I’m a Journalist. Why Are You Beating Me?

Stories of repressed Belarusian Journalists
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Strength in Solidarity!

“I’m a Journalist. Why Are You Beating Me?” is a book that expresses the solidarity journalists from Ukraine and Poland feel towards Belarusian colleagues who have suffered and continue to suffer from the repressions of the Lukashenko regime. All the journalists in this book, regardless of whether they were beaten or imprisoned for participating in peaceful protests, were simply doing their jobs! It is difficult to believe that such things are going on in Europe in the 21st century.

The testimonies of these Belarusian journalists tell of brutal beatings, the violation of human dignity, injuries, psychological trauma and complete disregard for their rights as journalists.

We want this book to help us publicise this problem and attract the attention of the wider public in Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, and the rest of the world, to the powerlessness and vulnerability of our colleagues in today’s Belarus. We also wish to make every effort to stop their persecution.

This book is a collection of interviews with and reportage on twenty Belarusian journalists who speak of torture, injuries, psychological pressure and anything else they have experienced while doing their jobs. Their collected testimonies provide evidence of violations in today’s Belarus of the right to pursue a profession, freedom of speech and other human rights. This is the most eloquent method for documenting their experiences, because the victims themselves speak about instances of persecution and emotions that will enable every reader to feel and understand what is happening in their country.

Many days in custody, being arrested in front of a child or during a live broadcast, loss of media status, police searches, beatings, injuries, bullet wounds, broken bones. There is little that these Belarusian journalists have not had to suffer, irrespective of their sex. Our Belarusian colleagues are telling us that their “press” identification markings are not protecting anyone anymore. In fact, they are much more likely to play a part in their arrest.

These stories are true, but that makes them even more difficult to perceive and understand. Our consciousness struggles to accept that all this could have happened. But it really did. Sergey Gerasimovich, a Belsat television journalist who was brutally beaten multiple times, had to redouble his efforts after his release from prison to come back down to reality and recover his health. Natalia Lubnevskaya, a journalist for the Nasha Niva newspaper, was hospitalised for over a month and underwent extensive rehabilitation after being shot in the knee by a police officer.

And how many people have seen the live report during which the Euroradio journalist Mikhail Ilin was arrested mid-sentence? While we are preparing this collection, more of our Belarusian colleagues are being arrested or dragged through the courts. The violations of journalists’ rights are increasing day by day in Belarus.
For Ukrainian journalists, these events are reminiscent of the turbulent days in Ukraine on Independence Square in Kiev from the end of 2013 to 2014, when there were hundreds of recorded cases of journalists’ rights and physical integrity being grossly violated when they were attempting to perform their professional duties. Ukrainian journalists understand better than anyone else the conditions in which their Belarusian colleagues currently find themselves and how they must feel. It is worth noting that in Ukraine, as in Belarus, professional journalist communities and associations have acknowledged and continue to stress that journalists are not part of any conflict or the global political debate. They are merely fulfilling their duty to inform citizens about the important events they are witnessing that are taking place in their country. That is why one of the aims of this book is to convince its readers, and maybe also the authorities, that journalists are not fighting for power in Ukraine, Belarus or any other country. They are carrying out a social mission entrusted to them by society itself.

The authors of this collection are Ukrainian journalist and editor-in-chief of the Procherk web portal, Nazary Vivcharik, and Belarusian journalist and correspondent for the Belsat channel, Ekaterina Andreeva. The creation of these texts was particularly difficult for our Belarusian colleague because she felt unprecedented pressure from the authorities: she was detained while reporting from the women’s march. She ended up at the detention centre on Okrestina Street. Then, during the final stage of this collection’s preparation, she was arrested again while covering events of social importance. We lost contact with her shortly after Ekaterina had sent her own story…

Nazary Vivcharik is a journalist who covered events during the 2013-2014 Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine. He appeared on air for the most important Ukrainian channels and also commented on events for Belarusian radio stations. His reports from Cherkassy were followed by listeners across the whole country. In addition, Vivcharik is a young Ukrainian writer who has published several novels.

We have therefore collected these testimonies and stories to show the international community how the Belarusian authorities have been reacting to their citizens’ peaceful protests and what dreadful challenges we, as a profession, face. No one knows better than journalists themselves what obstacles need to be overcome for them to fulfil their mission to inform society comprehensively, qualitatively and objectively about what their country is currently living through and what problems it is facing. And the pursuit of transparency and creation of publicity are almost the only mechanisms available for preventing further violations of journalists’ rights.

This book is a token of the friendship and solidarity between three journalists’ unions that are members of the European Federation of Journalists: The Polish Association of Journalists (SDP), National Union of Journalists of Ukraine (NJU) and the independent Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ).

Nazary Vivcharik

Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine.

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Serhiy Tomilenko
Chairman of the National Union of Journalists of Ukraine, member of the Steering Committee of the European Federation of Journalists
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“They wiped the bloodstained press card on my t-shirt.”

Anton Trofimovich’s story

On 15 July Anton Trofimovich left home for work. He had to cover another protest rally in the centre of Minsk. Like all Radio Svoboda (Radio Free Europe) journalists “working in the field”, he had been granted press accreditation by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He had no reason to expect that anything bad would happen to him that day. Yet a couple of hours later, he would be lying with his nose broken in a police prison van, and a law enforcement officer would be wiping the journalist’s bloodstained press card on his clothes.

“Hands in cuffs, blood pouring from his nose”

– My work colleagues had already been arrested right before my eyes. I knew that it was only a matter of time before the same would happen to me. And I wasn’t going to be saved by some accreditation or “press” vest.

But that day, I wasn’t expecting anything like that. For some reason, I thought that my work wouldn’t be obstructed. A queue had formed in front of the Central Election Commission (CEC) building. Everyone wanted to file a complaint about the non-registration of alternative presidential candidates. The queue stretched back almost a kilometre – Anton says.

That day the Radio Svoboda team (a camera operator and correspondent) were streaming live from outside the CEC building. Anton had received instructions from editorial staff to be particularly vigilant. He was meant to film on his cellphone from a different angle. He was also sending SMS messages, measuring the length of the queue and taking photographs for social media networks. When the people in the queue started being arrested, an OMON officer calmly approached Anton and asked him to go with him to a police prison van.

– But I showed the police officer my press card and he went away. Everyone was beginning to disperse when I met my colleague, Violetta Savchitz, and said to her: “Look, I’ve never been arrested before. Maybe we could take some selfies with the prison van in the background as a joke?”. We took five or six photos, had a laugh over them and went to look for some protestors who had already managed to escape – Trofimovch recalls.

He hadn’t noticed that they were being trailed by a dark slow-moving minibus without registration plates.

– I turned round at one point and saw a horde of men – six in civilian clothes and one in OMON uniform – running towards us. They immediately placed a hand over my mouth, forcing my jaw down, so I couldn’t cry out. Then things become foggy. At first, I didn’t even feel the blow, but then I realised my hands had been cuffed behind my back and blood was pouring from my nose. They dragged me to the minibus and shouted: “On your knees!”

The one who was commanding the others bent down and warned me: “If you behave well, nothing will happen to you”. They didn’t say where they
were taking me. It was impossible to lift my head. One of them pulled my bloodstained press card from my neck and wiped it on my t-shirt to read my name.

Violette Savchitz, a journalist from the BelaPAN press agency, was also detained. They put her in the same minibus, but Anton couldn’t see her because he was kneeling with his back to the passenger seats.

– My hands were very tightly handcuffed. After we’d been on the road for half an hour, my legs became stiff and I began stretching them. At this point, one of them interjected: “Sit on your arse, we’re not beasts”. How did I feel? Strangely enough, I was calm – I felt neither fear nor anger. I knew it wasn’t worth arguing. That wouldn’t achieve anything. But I didn’t know what to expect, because I couldn’t recall the police ever being so violent towards journalists before – Anton says.

The law enforcement officers escorted the journalists, with their heads forced down, from the vehicle to the Zavodskoy district police department. They were then told to stand with their faces up against the wall in the building’s assembly hall. The OMON officers left and ordinary police officers took their place. They behaved as if nothing had happened. They allowed us to take a seat and talked with us politely.

– You got the impression that once you’d been detained, you’d end up dealing with normal people. After all, what had happened before was a genuine abduction… We demanded to make a telephone call to the Minsk police department’s press secretary, Natalia Ganusevich. After speaking to her, they stopped making lists of our personal belongings and filling out the paperwork. An hour later, the head of the Public Order Protection Department arrived and begin joking around. He looked at our passports and informed us we were free to go. We weren’t charged with anything. We also didn’t receive any documents relating to our arrest. I told him: “I hope we don’t meet again”. But we saw him again the next day.

An act of intimidation against journalists

Anton went from the police department to the hospital, where X-rays confirmed that his nose was broken and he was given four stitches. Cuts to his head and bruising in his eye were also recorded. In the morning, Anton made an application to the Investigative Committee to instigate criminal proceedings on the grounds that his professional activity as a journalist had been obstructed (art. 198 of the Criminal Code). He then went to get a forensic examination so his injuries could be photographed. Just outside the entrance to the building, Anton was approached by two men. They quickly presented their police ID, confiscated his phone and drove him to a police station.

– After sitting there for two hours, I learned that I had been charged with “refusing to obey the police”. It was alleged that I had not complied with their instructions, so they had used physical force. Even though I hadn’t even had an opportunity to cry out! By way of a goodbye, the police chief told me: “Your future, Anton Anatolyevich, lies in your own hands”. I didn’t understand what he meant by that – Anton recalls.

A few days before the charge sheet expired, the case went to court, but it was sent back for revision and then closed because the deadline had passed. Meanwhile, the Investigative Committee informed Anton that the investigation opened at his request had been suspended. He is convinced that the case against the police officers who beat him will not be reopened. Over the three months of protests, almost one and a half thousand victims of the actions of officers from the law enforcement agencies have filed complaints with the Investigative Committee.
At the time of writing, not one law enforcement officer has had to answer charges in court.

Were the law enforcement officers who beat Anton acting on orders from above or did the situation simply “get out of control”?

– These dudes looked like a mob from the ‘hood. Either they’d been on the booze or they’d decided to compete among themselves for bragging rights by measuring who was the toughest. All of them were wearing masks, but I remember one of them particularly well. He was wearing a knitted green balaclava. He was the one who wiped the blood from my press card. I can’t get that balaclava out of my head... It all appeared like an act of intimidation against my colleagues – “Look what could happen to you, guys”.

Anton Trofimovich’s case was the first time in five years that a journalist had been attacked by law enforcement officers. At the beginning of 2016, police officers in civilian clothes had openly beaten TUT.BY correspondent Pavel Dobrovolsky in a courthouse.

– At the time, this incident was regarded as a “failure of the system”, a scandal. But this year it turned out that was only the beginning. Afterwards, the wave of violence just escalated – Anton says.

