

#STANDWITHBELARUS

CRACKDOWN ON CHILDREN

AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL



CHILDREN IN BELARUS: HOSTAGES TO THE REGIME



In Belarus, following the presidential election on 9 August 2020, protesters took to the streets to dispute the results. The incumbent Alyaksandr Lukashenka claimed a landslide victory, while Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya emerged as a popular candidate for protest voters. Peaceful protests continue across the country and reprisals against protesters continue too, with frightening regularity and increasing severity. Riot police have used force against peaceful protestors, torture and other ill-treatment in detention is widespread. Over 27,000 people have been detained under administrative legislation for taking part in peaceful demonstrations and an increasing number of peaceful protestors are being prosecuted under criminal charges and heavily fined or, in most cases, sentenced to prison.

The shocking government clampdown on dissent in Belarus demonstrates a blatant disregard for human rights: children, cultural figures, women, pensioners, medical workers, students and academics, trade unionists and other groups have all been targeted. Standing in solidarity, Amnesty International is highlighting some of the human rights violations each of these groups has suffered, illustrating the deep-rooted and pervasive nature of government repression in Belarus.

Children have been victims of human rights violations arising from the demonstrations. They have been deprived of their right to peaceful assembly and sometimes they have been caught up in police actions as protest participants, and as unwitting passers-by. They have been subjected to police violence on arrest, and in detention. Some have been subjected to lengthy periods of detention. They have been detained and penalised under administrative proceedings in violation of their rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and due process, and some have been charged and arrested as criminal suspects. School children have been openly threatened by school staff for their political views and those of their parents. Perhaps the most insidious form of pressure and intimidation, and not a new tactic by the authorities, is the mis-use of child custody legislation to threaten parents with the removal of their children into state care if the authorities believe that they have been placed in a “socially dangerous situation” – effectively making children hostages of the government.

As a state party to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Belarus must ensure that children enjoy all the rights afforded to adults, but they also need special safeguards and care. They should be detained only as an exceptional measure of last resort, protected from torture and other ill-treatment at all times, and should not be removed from their families against their best interests. Instead of acting to respect and protect children’s rights the Belarusian authorities are cynically exploiting their vulnerability as part of a campaign to crackdown on all dissent.

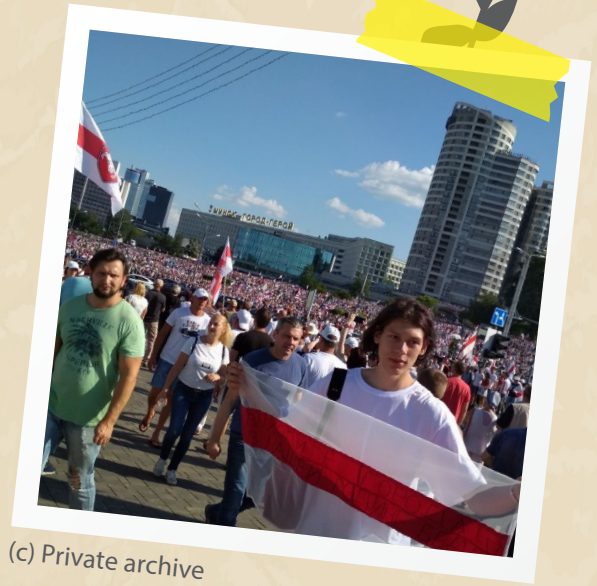
The following young people, and in some cases their parents, were interviewed by Amnesty International in January 2021. They represent only a small sample of hundreds of such stories and their stories are consistent with other cases documented by Amnesty International.

TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT



“If he was running away it means he is guilty.”

Piotr Kiryk was only 16 years old when he was beaten and detained by two police officers for being on the street following a demonstration in Minsk on 12 August 2020. He was getting off a bus with a friend at about midnight when two masked police officers approached them. He ran away, but when one of them threatened to shoot, he stopped and they led him towards a blue minivan. Outside the van they forced him to kneel on the ground and started to beat him:



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“I was sitting on the ground, I was hit several times with a baton all over my body: back, legs, and hips. Then they pushed my face up against the side of the minivan and searched me. They found my mobile phone and demanded the password. I said that I had forgotten it. After that, they hit me with the baton on the arm.”

Piotr was then forced into the van – the police grabbed him by his long hair and his hands were bound with plastic ties.

“They called us animals, cattle, Maydan-fanatics¹ ... They flashed a torch into my face and told us that we were drug addicts and would get a long sentence. In the van, they beat me on the buttocks, legs, and back with a baton.”

When he managed to tell the police that he was only 16, the beating became less severe, but continued. He was then transferred to a police van and taken to Maskouski district police station. He was interviewed and then collected by his mother. He left the police station at about 3.30am.

Piotr was accused of taking part in an “unsanctioned” meeting and received a warning from the Juvenile Justice Commission. However, after his lawyer appealed against the warning it was removed from his record on 31 December. He lodged a complaint about his treatment by the police and on 4 November the Investigative Committee refused to open an investigation into the allegations of torture or other ill-treatment, claiming “there is no evidence of a crime”.

¹ Referring to demonstrations in Ukraine in 2013-14.

Piotr appealed against this decision and, very unusually, on 28 December, the court supported the request and ordered the investigative committee to reopen the investigation. At the time of writing the investigation is ongoing.

Earlier in December, Piotr was detained again for taking part in an unsanctioned meeting. He tried to run away from police officers. He was briefly detained and received another warning. The head of the police station told his mother: “If he was running away it means he is guilty.”



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CRIMINAL PROSECUTION

“Dad they beat us every day”

Mikita Zalatarou was 16 when he was arrested at his home in Homel on 11 August. He has been in pre-trial detention since then and is accused of throwing a Molotov cocktail at a police officer. He denies that he threw anything, and there is no evidence to support the allegation.

