep the protest movement going. We're not scared to get arrested again.

In the Grodno region our coordinated efforts have achieved a breakthrough already. Previously you had to request a permit for a rally and then be allocated a remote location on the outskirts somewhere. Now our regional authorities allow meetings almost anywhere in the city, with no OMON presence. So we can now meet in the main square, with equipment such as stands and microphones supplied by the city authorities. Also, they are now obliged to live stream the rallies on the regional TV channel.

Overall, Grodno region was the first one to engage with the local authorities. There is a joint committee formed with

representation of different political parties and movements for striking factories. We keep speaking to authorities, though it feels like they are just trying to buy time. Our key demands are the resignation of Lukashenka and criminal punishment for those responsible for the beatings and violence against our people. The regional authorities are saying that this is beyond their capacity, even though this isn't true – the people's deputies have the power to impeach the president.

We will continue. There are now many of us, including factory workers, and we're very determined to achieve Lukashenka's impeachment. The authorities are trying to apply pressure and bribe workers. At one point, the city council representatives came to the state-run Grodno tobacco factory and everyone got paid a 500 roubles bonus (equivalent to less than 180 euros) so that they wouldn't support the protests. Yet they are still showing up at the rallies. Tonight at 5 p.m. we will gather to support them and the music hall staff. The drama theatre is also on strike; at some point they raised the red and white opposition flag over the building but it soon got removed. Many shops and cafes display the opposition flag as well. There is an incredible feeling of unity. During the female-only protests, which last for hours with girls standing in chains, our boys brought water, fruit, food, flowers and balloons. We got offered back massages and even sun spray on a hot day. Cars driving by were honking, drivers shouting, "thank you girls!" We've never been so united as a people, I never expected to see this kind of solidarity in my lifetime. It is an incredible feeling and gives us strength to carry on. We are in this together, we will carry on; there is no turning back now.

MB: At the very start of the protest movement, were there any coordinators or did the rallies happen spontaneously?

Everything happened spontaneously. For example, I subscribed to a Telegram channel as did many others from my area of Grodno. We were chatting and discussing ideas, such as whether to organize a car rally, something we now do on a daily basis. There are also three female channels where girls plan peaceful rallies, such as the flower rallies. Sometimes we split into different teams during the day so that we can support several striking factories for example, but we all gather in the main square in the evening. Ideas come from different people, and the chat participants organize themselves into action. There are the car rallies, but bike and motorcycle rallies have also taken place. So there is no main coordinator from whom you expect some sort of direction. We know that the whole country has taken to the streets. So those who organize and those who protest are the same people.

MB: Were you politically active before?

Before the elections I considered myself a member of the Grodno opposition. I took part in various opposition events, the last one was before New Year when legislation on further integration with Russia was about to be adopted. I attended protest rallies and arranged flash mobs. So yes, I have been a part of the opposition movement for a while now, ever since my university days. I am also involved in educational projects with our partner ABF Sweden – we arrange educational events on politics and economics. However, many people who are involved in the protests had little interest in politics until these elections. They now want to be heard, to take an active stand on the issue.

MB: What do you think the future holds?

We will not lose, this is the one thing that I'm certain of. There are too many of us now, there is no turning back. The bridges have been burnt. We don't have any illusions of a rosy future though – that is, that a new person in power will make all the problems magically disappear. There are many uncertainties ahead and issues we are not even aware of. Belarus has large external debts, many factories are losing money or already bankrupt and are only surviving on government aid.

Things will likely get worse in the near future, as the true state of affairs will be revealed. But we are ready to work hard and follow our new future government to revive our country and our factories. Ready to work for the sake of the truth and our country and economy, not for another lush presidential palace to be built. A few of my friends who left Belarus years ago are saying that they will come back when the government changes, to help to restore the economy. I think the next five years will be tough. But we are hoping for a breakthrough and we will work hard for it.

This story was originally told to Margareta Barabash and translated by Maria Thompson.

ALEKSEY, 37: “I HAD TO DRAW A LINE BETWEEN MY DIGNITY AND REALITY”

This is the story of 37-year-old photographer Aleksey from Minsk, who was arrested on 10 August 2020 during a walk around his neighborhood.

The Monday evening walk or how my “journey” began

I left my apartment at 6 p.m. on 10 August to go for a walk. I live in the city centre and have a couple of favorite places. Although I realized by then that they might have been cordoned off with police vans, I wanted to see what the city looked like after the election night. When I reached the hotel “Planet”, a girl approached and warned me that the police were arresting everyone with a white ribbon around their wrist. I said, “Thanks for the warning, but I don’t wear one”, and kept on walking. About 100 metres away I noticed police vans, as well as a group of cyclists. I didn’t think that they would arrest the cyclists. But they did.

I had a bottle of water in one hand. I probably caught their

attention the moment I lifted my hand. I was also wearing a white t-shirt [the colour of the opposition]. Two riot policemen started to follow me. I had nothing to hide, so I slowly went towards my house. I called another friend on purpose to signal that I might get into trouble. The policemen – two young men in masks – asked what I was doing here. I explained that I live nearby and had gone out for a walk. I showed them my passport, the pages with my picture and address. They were almost ready to let me go, but decided to double-check with their senior officer. He said, “Take him here”. I asked them what reasons they had for detaining me. He replied, “We have a lead. You look like someone we are looking for”.

The senior officer looked at me and told the young policemen to take me across the street to another van. I don't remember any names as I was already getting nervous. I knew this wouldn't end well. When we got to the other side of the street, another man in police uniform grabbed me and yelled, “Show us your phone”. Within the next moment I was thrown in a police van and told to keep my head down. At the same time, I got punched in my right flank. The doors closed and I realized that “the journey” had begun.

“They are human beings just like you and me. They just made the choice to stay in the forces”

In a few minutes there were five of us in the van. When I lifted my eyes and noticed a camera, I realized it was for my best to do as they told me. One of my friend's stories helped me. He is an artist and a photographer who works on

documentaries. When he was 26, he made the choice to do military service with the special forces troops. His stories, manner and style of talking reminded me of what I heard while being inside the police van. Back in 2014 when the World Hockey Championship was hosted in Minsk, we were walking by the fan zone on the championship's final day. Once the match was over, members of the special police force were shouting at people to leave the square. I remember how he could confront them with a harsh voice, "Comrade Sergeant, in which military base did you do your service? Let us get some beer and then we'll leave". I wondered back then why he wasn't afraid to approach them like that. He replied, "They are human beings just like you and me. They just made the choice to stay in the forces".

The moment I was thrown inside the police van, I felt like it was their professional rudeness, that they needed that. It is a professional mask, like when you're at McDonald's and asked with a smile, "How may I help you today?". It's the same here, just the other way around.

Twenty minutes later we stopped in a yard. We were transferred to another van, constantly accompanied by the sound of smashing truncheons and instructions to "lie face down!" or "move faster!". I was impressed by how and in which poses we were transported. I didn't know that this was the way things worked.

We were taken to the RUV. There, one by one, we were thrown out of the van and my leg was smashed with a truncheon. Two minutes later I found myself kneeling with my head touching the floor; they were putting us in lines across the wall.

“Finally, an adequate normal guy ... Finally, a normal batch”

I heard constant beating. I realized that the more precise I would follow their commands, the safer my body would be. Not every person was able to get down on their knees easily. Those who refused were brutally beaten. Every transfer to another van was preceded by kneeling. It doesn't require much effort to get someone on their knees. In the very beginning I had to draw a distinguished line between my dignity and the temporary reality. It was like a game where they [the authorities] were dictating the rules. The younger a policeman was, the thinner was their professional “mask” of aggressiveness, the older the thicker the mask was.

We were 50 people with our hands tied behind our backs. We spent at least one hour in that position. My legs started to ache. At this point a story of another friend of mine helped. He told me that once you start feeling pain it's possible to switch your focus to something else. Pain is just a signal to our brain. It worked.

One by one we were taken to an investigator. The situation in itself was chaotic. I was thrown in a room by an officer who then joined the other three officers already sitting in the room. I was ordered to kneel. So, there were four investigators sitting at the tables and me on my knees in the middle. There I understood that they didn't know what to do and how to do it. One of them yelled, “Let's make a conveyor – put tables and get people in here one by one”, interrupted by another policeman who had just come in asking for something, them all disagreeing, getting angry and screa-

ming at each other. I got tired of being on the knees with my head down, so I lifted the upper part of the body, sat on my bottom and asked whether it was ok to do so. It was accepted. Half an hour passed by. While I was sitting there, the rest of the group remained on their knees in the courtyard. It seemed like we were the first batch of detainees for the recently-changed shift of the officers.

I managed to make eye contact with one of the investigators and asked what consequences I would have to face. “Most likely, 15 days of arrest”. They were, for some reason, unable to write down my statement and kept asking for my home address. It was a tragic situation, but at the same time also comical. The captain came in and saw me sitting on the floor stretching my legs. He told me to immediately get back on my knees. He also said, “Finally, an adequate normal guy. Yesterday there were many with tattoos and stuff. Finally, a normal batch”. I don’t know why – maybe they had gotten tired after the day before – but they would only beat those who disobeyed their orders.

I was given my statement to sign. But I didn’t agree with everything that was written there. For example, I hadn’t taken part in a demonstration nor had I been screaming “Long live Belarus”. The investigator said that I could write down that I disagreed. There were at least ten people who were able to read their statement and either agree or disagree. Later when we were in jail I realized that very few of us had been given statements. Most of the group had neither read nor signed anything.

Another flashback about masks. A young officer had to make sure that we “behaved” after our fingerprints had been taken.

We were waiting in a corridor, lined up along the wall. The officer told me to move closer to the wall. I guess I moved too slow, as I got punched in the head. But all these scenes made me think that the young officer was just trying to show off to his supervisor. When I asked to go to the toilet, I got to hear all the ready-made phrases: “You should have used the toilet at home!” ”How old are you?” ”How much did you get paid?” I simply stopped listening. But when he finally took me to the toilet to wash my hands before taking the fingerprints, he whispered to me, “Wait a little, soon you can pee”. I couldn’t relax in order to pee, so he started to turn the water on and off. When I was done, he asked me in a calm normal voice whether it had gone well. He gave me soap to wash my hands before taking fingerprints. As soon as I turned on the water, he went off again with another, much harsher voice “Where do you work? How much did you get paid? Why did you go to the demonstration? What freedoms do you need?” When I looked him in the eyes I could see that it was not him speaking, but his mask. His eyes were saying, “Here is the soap, wash your hands”. Less experienced police officers acted as if they needed to show their supervisors that they could be aggressive. At least, it seemed so to me.

I was taken outside and told again to lay on the ground with my face down and hands behind my back, as well as to spread my legs. I asked whether I could put my jacket on first, as I was in a t-shirt and shorts. It was ok. The officer was screaming and cursing, “Put it on quicker!”, while whispering to me at the same time, “Please, quicker”.

Like Praying I and II

We got our belongings back. I guess it was around 8 p.m. We were still lying in the same position. Around midnight new vans arrived, as well as new riot police. Clamp bands had been put on our wrists before the riot police arrived. They started to guard us and introduced some unreasonable charges; for instance, if someone moved their shoulders they got beaten with truncheons. While lying on the ground I was getting cold, so I came up with the idea to slightly lift my tailbone, count to 60 and put it down again. I recalled an artwork by Wolfgang Tillmans from 1994 – *Like Praying I and II*.

Wolfgang Tillmans explored the word “praying” when used in a religious context as well as in the pose of vulnerability. As described¹ by art critic Emily Browne, “Like Praying I and II are communicating via body language that they are either in a meditative state of praying or a highly anxious state of panic. It really could go either way. The fact that one of them is clothed and the other is completely naked only seems to complicate the message of the work. The title is also a point of confusion. The words ‘like praying’ seem to want to be followed by the words, ‘but different’.”

I kept the picture in my mind and it helped me not to fall into despair.

We lay like this until 4 a.m. Throughout the whole night we could hear grenades and rubber bullets being fired. People kept asking for permission to turn around. Some

1 Browne, Emily. *Like Praying I and II*. Sartle.

were allowed, some weren't. I asked to be taken to the toilet. They were screaming that yesterday's guys had "pissed and shat themselves". I still kept on asking. A policeman asked me whether I was able to take my hands out of the clamp myself – I was – and then without any drama he took me to the toilet. When we had to pass by the other policemen, I was told to keep my head down, but the rest of the time I could walk normally.

At 4 a.m. they suddenly moved us to an assembly hall where we were told to sit on chairs. They took in another batch of newly arrested people. They were severely beaten. We got about five minutes of almost rest while we were told to sit with our heads down to our knees. This changed as soon as a Riot Police Captain came in. Everyone became silent immediately. My head wasn't positioned low enough, so I received a heavy smash on it. I heard noises the whole week after. It was this moment when I finally got afraid.

There was a guy in a yellow t-shirt whom they hadn't managed to arrest on 9 August, but did a day later. They took him to a room next to the assembly hall. It was a total shit show. He was told to unlock his phone. There, they found chats, pictures, videos, and after that – smashes and screams every ten seconds. He was asked who had paid him. The more questions were left without answers, the more violent they became. Another policeman ran into the room and yelled, "Can you hear what's going on next door? Now we will hear what you all have to say, one by one". He [the guy in the yellow t-shirt] was in there for maybe another 15 minutes. Then all of a sudden they took everyone downstairs to the

courtyard. They said they would take us somewhere else. It was 5 a.m.

While we were waiting we could constantly hear people being beaten somewhere. And screams from time to time. They transferred us to another RUVD in a different part of the city. There were 15-20 people in each van that was made for 8 people. The RUVD had a huge sports hall. They said that we would be kept there for the night. Those who disapproved would be taken outside in order to stay in the yard. It wasn't too bad. A wooden floor and lots of space. We were placed on the floor with some space between each other. One policeman said, "Get down, have some rest, raise your hand if you need some water, we have plenty of water, and raise your hand if you need to go to the toilet". That was it.