“Greeted by ovations, like superstars”

Three weeks after he was beaten, Anton was covering the elections again. On the evening of 9 August, he was working at a polling station at which there was no more space in the ballot box for new ballots and those wishing to vote had formed a huge queue stretching along the street. He did a few live broadcasts for Radio Svoboda from the scene and then left for the editorial office.

– On the way, the camera operator and I noticed we were being followed by a dark minibus. It was literally sitting on our tail. The colleague I was travelling with said on air, “we’ve got an escort”. And right after that, the minibus disappeared. Although I was already prepared for my work on election night to be over soon – the journalist recalls.

From the editorial office, the film crew headed to the Minsk Hero City Obelisk in the city (where protesters were supposed to be gathering). The authorities had completely blocked access to mobile internet and partially cut off the mobile phone network.

But the Radio Svoboda journalists managed to connect to the internet from a flat overlooking the obelisk. They livestreamed the protesters being dispersed for around an hour.

– We were really scared to come out of that flat after filming. I knew some kind of war was going on out there.

Belarusian learned what stun grenades were on the night of the ninth and tenth. I thought that rubber bullets were like airsoft (a field team game in which rubber bullets are shot – translator’s note), because we’d never dealt with them before. Previously, I had only covered one revolution – in Armenia. That was a whole month’s worth of shish kebabs. But here I was experiencing fear for the first time in my life.

The journalist and camera operator had to make their way to the car by night through streets shrouded in the smoke of exploding grenades.

– Everything booming all around, the wounded emerge from nowhere and show us photos on their phones... I think to myself: “What could save us now? A plastic snowboard helmet, a fabric vest?”. Later, we break into a sweat at the very thought of how to save our lives, and people, on seeing the “press” vests, stop us and start applauding. We walk across people’s yards, greeted by ovations like superstars.

Around three in the morning, I finally got home and went to bed, aware that I had reported on a turning point in Belarusian history. Nothing would be the same again.
The next day, the protestors started erecting barricades.

– It was time for us to go there, but I realised I was shaking. I go to the park for an hour and walk in silence. Then I return to the car, sigh and drive to “Riga” – Anton says.

On the evening of 10 August, the most important events in the capital were taking place on a square by the Riga shopping centre.

– In sterile, safe Minsk, we saw two-or-three-metre-long barricades made from rubbish bins and grates. Someone in the crowd shouted: “All of you here, everyone to the barricades!”. Before my eyes, minibuses blocked the road, forming a barrier so that law enforcement officers couldn’t get through. It was clear that the atmosphere was getting heated and would soon reach boiling point. The camera operator and I were standing on the roof of a pizzeria. Twenty metres away, they started shooting and I shout: “Let’s go!”, but the operator continued filming, at which point I said: “One more minute and I’ll smash your face in with this microphone”. Nothing like that had ever happened to me before...

Belarusian media partisans

On 2 October 2020, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus (MID) published new accreditation rules for journalists from foreign media outlets. Any previously issued accreditation automatically lost its validity from that date. The MID did not publicly notify any journalists about these changes.

Anton Trofimovich received his accreditation in May 2016 and there were never any problems renewing his documents. What is more, his accreditation had been extended at the end of May – when the protests were already gathering momentum.

Accredited journalists had always been left untouched in Belarus before – even at protests where the participants were being arrested.

– Generally, the MID was regarded as the most progressive ministry, and so it was – until this summer. Suddenly, nine Radio Svoboda journalists had their accreditation taken away. This was the way everything was going, because the authorities had been accusing us for months of coordinating the protests. They were saying that people get excited by our reports, so are more likely to go out onto the streets. The Minister of Internal Affairs Karayev gave the order to “deal with Radio Svoboda”. And that’s how we’ve been “dealt with” – Anton explains.

How has the work of journalists changed in the new conditions? Radio Svoboda has been forced to give up on the idea of streaming footage, live broadcasts and even making comments. Its correspondents are still in Minsk, but need to be very cautious when gathering information “in the field”. Recently, Anton did an interview at night in a dark yard, but was photographed by a “quiet man” (an agent in civilian clothes, translator’s note). Recently, Anton was required to present himself to the police again. He was charged under art 22.9 or the Code of Administrative Offences (the illegal distribution of media products). This does not put him at risk of detention. He can only be fined. But the journalist has no intention of going to the police department building. These days, answering a demand to present oneself at a police station can end in a 15-day prison term.

– The authorities have created such conditions that all journalists have become media partisans. Collecting information requires incredible effort. The main channel providing this information to users is the Telegram application. Journalism has moved to Telegram, and everyone is a reporter now. Today, the news in Belarus is not only the unique history of a revolution. It is also an unprecedented case on the media market. More is going on in one day than used to happen in a month. This summer we woke up to a new reality.

Catarina Andreeva
The Belsat journalist Stanislav Ivashkevich was arrested in Minsk as early as 9 August. He was only performing his duties, shooting material at the entrance to a school in which a polling station was located. Even though Stanislav repeated to police officers several times that he was a journalist, he was arrested along with several voters who were waiting for the votes to be counted. He was taken first to the central processing centre on Okrestina Street. In all likelihood, there were no beatings during this temporary detention, because this occurred before the mass protests. However, he and his cellmates were beaten during their later detention with rubber truncheons.

At this point, Stanislav’s colleagues raised the alarm. The journalist’s disappearance became big news on the internet, with such headlines appearing as: “The creator of the film about Lukashenko’s women has gone missing in Minsk”.

The fact of the matter is Ivashkevich is a presenter on the Belsat TV channel and an investigative journalist. He and his team had indeed shot material that broached the subject of the Belarusian President’s women and his interest in models. Naturally, Belarusians involved in the protests thought the journalist’s arrest had been politically motivated. But this was not the case.

Stanislav Ivashkevich’s story

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Stanislav disappeared in Minsk on the day of the presidential elections,

but on the morning of 13 August, he was released. He immediately spoke about the detention of other journalists about whom he had information.

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once before, in 2001, when I was still a student. I ended up there after taking part in a demonstration. 20 years ago, I stayed there overnight, and in the morning the court fined me. This time, I spent three days and two nights at Okrestina, which I will remember for a long time – the journalist says.

Being detained and fined is hardly a novelty for this investigative journalist. Any internet search on Stanislav's name will immediately turn up news stories containing similar content. Here is an example from 2017: “According to the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ), on 24 August, the District Court in Lida fined Stanislav Ivashkevich, a journalist from the Belsat TV channel, 420 roubles (ca. £180). Administrative proceedings were instigated due to Stanislav creating material on a village near Lida, which is sinking into the slurry created by a local pig farm. The story was broadcast at the end of September and shortly afterwards, Ivashkevich received a summons to appear at the police headquarters so that a report could be prepared. Ivashkevich was charged with the ‘illegal distribution of media content’ (art. 22.9 of the Code of Administrative Offences) and ‘working without accreditation’”.

The protests currently taking place in Belarus have forced Stanislav to intensify his efforts.

– On the evening of election day, I filmed a polling station closing and the announcement of the voting results. There was a lot of work to do on election day, so all the teams were mobilised. Some were shooting footage with a camera operator, while others were just using their phones. I was on my own.

At one point, the election commission refused observers entry. There were no explanations; the observers were just ignored. Someone started writing a statement.

I was standing off to the side, filming and doing interviews. At that point, OMON officers appeared and began arresting people, including me. Then, we were taken to the minibus that was parked in the schoolyard. I knew they were OMON, because over the next few days, men wearing black clothes with no identification markings were making arrests at demonstrations.

The journalist recalls that the detainees in the minibus were being guarded by ordinary police officers and patrol officers. When they were not being supervised by the superiors, they allowed some of the detainees to call their families. In other words, they showed a semblance of humanity. Then, the OMON drove the detainees to the detention facility at Okrestina, where the effects of clashes between law enforcers and protestors were clear to see.

– I saw the casualties, including a man wounded in the chest, who lay on the ground. My future cellmate had been riding the police minibus with the wounded man. They had lain them side by side, so his trousers were completely soaked in the wounded man’s blood. Later, he told us in the cell that after his arrest, when he was lying in the police minibus, he saw through the open door how a law enforcement officer threw a pump-action shotgun to one of his
I'm a Journalist. Why Are You Beating Me?

According to the journalist, no one was beaten at first. The police took down their details and took away their personal belongings. 13 people were put in a three-person cell and were held in those conditions without food and normal water for two days.

– Once a loaf of bread was brought to the cell and nobody took the last slice. That was symbolic. As for water, we were drinking from a tap by a basin, but it tasted unpleasant. It was possible to breathe somehow. Next to us, there was a six-person cell in which 40 people had been placed. From time to time, they would knock and shout because they didn’t have enough air. You could hear the cries of people who were being beaten.

But we had been picked up before the election results were announced, so I think they treated us a little more leniently. They say those detained later were treated more brutally. But we also faced unpleasant situations. Once they took us out to the yard, just to beat us with truncheons. They told us to run down the corridor and then down the stairs. A row of officers in black lined our path and each one delivered a blow with a truncheon to someone running past. We went out onto the yard, where we had to kneel with our faces to the wall while we were beaten across our backs. After this, they drove us back to the cell – again “past the officers in formation”, who drove us on with blows of their truncheons. After that, on the third day, there were mobile trials. Judges came to the detention centre and began to sentence each person in turn to 10 to 15 days in custody for taking part in an unauthorised gathering. My case was processed in the same way – says Ivashkevich.

The journalist recalls that all this time he was thinking how to get a message to his loved ones who were looking for him. It can only be imagined what his family were thinking. When he met the judge, Stanislav demanded a lawyer, but nobody paid any notice to his request. It was also ignored that Ivashkevich was constantly stressing that he was a journalist and was only at the polling station because he was performing the duties he had been assigned by his employer.

– The judge refused to view the video footage on my phone, which showed that I was at the polling station as a journalist. They also didn’t allow me to call as witnesses those police officers who had arrested me at a completely different part of the city to the address shown in the court files. The judge only took into account that I’m a carer for my underage son, making an exception in my case and fining me rather than sentencing me to the several days in detention the others received.

Out of the hundreds of people that were convicted that day, only four of us went free – the journalist stresses.

Interestingly, Stanislav did not receive his personal effects when he left. A few days later, the prison administration let in some volunteers who sorted out all the objects and posted photographs of them in a Telegram group. About five days after his detention, the journalist got back his belongings (his wallet, keys and telephone), but his belt and watch were still missing. Later, he found these too.
After hearing his story, I ask the most pressing question: "How do you feel after all this?"

– Fine. There were only a few scratches. But my colleague (Sergei Gerasimovich; there’ll be another story about him – ed.) was passing blood in his urine a few days after his release and his leg is still numb. As for my case, I didn’t approach the police immediately about my beating, because I could already see that many people were being denied their rights. But later on, I made an application to the prosecutor’s office – Ivashkevich revealed.

