



#STANDWITHBELARUS
BELARUS: WOMEN
ON THE FRONT LINE



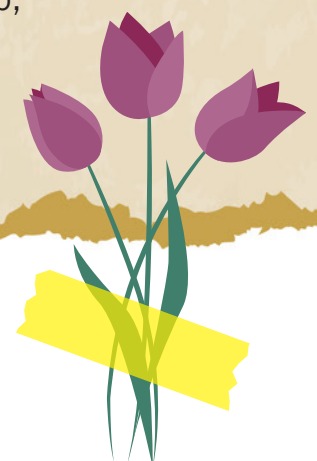
Women have been more active in political, peaceful protests in Belarus than ever before and unprecedentedly high numbers are being detained. According to the Belarus based human rights group Vyasna, in January 2021, 873 people were detained for up to 15 days for taking part in peaceful demonstrations and 391 of them were women.

According to the UN Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women “discriminatory stereotypes and patriarchal attitudes regarding the roles and responsibilities of women and men in society”¹ are prevalent in Belarus. This is expressed in the way women detainees are treated by guards and police officers – they are accused of being bad mothers, and wives, and frequently asked why they are not at home rather than demonstrating. Feminist activists interviewed by Amnesty International see a direct parallel between the levels of violence against protesters in the streets and endemic violence in Belarusian society including domestic violence.

In Belarus, following the disputed presidential election on 9 August 2020, hundreds of thousands of people across the country took to the streets to protest 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 unlawful force against peaceful protestors and thousands have been detained solely for protesting peacefully. Allegations of torture and other ill-treatment in detention are 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 sentenced to long prison sentences

The shocking government clampdown on dissent in Belarus demonstrates a blatant disregard for human rights: women, children, artists pensioners, athletes, students and academics, trade unionists and other groups have all been targeted. In its #StandWithBelarus campaign, 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.

This briefing tells the stories of four women whose lives have been irrevocably changed by events in Belarus. They are the director of a children’s hospice that is threatened with closure, a feminist political activist imprisoned for taking part in a peaceful protest, a journalist sentenced to six months in a prison colony for doing her job, and a queer feminist grass roots activist forced to leave the country.



¹ CEDAW, Concluding observations on the eighth periodic report of Belarus https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW%2fC%2fBLR%2fCO%2f8&Lang=en

VOLHA VIALICHKA

“There can be no justification for the excessive use of force, for the deaths which have occurred in Belarus in peacetime.”²

Volha Vialichka, the director of a hospice for terminally ill children, is threatened with criminal prosecution and has been forced to temporarily leave Belarus because she voiced her criticism of the human rights violations in the country since the presidential election on 9 August. Furthermore, the authorities are now threatening to close the hospice in retaliation for her political opinions.



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Volha Vialichka has been running the hospice since 2008, she is a trained psychologist specializing in oncology and has two children of her own. She has always been outspoken about the inadequate state of palliative care in Belarus, and before the presidential elections on 9 August she campaigned for opposition candidates and volunteered as an independent election observer. At the beginning of September her son's class teacher contacted her to express concern that her son was not being adequately cared for at home, and that she was informing the relevant authorities about her concerns.

“I have been in trouble because of my opinions before. I just think that when we are adults and I have an opinion and you have your opinion, or there is a level of understanding or lack of understanding that is one story, but to take it out on children – that is beyond a joke.”³

On 15 October 2020, Volha Vialichka was detained and spent 24 hours in police detention for participating in a fundraising event for the hospice. The authorities claimed that she had participated in an “illegal public gathering” and fined her.

² <https://ru.hrodna.life/articles/velichko-shkola/>. «Не может быть никакого оправдания тому сверхнасилию, тем смертям, которые произошли в Беларуси в мирное время.

³ <https://ru.hrodna.life/articles/velichko-shkola/> «Я, в принципе, за свою позицию получала периодически. Мне просто кажется, что когда мы взрослые люди, и у меня позиция, у вас позиция. Где-то понимания, где-то недопонимания. Это одна история. Но на детях отыгрываться — это просто анекдот».