We were lying on our backs with clams around our wrists. It felt uneasy, with ten big guys walking around keeping an eye on us. They also had a game: if someone's phone rang, they took it, asked for the password and looked through the pictures and videos. They asked for mine as well and thank god the battery had already died.

Expressions of solidarity, creativity and support in Zhodzina²

11 a.m. A head count and the same procedure all over again. One riot police officer per person, heads down, thrown in a van, kneeling down. We were eleven people. Some of them had been in this situation before. They were looking

2 A detention centre.

through the window and kept making guesses where we were heading. “Either to another RUVD, or maybe Akrestina, or Zhodzina – soon we’ll be able to guess”. Later it became clear that we were going to Zhodzina. In the van there were at least 3 “experienced” people. There were also younger guys, about 19 years old, and they were scared. The experienced ones kept saying:

“Don’t worry, guys, Zhodzina is fine. They don’t like us from Minsk there, so we will be beaten.”

“What can we do in order not to be beaten?”

“Simply don’t ask to not be beaten.”

They were either joking or really had the experience. I was pretty calm, I guess, because I didn’t have any expectations or previous experience of imprisonment. I didn’t know about the situation in Akrestina. If I knew, I would have panicked for sure.

On our way to Zhodzina we found out that one of the younger guys had a phone. He was scrolling and deleting messages, pictures and videos. Each one of us was able to send a message to our families to let them know that we were on the way to Zhodzina.

We arrived at Zhodzina at around 5 p.m. Me and another guy were released at 9 p.m. on the next day – the others had to stay longer. Tattoos, flags and coats of arms were, of course, targets for the police. One guy, just like me, lived three minutes away from where he had been arrested. He had been cycling towards a building material store. He said

he wouldn't even try to get his bike back, as he didn't want to deal with the police again.

In Zhodzina there was another nice moment. There was a button inside the cells. Once pushed, it lit up red and made a sound on the outside of the cell. While waiting in the corridor, I heard the sound “bi-bi-bi-bi-bib-bi-bi-bi-bib-le-ve-be-la-rus-le-ve-be-la-rus”. A guard's reaction was “Well, bi-bi there, it's not going to change anything. Let's see what happens when you've given up”. A guy was giving those signals right before his release, and I felt grateful for that. He gave me some hope, especially, after such a night. It really raised our spirits.

Interesting to note that while sitting in the sports hall, the detainees were asked not to keep their head down, but rather to keep straight. After being constantly exposed to humiliating commands including, “Head down, face down, on your knees”, those words get hammered into your head, your inner voice keeps repeating them even in complete silence. After a while you start putting your head down even if you aren't told to do so. However, I tried my best to keep my head straight.

There were twelve of us in the Zhodzina cell – and four beds. To me, after all the other “stations”, Zhodzina felt like a resort. They said it shouldn't be like this: twelve people in one cell was outrageous, a flagrant violation of the legal code. Still, due to the support and solidarity of my cellmates, I felt protected, and some tension dissipated.

The end of my “journey”

A few hours later an officer came into our cell and told us to “head to the exit with all our belongings” – as if we had any. On the way to the exit we passed, one by one, through the office of a major, dressed in a blue uniform.

“Aleksey, you are an educated young man... with a technical background... a sensible young man... Why did you participate in the protests?”

“I didn’t. I live nearby.”

“What do you mean by living nearby? You’ve certainly read everything on the Internet, and seen everything through the windows.”

“Of course I had. What should I have done? Have locked myself indoors?”

“Ok”, he said and gave me a document.

I looked through it. It was a warning with possible consequences if I would ever again participate in unsanctioned protests. Sign here and there, then collect your things and you’re free to go. That’s it. I was surprised that we could have our belongings back. They had been stored in three big rooms, all located in different buildings.

It is a huge jail. It took several minutes to walk from one room to another. We were accompanied by soldiers of the internal military forces, who were quite nice people. I managed to talk to one of them as I was curious what all this had been about, whether we would have another court hearing,

new arrests, fines, and so on. He said that there had been a hearing, that we had received a warning and that we should just consider the whole thing a nightmare.

Outside the Zhodzina prison a lot of people were waiting in hope to find their relatives. I was approached by many who had pictures on their phones wondering, “Have you seen him or her?” – “Sorry, I don’t remember”. There were plenty of people offering help and willing to give me a lift to Minsk. I remember a girl who was all covered in blood and scared of going back to Minsk, as she and her husband had been dragged out of their car and beaten by police. Her husband had been missing since then, presumably taken to Zhodzina.

I was able to charge my phone and call my friends so that they could give me a lift home. We took another guy with us who had been first taken to Akrestina and then moved to Zhodzina. He told us about all the horrible things he had heard of and experienced in Akrestina.

“Dear women: how important it is what you are doing right now”

I don’t think that I have been deeply traumatized by this experience. I used to have the uncomfortable feeling of looking into the eyes of, and passing by, people wearing uniforms – I haven’t felt any new dimension of that emotion or fear. However, I am still worried about the people who were detained and experienced Akrestina.

I now know how the system works on the inside. Experiencing the physical suffering that people might have experien-

ced in 2006, 2010, 2017 on my own body has given me a thorough understanding of the situation.

After being released, I woke up the next day around mid-day. At first I was in shock, wondering what it all had been about and what for. I felt despair and hopelessness. Then I heard noise outside. I opened the window and saw about 40 women with flowers and people clapping hands. It was like a remedy for my soul. I cried and thought, “Dear women: how important it is what you are doing right now”. That is all I have to tell.

The story was originally told to Nadia C and translated by Marina K.

THE REVOLUTION OF CONSISTENCY: WHY THE BELARUSIAN PROTESTS ARE A FAR CRY FROM EUROMAIDAN

Vasil Navumau and Olga Matveieva

The Ukrainian Euromaidan has had a tremendous influence on the dynamics of Belarusian activism between 2014–2020: for some activists it has become hope, a blueprint of decisive actions that led to radical changes of the regime; for others, though, a proof that any revolution demands victims and blood. The latter has been used by the official propaganda as a scarecrow, showing what an ugly and violent process any protest is. The interference of Russia and subsequent events in Crimea and Donbas led many to believe that any attempt of changing the political regime in Belarus could face the same consequences. All these arguments were on the tips of fingers during the heated evening exchange on Facebook between Olga and Vasil during the first day of the protest in Belarus. Olga, who has experienced deep personal transformation as a result of the Euromaidan, believed that to overthrow the regime, protesters should, like in Ukraine,

initiate forceful and fast solutions to the conflict. Vasil, who has recently participated in the collective action himself, was determined that the protests in Belarus have little in common with the Euromaidan and peaceful change with little blood is possible. The subsequent developments in Belarus showed that, paradoxically, both were right: revolution cannot occur without victims, but, at the same time, it can be peaceful. This is the Revolution of Consistency.

On 10 August 2020, Vasil was standing beside the window in his apartment and counting: 5, 15, 25, 50. Fifty buses with darkened windows – the ones used by so-called “tsikhary”,² prison trucks and ambulances³ passed along Surhanova Street and headed towards the shopping mall “Riga”, where citizens gathered in one of the dozen local protests against the election fraud dispersed throughout Minsk. Since the roads were blocked by honking cars,⁴ the buses with riot police crossed into the sidewalks, passing wounded men, who were being treated by the medics. As if this was not enough, just after the buses passed, around 150–200 fully equipped soldiers from the anti-terrorist special unit Almaz with guns and shields ran in the same direction. Vasil was horrified and in disbelief: this all seemed like a scene from an action movie. But it was

2 ‘Tsikhary’ are riot policemen who come to public events in civilian clothes. See Ирина Новик, ‘Кто такие «тихары»? Как сотрудники таможи, прокуратуры, МЧС и Следственного комитета работали на выборах президента и протестах’, 1 September 2020

3 Tsikhary exploited ambulances to reach protesters because ambulances were allowed to pass blocked roads during protests.

4 The protesters used to block the roads with their cars to hinder the police cars from getting to the sites of protests.

all true; military action broke out just near his house, where he was born and has lived his entire life.

A few minutes later he heard the sounds of explosions and screams, and within 15 minutes 50 buses came in the opposite direction heading towards Akrestina.⁵ As it turned out later (the internet was switched off for the whole day across the country), the vehicles were filled with shell-shocked and wounded people who were later beaten and tortured in the prisons. Vasil was speechless. As he was bypassing the shopping mall Riga at about 4 am the next day, he saw the blood on the sidewalk, scorched spots on the road, broken glass, and the remnants of what had been barricades several hours earlier. At that moment neither Vasil nor anyone in the country knew the scope of the violence experienced.

How the Protest Was Born

Between 9 and 11 August, the law-enforcement agencies stunned the country with a spate of violence, arresting, harshly beating, raping and torturing thousands of people in prisons; at least seven protesters were killed or died as a result

⁵ Akrestina is the Centre for the Isolation of Offenders (CIP) on Akrestina Street in Minsk. It is well-known as the centre for brutal torture of protesters.

of torture.⁶ Multiple corroborations of those acts leaked to the media and sparked a massive outcry throughout society. This resulted in a huge wave of mass protests against police violence: the former occurred daily over the course of 85 days [as of October] and attracted tens of thousands of citizens over the whole country.⁷ The protests in Belarus could be seen as a Revolution of Consistency: there is hardly a more fitting term for the description of the determination, solidarity and tenacity expressed in the face of brutal repressions by the Belarusians over almost three months. Despite this, two months later, no attacker has faced legal consequences for their wrongdoings, while, in a cynical turn of events, the protesters faced multiple charges for taking part in or organizing “illegal actions” (many of those were victims of inhuman treatment in prisons).⁸ This is due to the long-existing system of vertical power in Belarus, where the courts just rubber-stamp the decisions of the authorities, while the police are implementing purely punitive functions. The events of August became the point of no return for the Belarusians.

6 During the protests in August–September 2020, at least 1,376 people suffered from the actions of the riot police in Minsk. One in three received moderate injuries and disabilities. More than 600 people were beaten after being detained in police stations and the Akrestina centre. There were at least three incidents of sexual violence; one protester was raped with a juvenile. See ‘Минск избитый. Как силовики калечили протестующих — исследование «Медиазона»’, *Mediazona*, 13 October 2020.

7 Figures as of 31 October 2020.

8 The 1997 law on mass events has been widely criticized as repressive because it violates the constitutional right of Belarusians on free assembly. See ‘Белорусы предлагают изменить закон о массовых мероприятиях’, *Online Brest*, 4 October 2020.

Still, the regime shows no signs of collapse as the closest political elite consists mainly of the “siloviki” group that remains loyal to Lukashenka.⁹ Also, few of the police officers or employees of the law-enforcement agencies resigned, which sparked multiple rumours of extraordinary high salaries.¹⁰ Belarusian activists implemented several projects to try and dislocate the cohesiveness of this block: IT-company PandaDoc introduced the initiative of the re-education of Belarusian police officers with the aim of potential employment within the IT sector;¹¹ IT-activists developed an application to identify the most aggressive police officers during the mass protests (as a rule, they wear masks and a uniform without badges); activists launched a Telegram channel where the personal data of police officers was shared with the general public; and so on. This system of public pressure is meant to force police officers to feel their personal responsibility for the harsh actions and tortures, and to encourage them to resign.

Another meaningful shift, which occurred during the mass protests, was the expansion of horizontal networks and the formation of regional decision-making centres. The activists started organizing local protest actions – lectures on the history of Belarus, concerts and so on. They designed and intro-

9 ‘Siloviki’ – representatives of law enforcement agencies.

10 According to rumours, the salaries of riot police in Belarus were raised during protests. Compared to the average salary (\$450), payments to riot police reached up to \$1000 depending on seniority and rank. ‘СКОЛЬКО ПЛАТЯТ МИЛИЦИИ И ОМОНУ ЗА ЗАДЕРЖАНИЯ НА МИТИНГАХ?’, 10 September 2020.

11 Корреспондент, ‘Белорусская IT-компания переехала в Украину’, 29 September 2020.

duced the flags of the regions, launched chats in Telegram to resolve the vibrant local issues and to coordinate protest actions. Potentially, these smaller-scale structures of civil society, which are not yet institutionalized, could transform into local self-governing bodies.

Vasil, as an expert in contentious politics and protest movements, considered the Revolution of Consistency a process of national coming-of-age. During his academic endeavours, he observed how, within the previous decades, Belarusian society stuck to the social contract; in exchange for relative well-being, citizens gave up on certain freedoms. Hence, the cooperation between the actors has been delimited to specific areas without interfering in the political domain. In this system, the politically charged collective actions either stuck to routine forms linked to the symbolic events,¹² or to some creative forms with limited outreach (“Silent actions”, micro-protests, etc.). The police strictly controlled any attempts of influence and subjected the politicians and activists who tried to violate the status quo to repression. At this moment one can witness the emancipation of the creative powers, until now being colonized by authoritarianism. Current protest actions are not only massive and consistent, but creative as well (which manifests itself in banners, practices and slogans), serving as a symbol for deep transformations society experiences at grassroots level. One of the most

12 For over 30 years the Belarusian political opposition created their own calendar of politically-significant events, celebrated with protest meetings and marches (for example, Freedom’s Day on 25 March when the Belarusian People’s Republic was established in 1918).

remarkable dimensions of the protest is its gender aspect: Minsk has seen hundreds of women take to the streets in demonstrations of solidarity with the protesters. In several areas of the capital, large groups of women – dressed in white – formed long “chains of solidarity”.¹³ Women took a leading role in these protests – and probably the country’s path towards democratic change in general. The latest developments changed the Belarusian society at its core, leading to an unprecedented increase in solidarity. People became more concerned with the crucial processes in social and political development and became more aware of the history of the country.