During his prison stay, the journalist heard the outrage in the voices of officers who were discussing why people were going to the demonstrations. Apparently, "they have knives and are maiming law enforcement officers". But the officers who were saying this were those who were involved in the beatings, those who were wearing the masks. And the guards walking down the corridors was passing blood in his urine a few days after his release and his leg is still numb. As for my case, I didn’t approach the police immediately about my beating, because I could already see that many people were being denied their rights. But later on, I made an application to the prosecutor’s office – Ivashkevich revealed.

Stanislav also spoke briefly about his encounters with the prison officers.

– The same people who had beaten us shouted: “We didn’t invite you here”, “We’re working an extra shift because of you”, this probably cheered them up...

– And what about the foreign security forces? A lot was written on the internet about Russians arriving in Belarus as well – I ask.

– I think the source of these rumours could have been some officers’ accents, which sounded inauthentic to a Belarusian’s ear. But earlier, Alexander Lukashenko had openly spoken about officers from the law enforcement agencies of other states being granted refuge in the Belarusian security apparatus. For example, after 2014, “Berkutovs” arrived here from Ukraine. Apart from this, joint exercises with Russia involve exchanges of law enforcement officers between the two countries. But Russian law enforcement officers are not used on a large scale. In any case, those who were shouting at us and talking to us were speaking normally. We would have noticed if they’d been foreigners.

According to the journalist, the situation today in Belarus is still tense. Different social groups are taking part in the protests, with pensioners as likely to take part as workers.

– The Belarusians still don’t agree with the rigged election results. They want Lukashenko to leave, stop the violence and organise new elections. Many are afraid, but in spite of everything, tens of thousands are gathering. Mainly, of course, at the weekends. And of course Minsk has become the epicentre of the protests, though protests are taking place in other cities as well. By the way, there’s been an interesting development: I have seen how minibuses have approached protesters, opened their doors, law enforcement officers have thrown out stun grenades and people have dispersed, but then they have thrown themselves at the minibuses and the police have driven off without arresting anyone. So people are more determined. “Chats in the yard” have also become popular: people are agreeing to meet in advance, collecting in their yards, raising flags and holding discussions.

Sometimes started discussing the political situation. They were saying that Svetlana Tikhanovskaya would make a bad president. Before the trial, a guard leaned over towards a journalist to ask if it was true that everyone attending the rallies was being paid 70 roubles. The journalist of course denied this was the case.
Recently, a Belarusian journalist contentedly wrote on Facebook that the journalist community have managed to get food to one of the detainees. These are the realities of living in today’s Belarus.

Stanislav Ivashkevich was recently arrested again, but the police officers in the minibus accepted he was a journalist from a national news channel and released him. These days, the media don’t display any identification marks. He says that law enforcement officers sometimes target journalists. It is therefore safer for them not to openly identify themselves as “press”.

“The actions of law enforcement agencies have created a continuing sense of total lawlessness. I’d like the situation to change for the better – Stanislav confesses.

The interview with Stanislav Ivashkevich was recorded in the third week of October. Before 25 October, which was a Sunday, we asked the journalist to verify the text and he made a few improvements. He wanted to get this done before this date because he had to work that day “in the field”, as the journalistic jargon goes.

“I work at the protests. I’ll get right back to you if they don’t arrest me” – my Belarusian colleague writes to me frankly, without clouding the issue.

Nazarij Vivcharik

“Criminal proceedings, a concentration camp and torture by fishcake. Valeria Ulasik’s story”.

Valeria Ulasik’s story

The journalist Valeria Ulasik found herself in the epicentre of events when reporting live on the post-election protests of 9-12 August. She later faced charges in a criminal case. She told us about her feelings leading up to her arrest and her nightmarish stay in a detention centre.

During the election campaign in Belarus, Valeria Ulasik was cooperating with the Nastoyashcheye Vremya web portal. Initially, there were no plans for her to appear on air. She was supposed to remain behind the scenes. However, the film crew, which had come in from Prague, were arrested at the Minsk Hotel two days before the election. The journalists were deported from Belarus, which explains why Ulasik was broadcasting live from the mass protests.

Valeria was in the thick of the action when the law enforcement agencies were using special means (stun grenades, pepper spray and rubber bullets) against demonstrators and journalists:

– That was terrifying and utterly beyond belief. You simply can’t comprehend what must be happening in your city for there to be so many explosions. Flashes of light, smoke, gas. You simply don’t want to believe it’s happening for real – she recalls.

On that occasion, the journalist was fortunate not to have been injured or fallen into the hands of the police. But the next month she was simply taken from her home.

“We understood without uttering a word: they’d come for us”
Valeria was arrested on 8 September. That day, early in the morning, law enforcement officers turned up at the flat she shares with her mother, Halina Ulasik (the news editor at TUT.BY, one of the most popular information portals in Belarus).

– It was seven in the morning. I woke up because someone was ringing the doorbell very insistently. Clearly, it wasn’t a neighbour or the postman. I went into my mum’s room and we understood without uttering a word: they’d come for us. We sat there without moving for some thirty minutes, but they kept ringing.

I wrote to my friends that I was probably going to be arrested. I began cleaning my phone – I have nothing to hide, but I didn’t want to suffer the indignity of them snooping around my messages.

– Valeria says.

Suddenly, the ringing stopped. A colleague of Halina Ulasik’s who lives in the neighbouring building managed to get a message to the women: from her window, she had seen three people in balaclavas come out of the building, get into a car and drive off.

– I started thinking about what to do. Maybe I should leave or at least get my equipment out? But I didn’t have enough time. They returned and this time began banging on the door rather than just ringing.

Valeria and Halina opened the door. The law enforcement officials informed them that their flat was going to be searched and that Valeria had been charged with an infringement of article 23.34 of the Code of Administrative Offences (taking part in an unauthorised gathering). According to Valeria, “Mum asked why they were searching the flat when this was an administrative rather than a criminal offence. ‘How is that possible?’ They replied: ‘There is a criminal case’.”

– One of the officers showed us a document that mentioned article 23.34 of the Code of Administrative Offences, and below – article 293 of the Criminal Code (the organisation of mass disturbances). As I read this document aloud, my mum grew paler by the second – the journalist recalls.

The law enforcement agencies informed Valeria that she was under arrest. According to Valeria, “At that point, I say: ‘I have wet hair. Wait until I’ve dried it, otherwise I’ll get ill. And at least let me brush my teeth. It’s unlikely I’ll return home today. You can’t object to that, right?’ I wrote to my boss that I wouldn’t be coming to work that day, and probably not the next one either. I informed who I could, switched off my telephone and hid my laptop, though they still managed to find it. I purposefully really took my time drying my hair.”

Valeria was not allowed to be present while the flat was being searched. She was taken outside and then driven to the Moskovsky District police department, where the journalist received a charge sheet to sign. Her shoelaces were confiscated and she was photographed and fingerprinted.

– During the drive to the police department, they kept winding me up: “So where are your fellow journalists? Where are your buddies? Not one of them is here. I don’t think you’ll be missed”. Of course, I blocked my ears to all that. I knew they were trying to annoy me.
Then they kept me in a cell two paces wide and ten paces long. A narrow concrete ‘pencil box’ with a concrete bench by the wall. And I was only wearing a t-shirt. I felt cold.

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I’m a Journalist. Why Are You Beating Me?

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I’m a Journalist. Why Are You Beating Me?

"Are we in a concentration camp?"

Valeria’s case was still being heard when two plainclothes police officers came to collect her. They told her that they were taking her to the Investigative Committee for questioning. They escorted the young woman out to the police station forecourt and shut her in a car. She sat there for around half an hour, but wasn’t taken anywhere. Valeria assumes that they clearly weren’t given the go ahead from above.

– In the end, two masked men arrived and said: “Well, well, Valeria Alexandrovna, it seems we’re letting you go until the trial. Just come back in and take your belongings. And put on a jacket before you catch a cold. You won’t be appearing in court tomorrow”. I was handed over to the duty officer and he took me back inside.

– I began knocking on the iron door. I demanded to speak to a lawyer. “Why am I not allowed out? I’m cold, I feel ill, I haven’t eaten or drunk anything for the whole day, I haven’t been to the bathroom, I want to sleep.” I was screaming like that nonstop. In the end, the duty officer opened the door and asked: “What do you want?”. I told him I wanted to see a lawyer. “Look, I’m trying to get through to the person who makes the decisions here. And your lawyer is not going to decide anything here. Perhaps you could stop interrupting me? I already want you out of here as soon as possible”.

Around midnight, Valeria was escorted to a police jeep and taken to the detention centre on Okrestina Street. She was driven there with a young woman who had been arrested for stealing a bottle of vodka from a shop.

– That is the point, of course, that they finally managed to upset me. First they say they’re about to release me and then they hold me in a cold cell for four hours and take me to Okrestina. I was angry and shocked.

When the young police officer who was accompanying Valeria to the detention facility learned that she had been arrested “for political reasons”, he tried to show his sympathy. However, Valeria makes clear that this gesture failed to impress her: “After all, he’s part of that system”.

– Behind the wheel sat two unbalanced men. They were yelling at each other using the crudest language. They were telling filthy jokes and laughing just as filthily. In my opinion they hadn’t got any further than fifth grade at school (when children master basic literacy skills, translator’s note), at least from their manner of speaking and vocabulary. My guard rolled his eyes from time to time, saying, “they keep hiring all these retards” – Valeria recalls.

– At Okrestina we were met by some man. He shouted at me and that girl (the one arrested for stealing vodka – author’s note) to give him our earrings. Neither I nor she was able to do that. I couldn’t remove my earring because I’d only recently had my ear pierced. I told him I couldn’t do it. And he says there
Both young women were put in one cell. A little later, they were joined by another detainee, a 63-year-old woman who had been arrested during that night’s protest. Some women had gathered in Komarovski Square outside the covered market to express their solidarity with Maria Kolesnikova, who was in custody. That was when, on 8 September, the police decided for the first time to break up the women’s protest and many of them were arrested: “They were bringing them in all night. Some were wearing dresses and high heels, others something else pretty. Beautiful girls.”

The next day, the trial resumed and the case was heard remotely again. Valeria was taken to a separate room and placed in a cage with a laptop sitting on a table in front of her. Eventually, the court sentenced the journalist to 10 days of detention. The prison officer who had been guarding Valeria during the Skype trial was attempting to express his sympathy: “The guy was wailing nonstop: ‘How awful, 10 days, how awful!’ This only made me even more angry. What use was his wailing to me? Like a woman weeping at a funeral, dear God! I wanted to be taken back to the cell as quickly as possible. He even shouted ‘goodbye’ after me.”