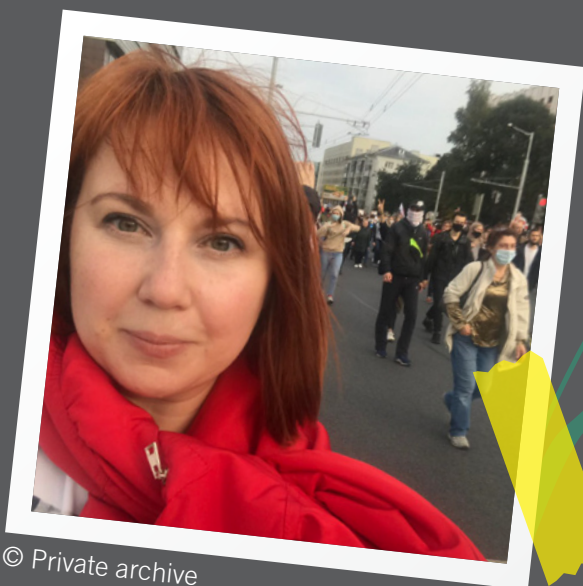
On 20 October 2020, she received a phone call notifying her that the guardianship authorities would be coming to inspect her child's living conditions at home. She left Belarus with her family the next day to avoid the possibility that her son would be taken away from her.

Since September 2020, the children's hospice has also become a target of the authorities. The hospice has been operating successfully and has fulfilled its financial obligations since 2008, and in March 2020 it went through a successful financial audit. Currently, the hospice's operations have been halted in two of its three premises. Since 29 September 2020 the hospice's staff have been banned from entering the buildings of a state-run factory where they rented rooms to run a volunteering centre. To date the hospice staff have been unable to collect hospice property from the factory building that includes important medical equipment and documentation. On 22 October 2020, the state-run Children's Hospital No. 2 unexpectedly notified Volha Vialichka that the rental agreement for a number of rooms the hospice used to provide care to the children was being terminated. On the same date, the hospice management was visited by representatives from the Financial Investigations Department, who seized the hospice's laptop and documentation, and later launched a fraud investigation against Volha Vialichka that is still ongoing.

The hospice is continuing to provide home palliative care for terminally ill children. Volha Vialichka is fighting a legal battle to keep it open while working remotely from an undisclosed location abroad.

YULIYA MITSKEVICH

“It doesn't work like that anymore in this country. There are no rights now.”



Yuliya Mitskevich, a feminist and a member of the opposition coordination council, served a 15-day sentence in Zhodzina detention centre because of her political activities, and was subjected to treatment and conditions which she described as torture. She was running a gender awareness organization called Aktyunym Byts Faina (Актыўным Быць Файна), and has withdrawn from the organization as she believes that her continued association with it will lead to its closure by the authorities.

She has left the country because of threats of criminal prosecution because of her social and political activism.

She was arrested on Friday 20 October 2020 outside the offices of her organization. She was initially taken to the Kastychnitski district police station, in the capital Minsk, where she was detained and asked to confirm that she had taken part in protests. When she reminded the police officers of her constitutional rights and her right to a lawyer she was told:

“It doesn’t work like that anymore in this country. There are no rights now.”

Yuliya is also a member of a sub-group of the opposition Coordination Council, Femgruppa, that promotes gender equality. She was told by the police officers who interrogated her that the real reason for her arrest was her participation in the Femgruppa, and she was asked to sign a statement saying that she had taken part in illegal actions as part of that organization. She refused to sign. She was then taken to Akrestina detention centre, in Minsk, to await trial. On Monday morning she was sentenced to 15 days in prison for taking part in an “illegal public gathering”.

“The judge didn’t listen to me or my lawyer – we told the judge that in the police station they didn’t let me see my lawyer, but she wasn’t interested. She took the decision within a second. They sentenced me to 15 days for participation in an “illegal gathering”. It was obvious that this was a case against Femgruppa and that it had been ordered from above.”

Yuliya described the conditions in which she was transported to Zhodzina detention centre, 50 miles from Minsk, after the trial:

“There were 20 of us and three women including me. We were put in a police van... I was put in a separate cubicle and the other two women were put together in another cubicle. I suffer from claustrophobia – it was a terrible experience for me. You sit and they close the door in front of you, you can’t stand, you can’t move and the cubicle is completely closed, no light, nothing. I concentrated on the little crack of light I could see through the door. They never tell you where you are going and you don’t know how long the journey will last. You don’t have the right to know.”