Still, the protest wave does not seem to be fading, which indicates a stalemate. One of the possible scenarios for potential development could be the protest’s radicalization, which has been pronouncedly peaceful: participants have not tried to attack police or occupy administrative buildings, which has been the highlight of similar “revolutions” in other countries. For example, many observers compare the Belarusian protest to the Ukrainian Euromaidan and try to give advice, proceeding from the Ukrainian case as a benchmark of a successful revolution.¹⁴ Below, we will list some of the traits that are characteristic of the Belarusian protests and compare them with the Ukrainian revolution.

13 Anelise Borges, ‘Women protesters in Belarus: “We can change the country for the better”’, *Euronews*, 14 August 2020.

14 Lisa May, ‘Belarus 2020 and Ukraine 2013-2014 Protests: Similarities and Differences’, *Era Institute*, 13 October 2020; ‘Belarus: Mass protest eclipses defiant Belarus leader’s rally’, *BBC*, 16 August 2020; Андрей Колесников, ‘Революция по-белорусски: почему она не похожа на Майдан и Болотную’, *Forbes*, 14 August 2020.

The Revolution of Consistency and the Euromaidan: Similarities and Differences

The 2020 Belarusian protests are evoking memories of similar events that have taken place in neighbouring countries. At first glance it seems that the revolutionary movement in post-Soviet countries used common narratives, including the Velvet Revolution in former Czechoslovakia (1989), Georgian Rose Revolution (2003–2004), Uzbek Cotton Revolution (2005), Kyrgyz Tulip Revolution (2005) and Melon Revolution (2010), Moldovan Grape Revolution (2009), Russian Snow Revolution (2011), Armenian Electric Yerevan (2015) and Velvet Revolution (2018), Ukrainian Orange Revolution (2004) and the Euromaidan (2014).

The term “Colour Revolutions” refers to the common traits observed in mass pro-democratic protests against authorities that swept multiple countries in the 2000s–2010s.¹⁵ Some scholars use this term to explain the specificity of the 2020 Belarusian protest, sometimes even comparing it to the Ukrainian Euromaidan.¹⁶

The majority of the Ukrainian observers recognize the ambivalent character of the Ukrainian Euromaidan:¹⁷ it used many innovations and creative instruments, and managed to reach

15 Poh Phaik Thien, ‘Explaining the Color Revolutions’, *E-International Relations*, 31 July 2009.

16 Лилия Ржеутская, ‘Протесты в Беларуси и Майдан: в Киеве у многих дежавю, но есть и различия’, *Deutsche Welle*, 11 August 2020.

17 Дмитрий Горевой, ‘Майдан или Арабская весна? На что похожи белорусские протесты’, TRT, 20 August 2020

its goals; however, it was done via violent means.¹⁸ In the beginning, the Euromaidan, much like the 2020 Belarusian protest, was peaceful. It began as a reaction of opposition forces and their supporters to President Yanukovych's refusal to sign an association agreement with the European Union. This was followed by the brutal dispersion of student protests and the shooting of dozens of protesters at the Maidan square (the so-called "Heavenly Hundred").

The brutal measures of the security forces caused a tsunami-like wave of mass discontent and violent clashes and eventually led to Yanukovych's escape from the country. He ended up in the city of Rostov, where he was granted asylum by the Russian authorities. Obviously, the role of the Russian Federation in these crucial events cannot be underestimated. Putin's support for Yanukovych, followed by the annexation of Crimea and support for separatism in Ukraine, led to the war in the Donbas region. So, even though the scale of the protest in Belarus and the violent response from the authorities seem comparable with that of the Euromaidan, the events in Ukraine prove to be additionally complicated by the direct interference of Russia. It is due to this complex situation and associated ambivalence that the Belarusians themselves are reluctant to compare their protest to the Ukrainian one.

18 Olga Onuch and Gwendolyn Sasse, 'The Maidan in Movement: Diversity and the Cycles of Protest', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 68/4 (2016), 556–587.

Similarities between the 2020 Belarusian protests and the 2014 Ukrainian Euromaidan

1. Both presidents – Viktor Yanukovych in Ukraine and Aliaksandr Lukashenka in Belarus – did not enjoy significant popular support during their last months in charge. The people were disappointed with the inefficacy of the public management system and its inability to withstand the contemporary challenges (Lukashenka’s notoriously ignorant response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been condemned by the majority of the population).¹⁹
2. The initial goal and the key idea of the revolution, both in Ukraine and Belarus, was increasing democratization and an openness of the state system; the main instrument for this was an attempted peaceful revolution, built upon the horizontal networks of solidarity.
3. The peaceful nature of protests at their initial stage. In Ukraine, it started as a reaction to Yanukovych’s refusal to sign an association agreement with the EU. In Belarus, it was a reaction to Lukashenka’s refusal to hold fair presidential elections. While in Ukraine the degree of violence has been quite high from both sides during the peak of the conflict, the radicalization of the Belarusian protest is occurring rather slowly.
4. The lack of anti-Russian sentiment in the initial stage of the protests and the increasing dissatisfaction with Russia’s interference later – obviously with a different degree of inten-

19 Ryhor Astapenia, ‘What Belarusians Think About Their Country’s Crisis’, *Chatham House*, 21 October 2020.

sity. EU integration was not perceived by most Ukrainians as a radical refusal to maintain relations with Russia. Rather, it was likely a strategy of approximation for both sides. Moderate anti-Russian sentiment in Belarus began to take shape when the Russian media started supporting Lukashenka's regime and calling the protesters "radicals".

5. The protests in both countries intensified due to the reluctance of public officials to recognize the security forces' brutality.

Differences between the cases

All the features mentioned above primarily relate to the initial stages of both protests. Further developments in both countries make these two cases rather contrasting in terms of political and social dimensions. Here are some key differences between the protests in Ukraine and Belarus:

1. The first important difference is the leadership and power structures involved in the build-up to the protest. In Ukraine, the protests were promptly organized and led by opposition activists who mobilized volunteers and launched various forms of public support. Even before the protest, there were various groups of influence within the political domain in Ukraine which did not allow for centralization of power in the public management system. In Ukraine in 2013, there was a fairly strong, united opposition, which held about 40% of parliamentary seats.

In Belarus, on the contrary, during his one-man rule for over 26 years, Lukashenka built a rigid centralized power system,

making it difficult, if not impossible, for opponents to strive for power or influence the policymaking in the country.²⁰ Any potential leader risked being repressed or co-opted by the state. As a result, in Belarus, the protests were decentralized and leaderless.

2. The structure, organization and localization of protests differed significantly. Behind the seemingly chaotic Ukrainian protests there was substantial organizational work by various actors. Euromaidan was in a specific area: a tent city was pitched at the central square of Independence – *Maidan Nezalezhnosti*. It was the epicentre of the protests where the whole country gathered. In Belarus, there were hardly any influential actors that could lead and orchestrate the protests. As a rule, the specific scenario of protest activity was decided “on the spot”: people self-organized, taking instructions from the Nexta Telegram channel as a vague orienteer.²¹ Also, the waves of protests were spread through multiple cities all over the country. In Minsk, the protests were not localized in the centre, since it was blocked by riot police. Instead, people gathered in city districts where they lived and then marched to the point of assembly.

3. The varying degree of support for the presidents over the regions of the country. Yanukovich, who is originally from the Donetsk region, invested a lot of resources in the devel-

20 The Associated Press, ‘Why Mass Protests in Belarus Are Different From the 2014 Ukrainian Revolution’, *Haaretz*, 23 August 2020.

21 The channel in the messenger Telegram, which has over 2 million subscribers, informing about the most vibrant events in the country and permitting organization of protests.

opment of his home region. Therefore, his compatriots provided him with significant support. Quite on the contrary, Lukashenka did not enjoy overwhelming support in any of the Belarusian regions: due to the events of August 2020 he received disapproval from people all over Belarus, belonging to various social, economic and political strata.²²

4. Certain differences in the ideological narrative of the two protest movements. While Belarusians were mostly preoccupied with the protest sentiments against the current leader, the political agenda of the Euromaidan was more complex. Initially, the key demands behind the Belarusian protests referred to the massive falsifications of the elections; later it focused on the ending of repression against citizens. This relative simplicity allowed to formulate a simple, yet powerful political agenda centered around the resignation of Lukashenka; a political motive universally shared by the whole population. The initial demand of the Euromaidan in Ukraine was European integration; however, the movement itself consisted of various ideologically varying groups, all of which had their own interests. Hence, the resignation of Yanukovych, who refused to sign the EU Association Agreement, was the first step in political transformation of Ukraine, rather than the ultimate goal. Also, initially, the factor of geopolitical orientation has been significantly less relevant for Belarusians,²³ as opposed to Ukrainians, for whom

22 Владимир Дорохов, 'Социолог: 50% плюс 1 голос могли не набрать и Лукашенко, и Тихановская', *Deutsche Welle*, 4 October 2020.

23 Дракохруст, Ю. 'Обвал пророссийских настроений в Беларуси. Почему он произошел?', *Белорусский партизан*, 2020.

Russia has been a negative “other”.²⁴

5. The role of factory workers' strikes was different between the protests. Workers were considered Lukashenka's basic electorate since he had not allowed privatization of factories and large enterprises in the mid-1990s. Hence, the workers received a salary from the state and depended on it. Still, at the initial stage of the protest, they quite actively participated. Although the support for the protest was far from being overwhelming, the strikes shattered the illusion of total support for Lukashenka by the working class. In Ukraine, the factories were privatized in the 1990s by the oligarchs, who had a varying view of the Euromaidan. Thus, strikes as an instrument of political struggle in Ukraine were not popular.

6. The intensity of confrontation in Ukraine was significantly higher compared to Belarus. The collective actions in Belarus were pronouncedly peaceful even after mass arrests and violence by the security forces. This can be explained by the fact that during 26 years in power Lukashenka managed to build a coherent repressive system, all elements of which would remain loyal even amid the collapse of the state system. As a result, the peaceful revolution remains, probably, the best course of action in the current situation: proceeding from rational calculations, the participants realize that any radical action (such as the occupation of administrative buildings as happened in Ukraine) will be brutally repressed with the use of firearms. In Ukraine, the security apparatus has been less

24 Асхад Бзегежев, 'Не Майдан. Почему сравнивать протесты в Украине и Белоруссии некорректно', *Snob*, 19 August 2020.

coherent. That is why the violent confrontation was the more rational choice.²⁵

7. The administrative pressure. Yanukovych was not ready for a protest of such magnitude, hence he did not use any administrative measures, in particular through the national media. Lukashenka used all the levers of influence, pressure and repression, starting with blocking the Internet and depriving the media of access to fair information and data. Due to this, the “margin of safety” of the security forces turned out to be different in both cases. In Ukraine, the security forces quickly sided with the people’s militia. In Belarus, rewards to the police helped Lukashenka to keep the police under complete control.

8. The social contract. Due to decades of political and social transformations, a weak Ukrainian state has eradicated citizens’ fear of the authorities and developed a habit of relying on themselves. In Belarus, the state gave certain economic benefits in exchange for obedience. This led to the Belarusians getting used to cooperating with the current regime and being patient with the violations of their freedoms.²⁶

9. The potential interference of Moscow. The Belarusian protesters were well aware of the potential dangers of simulating the Ukrainian Euromaidan in a Belarusian context: the possibility that Russia could extend military help was always somewhat tacitly expected. Therefore, the protests have been

25 Ibid.

26 Пётр Погожельский, ‘События в Беларуси и Майдан в Украине: можно ли их сравнить?’, *БЕЛСАТ*, 11 August 2020.

peaceful even when harshly repressed and not portrayed as a Coloured Revolution supported by Western countries. Apparently, Lukashenka tried to convince Putin to support him, but this has not worked.

Hence, the pronounced reluctance of protesters to express some geopolitical preferences was rather a strategic choice: the main grievances of the protesters revolved around the absence of civil rights, the harsh beatings and tortures, as well as the massive falsifications during the elections. Russia has not been recognized as the main adversary in Belarus, not least because many Belarusians remain positive towards their Eastern neighbour.

Furthermore, the political opposition and the “old-school” leaders had little-no influence over the organization of protests, as opposed to Ukraine, where the voice of the revolution was amplified and supported by various political camps. On the contrary, in Belarus, it was a pure voice of the people.

How both cases influence the personal transformation

Seven years ago, Olga, a citizen of Ukraine, public official and a scholar, was anxiously following the events happening in Kyiv and reflecting on how they could influence her everyday life in her native Dnipropetrovsk region. This region has historically been geopolitically polarized: one part of it sought for self-identification since the country’s declaration of independence; the other has longed for Russia, being intricately linked to it due to the tightly integrated economy. Between 1991 and 2013, the ties were so close that they determined

the economic structure of the region and strongly influenced the civic mentality and orientation of the citizens: in their activities, they rather aspired to Moscow than to Kyiv. It should come as no surprise that during those years, Olga studied international relations focusing on global problems emerging in the relations between Russia and post-Soviet countries, such as Ukraine and Belarus. This focus was dominant in her early research and practical activity.

Obviously, the Kremlin's policy for restoring its influence in the territories of post-Soviet countries has had significant consequences for Ukraine, leading to pro-Russian president Yanukovich winning the presidential elections, pro-Russian politicians and oligarchs enjoying certain support in various regions, media channels supported by Russia broadcasting all over the country, and economic incentives and preferences being allocated for certain policies. People of the Central, Southern and Eastern parts of Ukraine were mainly oriented towards the pro-Russian vector of development. Being an average citizen of the Dnipropetrovsk region, Olga had deep connections to Russia, hence she was shocked by the radical political changes occurring in Ukraine in 2014 and the country's deepening conflict with Russia. It took time for her to reconceptualize her own system of values which would fit awakening Ukraine. On one hand, it was painful to lose contact with Russia. On the other, she strived to feel the emerging vibes of new Ukraine and stay on the same page with activists, policymakers and scientists. During the initial stages of the conflict she was split in her sympathies: she did not treat the radical actions of the protesters as a panacea, but in a short-term perspective, it was an efficient tool for immediate transformations.