The court treated the journalist’s cellmates more leniently. The 63-year-old woman was fined and the girl who had stolen the bottle of vodka was sentenced to five days of detention.

– The girl was surprised: “I stole and got five days, but you didn’t do anything and got ten?”. She didn’t realise that things had got that bad.

How “politicals” were greeted at Zhodino

While she was being held in custody at Okrestina Street, she didn’t eat anything.

– I was physically incapable of swallowing what they gave us. It was impossible to eat more than one spoonful of that broth without vomiting. The fishcakes made from bread and fishbones were also impossible to eat. Clearly, they have a new method: torture by fish – Valeria recalls.

Her hunger and thirst caused her blood pressure to drop and she began “shaking” a little. On the morning of her trial, the journalist’s cellmates shared some sugared tea with her. She didn’t drink anything else for two days. The water from the tap was dirty and she found the kissel that was served with lunch impossible to drink. Nothing at all was given to drink at dinnertime.

The iron beds were pure torture. They cut into the body through the thin mattresses, leaving bruises. And all this was accompanied by extremely unsanitary conditions, with cockroaches scuttling around the cell.

On the third day, Valeria and some of the other prisoners were transferred to a prison in Zhodino. In recent months, this has become common practice in Belarus: Okrestina prisoners are sent to other detention centres outside the capital before the weekend to make room for those arrested during the Sunday march.

Valeria was taken to Zhodino in a police prison van. She was stuffed into a “cabin
Valeria had heard that the conditions at Zhodino were better than those at Okrestina, so she was reasonably optimistic about being transferred. But when she arrived there, she was shocked by what she saw.

– The “welcome” at Zhodino is terrifying – apparently, to scare new arrivals out of their wits. They came to collect us with dogs, all barking away. The guards kept cursing, smacking their batons against the walls and yelling, “quicker, quicker still”, “stand up here”, “what are you standing for, you retard!”. You get taken through some dungeon, the dogs bark, the guards bang their batons, yel at you. It was so bad that I almost missed Okrestina – Valeria remembers with a sad smile.

However, the cell was cleaner and warmer than the one at Okrestina and the food tasted much better. There was even running hot water and a mirror hung on the wall.

According to the journalist, the prison staff were a mixed bag. Some even behaved like human beings: “However, the management there were all bipolar: five minutes of silence, five minutes of screaming obscenities. No one understood why this was. They are very strange people with a disturbed psyche. They always want to make themselves feel more important at others’ expense. They insult people and express themselves appallingly.”

During her period of detention, she was only allowed two 15-minute walks: “The window in the cell was completely blacked out. Nothing could be seen through it. It was only possible to make out whether it was day or night. When we moved up close to the grating, we could feel a light breeze and just breathe some fresh air. Being confined for ten days without daylight and fresh air is incredibly tough.”

“I knew they’d have no problem finding a way to remove me”

The criminal charge that facilitated the searching of Valeria’s flat on 8 September disappeared into thin air. There have been no more investigations into her activities and she has not been summoned for questioning.

However, the TUT.BY web portal did receive a warning from the Ministry of Information in connection with “the publication of false information pertaining to a criminal case against Valeria Ulasik”. One of the reasons for this warning was that it served as formal proof justifying the authorities’ decision to strip TUT.BY of its status as a media outlet.

Shortly after her release, Valeria left the country; she has decided to take a short break. However, she is keen to stress that this won’t be for long: “I plan to return soon”.

When talking about her arrest, Valeria acknowledges that nothing that had happened to her had taken her by surprise.

– As soon as I began broadcasting live, I realised that if I became a person of interest to them, they’d have no problem finding a way to remove me. They’d just run my details through their database: first, they’d remind me that I had worked at Belsat, then that I had taken part in the Kalinovsky Programme (this programme helps young Belarusians whose political views make it impossible for them to study in Belarus – translator’s note) and finally, they’d point out that my mum is the news editor of the TUT.BY portal. That’s what I was expecting and that’s exactly what happened. I can’t say I was surprised when they rang my doorbell.

Catarina Andreeva
Belarusian media outlets write about Yegor Martinovich regularly. The editor-in-chief of the online newspaper Nasha Niva was detained during the night of 10/11 August. He was released shortly afterwards, but in September his apartment was searched. He then spent three days in custody and was fined, but that was not the end of it. Such are the daily realities for this journalist. Despite the problems Martinovich is facing, he doesn’t give up. He continues working. His social media posts on the situation in Belarus are read by many people, many of whom come from other countries. His posts gather many likes and comments and those who read them are happy to share them. His texts are laconic, but catchy and laden with deeper meaning. It was Martinovich’s posts that persuaded me to observe the situation in Belarus more attentively.

Evidently, Yegor not only loves his country and profession, but also the publishing company for which he works.

- We have a website and three magazines: two for children and one history magazine. We employ around 20 staff in total. What makes our newspaper different? It was established in 1906! Nasha Niva is mentioned in every Belarusian history textbook. It’s a national brand that has been around since before the First World War. After the Bolsheviks took power, the magazine ceased to exist. It was revived in 1991 after Belarus gained its independence. Now, I’m the newspaper’s editor-in-chief – says Yegor Martinovich. – We work in Minsk and are well aware that the regime doesn’t make things easy for the free press. We’re hoping to get through this period without being arrested or fined. After all, we’re working completely legally.

However, things haven’t gone to plan. A few months after the election, one criminal case and two administrative cases were initiated against Yegor Martinovich. Since 28 August, Nasha Niva’s original website has been blocked. Its articles now appear on the nashaniva.by website.

- We have a lawyer now, but in the current situation in Belarus, lawyers are mainly hired to enable defendants to maintain some form of contact with their families. These days, everyone knows that once a case has been brought to court, it makes no difference what is said, as the decision has already been taken. I am being tried in a defamation case. It is rare for proceedings to be instigated based on this legal article, so this is an exceptional situation. I was detained for 3 days. I imagine that is the maximum period someone can be held for preventative purposes – Yegor said.

Since the protests began in Belarus, Yegor has been arrested twice. His first arrest took place in Minsk during the night of 10/11 August. For over a day and a half, no one knew what had happened to him.

On the afternoon of 12 August, Martinovich turned out to be in custody in Zhodino, from where he was moved to Minsk.

– The day before, our editorial colleague Natalia Lubnevskaya had been wounded. I spent virtually the whole day with her in hospital. The next day, I went to pick up a journalist who was hiding from the police in a café. I was approached by a man with a rifle. He told me to get out of the car and demanded that I show him my documents. I took out my press card. This pleased him and he directed me to the prison van. It was so cramped in there that it was impossible to sit down and anyone unable to keep on their feet had no option but to fall on another sweat-drenched prisoner – Yegor recalls. – When we got out of the van, they beat us with batons, so everyone moved quickly with lowered heads. It was impossible to say anything.
According to Martinovich, he, along with the other detainees, “spent the first night lying face down in the yard of the Zavodskoy District Police Department”.

He was then taken to a detention centre in Zhodino in the Minsk Region, where 27 people were being held at one time in the Republic of Belarus’. The other men, some of whom had been beaten to a pulp, had no opportunity to inform their loved ones that they were in custody and didn’t know when their case would be heard, even though 72 hours had passed since their arrest” – Martinovich wrote on a social networking site after his release.

people were looking for me after my disappearance and I couldn’t just forget that. At this point they let it be known that in that case, nothing could be guaranteed – Yegor said.

Later, the situation got tenser. In September, the story of the alleged defamation of a person in public office began to gain ground along with new searches and a new arrest. Why “alleged”?

During an official event in Kiev Square in Minsk, a DJ decided to drop a song by Viktor Tsoi called *Peremen!* (Changes), for which he was immediately arrested. The DJ was Vlad Sokolovsky. He later informed a journalist that during his detention

On Okrestina Street, he was beaten by the deputy interior minister, Alexander Barsukov, whom he recognised from photographs. Nasha Niva wrote about this. The article mentions that during the third day of his sentence, one of the bosses came to Sokolovsky’s cell and hit him twice.

During this period, Yegor’s colleagues were looking for him everywhere, while he was sitting in a cell without any information about his legal status and not knowing what would happen next. He didn’t get anything to eat until he’d been there 20 hours.

“I’m a journalist, so I can be released from detention ’in the name of the press’.”

Next, he was fined 405 Belarusian roubles (about £120) for taking part in an unauthorised gathering.

– When I was released, a spokeswoman from the law enforcement authorities’ press office approached me and said that my situation was ugly. But if I kept my mouth shut, they’d destroy the charge sheet and we could consider everything forgotten. I said this was obviously impossible because

– After his release, Vlad Sokolovsky recognised that governor. It was Barsukov, deputy to Karayev, the interior minister. The deputy minister arrived at the detention facility on the night of 14 August. He assured the people there that no one was being beaten or tortured. After these events, the DJ left for Lithuania. And my house was searched.
I was taken with my lawyer to the Investigation Committee for questioning. Telephones, pen drives, any other devices, documents and SIM cards disappeared from my apartment. And I didn’t get out for three days. I was charged with defamation (Art. 188 of the criminal code) in a file that raises the topic of deputy minister Barsukov – Yegor explains.

In the eyes if the law, he is now a suspect in an ongoing case. He has received a ban from leaving the country. He has also been reminded about his detention in August: “Please remember that you were detained for participating in an unauthorised gathering”. – But the paradox is that when I was in custody, the police chief came to me without a lawyer and asked if I wanted to leave the country like Tikhanovskaya [Lukashenko’s presidential opponent, ed.]. I don’t know how to interpret that. Either it was a set-up, or they really wanted to expel as many politicians, activists and public figures as possible from the country so as not to draw public attention to the current political situation.

Later, they put a man in my cell who also discussed similar topics with me. In the end, when I left, I was handed a document informing me that I was not allowed to leave Belarusian territory. But I really didn’t intend and still don’t intend to go anywhere. I want, as I should, to work in my own country.” – Yegor stated.

In his view, everything boils down to the fact they want him to betray the name of the journalist who conducted the interview with the DJ. The article was published unsigned due to a technical hitch. But the editing team later decided to leave it unsigned so as not to expose its author.

The Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) has commented on Martinovich’s detention and the pressure he has been placed under. The organisation has made the following statement on its website:

“In the criminal proceedings against Yegor Martinovich (a case involving law enforcement officials), there are noteworthy signs of censorship and abuse of legal norms meant to restrict freedom of speech. We demand Yegor Martinovich’s immediate release and termination of criminal proceedings.”

The BAJ representatives also state that they favour the “general decriminalisation of defamation”.

Yegor continues his work reporting on domestic events. He claims he was lucky in that, unlike other prisoners, he was not beaten heavily during his detention. He admits that the psychological burden of this work really weighs down on him, but he knew from the very beginning that the journalistic profession and telling the truth in Belarus carry a certain element of risk.