In Zhodzina she was placed in a cell for eight detainees: “Everything is based on torture. They don’t take you for exercise, there is no shower and you just wash as you can in the basin, they don’t tell you the time.” During the 15 days she was in detention she was only taken for exercise twice. The lighting was never turned off at night making it very difficult to sleep and correspondence from outside was only handed to her on the tenth day of her detention. “It was a lovely moment because they brought all the letters and postcards from all kinds of people including strangers and people I hadn’t heard from for a long time. It was important.”

During her time in Zhodzina, she was twice interrogated by two employees from the Head Office for Combatting Organized Crime and Corruption.



“They held ‘talks’ with me which were actually interrogations. They promised me things and threatened me. The first time they asked again about Femgruppa, and about the women’s marches and finances, but the second time they were interested in my organization.[.....] They tried to recruit me by saying ‘you don’t know, but maybe among those who come to your discussion groups there are destructive elements who plan to commit extremist acts.’ They said that I should do everything to find these elements and report on them. [.....] When I refused they tried to threaten me. They said I was lucky I was only in detention for a few days, but there are other ongoing investigations which could lead to me serving a criminal sentence. They threatened me by saying I could be arrested at any time.”

Shortly after her release, Yulia left Belarus for her own safety and is now living abroad. She left behind her husband and her cat.

KATSYARYNA BARYSEVICH

Katsyaryna Barysevich is a journalist, well known for her accounts of criminal trials, and she has now become the victim of an unfair trial like so many of the people she has written about. On 2 March 2021 she was sentenced to six months in a prison colony for having carried out her professional duties and exposed what appears to be an official cover-up over the killing of a peaceful protestor.



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On the night of 11 November 2020, several men and women in plainclothes and face masks came to a neighbourhood informally known as the Square of Changes, in the capital Minsk, to remove white-red-white ribbons hung there by local residents in protest against ongoing human rights violations and police violence. When one individual from the neighbourhood, Raman Bandarenka, verbally confronted those removing the ribbons, the individuals severely beat him and forced him into an unmarked van. Video footage recorded by bystanders and several CCTV cameras captured much of this incident. It later transpired that he was driven to the Central District police station, and then taken by an ambulance to the City Emergency Hospital several hours later. Raman Bandarenka was badly injured and unconscious when he was admitted to hospital that same night and died there on 12 November from severe head injuries. The authorities blamed Raman Bandarenko for his own death claiming that he had been violent and that he was drunk.

On 13 November, Katsyaryna Barysevich published an article on Tut.by, a news website that she worked for, in which she cited medical records showing that Raman Bandarenko had no alcohol in his blood. Raman Bandarenko's mother had given Katsyaryna permission to publish this information.

Katsyaryna Barysevich was arrested on 19 November and later accused of “violating medical confidentiality, with grave consequences”. The doctor who provided her with the information is also being prosecuted under the same charges.

A colleague interviewed by Tut.by said she had called Katsyaryna the evening before her arrest and suggested they go out for a drink together that night. As they drove away from Katsyaryna's apartment building they noticed two cars outside with the lights on and figures wearing black inside. Katsyaryna commented: “How good that you picked me up! Because I think they want to arrest me!”⁴

On 19 November Katsyaryna left the house at about 4.30pm to go to the shops and returned escorted by policemen in balaclavas. Her 18-year-old daughter, Dasha Radkouskaya, told Amnesty International: “Oh, there were an awful lot of them, ten at least, not all of them came into the flat. They were all wearing black and their faces were covered with masks and balaclavas so that only their eyes were visible.”

They searched her flat and took Katsyaryna away. Initially she was taken to the detention centre of the Committee for State Security (KGB) and later transferred to the pre-trial detention centre on Valadarskaha street.

The trial started on 19 February 2021. There was little information about the progress of the case because her lawyer has been forced to sign a non-disclosure agreement. Her daughter commented:

“It is hard not knowing what is going to happen. There is only me and grandmother and grandfather. They worry a lot, so it turns out that I am the main person. Everything is on my shoulders.”