In some respects, the reluctance of Belarusians to voice the anti-Russian sentiments made the situation in Ukraine similar to the Belarusian one. In this regard, the Euromaidan showed all the faults and weaknesses of the Ukrainian public administration system – the lack of stability, its dependence, economic weakness and the high level of paternalistic sentiments of citizens. The economic downfall after the Euromaidan proved to be a painful shock. The change in the strategic vector of the country – orientation on the integration with the EU – meant a rupture of relations with the Russian Federation.

The decline in production, the rising unemployment, the reduction of the tax revenues and the mass impoverishment of the population were consequences of the rift. These rough times pushed Olga to leave the “comfort zone” in her profession. During these events she understood the most important thing – staying in such a “umbrella” environment, provided by Russia for a long time, could lead to stagnation due to discouraging entrepreneurship and innovation.

Still, in addition to the losses, Ukraine got particularly important gains during this period. It reduced the degree of paternalism and focused on increasing the competitiveness of business and managerial initiatives, increased the role of innovation and intensity of knowledge, focused on universalized requirements of the global market, started paying attention to the added values, and reoriented itself to the development of the services sector.

The social and political sphere has undergone even more tangible changes. “Nationalization” of economic, political and

social relations gave a powerful impetus to the rebuilding of statehood and national revival. The restoration of the mass popularity of Ukrainian symbols, such as language and traditions, led to the revival of culture.

It has significantly affected Olga's sense of national belonging. Many Ukrainians have experienced the same: from a blurred understanding of their role in society they have come to a clear system of values. As a bonus, they have received independent institutions of volunteering, social partnership and civic activism. Olga realized the need to get involved in the process of nation-building and statehood by rethinking her civic role. This is where her civic activity began. Olga's civic organization embraced initiatives and people who are willing to contribute to these processes of social transformation. However, and most importantly, Olga came to the conclusion that building society, based on networks of solidarity, could be more important, tangible and rewarding than immediate transformations via direct action. Although in Ukraine that was probably the only possible option, the Belarusian case shows that this path will often not allow the transformations to be sustainable, especially amid the lack of instruments for conflict resolution between society and state.

Conclusion

Irrespective of its result and whether or not the result leads to actual political change, the Revolution of Consistency and the cooperation between Belarusian and Ukrainian colleagues (Olga and Vasil) during this period has taught the co-authors several important things.

Firstly, determination, consistency and solidarity can lead to deep shifts in national self-identification: after the recent protests, it is not possible to imagine that Belarusians will someday succumb to the authoritarian regime again. The last few months has changed the nation to its core: Belarusians will not be silent in the face of violence and injustice again.

Secondly, both Belarusians and Ukrainians should build bridges and seek peaceful solutions to conflict wherever possible. At the same time, they cannot stay silent when human rights and freedoms are violated in neighbouring countries. The case of Belarus shows that in situations when support from other states is weak, the result will be many civilian casualties.

Thirdly, as the Ukrainian experience testifies, not only the immediate result of transformations is important, but also long-term ramifications. Here one should choose the instruments that will allow for softer and smoother transformations both in social and political spheres. Revolution is always a heavy stress for society while radically transforming the established system (public administration, economy, social protection and public services). One needs to find the source of qualitative systemic transformations – the potential points of growth. As new social needs are emerging, they require new civic responses and reflections and it is here where renewed, non-revolutionary consistency will be useful.

However, more important than actual political and economic change is that, tired from injustice and violence, the Belarusians are prepared to stand for their right to be free.

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PAVEL, 22 WAS SENTENCED WITHOUT A TRIAL

This is the story of 22-year-old Pavel from Minsk. When the Belarusian authorities shut down the Internet in the entire country, Pavel and his friends went outside simply to understand what was going on. They were arrested immediately.

On that day [the day of the arrest] my friends and I decided to go outside, out of curiosity, simply to see what was going on, as the Internet was shut down and we had no information at all. When we reached the Belarusbank building at Dzerzhinskogo Street, a yellow minibus appeared. OMON representatives jumped out of it and started running at us. I tried to escape to the right of the bank, but there was a fence so I had to go back. It was too late. They grabbed me and dragged into the vehicle. My glasses fell on the ground so I drew attention to them, but the officer cursed at me in return, saying, “I don’t give a fuck” (this was their favorite expression, by the way; they said it all the time) and hit me in the stomach. The glasses were left somewhere on the ground. They threw me on the floor of the bus, walked over me a

couple of times while I was still lying on the floor and rudely asked for my phone.

They brought us to the Moskovsky district police department and dragged everyone out of the bus up to the assembly hall on the 3rd or 4th floor. While walking, the officers were holding our arms twisted upwards and commanded us to keep our faces down. It was hard to walk like that and I wasn't very good at it, so they kicked and hit me in order to make me walk faster. We were told to lie down on the floor. A police officer approached each of us, asking where and why we had been detained. I told him that I had simply taken a walk outside. He asked me why I went outside today, as I should have stayed at home instead.

They made us sit on chairs while holding our handcuffed hands to the front of us. We had to make sure that our heads were kept as low as possible, otherwise we would be beaten. I don't remember if I was beaten there, but I heard how they were striking hard down on those who were "misbehaving".

We sat like this for quite a long time – until we were all registered and our data had been processed. Then they took us to the inspection department. There, they took all our personal belongings. A police officer tore my belt and took off my shoelaces. After that they took everyone to the first floor where we had to sit "on our knees, heads down, hands behind our heads, knees crossed" for another hour or so. This position is very uncomfortable, reminding me of the shape of a bridge. They were filming us in this position and probably taking photos as well. Luckily, one officer saw that I had started to shake and realized that I was unwell, so he took me to the

toilet and allowed me to use it, as well as to wash my hands and face. When we returned, we were allowed to sit in a normal position. At this point, some people were taken to cells. They dragged the rest of us back to the assembly hall and we remained seated in chairs again, making sure that we kept our heads down.

All in all, we spent around 6 hours there waiting for the protocols, most probably from 3 a.m. to 9 a.m., though I cannot confirm since we didn't have our watches. Around 9 a.m. they read out our charges. I heard that one guy was accused of holding a grenade. He had clearly been severely tortured, his body was covered in bruises. I was afraid that they would torture me like that, but they didn't touch me. As I understood it, for a mere conduct of disorder, they issued administrative fines and immediately released people by making them sign agreements not to participate in the protests.

While people were being released and given their belongings, someone either stole or accidentally took the wrong phone – this seemed to knock down all their work, because they stopped reading the charges and were actively swearing. As a result, they changed their method of work: some people were given their personal belongings and protocols for signing, and some were simply taken to the cells. I guess it was around 11 a.m. or midday when a police officer took me as part of a group to a cell. An investigator asked the officer if he had familiarized us with the case materials. He replied that he had, but in fact I never even saw my charges. There were 15 of us in an airtight cell and we were given only one litre of water. Apparently this was their sense of humour, because

in the neighbouring cell where there were eight people, they were given three litres.

We waited and thought that we would be taken immediately to court. But in the end, two hours later, avtozaks arrived and the officers threw us in. I was unlucky and forced to ride in an avtozak with cruel and ideological riot police officers who enjoyed making fun of people in brutal ways. They shoved about 27 people into the avtozak. On the way, they kept telling us that we will remember this for a long time and threatened that we would be severely beaten. They made sure that we sat in an uncomfortable position with our heads down and our hands behind our heads. Sometimes they would warn you before they beat you; sometimes they would beat you without a warning. There was a command to raise our head if we wanted to speak to someone. They made us sing the anthem of Belarus; those who sang poorly were beaten. It happened several times, they beat us alternately. They kept saying, “Well, now what? Did you get your changes?”¹.

After two hours, we arrived at Zhodzina. It was very uncomfortable remaining in this position for such a long time, because my legs got very numb. If you complained, they would beat you even more. Some of the group were allowed to change positions, but they disliked me and did not allow me anything, because they thought I was “too much of a greyhound”, in their words. In general, they enjoyed beating those who reacted. At one point I was able to change my

1 A reference to Viktor Tsoy’s song *Peremen*, meaning Change, from the 1980s, that became a protest anthem in the post-Soviet world.

position since the officer who was at the back of the avtozak wasn't very observant, which made it possible to secretly change the position of my legs.

They severely beat a man with long hair as well as those who had any visible tattoos, and journalists – Russian journalists were detained among us. They kept asking for people's salaries and when they heard the reply, they would say, "So what are you not happy about?" It was better to answer, because if you stayed silent, they would beat you even harder. They seemed to enjoy beating people with truncheons as well as kicking them.

They beat me when I requested something. There was a dialogue when they asked whom I voted for and I replied that, "I voted for Dmitriev²". He, in turn, replied that, "all your Dmitrievs and Tsikhanouskys want to sell everything and privatize the country". I said, "Lukashenka also has privatization in the program". He replied angrily, "We are not talking about politics right now, look what you did to the city." This phrase, "look what you did to the city", seemed to be their argument. One man said, "So what to do? Sit at home and do nothing?", to which they replied, "Yes, you have to stay at home and not go out at all!"

Upon arrival, they laid us on the prison ground with our faces down and made us wait for the staff to come and give orders for distribution. Afterwards, we were transferred to a cell. There were about 20 people in a regular prison cell with stone walls. From that moment on, we were at least treated

2 One of the oppositional candidates in the presidential elections

normally and not beaten. Prison staff even brought us water upon request. In this cell I spent the remaining two and a half days of my arrest.

People were taken in and out. The cell was constantly overcrowded. At most, there were 37 people in the cell, which was designed for five people. The biggest problem was to find a place to sleep. We laid out the mattresses on the floor, someone slept on a bench and someone on the table.

We were given food on a daily basis. There weren't enough cups for everyone though. One person had a broken leg so they gave him an anesthetic pill. The group of people in the cell had all been accidentally caught, just like me, so there was no strict hierarchy in the cell. There was an atmosphere of solidarity and we supported each other as much as we could. But the absence of any information was very depressing because we were not allowed to request a phone call. They explained that we were being held until the "circumstances were clarified". We were eventually released after 72 hours had passed, plus the additional 12 hours of delay. We weren't charged and released on a written agreement not to participate in the protests.

HC: So you're saying there was no court?

There was no court. The charges were drawn up in the police department and they never showed it to me. Some people saw their charges, but refused to sign them. We were released on the morning of Friday 14 August.

HC: Were you beaten in Zhodzina as they were releasing you?

No, they didn't beat us at the moment of release. When we went to collect our stuff, everything was scattered and mixed: phones, money, watches... everything. I was lucky because my belongings were in my bag. But there were people who could not get anything back at all. We were met by volunteers and I am very grateful to them for that.

HC: How did you get home?

My parents met me. Apparently they had been waiting for me outside of the prison gates because my friends had contacted the local police department and were able to find out that I had been taken to Zhodzina.

HC: What lesson did you learn from this awful experience? Did you learn something new about yourself or about other people?

To be honest, not all officers were cruel, I'd rather say most of them were understanding. I was rather unlucky, because I was caught by brutal riot police officers. Well, again, I really liked the atmosphere of solidarity in the cell, because there were people with different opinions; there was even a person who had voted for Lukashenka and remained unconvinced. When imprisoned, I saw people united by a common problem and when I was released, I was amazed to see even more solidarity and positive social changes, and it was very encouraging.

In connection with these events, solidarity has become a trademark for the Belarusian society. People were outraged by the unprovoked violence. They gathered together, began to organize strikes and express their protest against the violence.

I took photos of my bruises and I want to punish those who mocked me. When recording and registering the evidence of beatings, the doctor expressed their solidarity by shaking my hand. The investigator accepted my testimony. I know that the forensic experts worked even on weekends to be able to serve as many people as possible. It inspires me a lot and gives me hope that our civil society is developing.

HC: As far as I understand this was your first experience of detention. Do you think it will change anything? Do you feel your contribution and involvement?

Yes, it was my first experience of detention and I hope to never be detained in the future. Speaking about change, I think that society has changed in the sense that we are ready to rebuff this regime and it will no longer be the same as it was in previous elections. Our people have always been apolitical and did nothing to change things. As far as I know, in Hrodna [a city in Belarus] they've already managed to make the authorities release those who were imprisoned during protests, including the journalists. In Barysau and many other cities, the authorities had to publicly apologize as well as open cases against cruel officers. I think that we can really achieve something. People have stopped being afraid to file complaints and tell the truth. This is a truly new type of relationship between the society and law enforcement agencies, including the authorities and the state apparatus. The people have expressed their opinion and now the authorities have to deal with it.

The story was originally told in Russian to Hope C. and translated by Maryana Smith.

**ANASTASIYA, 33:
“WE HAD TO TAKE OFF ALL
OUR CLOTHES, INCLUDING
UNDERWEAR”**

This is the story of 33-year-old Anastasiya from Minsk who was arrested along with her husband on 12 August 2020.

I was arrested at 1 a.m. on 12 August, and released at 6 p.m. on 13 August. We had been walking in the Minsk city areas of Kuntsevchina and Kamennaya Gorka. There were no demonstrations while we were there.