– As for the injuries from the baton blows inflicted on me during my detention in August, they were only bruises. Of course, it’s not nice being fined, but these events still need to be reported on. By the way, on a march a few weeks ago, my attention lapsed literally for a moment and at the very same time, I felt someone patting me on the shoulder. I was expecting an OMON officer, but it was these strange men in jeans with batons and weapons. Those who work at the protests. I don’t know what kind of organisation they are. They arrested me and my photographer colleague. They led me to a prison van. After we’d driven around Minsk a while, they dropped us at the police station. I didn’t know if they were going to lock us up again overnight or charge us.
The charges we heard later were absurd: we were being held on suspicion of refusing to obey the police. There, everything is mixed up and fabricated. Such charges are probably laid to discourage journalists from working and put people off from going out to protest – Yegor claims.

– We won’t let the fines and detentions deter us from continuing our work. Journalism must live on – Martinovich said.

At the end of October, at the time of this report’s writing, demonstrations are still taking place in Belarus. Many protestors have been arrested, as have journalists. The people are demanding only two things – an end to the repressions and Lukashenko’s resignation.

“It’s the images that scare the authorities most”.

Vladimir Gridin’s story

“Get up! Phones in your pockets!”. In the semi gloom of a bar in Minsk, OMON officers are shouting at and kicking people who just a moment ago were sitting quietly at one of the tables. “At least let me get my equipment,” says Vladimir Gridin, one of Belarus’ most famous photographers. He has come to the bar with a colleague to send some photographs to his editorial office. The video of their arrest quickly circulated around all the media outlets.

On that day, 13 September, Vladimir Gridin had been taking photographs during the March of Heroes – a protest rally in Minsk that had attracted almost 200,000 people. After the march, Gridin dropped in at the 1067 Bar with another photographer Alexander Vasyukovich to send his material to his editorial office, because he was unable to send photographs directly from the rally: mobile internet doesn’t actually work in the city on Sundays. About 30 or 40 minutes later, a group of masked officers stormed the bar: they got the journalists in an armlock, took them outside, put them in a black minibus and took them to the Frunzensky district police department.

– At first, I thought they’d made a mistake, they’d confused us with someone else. I had a press badge round my neck and tried to tell them we were journalists. Zero reaction – Gridin recalls.
An aggressive officer met them at the police department:

“Who knows, maybe he was hoping to get promoted? Immediately, he took our memory cards from our cameras. While we were waiting, my phone rang. He ordered me to answer it, but I just dropped the call. He noticed this, lost his temper and kicked me in the stomach.

By the time the journalists arrived at the police department, a charge sheet had been prepared alleging they had “taken part in an unauthorised gathering”. Everything became clear at that point: this was no mistake; they would need to spend at least 72 hours in custody.

This officer also hit a friend of Alexander Vasyukovich’s several times – the designer Yegor Kolyagin, who had also been arrested at the 1067 Bar. It was already night when all three of them were taken to the Okrestina detention centre, where they were put in separate cells.

“There should have been a photo here”

– Sasha and I believe that we were originally the victims of a random arrest. Only later, when they saw our data and discovered what we had been photographing, did they decide to punish us. But most of our colleagues think that they were acting on orders: to locate where we were, go there and arrest us – Vladimir says.

Gridin and Vasyukovich were detained on Sunday, but the court did not take up their case until Tuesday. The journalists were not taken to the courthouse. Instead, they participated in the trial by video link from the detention centre. This trial format had become the norm in Belarus by then. The authorities explain that this is a precautionary measure curtailing the spread of coronavirus. Lukashenko has repeatedly ridiculed the pandemic, labelling it a “psychosis”, but when the motives are political, the authorities are happy to employ anti-Covid restrictions.

Vladimir Gridin was charged with alleged participation in an unauthorised gathering on 13 September, at which he shouted out the slogans, “Shame on you!”, “Go away!” and “Long live Belarus!”. The case rested on a copy of the charge sheet and report drawn up under police questioning. However, the most absurd thing about the situation was that the case files stated that Gridin had taken part in a protest at 7, Romanovskaya Sloboda Street (the bar where the journalists had been arrested), but there had not been any demonstrations that day anywhere near the bar. The court was even given CCTV footage that clearly showed that the arrest had taken place at a time when Gridin had been working on his computer in the bar. It was inconceivable that he could have shouted out any slogans at that particular moment.

The judge sent back the charge sheet for revision, but the journalists remained in custody. The next day, the police returned the edited charge sheet to the court: it was now claimed that Gridin and Vasyukovich had been protesting near Pushkinskaya metro station for two hours prior to their arrest. There had indeed been protests that day at that location, but the journalists had been carrying out their professional duties. According to Gridin,

“They presented a recording to the court in which Sasha and I go out to the roadway, photograph the protestors and walk away. This was regarded as proof of our participation in the rally. Even though it was obvious that we’d just been doing our jobs.”

This trial format had become the norm in Belarus by then. The authorities explain that this is a precautionary measure curtailing the spread of coronavirus. Lukashenko has repeatedly ridiculed the pandemic, labelling it a “psychosis”, but when the motives are political, the authorities are happy to employ anti-Covid restrictions.
In the end, both photographers were sentenced to 11 days of detention.

After that court decision, all Belarus’ independent media outlets, in an act of solidarity, chose not to publish photographs with their stories. The photographs were replaced by a white frame containing the words: “There should have been a photo here” and brief information about the photographers’ detention.

“My detention is not quite a closed chapter for me”

The two young men with whom Gridin originally shared a cell at Okrestina were sentenced to 13 days of detention. However, one of them was later charged under art. 342 of the Criminal Code (actions grossly breaching the peace), an article that has been widely applied during the political repressions currently taking place in Belarus.

One of the “politicals” in Gridin’s cell had not received any of his personal possessions, including his clothes. He was freezing and quickly became ill.

However, on the whole, the period of detention passed by without any more notable incidents. The prison meals were supplemented by food packages sent in by loved ones. However, some of the products in the packages failed to reach the prisoners, disappearing without trace. The hardest challenge they faced was adapting to the rhythm of life behind bars. The journalist recalls: “Time flows differently there. I’m generally a good sleeper, but there I couldn’t fall asleep for half the night.”

One day, a homeless man was thrown into Vladimir’s cell. He was drunk, giving off an awful smell and behaving inappropriately. According to Vladimir: “I think they did that on purpose. A filthy little trick. The idea most probably came from the prison officers”. However, in the end, they didn’t come into conflict with their new cellmate.

Vladimir’s final hours in custody were particularly nerve-wracking for him. It is not unusual in Belarus for prisoners finding themselves facing new charges upon their release. Fortunately, this did not happen to the photographer.

However, he was left in no doubt that their prison term was a personal act of revenge against him and Vasyukovich: “They could have detained us for three days or fined us… But they clearly wanted to punish us more harshly.”

The August bloodbath

Vladimir Gridin began working in journalism 12 years ago. He has been arrested several times during this period, but he had never been to the detention centre at Okrestina before the recent repressions. He had also never worked under fire. Taking photos during the dispersal of the protests on 10-12 August was a completely new experience for him.

On the very first day of the protests, Gridin took one of his most memorable shots from this period. The photograph depicts a young woman injured by a stun grenade. She sits on the ground, covered in blood.

– First, I took a photograph of a guy being carried in people’s arms. I saw an explosion go off near him and people taking him to an ambulance. Nearby, someone was helping this young woman. She later told me that she doesn’t remember anything from that day. She’s in Czechia now and has had two operations. For over a month, she was completely deaf in one ear. She will only regain partial hearing… Sometimes we exchange messages.

On 10 August, the second day of the protest, Gridin was working near the Pushkinskaya metro station, where soldiers from the Almaz special
One of them said: “Don’t touch the journalists”. First, I sighed with relief, but then I saw that they were escorting away a Danish photographer. I ended up following some paths through a park. And for the first time, I felt scared. Because in such situations, it is better to be with someone – he recalls.

In August, despite the risk of getting shot or injured by exploding stun grenades, he felt more comfortable working than he would a few months later. During the first days of the protests, law enforcement officers were given carte blanche to use unlimited force, so anyone who was arrested could be brutally beaten. However, there was still no unit focused on the repression of journalists.

Journalists as hostages

For the last few years, Gridin worked as a photojournalist for Radio Free Europe’s Belarusian service, Radio Svoboda. However, at the end of August, the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, without providing any explanation, stripped him and several other Radio Svoboda journalists of their press accreditation. He then began working as a freelancer for the TUT.BY portal. However, on 1 October, the authorities revoked the portal’s status as a media outlet. This was all done with a single objective in mind – to make it impossible for independent media to operate within the bounds of the law.

Vladimir believes that the origins of this unprecedented “hunt” for journalists should be sought in a statement made in July by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. In this, it was written that street protests were being coordinated through reports produced by Radio Svoboda correspondents. Following its publication, the law enforcement agencies, echoed by state propaganda, started publicly referring to journalists as the organisers of the mass protests. The persecutions had begun:

– I don’t know if the security agencies have “black lists” of journalists who should be detained. But those who end up behind bars are usually the ones taking photos and filming. It’s the images that scare the authorities most.

Why images? Law enforcement officers are breaking the law, they’re beating people. They believe that it is due to journalists that they can be identified, and later punished.

According to Vladimir, the detention of journalists has essentially assumed the form of a conveyor belt: “Some are released, while others are arrested. It is as if they’re purposely taking journalists’ hostage.”

There is no way that all this could not affect the media’s day to day work.

– I really want to take photos. But I want to select a moment when the risk will be really worth it. After all, I could go and not take a single photo because I get arrested immediately. What would be the point of that? I regret I wasn’t at Orlovska (Orlovskaya Street in Minsk, where law enforcement officers launched an attack on protestors involving the mass deployment of stun grenades – translator’s note) – the journalist confesses.

Catarina Andreeva
I asked Pavel Sverdlov, the editor-in-chief of Euroradio, about how safe journalists are in Belarus and what it was like working as an editor these days.

The conversation took place on 20 October, the same day as one of Euroradio’s staffers, Artem Mayerov, received a custodial sentence of 15 days. The young man was just carrying out his professional duties, had a press card in his possession and was wearing a vest marked “press”. Nevertheless, he was charged with refusing to comply with police instructions (a law enforcement officer allegedly ordered the place where the protest was taking place to be vacated to avoid breaching the peace).

– The other Euroradio journalists were only held for a few hours. Generally speaking, a few minutes after journalists go live, they come for them and stuff them into a car. They do this to disrupt our work. But before, they were releasing us after a few hours, when the protests had come to an end. Later they started detaining us – Pavel Sverdlov says.