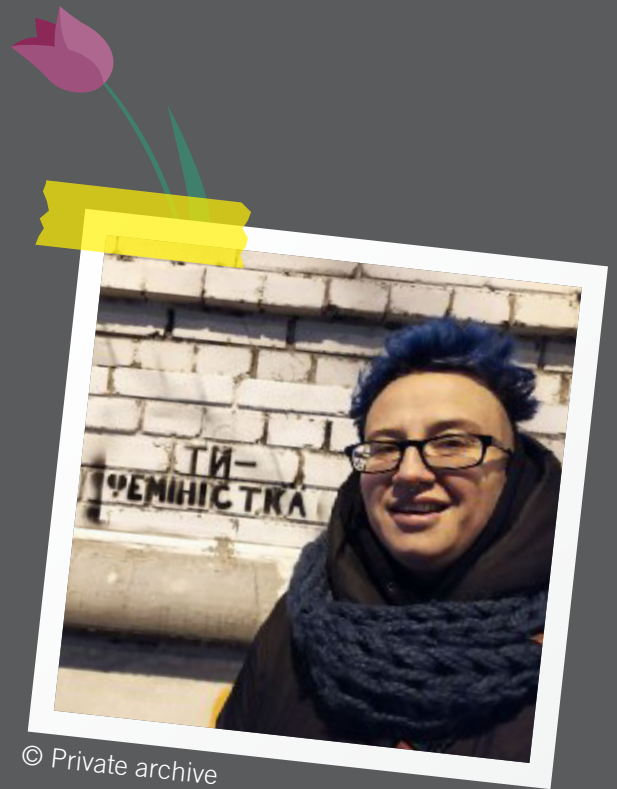
On 2 March the Moscow district court in Minsk sentenced Katsyaryna Barysevich to six months in a prison colony. The doctor who provided her with the information was sentenced to a two-year suspended sentence and released. In both cases the charges are unfounded and Katsyaryna should be immediately and unconditionally released.



⁴ <https://underpressure.press-club.by/katerina-borisevich>

NASTA BAZAR

“We have post-traumatic stress disorder on a national scale. Everybody is very traumatized, and I think we are going to be living with the consequences for a long time.”



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Nasta is a feminist, queer, grass-roots activist, and a single mother with two children. She was forced to leave Belarus because of the high possibility she would be arrested, and concerns for the safety of her children. She is now living in Kyiv, Ukraine and assisting other Belarusians who have been forced to leave the country.

On 13 September 2020, she took part in a march, along with ten of her colleagues from the queer movement. She described witnessing the excessive use of force by police officers towards peaceful protestors:

“All I had in my head was “This is not a video” – we have seen so many videos of beatings, but this was real life. ... I remember seeing how they beat a man and then I remember thinking that this is how people get those bruises I have seen. I always thought I would say or do something, but I was completely stunned, and I only had irrational thoughts in my head.”

Nasta was then dragged by fellow protestors into a shop that had wide metal doors. They could hear men and women screaming and bodies being thrown against the doors. They eventually left the safety of the shop and re-joined the march. Then on 15 September a video started to circulate on Instagram posted by some pro-government elements. In the video Nasta and her colleagues could be seen clearly running away from police officers. The commentary stated that they had been paid to take part in the march. Following the video, an activist who was on the same Telegram chat as Nasta was arrested and then a neighbour in her village was arrested in front of his children by police officers with guns. It was then that she decided she couldn't stay anymore and left for Kyiv with her children.

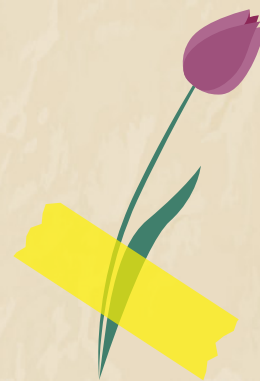
Nasta drew parallels between the violence used by the police officers and the general levels of violence in Belarusian society, including domestic violence:

“The most frightening for me is that most people don’t see any parallels between what is happening on the streets now and domestic violence. It is one continuum. People don’t see the connection and when violence is normalized in society it gives rise to more violence. I am sure that the level of domestic violence must have grown recently because I don’t believe that you can beat people like that on the streets and then go home and be affectionate to your wife.”

She struggles with feelings of guilt because she is not taking part in the protests and because she is relatively safe in Kyiv. She lives according to the maxim: “Do what you can with what you have where you are.” She is currently helping to put Belarusians in Ukraine who have left the country in contact with organizations that can offer assistance.

She believes that the political struggle that is going on now is just one of many battles that need to be fought:

“I am sad that we will win, but only one battle. We will then have to go back but that won’t change very much for me. As a single mother and queer woman I fall into two groups that are discriminated against. I dream of a world where you are not called a single mother, but an independent mother.”



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.