We got a lift in a car. There were two guys in the car – one of them used to be a doctor, the other one was a driver – and they said they were volunteers helping people. We got stopped by the police. They checked our IDs and let us go, urging us not to drive around much during these turbulent days. At the crossroads, close to our house, we saw the OMON. Many people were lying face-down on the ground. This part of the city had been quiet that day with no demonstrations. I thought that someone had gotten sick – it never even crossed my mind that people had been arrested. I asked the ex-doctor

whether we should help. People were lying on the ground, you know.

He slowed the car down and asked through the window if they needed help. A policeman who was detaining someone screamed something at us and got quickly into a van. They had already taken notice of us. Later I realized that it was that policeman who had warned his colleagues. I was naive. We had bottled water in the car – it was a sign for them that we were “dangerous” and might have helped the protestors.

A stun grenade was thrown at our car. Explosion, disorientation, and moments later a riot policeman screaming at us, “Get out of the car, and lie face down on the ground”. We all got out and laid on the ground. Soon afterwards I was lifted up on my feet with my face against the car. They asked the men in our car where they were from, what they had been doing, where they worked. They had some check marks: if doctors – arrest immediately; water and medical supplies found in a car – arrest immediately. No one believed us when we told them that we were heading home. They checked my phone, found some videos that had been taken many days earlier and for some reason they didn’t like them. “Our clients”, they said.

The men were beaten. I heard the police screaming, “You, doctors, scumbags, are helping the wrong people”. I asked them not to harm my husband – he isn’t a doctor. But no one listened. The people laying on the ground were told to crawl to the lawn. They were pushed into a police van, already containing a lot of people, most of them lying on the floor, like layers on top of each other. They continued beating those

lying on top. After a short ride, the van stopped at a crossroads where many more people had already been laid on the ground. They took us out of the van. Within a few minutes maybe six policemen approached me asking the same questions over and over, for instance who we were, where we were going and so on. I realized, after 12 p.m. that they were arresting everyone they could see. Half of the detainees were those who were on their way home from a store, had gone outside for a smoke, stepped out of a taxi. There were plenty of such stories.

They put us in another van with two cells and a net. I was put in one of them. My purse was left in the car. They took our phones. I was then taken out of the cell, and ordered to kneel and face the net. I had to stand like this all the way to the Akrestina Detention Centre, which we found out later, as we had no idea where we were heading. To be honest, the first 15 hours before the trial I was afraid they were going to take us outside of the city, kill us and then bury us somewhere. I felt like it was total anarchy – the authorities had all the power and no justice to follow.

In the Akrestina Detention Centre I lost the guys. I was taken to a room, where around 20 women were already standing with their faces towards the wall. Both prison employees and riot policemen were there. The latter were screaming, giving orders and humiliating the detainees in every possible way. An employee asked if there were any underage or international citizens among us. These were released immediately. However, I heard they had kept some 16-year-old boys in custody, though I didn't see it myself. We were given some

black trash bags for us to put our valuables in, such as jewelry, wallets and phones. I had my husband's wallet with credit cards, a ring, a necklace with a little cross, a bracelet I was gifted by my parents, keys. Then we were taken to a separate room, two girls at a time, to be searched by female police officers. We had to take off all our clothes, including underwear. When it was over, we were allowed to dress. And then they started to put us in cells.

I remember one girl there who said something to a riot policeman. In return, she got severely beaten. While beating her, he was screaming, "You junkie, you slut!"

We ended up in a disciplinary cell, outdoors. There were 29 of us there. All of us must have been arrested on the same night. It's hard to explain what the disciplinary cell looked like. Imagine an outdoor space, 4 x 5 m, no roof, made of concrete, with only one sewage hatch, which we used as a toilet, and a net above our heads through which we could see a part of the building with a balcony for the guards and the sky. Many were cold, especially those in dresses, shorts and t-shirts, as many people were arrested on their way from a shop.

We didn't know where we were. I asked one of the officers while being searched, so I knew we were at an OIS (Offenders' Isolation Centre). But which one? We were trying to guess, as well as wondering what was going to happen to us. One woman among us, a lawyer, said that those who had been detained on 8 and 9 August got fines and were released 2 days later. I was less optimistic as everything resembled total anarchy. It felt like we had been kidnapped and detained by some gangsters.

Our disciplinary cell was next to a male one, and we could hear how badly they were beaten and tortured. The only thing we could hear that night was the sounds of beatings and the screams of those held inside. I was very worried for my husband. Every scream made my heart scream as well. There were two other girls who had been arrested along with their husbands. It was as if they were slowly being killed. The beatings continued all night. In the morning we heard other sounds from behind the wall. We were totally disoriented. “11 a.m. Shame, shame”. When we heard “Shame” we got even more scared that our men would be beaten even more brutally. The riot policemen didn’t let the male detainees use the toilet, and each time someone there was disobedience they got furious.

We didn’t get any water in the first 15 hours. We didn’t try to argue. From about 3 p.m. they started calling us to our court hearings. They had lists with names. The hearings were in the same building, one floor up. Men and women were lined up facing the wall and waiting for their turn. A small room with two judges and two secretaries. They didn’t wear masks. Didn’t even cover their faces. They read my rights out loud, but the right to counsel wasn’t mentioned. I was asked whether I had trust in the court. I said that I didn’t.

– Why?

– I don’t believe in your impartiality.

– What Article in the Legal Code is it?

– How should I know?

In the court papers I read afterwards it said that I had trust in the court.

– Do you have any eyewitnesses?

– Yes, my husband. You may call him, he might be in the building.

The court statement with accusations was read to me. The statement was based on a witness statement given by someone named Zhukouski. As I later found out, he is a district police officer. According to the statement, he had arrested me in a district far away from where he worked, and far from where I had been that day. I was arrested as if I had been participating in a protest, as if I had been screaming, “Stop the cockroach! Long live Belarus! Freedom to Tsikhanousky!”. In short, as if I had been taking part in an illegal meeting. She [the judge] asked me whether I knew the witness – I had no idea who he was – as if it would have made any difference.

I didn't accept the charges, which was noted in the court statement. I was then charged with an 11-day administrative detention. When I asked why for so long they didn't answer. I wasn't given anything to sign. I managed to look through the window. It was daytime. Many people were kneeling with their faces towards the wall, being severely beaten by the police.

In the court we got water for the first time since our arrest. We asked for it for the first time – we had been afraid to ask policemen before. Then I was taken back to the disciplinary cell. One girl there was on her period, her clothes were cove-

red in blood. I gave her my face mask. At least something to help. Another girl had a broken knee. We asked at least four times to call an ambulance. Only when the court hearing started was she taken away, hopefully, to a hospital. Another girl had been beaten so severely that she couldn't stand – her hip muscle was injured really bad. She was taken away. Hopefully, they got medical attention, as I don't know what happened to them. I haven't seen them since.

Then we were divided into two groups to be taken to the cells on a different floor. Many were severely beaten by a blonde female supervisor. She was violent, randomly choosing girls to smash with a truncheon. She would kick every girl who entered the cell. About 13 of us were crammed inside a cell meant for four people – there were already about 25 girls in there, so at least 36 people were in the one cell. At least we could sit. We had already been standing up for 15 hours in the concrete room. The girls who had been taken there before us shared some bread with us – it was the only food they got. They also made some space for us to sleep.

There was one little window, but it was shut. We were suffocating. I later read about a torture method called “the sauna” – that's what it was like in there. There was a sink and toilet. We undressed to keep just underwear on, wet our clothes and hair in a sink so as to not be affected by the heat. I lied down under the bed where three of us could sleep. Between 2 a.m. and 4 a.m. we could hear how the men were taken from their cell to give statements. We could hear how their last names were called, they took out three at a time, all while systematically being beaten. They were asked about their jobs. I guess

they had a system in order to decide who would be released first and who would be detained for longer. The girl who had been severely beaten was marked with red paint. A few girls never came back to the cell. I hope they were released. I guess it was already the morning of 13 August.

The shift changed, and there was one woman who gave us toilet paper and garbage bags. We asked her to not shut the door in hope for some fresh air to breathe. There was a moment when we could step outside the cell to get some air. One girl who had been very badly beaten and thus couldn't walk was carried outside on a blanket for some minutes to breathe, and then taken back. No one called an ambulance.

We were regularly questioned. Some of the investigators were quite neutral and told us not to worry, and that everyone would be released soon. Close to 4 p.m. three of us were called out. Then we had to wait quite a while when they were trying to find some of the guys. They mixed up our patronyms and last names. I asked them to look for my belongings – the keys to our apartment were there. Of course, we didn't get anything back. Some people are still trying to get their stuff back.

We were given some papers to sign. Before being released I had been forced to sign papers with a warning that if I would be detained by the police once more in an attempt to organize or take part in an unsanctioned meeting or demonstration I would face legal charges.

It was about 6 p.m. on 13 August when we were released. On our way out we passed by the courtyard and they told

us to line up. Three girls and around 10 guys were called up. Others had to step back and get undressed – trousers and underwear down to the knees. They got beaten. Then they told us to get dressed, and run towards the exit gate where there were already at least 100 people. We were still guarded by riot police who were beating randomly picked people in the crowd. Humiliating, threatening, asking whether they would protest again, whether we had a bad life before and so on. We were released in groups of six people. At that point we didn't realize that we would be out soon – we thought it was just a transit to another torture chamber. They screamed at us to run towards the park. Many were disoriented and took off in different directions. When I got out, I looked around to see whether my husband was there. The only thing I heard was, “Go over there, there is water and tea”. I went up to one of the volunteers and asked about my husband. “It was impossible to get all the names today, as most of those released ran away as soon as they were out. When volunteers, most of whom were guys, tried to approach them, they just ran away”.

I had a good sense of the situation. “Where should I go, I don't have my keys”. I remember two phone numbers by heart – my husband's and my father's. I borrowed a phone and called my husband. His number was out of coverage – it made me realize that he might be still detained. Then I called my dad. I didn't want to scare him, so I asked how he was, what he was doing. He knew that I had been missing.

A taxi arrived, and I went to my parents-in-law. They had an extra set of keys. When I got there, they started asking

about Ivan, my husband – at that point I was 100% sure that he was still arrested – they became hysterical, I had to calm them down. I tried to eat something, Just a few spoons and then you realize that you can't. I took a nap, woke up a few hours later and continued searching for my husband. Friends called and asked whether they could help. One of them took me to a lawyer so that I could sign an official inquiry. Then I came back home, found an old phone and went to a store to restore my SIM-card. A female friend of mine came over, as I realized that if I stayed alone for longer, I would have gone mad.

Lists of those released from the Akrestina Detention Centre – half of them were taken by ambulance to the ER – were released. It was the longest night ever. I was too scared to call the hospitals. Then I saw a message that someone undefined had been taken to ER. When I called them, they told me I should call the police. The police told me to search in the lists. We then realized that the authorities had made an announcement that everyone would be released. It was our only hope. I was also sure that he was in Akrestina, not in Zhodzina prison. While still in the detention centre I heard from the arrested that those detained on 9th and 10th had been taken to Zhodzina and those on 11th and 12th only to Akrestina as other prisons were full.

While I was detained I got the feeling that the police themselves were shocked by everything that was happening and by what the OMON was doing. Shocked, as in the end it would be the police who would have to take care of what the OMON had done.

At about 2 a.m. I wrote to my mother-in-law asking her to go to Akrestina and wait for my husband there. I was afraid to move around in the city. I am thankful to my female friend who was trying to distract me, but half of the time I was hysterically crying anyway. At about 5:30 a.m. my mother-in-law called, and I heard my husband's voice. He asked about me, our cat and that something needs to be done to save many people who were suffering. Then his mum took the phone and said that his blood pressure was over 200 and that he was in shock. And then his mum burst into tears – she couldn't hold it together any longer. She said that he had been running around, saying that many people needed help and that we had to do something. I realized that I had to be strong. I took a taxi there. My husband was in a state of shock. They had been divided into two groups; one was released and the other taken to another cell to be beaten and thus more likely to be killed. We had to hug his mother in order to calm her down.

We came home. Later we had to call my husband an ambulance again, due to his high blood pressure. He was prescribed some pills. On the first day we were too afraid to step outside our apartment. The next day our friends took us outside of the city. While we were sitting in a cafe we suddenly saw people running by and got so scared. In the evening we went outside the city again. Someone began to fire fireworks, and we started running away as we thought it was grenades at first.

My husband didn't have any court hearings, he had been kept in there for 72 hours – just like that. When we went to

Akrestina to collect our belongings I started to panic. I have a very clear memory of that courtyard and I don't think I will ever be able to step inside there again. We might need to ask our lawyer to collect our belongings.

I learned many things about myself. I can't change what I have done or how I've reacted. In many situations humour helped. By the time I was released, there had been very few businesses on strike. So for the first 12 hours when I was unable to read any news, I thought that everything had been for nothing. But on the night when my friend came over and started updating me, that was the moment when I felt hope. Then came my next concern. If this all really was for something, if we're able to overcome our fears, if we become able to object, I don't want my country to be taken away from us. It's a new fear. That all the people who died, suffered and were injured, would be for someone else instead of the current president popping up to give our country away to either Russia or the European Union. Everyone who was released from Akrestina had to sign a paper that warned of legal charges, and risking their lives twice would be very silly. How would it help those detained there? I post about this on social media and sometimes get very disappointing reactions.

I hope that once everything is over we'll be able to choose our own path and implement reforms, with no particular interference from outside. We are friendly towards other countries.

The story was originally told to Nadia C. and translated by Marina K.

YAUHEN, 25: “THEY PUT A COMBAT GRENADE INSIDE MY UNDERWEAR”

Yauhen, 25: “This is a friend’s story of what happened to him on the night of 11-12 August 2020. I can confirm the authenticity of the source”.