14 July. One of those arrested during a live broadcast was Mikhail Ilin.

At the moment of his arrest, several thousand people were watching his report. It happened in the vicinity of Victory Square, from where Mikhail Ilin and Artem Mayerov had been covering the protest by supporters of the unregistered presidential candidates – Viktor Barbariko and Valery Tsepkalo. At the time, as Pavel Sverdlov had already mentioned, journalists were being released almost immediately.

– One of the legendary police minibuses pulled up next to us and several men in civilian clothes jumped out. They arrested me and Artem. The livestream stopped at the point I shouted, “We’re journalists!” But that made no difference to them at all. When we heard them talking later, we realised that we had been deliberately targeted for arrest. They were hunting journalists who were broadcasting live. We rode in this minibus some 10 minutes before being dragged to one police van, then another. These rides accompanied by police officers lasted at least an hour, until the minibus was completely packed with people,

14 July. One of those arrested during a live broadcast was Mikhail Ilin.

Apart from the Euroradio journalists, some Belarusian Radio Svoboda correspondents who had been streaming live were also arrested. Mikhail Ilin stresses that the journalists were generally giving a complete and realistic picture of the domestic political situation in their reports. Clearly, the authorities didn’t want the scale of the protests to be revealed.

– Frankly speaking, I think we were lucky that time. They shut us in a separate room, where we met the detained Radio Svoboda journalists – Ales Piletski and a camera operator. We sat there several hours without our phones. Generally speaking, they have the right to detain us for three hours, or until the circumstances of our arrest are clarified. So we were isolated from society while
the law enforcement agencies interfered with our work. We were released in the evening, when the protests had calmed down. Several criminal cases relating to the events of 14 July were instigated against young people who had resisted arrest. I was summoned to the prosecutor’s office as a witness even though I hadn’t seen anything because I’d been placed under arrest.

The journalists were released without charge from the police headquarters in the middle of the night.

Mikhail did not make a complaint against the police. He says that the situation in July was only the tip of the iceberg. Later on, there was even more work to do, so he basically decided not to waste his time. Anyway, he didn’t have any faith in the efficiency of the judicial system.

– All the same, there was still a chance that I would somehow come up against law enforcement officers – Mikhail says.

These days, Mikhail mostly focuses on his work on the social media networks YouTube and Telegram. It’s worth remembering that the Warsaw-based Euroradio (or European Radio for Belarus) has been active since 2006, broadcasting to Belarus in the Belarusian language on FM frequencies via satellite and on the internet. Consequently, it’s essentially a foreign media outlet. And that’s the problem. Recently, all foreign media outlets have been obligated to apply for new press accreditation for their staff operating in Belarus. Hardy anyone has been granted it.

– We’ve been working without accreditation for several weeks. This means that we, like Radio Svoboda, Deutsche Welle and others, can’t work normally. We cannot publish under our own names. We can be held liable for distributing materials on behalf of a foreign publisher. This kind of infringement is fineable. But the crucial thing is that de jure and de facto, we are virtually unable to work. Even if we wear vests marked “press”, as far as the law enforcement officers are concerned, we are nobodies. That’s why my colleague Artem Mayerov was detained. Apart from his work for us, he cooperates with the Belarusian Rino newspaper, which should have protected him. Even so, he was arrested for allegedly refusing to obey the police. Other colleagues were detained as well. All of them were sentenced to between 13 and 15 days’ detention – Ilin says.

So what can be done? Journalists have little option but to work at their own risk.

– Every protest can end in brutal detention and physical injuries, and apart from that, we can be held liable due to our legal status. The other problem is that without accreditation we can’t do interviews with any government representatives. I used to be able to telephone the Belarusian Interior Ministry’s press secretary for comment, but now she’ll refuse such requests, because I represent a non-accredited media outlet. She would also remind me that working for foreign media outlets without accreditation is prohibited. I can be prosecuted for that – explains the journalist.

The only remaining option is to collect information from the streets by sampling people’s opinions.

– The best-attended protests take place on Sundays. Will you be covering them?

– I don’t think it’s worth going for the sake of taking one photo. We could receive a 15-day custodial sentence for that, and that lost time could be more profitably spent. We ask people – readers, listeners – to share photos, films and other content. And this will be the safest solution for us – the journalist said.
Interestingly, Mikhail’s arrest during a live broadcast in July was not the end of the matter.

– On 23 September, when the information appeared that Lukashenko had been secretly sworn in as president, many people came out onto the street of the road, crosses a grassed area, weaves around other vehicles, then disappears from view with the protester before the law enforcement officers can catch them. The law enforcers fell on us, because we were filming. They told us to hand over our phones. I resisted because I was just doing my job. But

the officers threatened to shock us and got me in an arm lock. In the end, one of them pulled out my phone, managed to unblock it and forced me to remove the recording. But in the end, I used my iPhone’s technical capabilities to recover the video – Mikhail says.

The journalist recalls that he and his colleague were wearing vests marked “press” at the time, thinking that these would protect them. They tried talking to the police officers and protested until they were knocked to the ground. Of course, no one made any attempt to introduce themselves to them. He was saved by the fact that the officers’ propensity for violence wasn’t accompanied by technical skills, so Mikhail was able to save the recording.

– These days, journalists covering the protests in Belarus need to be able to sprint. That’s the main skill. Second in importance is the ability to conduct interviews – Mikhail jokes.

By the way, Mikhail is active on Twitter and other social media networks, where he makes tongue-in-cheek comments on unfolding events. He has many followers.

Belarusian enforcement officers don’t like playing CS (Counter-Strike, as series of shooter video games, ed.), because it doesn’t allow you to shoot civilians – is one of his newer posts that has collected hundreds of likes. For Mikhail, this is one way a creative person can gain a moment of release from the negative news stories Belarusians are being exposed to on a daily basis.

It is worth recalling that even though the official date of the presidential election in Belarus was 9 August, mass protests against Alexander Lukashenko began taking place from the very first days of the election campaign.

The opposition don’t agree with the announced results (over 80% for Lukashenko) and believe that Tikhanovskaya won. Demonstrations have been brutally dispersed using violence, stun grenades, rubber bullets, tear gas and water cannons. Law enforcement officers have not only attacked protestors, but also random passers-by, while journalists have been detained and their footage has been confiscated.

Even though it was a weekday. And we streamed everything live. I was the presenter, and Artem, the cameraman. We went to the Pushkinskaya metro station, where we shot an epic video that later went viral on the internet. The footage shows a man fleeing from OMON servicemen and jumping into a taxi. The driver shows lightning reactions: He immediately puts his foot on the gas, drives down the wrong side
“Stripped naked and kicked in the stomach. Alena Dubovik on being tortured in custody”.

Alena Dubovik’s story

“Lower!” – shouts the warden, a young woman in a mask, as she shoves the Belsat journalist Alena Dubovik. But Alena, who has been forced into the lastochka (lit. “swallow”) position with her arms locked behind her back, is unable to bend any lower, so the warden kneels her hard in the lower abdomen. The next day, the scene repeats itself, with the warden striking the young woman several times in the same place. After her release, Alena is hospitalised with a suspected ruptured ovary. As yet, no investigation has been opened into the journalist’s torture.

Alena Dubovik began working at the Belsat TV station in March 2019, joining the news section in September of that year. Given the authorities’ flat refusal to grant accreditation to Belsat staffers, the correspondents’ work “in the field” very often lands them in court. They are invariably charged with violating art. 22.9 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which pertains to the “unauthorised distribution of media products”. Alena has also been charged four times, but this has not stopped her. When the protests began, the journalist travelled around the country, shooting footage and reporting on the rallies held in support of Svetlana Tikhanovskaya. She was arrested many times, but before the elections, journalists were usually released from police stations after a few hours. Alena could never have imagined that she would very shortly be standing with her face to the wall in a detention facility with prison staff shouting and cursing in the background.

– I don’t remember everything. After, I was released from Okrestina, I had memory lapses. I still have memory lapses lasting a few seconds today. The psychotherapist calls this a stress response – Alena lets me know before the interview.

– In the vicinity of Kalvariyskaya Street, I managed to film a military man (presumably, a soldier from the Alpha special unit – author’s note) aiming a weapon at a woman and shouting: “Do you want a second Ukraine here?!”. And she replied: “What are you doing? You could be my son!”. The soldier replied: “You’re not my mother!” and suddenly aimed his weapon at me, saying: “Stop filming, you bitch!”. I have that video, but haven’t watched it yet – remembers Alena. She continues: “He was very aggressive, completely delusional, like a wild beast. I don’t think he would have had any scruples about shooting me.

On the evening of 10 August, the journalist went to Kalvariyskaya Street, where a group of protestors had gathered near the Korona shopping centre. She was meant to cover events live by telephone, film some videos and, when possible, connect to the nearest Wi-Fi networks to send them to the Belsat editorial office.
accept that someone in complete control of their faculties would be capable of beating their compatriots to death, and even taking pleasure from this.

– I called the editorial office in Warsaw; told them my story and asked the woman who had been targeted by the soldier for a comment. At that point, the editor said: “Alena, that’s enough, get out of there”. I didn’t know where to go. I decided to just head straight down one of the streets. There, I realised that I had “company”: a masked man in sportswear was following me. He was literally breathing down my neck. I turned round sharply, stopped and looked him in the eye. The plainclothes police officer walked on, pretending I was of no interest to him, but later stopped.

In the meantime, I ran into a yard and rang one of the buildings’ intercoms. I said: “Hello, I’m a journalist. I’m being followed. Please let me into the stairwell.” But the woman who opened the door suggested that I go up to her flat. It was from there that I sent the video to the editorial office.

Many journalists spent the night of 10/11 August with strangers. People fleeing law enforcement officers sought shelter in flats. They crowded into these flats in their dozens and lay on the floor with the lights switched off. Exploding stun grenades could be heard from outside the window. There were also several cases of the windows of homes being sprayed with bullets. It was safer to remain in hiding than attempt to travel across a city under siege.

However, Alena had to return home that night: her young children, three, five and seven years old, were waiting for their mother. She knew that there was a Belsat camera crew somewhere in the vicinity, but it turned out that the cameraman from this group had been detained. His wife, Tatiana, suggested that she could take Alena home via the Tsentralny district police department, where she thought her husband was being detained. Alena agreed to help find her colleague.

– Twenty people stood outside the police station. Women were crying. Families were not being given any information at all. Some human rights activists gave us a missing person form. Tanya filled it out immediately on her knees. At that point, a police prison van pulled up.

Initially, Alena and Tanya were seated on a normal bench inside the prison van they were travelling in, but a few streets later, they were transferred to a glass “cabin cell” about a metre wide.

– I remember they said: “You need to understand that we’re doing this for

thought: maybe they have brought in a new batch of detainees, so we should step aside. But they’d come for us. To take away those who were looking for their loved ones.