Mikita’s father told Amnesty International that on 10 August, Mikita was on the main square of the city waiting for a friend at a bus stop as a demonstration was being dispersed. When the crowd started to run somebody shouted at him to run too, and so he joined the running crowds. The following day, police officers came to Mikita’s home, detained him and took him to the local police station where he was held in police detention from 10.30am until 5pm without access to a lawyer, a social worker or his parents.

His mother finally saw him at 5pm during police questioning. He told his mother that he had been beaten, and suddenly turned very pale and fainted. The police officers called an ambulance and he was taken to the accident and emergency department of the local children's hospital. At the hospital he told doctors that he had been beaten at the police station in efforts to force him to give them the password to his mobile telephone, and he was returned to police detention within hours.

Mikita's 18-year-old brother, who was detained at the same time was in the police station when Mikita was being beaten, reported hearing his screams. Mikita's father, Mikhail, reported the allegations to the prosecutor's office, and lodged an official complaint.

Ten days after his arrest Mikita was moved to Pre-Trial Detention Centre No. 3 in Homel where he remains at the time of writing.

The trial against him is ongoing. Mikita alleges that he continues to be subjected to torture and other ill-treatment. Mikita has been under pressure to give the police names of other people, but he has no information to give. The prosecutor has told his lawyer that if Mikita gives the police a name he can go free. Anonymous individuals have also passed on this message to his father.

During a court hearing on 19 January he told his father that he had been beaten on 29 December and that law enforcement officers had used an electric shock baton on him. There are two other co-defendants in the case and one of them admitted at the same court hearing that he had thrown a Molotov Cocktail at police officers, and denied that Mikita had thrown anything.

Mikita has epilepsy and is educated at home because of his condition. Before his arrest he had not had any fits for two years and had not needed to take any medication. Since being in detention he has had to start taking his medication again.

His father told Amnesty International:

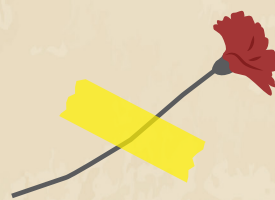
**“For those who beat him,
my son is just a step
on the career ladder...
and somebody will
get a medal”.**



(c) Private archive

THREATS TO PLACE CHILDREN IN CARE

“You should be grateful you got him back alive.”



Fourteen year old Aleh² was waiting for his friends in the car park of a shopping mall in his home town at 5.30pm on 12 August when he was detained by riot police in masks, helmets and bulletproof vests.

Police officers put him in a minivan and took him to the local police station. His mother, Tanya, told Amnesty International:

“In the minibus they beat him, pulled his hair and pulled his fingers back to force him to unblock his phone.”

Tanya was threatened and forced to sign a report that Aleh had been taking part in an “unsanctioned” meeting although she was convinced he had not.

Police officers found a small flyer with the Belarusian red and white opposition flag in his pocket, and he was wearing a red bandanna. The child protection department have put the family on a watch list claiming that Aleh lives in a “socially dangerous situation”. When his mother objected that there was nothing wrong with a 14-year-old being out on the street at 5.30pm police officers told her: “You should be grateful you got him back alive”. Aleh was released the same day.

In November, Tanya gave interviews to Belarusian opposition news websites based abroad, and following this, in January the police notified her that they were requesting that a criminal case be opened against her for “insulting the honour and dignity of a police officer”. The Prosecutor did not give permission to open the case. Tanya has lodged complaints about police ill-treatment but each request for an investigation to be opened has been refused on the grounds that “there is no evidence of a crime”.

² Names have been changed and some details omitted to protect the family from possible retaliation. His mother fears that she will lose custody of her children.

THREATS AND INTIMIDATION IN SCHOOLS



Eight-year-old Olha³, came home from school in October and told her parents that some people had come to her school that day and told the class:

“If your parents are going to these meetings and saying bad things about the president your family will be listed as deprived and you will be sent to a children’s home.”

The children were told that a boy in their town had already been removed from his family and placed in a children’s home.

Olha’s mother told Amnesty International that ever since the incident at the school, Olha has been anxious and cries, telling her parents that she doesn’t want them to take part in any demonstrations. She has learnt that it is better not to draw anything using red and white colours.

“It is all wrong – they shouldn’t put pressure on people just because they have opinions that differ from generally held views. I hope that everything will get better and that I pass my exams in June,” sixteen-year-old Ilya speaking to Amnesty International in January 2021.

Sixteen-year-old Ilya was detained when he took part in a demonstration against election fraud on election day in August. He was detained for six hours in Akrestina detention centre. He was beaten when he was detained and then forced to lie face down in a police van. He witnessed shooting as riot police dispersed the demonstration and saw other detainees with serious injuries, one had been hit by a tear gas canister and another had been shot in the stomach with a rubber bullet. In October, he was called to the Juvenile Justice Commission and given a warning for “minor hooliganism”. It was after this that his problems in school started. He was called for regular “professional talks” with the school director and the social worker:

“Then I started to be bullied (sic.) by the staff. They said I was following the wrong ideology, and that if I continue going to demonstrations I will have more problems. They told me that the protestors are Nazis and that I would become a Nazi too. They said I would fail my exams. We are about to have our final exams and they said that I might have problems, and that I wouldn’t be able to go to university.”

In November, Ilya won a prize for astronomy and the “professional talks” stopped, but the social worker continues to threaten him.

³ The name has been changed and some details omitted to protect the family.

JOIN OUR SOLIDARITY ACTION

1 Take or create a picture of a flower.



2 Write a solidarity message in support of Belarusians.

3 Post this image on your Instagram, Facebook or Twitter.



4 Tag @amnesty and we will share.

5 Use hashtag #StandWithBelarus.