There were about 300 people around me. Two black minibuses from the Almaz Special Forces came up and parked beside us. I also noticed an approaching convoy of special vehicles – at least six avtozaks with OMON police officers. The OMON and the Almaz started to run towards us at the same time. We realized that we were surrounded on three sides and began to run towards where it seemed clear. Soon we noticed another group of Special Forces in front of us, with machine guns and wearing helmets. They would just stop cars at random, break doors and smash windows. They would point weapons at people, force them to kneel. We understood that we had nowhere to run.

I hid in a secluded place. It was covered with billboards on all sides. But in one place there was a clear area without any advertising. I looked through this open area and saw a man

on his knees while a soldier was beating him up. The man fell, but the soldier continued to beat him. He then bent down, said something to the man on the ground and then raised his head. And that's when our eyes met. Signalling with his forefinger, he told me to "get over here."

It was the most frightening moment of the evening. I realized that I was finished.

They beat me up and tied my hands behind my back. After that, three Special Forces soldiers took me around the corner and said, "We are now putting a grenade in your pants, if we take out the pin, you explode, and we will say that you blew up on an unidentified explosive device." They put a combat grenade inside my underwear and ran to the side. Then they returned, beat me up again and took me back. Pieces of my teeth chipped off because I was forced to carry my backpack in my mouth. If the backpack fell, they would beat me up; when I lifted it they would continue to beat me. They beat me constantly.

They put me in an avtozak, between a whole bunch of other people, around 20 in total. We were lying on top of each other. From time to time we were beaten. If you complained about something, they would hit you an extra time. A man said, "I have asthma, I am suffocating." The Special Forces soldier approached him, put a foot on his throat and began to choke him while saying, "You can die, we don't care".

At some point I was taken out of the avtozak and moved to another. Inside, two commandos were standing on each side. They forced my face down on the floor and beat my legs for a few minutes; my legs became very swollen. I was then

brought back to the first avtozak and we drove away. Half the time the foot of a riot police officer was on my neck. If you lifted your face off the ground, even an inch, they would start to beat you.

I had neither my passport nor my phone with me. Phones were taken from those who had them and the soldiers tried to unlock them. If you didn't say the password, they smashed your phone. One young man was asked for the password, but he refused to give it. They stripped him naked and said, "If you don't tell us the password, we will rape you with these sticks". The young man gave them the password and they started to go through his Telegram channels.

There were a couple of girls, around 18 years old. Their crime was that whenever someone felt bad, they would pay attention to it. The riot police came up and began to insult them, along the lines of "You corrupt whores". One girl answered back so they shaved off a section of her hair. "If you don't shut up, we will take you to the detention centre and put you in a cell with men. You will be raped there, and then we will take you out to the forest. This is how your story ends". Girls got beaten much less than guys. Guys were beaten very hard; there were no limits. The soldiers and the police would beat them with their fists, feet, sticks. When we were put up against the wall, we were simply hit with our heads against the wall.

We were brought to a transfer point where people were reloaded into other cars going to the detention centre. We were taken out of the avtozak. Well, they beat you and you just ran. There was a corridor with about 40 people, 20 on each side. When you ran through, everyone would beat you. They

aimed for our heads, groins and legs so that we fell; then they would beat us until we got back up. At the end, they grabbed me by the arms and legs and threw me onto a bus.

I believe that it was Russian special forces who dealt with us. I was wearing a t-shirt saying “Freedom to Sentsov”, which refers to a Ukrainian film director who was accused of terrorism by Russian authorities in 2014. They reacted to this t-shirt with, “Alright, so you are also against Russia.” They spoke with a Russian accent and addressed us with, “You, Belarusians”, thus separating themselves from us. “You have such a great *batska*¹ what is it that you don’t like?”. Belarusians don’t say things like that.

They used both rubber truncheons as well as the ones with a metal rod inside. At the beginning they would beat us with the rubber ones. There was no option for resistance. You did what you were told. You were silent. You didn’t try to remind them about your rights. On the bus, a soldier came up to me, stood on me and then began to beat me on the head with this baton with a metal rod; after the first hit I felt almost nothing. He beat me for a while, then he left, and more people were put in layers on top of me. It was hard to breathe. It’s not clear whether it was best to lay above all the others, where they would beat you, or below, where you were suffocating.

They took us back through the corridor to the avtozak. The avtozaks have small cells inside designed for three people. There were eight people crammed into each . I was pressed against the wall and I saw blood streaming down from it. I

1 Lukashenka’s nickname, meaning “daddy”.

hadn't realized that my head was bleeding, as I hadn't felt any pain. It was very crowded and I began to lose consciousness. I passed out several times.

When we arrived at the detention centre and they opened the door of the avtozak, I just fell out. They said, "Oh, looks like this one is done." They grabbed me by the neck and threw me out, dragged me along the ground and left me on the grass. My head was bleeding, my whole body was blue. I couldn't move and kept losing consciousness from time to time. I started to feel sick and saliva was pouring out of my mouth. They dropped the phrase, "Oh, and this one is also on drugs." At some point, I started to shake.

The doctor said that since I was unconscious, they shouldn't beat me again. Everyone else was forced to kneel and continued to be beaten. The activists and those who, in the authorities' opinion, had been organizing the protests were marked with red paint, separated and taken away. Screaming and groaning was constantly echoing around the detention centre. There is a rumour that there are special torture chambers where people are beaten until they lose consciousness; I think it's true.

There are a lot of wounded in the hospitals with bullet wounds, cuts and fractures. There are not enough doctors. I was lucky that the ambulance picked me up from the detention centre. It is a concentration camp where people are being tortured.

The story was originally told to and translated by Anastacia S.

THE PROBLEMATIC ECONOMY OF BELARUS

Anders Åslund

The direct cause of the popular protests in Belarus was Aliaksandr Lukashenka's theft of the presidential elections on 9 August 2020 and his political repression. Lukashenka has ruled the country with a small kleptocratic elite. The underlying economic problem is that Belarus has an old Soviet-style, state-dominated and overregulated economy that has been stagnant since 2012.¹

Unlike most other former Soviet countries, Belarus never carried out a transition to a market economy. The public sector still generates three-quarters of the nation's gross domestic product (GDP). Within the Soviet Union, Belarus stood out as one of the most productive and least corrupt republics, and that remains true. This highly industrialized economy is dominated by big state companies, mainly in heavy industry. They still produce Soviet products with soft budget constraints.

1 International Monetary Fund, 'World Economic Outlook Database', October 2020.

Although they produce the best of Soviet goods, Belarusian manufacturers are not competitive in the world market. This renders Belarus abnormally dependent on the Russian market for its exports. But it is also dependent on Russia for its exports to the West, because two-thirds of these exports are refined oil and fertilizers, based on oil and natural gas imported from Russia. Until recently, Russia subsidized its sales of oil and gas to Belarus to the tune of about one-tenth of Belarus's GDP. As the relations between Russia and Belarus have deteriorated, the Kremlin has gradually eliminated these subsidies, squeezing Belarus economically.

Lukashenka has aggravated the country's financial situation further by insisting that Belarusians should have an average wage of 500 US dollars per month, which is more than the stagnant economy can support. As a consequence, the country has ended up in a repeated foreign exchange crisis. In 2009-10, Belarus was bailed out by the International Monetary Fund but since it immediately violated its conditions it has received no more IMF funding. In 2011, as the country was running out of international reserves, the exchange rate plummeted so that inflation surged to 109 percent.² After holding out for many months, Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, bailed out Lukashenka. In recent years, Lukashenka has appealed to both Russia and the West for financial support but received little. International private investors have largely avoided Belarus, though surprisingly it managed to raise \$1.25 billion in Eurobonds in late June 2020.³

2 Ibid.

3 'Belarus raises \$1.25bn from eurobond issue', *Belta*, 25 June 2020.

The advantage of Lukashenka having never managed to attract much international financing is that the country's total public debt amounts to only \$18 billion or 35 percent of GDP;⁴ its GDP in 2019 was \$62 billion with inflation under control at about 5 percent.⁵ All the international financial institutions are in place and plugged in. With a normal regime and economic policy, Belarus should be able to attract sufficient international funding to be able to maintain macroeconomic stability. There is no reason why the well-educated and disciplined Belarusians should be living in stagnation and poverty.

Yet, Belarus is in a currency crisis. In one month, its freely floating exchange rate has slumped by 20 percent this year. That is bad, but not a disaster. Belarus's financial problems are limited. Its annual current account deficit is merely \$2.5 billion; Belarus would only need international financing of \$6 billion in the course of the next year to establish sufficient reserves.

There are two alternatives in order to solve Belarus's financial crisis. One is a standard IMF stabilization programme. The alternative is that Russia bails out the country as it did most recently in 2011. This is an existential choice. The IMF would open Belarus to the global economy and good governance, which would lead the country to the European Union. Russia, by contrast, would insist on taking over Belarus's biggest

4 Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Belarus, 'Public Debt of the Republic of Belarus'.

5 International Monetary Fund, 'Republic of Belarus: 2018 Article IV Consultation-Press Release', 17 January 2019,

state-owned enterprises and capturing the Belarusian state in oligarchic kleptocracy, as Russia has imposed upon Armenia. There is no third way. Belarus cannot stand alone.

Belarus would be best served by a normal IMF standby programme: a one-year standby programme. The IMF complains about concealed subsidies to the dominant state enterprises, but the official budget deficit is minimal. The liberalization of the Belarusian prices and domestic trade should be relatively easy. The IMF demands would be limited to some structural reforms, notably the deregulation of about one-fifth of consumer prices that are still regulated and the opening of the economy to the private sector.⁶ Some inflationary pressure may arise, but Belarus has strong macroeconomic institutions which can control such pressures. Unlike other post-Soviet countries, Belarus has no oligarchs and little capture by big businessmen. Corruption is concentrated in a narrow circle around Lukashenka.

The IMF, the World Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development know Belarus because they have been present since 2016, when the European Union ended its prior sanctions. A normal government that wants to pursue market reforms and boost the standard of living could swiftly conclude a viable agreement with the IMF, and the IMF is fast. In a crisis situation, it can disburse funds in one month.

Belarus has many assets. It has maintained the best of the Soviet educational system with excellent education in mathe-

6 Ibid.

matics and natural sciences. Lukashenka has tolerated good technocrats in all ministries, so Belarus probably has the best state administration in the former Soviet Union, including a competent Central Bank and Ministry of Finance. While Lukashenka has denied the coronavirus pandemic, the Belarusian Ministry of Health Care has reported meticulously to the World Health Organization. The rot in Belarus is not very deep but concentrated at the top. A substantial software industry has developed. Belarus also has a strong diaspora, many of whom are ready to return.

But the IMF can only conclude an agreement with a legitimate government, and Lukashenka is completely against the IMF conditions since he does not want to relinquish his tight control over the economy. Therefore, as long as Lukashenka rules the country, the only option for financial support is Russia.

In sharp contrast to his tardiness in 2011, Putin acted fast this time. After five phone calls from Lukashenka and two and a half weeks, on 27 August 2020 Putin granted him full support. He clarified that Russia would support Lukashenka with all the “law enforcement” support he might need. Putin insisted on three conditions: the Union State Treaty of 1999 between Russia and Belarus; the Eurasian Economic Union; and the Collective Security Treaty Pact.⁷ These three treaties keep Belarus tightly tied to Russia and compelled it to ever greater economic and political integration.

⁷ Vladimir V. Putin, Interview with Rossiya TV channel, 27 August 2020.

On 14 September Putin met with Lukashenka, of whom the latter came begging for financial support. Putin emphasized economic integration: “With regard to our economic relations, Russia remains the largest investor in the Belarusian economy. Just one of the projects – a nuclear power plant – is estimated at 10 billion in US dollar terms. In general, over 50 percent of Belarus’ foreign trade is with Russia. Almost 2,500 enterprises with Russian capital are operating in Belarus.”

Putin promised that “during this complicated period Moscow would grant Minsk a state loan of \$1.5 billion”.⁸ Given Russia’s vast international currency reserves of nearly \$600 billion,⁹ Russia can easily afford to bail out Belarus but Moscow insists on the power of the purse and drip feeds Lukashenka. Russia will only offer a credit of \$500 million this year and another \$500 million next year, while the Eurasian Economic Union will additionally provide a credit of \$500 million this year.

In addition, Putin wants Lukashenka to find financing by selling attractive Belarusian state-owned companies to Russian oligarchs. Most state enterprises need to be privatized to become efficient and competitive, but in the present political situation risk-loving Russian businessmen will buy everything ‘for a song’. Such deals are typically done through debt-equity swaps that would give the Belarusian state little. As Putin presents it, he promotes Russian private enterprise

8 Vladimir V. Putin, ‘Meeting with President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko’, 14 September 2020.

9 Bank of Russia, ‘International Reserves of the Russian Federation (End of period)’.

investment but he allows no competition. He decides which Russian oligarch is supposed to seize what enterprise, which means that asset prices will be depressed.

The main Russian targets are four big state-owned companies, the Mozyr and Naftan oil refineries and the two fertilizer companies, Belaruskali and Grodno Azot, all of which account for two-thirds of Belarus's exports to the West. We know Putin's designs from 2011. At that time, Gazprom seized the Belarusian gas company and the half of the trunk pipeline it did not already own. Slavneft, which is controlled by the state company Rosneft, took over 42.5 percent of the Mozyr oil refinery. Slavneft is run by Mikhail Gutseriev, one of the most shrewd Russian oligarchs, whose big bank Binbank collapsed in a major scandal in 2017.¹⁰ He is also likely to opt for the Naftan oil refinery.

In the fertilizer industry, Putin's man is Dmitri Mazepin, an experienced corporate raider. In Russia, he owns the fertilizer company Uralkhem and is the dominant owner of Russia's potash giant Uralkali.¹¹ Uralkali is eyeing Belaruskali, which is the biggest potash producer in the world.¹² Reportedly, Mazepin's Uralkhem is also intent on getting Grodno Azot, Belarus's fourth biggest export company. The three big Russian state banks, Sberbank, VTB and Gazprombank, all sanctioned by the US government since July 2014, play major roles in the Belarusian banking system. Such a Russian eco-

10 Vladislav Inozemtsev, 'Putin's Belarus intervention could be good for business', *Atlantic Council*, 2 September 2020.