I glanced at my telephone. It was 23:21, and a second later, someone grabbed me painfully by my forearm. My phone was snatched from my hands and I was dragged to the vehicle.
your own good”. The walls of the cabin cell were covered in blood. I pulled up my hood so my hair wouldn’t come into contact with them. But we didn’t know where they were taking us.

**Naked men on their knees, blood on the floor**

Alena does not recall getting out of the prison van or arriving at the detention centre on Okrestina Street. The next image to resurface in the journalist’s memory is of several dozen women standing in the yard with their faces to the wall. Without shoelaces, belts or jewellery.

– It was there that I saw my warder for the first time. She was taking down our details and using the crudest language. Then she began the body searches. I was the first in line. As she was escorting me to the inspection room, she kept shoving me and forcing me to stoop down really low into the lastochka position. I couldn’t lift my head. In my peripheral vision, I could see men on their knees. I raised my head slightly and she hit me in the back of the head, shouting: “Don’t lift your head!” In the room, she told me to strip and made me squat naked. Afterwards, without giving me time to dress, she pushed me out into the corridor in my underwear. There, I finally saw what was happening.

– A lot of completely naked men were kneeling in a humiliating position, faces down with their hands behind their backs. I saw brown stains on the walls and drops of blood on the floor. Before I saw all this, I hadn’t been afraid, but at that moment, I knew that my life and health were now at risk.

Alena put on a tracksuit top and pulled the hood over her head. A passing police officer took her for a man and shoved her with his leg towards the wall. Then, the warder ran up and took the journalist back to the yard. Alena saw Kristina Vitushko (a Belarusian analyst and social activist – translator’s note) slumping to the ground.

– This is the wife of a famous physician, a Doctor of Medicine. She has diabetes. Help her! – Alena said to the warder.

– The diabetic wives of famous doctors don’t wander the streets at night.

– Kristina sat without speaking for about an hour. I don’t remember what happened afterwards.

The four-person cell (No. 9 on the second floor) where Alena, Tanya and about thirty other women were taken was cramped and stuffy. The women – ranging from students to grandmothers – squeezed up together on the bunks and leaned back against the bright yellow walls. Alena climbed up onto the top bunk, which was nearer a window through which a night breeze seeped into the cell.

On the morning of 11 August, everyone was taken out of the cell to make way for a “shakedown”. This standard prison procedure at Okrestina has no rhyme or reason. After all, the women had been strip searched the previous day and had not received any parcels from their families since. So what were the warders hoping to find by turning everything upside down?

– A few minutes later, we were returned to the cell one by one. I don’t think I stooped low enough. The warder from the day before thumped me in the back between my shoulder blades. I straightened up from the pain and then she knee’d me with her left leg in the lower abdomen, with the words, “Lower, bitch!” I came into the cell, sat down on the bench and began feeling sick. First the pain was sharp, then more of a dull ache. It was difficult for me climb onto the bunk. I didn’t make it to the bathroom...

**Trials and beatings**

The trials took place at the temporary detention facility. On 13 August, Alena was brought to an office space, where she found a judge and court clerk already seated.

According to Alena’s case files, she had been arrested on 11 August near the Riga shopping centre, where she had been shouting slogans. This was impossible because she had been arrested late in the evening on 10 August. The journalist asked for the CCTV footage from the Tsentralny district police department, where she had actually been arrested, to be appended to the case files, as the
building was several kilometres from “Riga”. The prosecution’s entire case was based on the testimonies of three police officers whom Alena had never seen before.

– They couldn’t care less that I was a journalist. I was outraged and told them that this was no court. It was more like a mock trial. The judge responded by having me removed from the room for “contempt of court”. I was told to return to my cell to await the court’s decision. I was again met by that same warden. She appeared to have some kind of fetish – getting people to stoop down as low as possible. I couldn’t bend down, so she kneed me several times in that same place to the right below my stomach. And added: “Disobedient bitch, get the fuck into your cell!”. I was in a very bad state and shocked that such things were even possible.

Three hours later, Alena was set before a completely different judge, who was completely unfamiliar with the journalist’s case. She saw that Alena was feeling ill and suggested that she sit down on a chair.

– Then I thought: “Screw you! Now I see you’re going to offer me your buns... I was brought biscuits and water. But I didn’t even touch them. I kept standing there unaware of what was going on. Later, they brought me back to the first judge. She told me that my case was still being looked into and I was now being charged with shouting slogans near the police department building and disobeying law enforcement officers. But there was no evidence other than the words of anonymous masked police officers. In the end, she announced her decision: the case would be sent back for further consideration.

The journalist was given a chance to sign a document stating that she had “received a warning and expresses remorse”. They positioned a camera to record her words of “remorse”. But Alena stated the opposite in the written statement, making it clear she didn’t agree with the charges. After this, she spent another three hours trying to find the things confiscated from her during her detention – two telephones, a bag and some jewellery.

– They were saying to me, “Your belongings are nowhere to be found. Go home. We’ll find them next week and then you can collect them”. They were surprised that I wasn’t running straight out of the gate, that I was still demanding my rights. In the end, I got to collect my belongings two weeks later.

I remember her eyes

Alena spent the night of 13/14 August at home, trying not to pay attention to the pain in her stomach.

– I didn’t tell me husband about my stomach. What was the big deal? Especially after I’d learned that people were being beaten black and blue, I thought: I’m not even bleeding... But in the morning, I went to the kitchen, suddenly felt really ill and started to faint. My husband caught me and drove me straight to the doctor’s. As soon as they heard that I had been held in custody at Okrestina, they immediately informed the head of the clinic. They treated me very gently, almost tenderly. They did all the tests and an ultrasound. Some liquid was found in my right ovary – the place where the warden had been directing her blows. They suspected a rupture in my ovary. An ambulance was called. A gynaecological examination failed to confirm the diagnosis. I was hospitalised with a diagnosis of “bladder injury, abdominal contusion and bruising in the abdominal region”.

Some human rights activists came to the hospital to help Alena draft a statement on the physical abuse she had suffered at the hands of the prison warden and submit it to the Investigative Committee. Alena says she has spoken with over twenty women who had come into contact with that warden and all of them
said the same thing: she had beaten them too. One elderly woman was shoved so forcefully that she fell onto the concrete floor. Shortly afterwards, Alena acquired a photograph of that woman.

– My lawyer asked why the prosecutor’s office had not demanded to see the CCTV footage from the corridor of the detention facility, and the examining magistrate replied: “That footage may already lie at the bottom of a river”. They asked if I was ready for a confrontation and whether I would be able to pick out that warden from five similar women. And if she changed her hairstyle and the colour of her hair? I remembered her eyes – furious, kind of drunk, black. As if she hadn’t washed off her mascara for years or had got herself some bad permanent makeup.

“I’m certainly not going to quit”

For a long time, Alena did not talk with anyone about what had happened. Any conversations with her husband were brief. Did they beat you? Yes, they beat me. How, who, where? I didn’t want to return to that. It wasn’t until the end of August that the journalist found the strength to have a frank conversation with her husband. Her mum still doesn’t know the details.

Alena went to Latvia for a few weeks of rehabilitation. Then she went back to work.

– I wouldn’t say I’m afraid. I need to work on. One other thing, for better or worse, plays a role here: they beat you and you think to yourself: “Hey, they didn’t beat me that badly, I still have some strength”.

– I believe our reports from the scene are valuable. These days, when most journalists are not working in the frame and don’t have the courage to cover events “in the field” due to the unbelievably high levels of repression, people need Belsat more than ever.

– I was offered the opportunity to write articles from home, but I’m not ready. I adore television journalism and all that travelling. I like doing the news! I’m certainly not going to quit. For the time being.

Catarina Andreeva

“The female journalist shot with a rubber bullet”.

Natalia Lubnevskaya’s story

Natalia Lubnevskaya, a journalist working for Nasha Niva, was wounded by a rubber bullet during the protests in Minsk on 10 August. She was covering the rally as a reporter. As can be seen in a video in the possession of Nasha Niva, a law enforcement officer purposefully targeted Natalia.

The young woman spent 38 days in hospital and the publication for which she works is facing a fine.

Natalia Lubnevskaya has been a journalist for five years. So far, she has mostly written on social topics. She recalls that before Belarusians became actively engaged in politics, she covered women’s rights, fashion and economics. The young woman is sociable, communicative and keen to talk about the situation in her country. I can hear a dog barking in the background. I would later read in the Belarusian media that it was her pet that the journalist missed most during her hospital stay.

This summer, when the forthcoming elections and any interrelated topics became the main focus of discussion in the country, any news on these topics
was no longer just politics. It became something more. In such circumstances, even Natalia couldn’t avoid politics.

– This was something that interested everyone. After all, all the material related to the protests in some way or other. That’s why I couldn’t possibly avoid them. Nobody forced me to work during the demonstrations. I took an interest in them myself. I wanted to see what was happening with my own eyes, to better understand the situation.

I began reporting on those processes. What happened on 10 August will stay in Natalia’s mind for a long time.

– I don’t think I could have been confused for one of the protestors – recalls the journalist. – At the moment all this happened, I, like most of my colleagues, had identified myself as a journalist by wearing a blue vest marked “press” and carrying a press badge. We were all standing in a group off to the side – we could hardly be confused with passers-by or protestors. We weren’t shouting, talking or looking for a fight. But it all happened in the flash of an eye.

The police officer didn’t shout anything at me either. He just fired. It’s hard for me to take this in, but I think he targeted me. I really think so, because over the next few days, a hunt began for independent journalists.

The video footage showing the moment Natalia Lubnevskaya was shot spread around the internet.

The editors of Nasha Niva posted a video showing how an officer from the law enforcement agencies shot Lubnevskaya from close range (according to the newspaper, this could have been a soldier from the Ministry of Internal Affairs’ Almaz special anti-terrorist unit; according to other data, the man who shot her probably belonged to the Alpha special unit of the State Security Committee, or KGB). According to the editors, the law enforcement officer targeted the journalist even though she was wearing a blue vest marked “press”.

Despite feeling a very strong burning sensation in her leg, the young woman managed to escape the scene herself. Immediately after the incident, a passer-by took her to hospital.

– It was officially recorded as a gunshot wound because the bullet was shot using gunpowder. It therefore makes little difference whether it was a rubber or ordinary bullet. I spent 38 days in hospital. Then I was on sick leave for a few more weeks, because I remained under observation in an outpatient clinic. Now I’m getting back to my normal work routine. The wound has healed, but I’ll still need to undergo rehabilitation to loosen up my knee and restore full function to my leg. After all, although the bullet didn’t harm the bone, it did pass near the knee joint. All that time I was in hospital I couldn’t move or bend my leg. It was in plaster for several weeks, stretched straight the whole time. After so many days in that position, a limb needs to be loosened up. That’s a peculiar and none too pleasant process – the journalist says.