11 'Dmitry Mazepin', *Forbes*, 2 March 2015.

12 'Belarus/Potash: Sow What?', *Financial Times*, 19 August 2020.

conomic dominance could essentially transform Belarus into a Russian province. Armenia has already gone through this process.

Unfortunately, there is little the West can do. At least, the West should try not to do any harm. The West should be guided by four principles. First, it should sanction violators of human rights and the election. Second, the West should not impose any sanctions on Belarusian enterprises, because that would only make the country more dependent on Russia. Third, the European Union should offer visa-free travel or similar for ordinary Belarusians, while blocking Belarusian officials from entry. Fourth, it should not recognize Lukashenka as president.

Fortunately, the West is moving in this direction. On 2 October, the EU adopted sanctions against 60 individuals.¹³ The same day, the US expanded its 2006 sanctions on Belarus from 16 people to 24.¹⁴ Three days earlier, the UK had sanctioned eight Belarusians,¹⁵ and Canada eleven.¹⁶ None of these states have recognized Lukashenka as president.

As the EU puts it, those Belarusians sanctioned were “identified as responsible for repression and intimidation against peaceful demonstrators, opposition members and journalists

13 European Council, ‘Belarus: EU imposes sanctions for repression and election falsification’, 2 October 2020.

14 US Treasury, ‘Treasury Sanctions Belarus Officials for Undermining Democracy’, 2 October 2020.

15 UK Government, ‘Belarus: UK sanctions 8 members of regime, including Alexander Lukashenko’, 29 September 2020.

16 Jason Douglas, ‘U.K., Canada Impose Sanctions on Belarusian President Lukashenko’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 30 September 2020.

in the wake of the 2020 presidential election in Belarus, as well as for misconduct of the electoral process”.¹⁷ The essence of the sanctions is a travel ban and asset freeze.

The difference in sanctions imposed by the US and the EU, respectively, is significant but not unusual. The US tends to be tougher while targeting fewer people. It has persistently sanctioned Lukashenka himself, as the UK and Canada now do, while the EU excluded him from sanctions. Instead, the EU tends to sanction many more people, sticking to the Nuremberg principle that no official must obey unlawful orders. Similarly, the EU has sanctioned many more people than the US due to Russian military aggression in Crimea and Donbass; but it has not sanctioned several of the top people the US has punished.

The three Baltic countries – Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia – have stood out as the bold frontrunners. They listen carefully to Belarusian civil activists who call for many named human rights violators to be punished. Impatiently calling for joint EU action, they sanctioned thirty top Belarusians, including Lukashenka, on 31 August.¹⁸ As the EU failed to act, the three Baltic countries sanctioned over 100 Belarusian officials.¹⁹ These sanctions might be quite hurtful since many members of the Belarusian upper middle class have summer houses in the nearby Baltic seaside resorts, notably Jurmala in

17 European Council, ‘Belarus: EU imposes sanctions for repression and election falsification’.

18 Andrius Sytas, ‘Baltic states impose sanctions on Lukashenko and other Belarus officials’, *Reuters*, 31 August 2020.

19 AFP, ‘Baltic States Expand Sanctions On Belarus’, *Barron’s*, 25 September 2020.

Latvia and Palanga in Lithuania. Belarus has responded with counter sanctions against 300 Baltic officials.²⁰

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20 ‘Belarus to sanction some 300 officials from Baltic states in tit-for-tat move: Belta’, *Reuters*, 29 September 2020.

**ELIZAVETA, 21:
“IF YOU KEEP STARING,
WE’LL MAKE YOU EAT
THE GLASS.”**

This is the story of 21-year-old Elizaveta from Minsk and her encounter with the Belarusian police force.

On 10 August, my friends and I drove to the city centre in order to support the protesters. It was indeed a peaceful protest. People were standing with flags and chanting “Zhivye Belarus” (“Long Live Belarus!”). Nobody was throwing Molotov cocktails or anything similar. As we drove, we saw that most of the downtown roads were closed by traffic police so we had to choose other routes to return home. We decided to stop by a convenience store on the way home. It was around 2 a.m. when we got there and parked the car.

All of a sudden, three avtozaks stopped next to us. The riot police rushed out and started to shout at us using curse words, humiliating us by screaming “get out of the car, pigs”. We stayed inside the car, shocked and paralyzed. We didn’t know what was going on because we hadn’t done anything bad, we had just driven around the city. Ten to fifteen seconds later the riot police officers were standing in front of the four

car windows. They started to break them with feet and truncheons, while we were all still sitting inside.

The girl who was sitting to my left on the back seat had her face cut all over with small pieces of broken glass and my boyfriend's face was bleeding from deep cuts as well, while he was in the front seat. The policemen were behaving just like the OMON and were all wearing balaclavas so I could only guess that they were from the traffic police, though I'm unable to prove this. They started by taking the guys out of the car, they took one guy's head and started to hit it against the broken car window. The two other guys lay on the ground and were beaten. My boyfriend told them that his head was injured and bleeding; they advised him to calm down and beat him with truncheons several times. It was so scary. They didn't hurt the girls, they simply told us to stay inside the car and remain seated. Small pieces of glass were everywhere: in my hair, on clothes and even inside my pants so basically we were sitting on the glass. They were yelling curse words and ordered us to keep our heads down. They were threatening us by saying, "if you keep staring, we'll make you eat the glass".

Afterwards, they put me and the other girl in their car, the two guys were taken away in another car and our driver was put in a third police car. Our car was taken to some place we didn't know. Later we found it at an impound, but the car keys were missing, along with 50 euros. When the driver complained about it, they replied, "Say thank you that the car wasn't damaged completely". They later transferred us to an avtozak and made us switch our phones off. They simply broke the guys' phones into pieces by throwing them against the tarmac. They didn't check the information on our phones.

We were in Kamennaya Gorka, a city district in Minsk, and we saw around 300 so-called “cosmonauts”, as we call equipped OMON with shields. There were also other OMON officers who were going inside the yards, taking random people who were simply sitting on benches or walking their dogs. They arrested everyone they saw. There was a man in our avtozak who seemed to be the classic drunk who drinks by the convenience store every other night, who was covered in blood and asked for an ambulance. The OMON laughed at him and said, “Say thank you that we didn’t kill you”. It was that bad.

Later the police came back and took us back inside their car. We heard they were given another car’s plate number over the walkie-talkie, which meant that they were going after cars that were in the city centre. They started following a car; it was a grey Peugeot as far as I remember. While trying to stop that car, the policemen drove at 160-170 km/hour, on the wrong side of the road, on sidewalks, and so on... The driver of the grey Peugeot lost control of their car and drove into a ditch behind the ring road. The driver went out and ran into the field; the police caught up with him, beat him badly with truncheons and dragged him back because he couldn’t even walk. I saw that there was another man in that car who had managed to get out. He was lying unconscious next to the car and could barely breathe. Six policemen ran towards him and started to beat him with truncheons, kick him in the stomach repeatedly and one policeman hit him on the head. We were sitting in the police car with tears in our eyes. We couldn’t do anything.

The victims were only able to take 1-2 breaths per 30 seconds – that’s how heavily they were beaten. Only when the police realized that they were almost unable to breathe did they call for an ambulance. Then militia officers drove us back to Kamennaya Gorka and asked for further instructions over the walkie-talkie. They were told that the local RUVD was overcrowded and they didn’t know what to do next. So they had to let us go, but before releasing us they took our addresses and full names, and threatened us by saying that if they saw us anywhere, “we’ll be finished”. They also told us that we had to stay at home for one week and not go outside.

When we got home, we still didn’t know what had happened to our male friends. We tried to find them in the lists of people who were detained. There was no information at all. I know one road traffic policeman and he told me that the OMON was bringing people to the forest, beating them horribly and leaving them there, because there was no more room in the RUVD. It was like some sort of entertainment for them. So we were very much worried about what had happened to our friends. We couldn’t even eat during those days. We only knew that we were lucky that the policemen let us go.

When we found out that they were in Zhodzina prison, we went there and basically spent the next two days outside its walls. There were a lot of volunteers and I’m so grateful for them. When my boyfriend was released, he told me terrifying stories of people who were raped with truncheons, both men and women. Many women who visited the gynecologist afterwards turned out to have ruptured cervixes, as a result of the rape.

My boyfriend had been beaten harshly. He also told me that one female lieutenant enjoyed beating the genitals on men.

I'm in a huge stress over what has happened and have problems with my sleep. I cannot even imagine what I would have felt if I had been taken to jail together with them. I've cried my eyes out and right now I'm scared to go to work. I haven't been to work for a week now, because I'm afraid to go outside. Even if there is no visible violence in the streets and the protests are peaceful, after midnight I can see weird men in masks walking outside and looking around, checking who has the white-red-white opposition flag on their windows. They keep monitoring and can catch you at any unexpected moment. And I don't know what to do now, because none of my friends have been to work since that day, not me, not my boyfriend, nobody. We are simply afraid to go outside. And it is indeed very scary. I'm afraid that they will break into my apartment, because there were cases when ordinary people have helped protesters by allowing them to enter their apartment, but it didn't help – they would break into people's homes and arrest everyone, at one point even a 16-year-old.

MB: Have you ever participated in any political activities in the past?

Frankly speaking, never. I've never been interested in politics. I would talk and discuss with friends, but I never participated in any activities. My boyfriend has an interest in politics and is quite informed. On 19 June my boyfriend and I took part in a chain of solidarity for the first time. We stood in a chain and clapped. That is when it all started. OMON men came and beat the people who were standing and forced them to

run away. At that moment I realized what was going on and what was happening in the country. Even an apolitical person could see it. Whether you want it or not, you have to go out and say what you think, there is no other way. If you keep quiet, nothing is going to change.

MB: What do you think about the future of your country?

To be honest, I think that Aliaksandr Ryhoravich [Lukashenka] will hold on to his power for as long as he can. The OMON and the police will continue to perform cruelty. I know that nothing will change if people stop going out. Everyone is hoping for the best and only thanks to the factories that are on strike at the moment things have started to change. We see that the workers are supporting us. Hopefully, they can change the situation in the country. I hope for it in the near future.

MB: What do you think the West can do to help change the situation in the country?

The EU has done a lot already by sending money to funds for victims of the protests. We were able to fix our car with that money. Right now, the EU rejects Belarus' voting results, but they need to impose sanctions as soon as possible. Lukashenka always says that the EU is not worth anything and cannot do anything, so right now is the time to show him that it isn't true because we live in one world, one planet and everyone can be affected.

The story was originally told to Margareta Barabash and translated by Maryana Smith.

**IVAN, 42:
“LUKASHENKA’S
HATRED WAS THE
CATALYST OF OUR
AWAKENING”**

This is the story of 42-year-old Ivan from Minsk. He is a journalist who was arrested for having filmed the post-election protests on 11 August 2020.

It all began on Tuesday, 11 August, when our car was stopped by the traffic police. Two men from the OMON then approached us demanding to show them our mobile phones. Both my friend Pavel and I had photos from the protests and videos that I made for the Zviazda TV channel. We were immediately tied up and thrown into an avtozak. They yelled at us and started beating us. Within two hours, the wagon was packed with new detainees, and everything was happening according to the exact same scenario: they threw a man into the wagon, beat him up, and locked him up in a so-called “glass” – a small cell designed for one person. It all resembled a scene from a thriller movie, whose screenwriter, it seemed, had run out of imagination.

The dialogues of those people in black uniforms lacked diversity – it was mostly prepositions, interjections and swearing. If you translate their speech into normal language, the message would be the following: “All of you living in this country are bad people for daring to have your own opinion. For this you will be mutilated, beaten and humiliated”. Meanwhile, the wagon was getting full. The detainees were getting acquainted, sharing the reasons why they had ended up in the “glass” – riding a bicycle, driving a car, walking by, wearing a white ribbon. There were no protest participants in the avtozak, only civilians, who, in the opinion of the OMON, were criminals.

Finally we were thrown out of the wagon into the courtyard of some building – heads to the ground, hands behind our backs – beaten once again, pushed into a sports hall, ordered to kneel, heads to the ground; in this position I basically spent the following fifteen hours. We were questioned about our first and last names, date of birth, and address. Meanwhile the OMON was beating people up – we could hear the clunk of the truncheons and people screaming in pain. We were searched and our belongings were taken away. Everything repeated over and over again: they would beat us, take us to the toilet, and then beat us again. There was no variety neither in their dialogue nor in their sadistic “sense of humour”. Some people were beaten more than others; they were probably the “most dangerous enemies” of all of us knelt on the floor.

A handsome curly-haired guy was very seriously beaten. They beat him in the hall, then dragged him to the toilet and

continued to beat him there. They wouldn't allow him to lie on his stomach so that he could rest. They told him, "Well, what? You're a fighter! Come on, fight with me!" This was extremely disgusting to witness – it was even more disgusting than their swearing and abuse. There were so many of them, dressed in uniform, and they could do whatever they wanted as they were protected by the indulgence to police arbitrariness granted by Lukashenka. After 24 hours of moral and physical pressure, we were still able to stick with our opinion and some even dared to express it. They didn't know what to do with us. All the pre-trial detention centres were overcrowded and the evening was approaching, which meant new detainees, so they were looking for an opportunity to get rid of us. We were taken to Akrestina.

The admission process was no different from the one at the police department: again we were beaten, again we were forced onto our knees. The only difference was that we kneeled on grass instead of wooden floors. We were kept outside, in the inner yard. There were people detained on 9 and 10 August, our group and a group detained the day after us. By midnight there were about 150 detainees in the yard. On the night of 13 August, the OMON acted even more brutally than usual; all the newcomers had their clothes torn into pieces, they were hurt, and they got numbers painted on their backs. The OMON simply said that they no longer had names, only numbers. The night was very cold; we had to spend it on a concrete floor. All of us tried to sit close to each other in order to keep warm.

They came after us in the morning. The detainees who had already been convicted were sent to a pre-trial detention cen-

tre in the city of Zhodzina, others were let out. Before releasing us, they chased us through the “Corridor of Shame”, as they called it. They put us against the wall, beat us up and kicked us, and even used electric tasers. I was lying on my stomach on the grass, and an OMON guy hit me with a truncheon asking me the question, “Who do you love? I’m asking, who do you love?” I had no idea what he wanted me to answer. And then he said, “I love Belarus! And you must love Belarus! We will not surrender the country to the fascists!”

NC: Was this your first detention?

No. I am a journalist and once, in 2001, I was taken to the police department. At that time I was working for the state television and I was present at the anarchist event centre of Minsk. People had gathered in an abandoned building and were having a party with an exhibition, concert and performances. I was filming the event when I noticed a police bus and two officers who seemed to be concerned about what was going on. I told them that everything was peaceful and there was no reason to intervene. I followed them inside and showed them around. Later in the evening I was waiting for the car from our TV centre to pick me up, but instead eight police buses arrived and I was the first one to be detained. I was taken to the police department, where I was told that a journalist should cover only officially sanctioned events. I was very surprised to hear that. My camera with all the material was taken from me. During my professional career as a journalist, I have witnessed people being detained, and I know that elements of intimidation are often applied in

order to restrain a person, especially when such a person is considered dangerous.

NC: Tell me what was the most shocking thing about your latest detention.

I was probably luckier than others. I wasn't beaten that severely. After all, I am an observer and I tried to memorize everything that was happening as well as the names of the people around me in order to be able to present the events later. I was doing my job, and it helped me to pull through. I could, to a certain extent, understand and explain the rage and brutality of the OMON – they are trained to act this way and they are constantly being told that we are enemies and that we are a threat to the government and them, respectively. They would seize us, humiliate and beat us and then leave. There's no individuality; they function like an organism created for punishment and intimidation. What I couldn't understand was the behaviour of the police officers who continued to torment people after the OMON had left. These police officers go to work everyday, they are educated and they have the ranks of lieutenants, captains and majors. Two lieutenant colonels entered the sports hall where we were held and they witnessed everything, thus, everything was happening upon their approval. They stood behind the humiliation and torture of innocent people – this is what surprises me most of all.

NC: Please tell me about the people you were surrounded by during the detention. Do you keep in touch after what has happened?

I was seized together with my friend with whom I, of course, keep in touch. I found one of the detained men on social media after the release and I wanted to meet up and talk to him, as I really admired his behaviour during the detention. There are many people who witnessed the same thing as I did, and of course we will continue to communicate.

NC: Were you beaten before being released early in the morning, on Friday 13th?

Yes, there was a little yard, where people were beaten by the OMON. People were sent there in groups of ten and beaten up. There was also an element of ideological education involved. People were told to “love their country”, to “stop protesting” and were blamed for everything that had happened to them. It was very strange to hear, especially taking into account that so many people were detained on no ground whatsoever: they were cycling, walking home from work, driving their car...

NC: Reflecting upon this dreadful experience, what are your findings, hopes and plans? How do you see the future development of the current situation?

I assume that Lukashenka will stay in power for some time. However, he will never become the leader of the country in the eyes of our people. He has lost all respect and today he's just a man who has seized power and holds on to it without any legal right. A man who is afraid of his nation and is fighting against it. He attacks women and children, he hides behind the backs of those thugs in uniform, he doesn't respect the laws adopted by his puppet parliament – it all shows his weakness.

Despite all this, people have managed to unite and become a nation for real, and it's all worth it. I believe that Belarusians will never again become these obedient and humble people that they've been for 26 years. Many of us used to be distant from politics, we just tried to survive, live our lives and do the best we could regardless of the circumstances. We were creating families, bringing up our children, working and studying, not really reflecting upon the issues such as who we are and in which direction we are moving. We sort of shielded ourselves from the outside world, creating boundaries and not daring to take a step beyond them. It all has changed. People are different now. There is an atmosphere of unity and solidarity in our cities, sincere emotions, openness and positive interaction. It's curious that Lukashenka's hatred served as the catalyst of the nation's awakening. This is probably worth the 26 years long dictatorship.

The story was originally told to Nadia C and translated by Darya L.

TATSIANA, 37: “WE HEARD GROWN MEN SCREAMING FOR THEIR MOTHERS”

This is the story of 37-year-old Tatsiana, who works for the non-governmental TV-channel Belsat TV. She was detained on 10 August 2020.

I am an employee of Belsat TV. It's the only non-governmental TV-channel in Belarus, a project of Poland and the EU. I was previously an operator and news reporter. Right now, I'm working in the social media marketing department, and my husband is a videographer.

My husband was working during the protest action on 9 August near the Obelisk¹. He was supposed to be working on the 10th as well, so I drove him to the city centre, close to the Obelisk, where the clashes had taken place the day before. Fifteen minutes later I tried to call him, but he didn't pick up

¹ The Minsk Hero City Obelisk was erected in 1985 in honour of the 40th anniversary of the Great Patriotic War. In 1974 Minsk was honoured with the title of hero city for the courage and bravery its residents demonstrated during the Nazi occupation that lasted for 1,100 days and nights.

his phone – just minutes after he got out of the car, he was seized by the OMON. They opened his backpack, saw the camera and immediately threw him in an avtozak. The fact that he is a member of the press probably played against him.

I tried unsuccessfully to reach him through calls, and three hours later I went to the central district police station with my friends in order to obtain information about him. There were many other people trying to find their relatives: an elderly couple looking for their son; a woman whose son was seized right in front of her; a younger couple searching for their teenage son; a young woman looking for her boyfriend; and so on. We weren't given any information, and one of the women started arguing with a police officer. Ten minutes later two avtozaks appeared by the entrance. The OMON jumped out, took us by the arms and threw us all in the wagons, without introducing themselves or explaining the reasons for the detention.

Ten minutes later we were transferred to another wagon, then to another one, with metal cells designed for one person. However, two/three people were packed into each cell. A girl in the cell next to ours was diabetic, and thus insulin-dependent. She wasn't feeling well, and we asked the police to call the ambulance – no one did.

We were taken to the notorious Akrestina detention centre. They were very brutal there – they kept yelling, “faster, you bitches!”, “face the wall!”, and “don't you dare say a word or make a move!”. We were led through a corridor, followed by the OMON and we noticed many men on their knees, face down with hands behind their backs. They were kne-

eling against the wall, naked or in their underwear. We heard people screaming when they were brutally beaten. We were led into a room where they took our names. We were then forced down onto our knees in the same line with the men in the corridor. One by one we were taken into a room and ordered to take off our clothes. There was a video camera in the room and the door was open. We were ordered to squat naked – it was a so-called “examination upon admission”. After that we returned to the corridor – back on our knees, hands behind our backs and face down. When the “examination” was done, we were taken to the isolator cell.

The cell was designed for four people: ten square metres with two bunk beds, a sink and a toilet. By that night there were 20 of us. We had all been seized randomly. One of the girls, who lived near the Obelisk, was out to feed homeless cats – she was seized wearing her indoor clothes and holding a pack of cat food in her hands. One of the girls was detained right in front of her porch, her mobile phone was checked and subscription to several opposition Telegram channels was found.

My detention lasted for two and a half days. During that time I witnessed completely random women coming in and out of our cell. I met over 80 people during this time – only one woman was actually seized due to attending the protests. Some women were volunteering by handing out bandages, and they were stopped and detained by the OMON while going home by taxi. One of the detained girls had terrible wounds to her legs. She and her friend were detained right on the road, pulled out of the car and beaten. Some of them

were hit in the back of the head with a truncheon. One of the girls had been mistaken for a guy, and she was seriously hit on the leg; I suspect she had a ligament or tendon rupture as her leg was swollen and she was in pain. We asked for a doctor, but no one would listen.

The diabetic girl's condition was getting worse, and she urgently needed insulin. We all desperately cried for help, and eventually they allowed her to take her insulin that was given through a little window in the cell-door. The girl who was hit in the back of the head experienced double-vision. She was given regular painkillers and that's it.

People kept arriving at the cell as time went by. The first night there were 20 of us; the next night there were 33; on the third night, when I was released, there were 46. We were fed only once during the entire detention: a plate of oat porridge.

The worst experience was the sound of arriving avtozaks, followed by desperate screams of the detained men. They would scream in pain for about 15 minutes upon the arrival to Akrestina, then another wagon would arrive – and all would start from the beginning. We heard grown men screaming for their mothers as we stood there locked in the cell, absolutely helpless. It would happen six or seven times a night. We heard how people were stuffed in the cells during the night, and during the day, they were taken somewhere else, probably to Zhodzina or Slutsk.

Our wardens were, probably, OMON representatives, not the ordinary employees of Akrestina, and they obviously had an order on intimidation and harassment. We, the women,

were not beaten unlike the men, yet we were humiliated; for example, we were commanded to do the “saw-wing” pose, bending down holding our hands as high as possible behind our backs. Once, we were taken into the corridor in order to update the name list, where one of the wardens from the OMON – a very brutal woman – forced us into the “saw-wing” position, twisting our arms and bending us down. My friend who wasn’t able to bend low enough, received a knee-strike in her stomach. There were older women too who, when forced into the “saw-wing” position, would just fall down. Everything that could be done normally was done with senseless humiliation. There was no court, no charges and no lawyers.

I was released after having signed a so-called “prosecutor warning”, suggesting that I not get detained for a second time otherwise it would count as a criminal offence. A very strange paper, legally speaking. I wasn’t given a copy, so I can’t present it.

Those who weren’t released the same day as me had a trial. The trial, of course, was held in Akrestina, without the presence of lawyers. My friend refused to sign the agreement, as the content was completely deceitful: the statement declared that she was an active protest figure and had been detained during the illegal mass protests. When she refused to sign it, that woman from the OMON took her into the corridor and kicked her in the stomach, and as the result, my friend was hospitalized upon the release. She was diagnosed with abdominal contusion and suspected ovarian rupture. However, they edited her statement, writing the actual place of our

detention, i.e. at the Central district police station, though it was stated that she was protesting in front of the police station and behaving inadequately.

NM: For how many hours in total were you detained?

53 hours.

NM: While you were being released, were you told anything?

From the original group of people that were detained during the same period of time, there were 16 of us left at some point. Eight of us, including myself, were let out of the cell at night, our names were read out loud, each one of us signed that “prosecutor warning” and then we were released. The remaining eight had to stay in the cell. According to the law, the authorities may detain us for 72 hours for “clarification of circumstances”. Those women were released only the next day after the trial, being sentenced to fines.

NM: As I understand, you actively participate in political life, filming reports for Belsat. Was this your first detention?

This kind of detention happened for the first time. It wouldn't have been as traumatic for me or others if it had been a regular detention, with no such harassment and violence. I know how it usually goes: people often complain about not being able to receive packages from their relatives or that there are 16 people in a cell designed for eight. It is an exceptional situation nowadays. Usually people are not tortured upon arrival, not forced to be naked on their knees against the wall or walk in the “saw-wing” position. After all, we were administrative detainees, not criminals.

It was clear that everything was aimed towards intimidation and loss of morale. It was done with a conveyor belt-technique: hundreds of people were transported there every day, held for a few days and then released, completely exhausted and debilitated. One young man who was released the same day as I told me why the men were screaming: when an avtozak arrived, the door would open and the OMON would be standing in two lines along the way, forming a corridor. The men were forced to run through this corridor one by one, receiving numerous punches with truncheons. When they reached the end of the corridor, they were barely crawling. Every night ambulances were taking people to hospital as they were beaten almost to death. The aim was to destroy people mentally and physically, and they succeeded. This young man told me that he would never again go out in the streets and that he would warn his friends against doing so.

NM: How was the atmosphere in the cell? Was there solidarity and mutual help?

Yes. There were no conflicts and everyone was very friendly. Of course we were all suppressed, but we did our best to help each other; everyone was worried about the girl who had diabetes, about the girl whose leg was badly injured and swollen. We called for help and insisted on getting medicine to those who were in bad condition. We decided to keep in touch and share the news with each other in a special group chat.

NM: Regarding this terrible experience you went through: was there anything positive about it? Is there anything you learned about yourself?

Well, I now know many ways how three people can sleep together on a single bunk. Otherwise, it was just a senseless and ruthless traumatic experience. The only positive thing for me is that I'm not as traumatized as many others. I can talk about it, unlike many who went through hell and are not yet able to speak about their experience, although they have much to tell. I really hope that we get to hear their stories soon.

NM: Despite everything that happened to you, are you planning to participate in the upcoming events? Do you see any point in it whatsoever?

Of course it makes sense. You know, when being locked in that cell, you feel that all hope is lost, that they've won, but when you get out, you realize that the people are not willing to stop the resistance, you see how many are involved, you feel the support – nothing similar has ever happened in our country. It makes me feel that everything that has happened was not in vain, and, sadly, this huge wave of protests in our society wouldn't be possible without these sacrifices.

The senseless and merciless tortures – this is what caused the society to rise, followed by the fact that Lukashenka gave himself 80 percent of the votes. That has happened before, yet our country has never experienced such terrible tortures on a mass scale. It is a societal uprising at a very high cost, especially regarding those who have been killed and those still missing. I want to believe that everything we are going through today is not in vain.

The story was originally told to Nemiga M. and translated by Darya L.