She’s able to walk now, but is unable, as the professional jargon goes, to work “in the field”. She is yet to regain enough mobility to be able to walk fast, let alone run, during the protests. So the reporter is working instead from her computer and by using her telephone.

– I do interviews and work using my phone. Apart from the Sunday protests, their aftermath and many other incidents are also important.
People are still being detained, so I have a lot of work; I’m continuously collecting comments on the events – Natalia explains.

After what happened to the journalist, many colleagues interviewed her. In September, a special feature on Natalia appeared in the women’s section of the TUT.BY website. This article focused on the journalist’s emotions. She recalls how her family and friends reacted to the shooting and talks about her treatment, medical care, assistance received from volunteers and also the visit she received from a group of parliamentary deputies.

“Straight after the operation, the medical staff informed me that some deputies had arrived and wanted to speak to me. I was still under sedation, so wanted to sleep. I didn’t feel like talking to anyone, even to deputies. They had come to say they were ready to help. At one point, I couldn’t bear it any longer and said that we only needed one thing: for them to make a public statement about what they’d seen. They said they understood everything, but they were too low down in the hierarchy to have any decision-making power”.

Lubnevskaya submitted an application to the Investigative Committee requesting that proceedings be instigated in relation to the offence of wounding with intent. The investigators came to interview her twice, but her requests were not granted.

On 21 September, Yegor Martinovich, the editor-in-chief of Nasha Niva, said that the newspaper was faced with the possibility that it could have to pay a fine because of Lubnevskaya’s shooting.

“This is the first, and hopefully, the last time that such a situation – the shooting of a journalist – has occurred. Of course, there are no contingency plans in place for dealing with such exceptional circumstances. Since Natalia’s case could be classified as an accident at work, our accounts department have approached Belgosstrakh [the state insurance institution] to find out what documents they need to be provided with. The specialists drew up a list of essential documents, but warned that Nasha Niva ought to receive a fine, because we had not informed them about the incident in time and had not conducted our own investigation” – wrote Martinovich on Facebook.

The following is from a statement Natalia gave to Belarusian media:

“I’ve written a statement, but the investigation hasn’t been opened yet. In the last notification I received, they informed me that the application verification process had been extended by a month, to 21 September. Even though we’d earlier provided the video footage showing the moment I was shot and witness contact details. Well, I don’t have a law degree; maybe I’m just not familiar with the nuances of other people’s work…”

The journalist received another notification, informing her on this occasion that the deadline for her application had been extended to the middle of November.

– The editors received a notification from the Health and Safety Department.
It turned out that we had failed to complete the paperwork on the incident in a timely manner; “we failed to prevent” that situation… The case is being settled by legal means. By the way, we granted the investigator access to the video before we posted it on the internet. But neither then, nor later did that change the situation. Though, generally, when a hospital informs the relevant authorities of a criminal injury, a case is opened and investigation began the very next day. If, instead of my case, they were dealing with an alcoholic who had been in a fight with a drinking companion, a criminal case would have been opened within a few days – Natalia explains.

The journalist recalls that the ensuing situation shocked her family. If someone is entering a war zone, it is natural, of course, to fear for their safety, but this was only a protest and she couldn’t have expected that she would be shot there.

Natalia sums things up: “My loved ones are very worried about me now; they’re suggesting I take a holiday. But I know that I was acting in accordance with the law. And I’m still working according to journalistic norms and principles. I’ve also spoken with my fellow journalists; they’re confused as well. Now a vest marked “press” no longer guarantees a journalist’s safety. On the contrary, it increases the risk they’ll go after you.”

– Have you thought about changing your job?

– No, I’ve always liked my work. And now I realise even more how important what we do is. If the authorities are that scared of what we are shooting or writing, that means it’s having a powerful effect.

Our conversation was recorded at the end of October, but before 25 October, the first day of the nationwide strike that Svetlana Tikhanovskaya had declared.

– I’ve no idea what will happen after 25 October, but I suspect the protests will move into the economic plane. What can I say? We’ll continue to cover these events, attempting to give both sides a chance to have their say – Natalia said.

The only problem, the journalist claims, is that the government’s supporters often do not want to have their say in the independent media.

After all, they are officials and law enforcement officers, or people of the system. Consequently, even if the media ask them to comment, the chances of them replying are slim indeed…

Nazariy Vivcharik
Alena is only 23 years old. Her career in journalism began in September 2020, at a time when Belarus was being carried on a wave of historic events. Yet, out of all her detained colleagues, she was the one who received the longest sentence.

A month behind bars, several transfers, five days in a punishment cell with a fever. She was forced to testify against herself, sign falsified charge sheets and express her remorse on camera. But she has still found the strength to carry on. And she has finally decided on a profession too.

– I studied international journalism.
In the end, after graduating, I found a job in commerce. I was working in an office. When all these events started, I had a choice: to attend them as a participant or cover them as a journalist. I initially decided to only be a participant, but at the beginning of September, I changed my decision – the young woman says.

On 9 August, the night after the elections, Alena hid a Belsat film crew in her flat after they’d come under fire from stun grenades. While they were talking, it turned out that Lena was a journalist by training and really liked taking photographs. She quickly forgot about their conversation and returned to her usual work. However, later she felt she couldn’t hold out any longer:

“I wanted to document these events and take photos for myself. I knew that history was being written before my eyes and such an opportunity couldn’t be missed.” In the end, the editorial team at the Belsat channel accepted Alena for a two-week work placement as a journalist and photographer. She worked in Minsk during numerous trials of detainees and reported on the women’s protests on Saturdays and the Sunday marches.

Payback for a photograph
On Saturday 26 September, Lena was reporting on the women’s march in the city centre. The participants were initially standing in small groups. Some minibuses without registration plates pulled up and one woman at a time was grabbed from each group. Despite these arrests, they managed to form a column, which began moving along Independence Avenue. Lena tried to keep close to the rest of the journalists. But her “press” vest should have been left at home: recently, rather than performing its intended role, it had made her a moving target by attracting the unwanted attention of law enforcement officers.

– The brutal dispersal of the protest had begun. One of the girls ran into a yard with OMON officers in hot pursuit. I saw an elderly woman sitting on a grass verge. She was shouting: “Let go of my daughter!”. I recorded that and ran to a café to send the film to my editors. A moment later, I saw some OMON officers calmly speaking to the women left on the street and not attempting to arrest anyone. At that point, I came out of the café holding my camera. I wanted to capture this moment on film to show that normal dialogue is possible… – Lena recalls.

She managed to take a few photos and lower her camera. A moment later, some law enforcement officers appeared in front of her. They grabbed her and dragged her to a minibus.

– Some young women arrested earlier were sitting inside. Some law enforcement officers asked which of us was the journalist and I replied it was me. I was moved to a minibus parked alongside, in which female journalists from Euroradio, TUT.BY and Nasha Niva were being held. All of us were taken to the Oktyabrsky district police department.
The police department to which detainees are taken is usually determined by the district within which their arrest has taken place. By this logic, Alena would normally have been taken to the Sovetsky district police department. Instead, she and the women she was with were taken to the Oktyabrsky district department, which was much further away, so there must have been some reason for this. In fact, at the end of August, Oktyabrsky became the favoured destination point for detained journalists. In all likelihood, the authorities had decided that this was the place that would “keep an eye on the press”.

The detainees were taken to an assembly hall – a cool room in the basement where staff meetings would have been held in more peaceful times. On a raised platform in front of the rows of chairs there was a “praesidium” table and in the corner of the hall, some iron armour – a strange gift from one of the former police chiefs. The walls were hung with portraits of all the police chiefs from the 1920s until today. The smiling faces of political officers of the Red Army against a light blue background particularly stuck in the journalist’s memory.

– None of the men in civilian clothes introduced themselves. We were allowed to drink some water and use the bathroom. Our personal property wasn’t taken away either. Later, they released all the journalists with press cards and brought me a charge sheet alleging my “participation in an unauthorised gathering”. I tried to explain that I wasn’t participating, that I was only taking photos, but that didn’t bother them. They listened, nodded and threw out their hands, saying they couldn’t do anything because the charges had already been laid and I’d be able to explain myself in court: “Now, sign it” – Lena says.

– All Monday, I was waiting for the trial, but it didn’t take place that day. When the girl I’d been sharing the cell with was taken away for her trial, I was instructed to roll up the mattresses. They said they were taking them away for cleaning. I was suspicious anyway: the warder only delivered this message to me; they weren’t taking the mattresses from the other cells.

Five minutes later, they brought a woman to the cell who looked like she was homeless. She said that they’d been purposefully driving around the city picking up people like her to put them in cells for “politicals”. They hadn’t charged her with anything – they’d just grabbed her and her drinking companions.

That day, the guards were particularly rude to the detainees: “Oh, they’ve brought in some insects!”, they said of the women. Men were called ‘animals’.

“Oh, they’ve brought in some insects!”

Lena was taken by panda car to the detention facility on Okrestina Street. The young officer who was escorting her allowed her to call her mother. He mother asked if they were beating her, and Lena tried to allay her fears – “No, they are not beating me”.

At first, she was alone in a double cell, but in the evening, they began bringing in more people who’d been detained during the march. On the first evening, the girls did not receive anything to eat, but Lena did not plan to eat anything anyway on principle, at least not before the trial. She couldn’t sleep that night, as the light was as bright as daylight. The next evening, Lena received a package from her family.
That night was awful. They didn’t give us back our mattresses. That woman was twisting and turning on the bottom bunk, coughing and warning us that she was carrying lots of diseases. I shared the upper bunk’s wooden base with my other cellmate, who by then had been given nine days. I remember I kept falling into the gap between the bunk and wall – Lena recalls.

The court fined her 50 base units, or 1,350 roubles (ca. £400), for participating in an illegal gathering. She sighed with relief, happy to think she would be released. But since she had also been charged with refusing to comply with a police officer’s instructions, she was sentenced to 15 days in custody as well – the maximum term. The witnesses – all OMON officers – testified from behind closed doors. Lena seemed to recognise one of them.

The “politicals” have quite a cynical form of prison humour, but this often helps people not to lose heart. On learning about the court’s decision, her cellmate gave Lena the pseudonym “Fifteen plus fifty”.

The “summer camp” at the prison in Baranovichi

On Thursday morning, the door to my cell opened: “Dovnar, take your things and get out!”. Some police officers escorted Alena to a prison van and shut her in one of the glass “cabin cells” in the middle of the vehicle. No one told her where she was being transferred to. She was warned that they would shoot her if she tried to escape. A police dog sat in the aisle. “Escape? Me? I still had another 11 days to serve out”, Lena jokes.

Lena didn’t discover that she had been transferred to the prison at Baranovichi until she actually arrived and found herself waiting, along with dozens of other women, to be assigned a cell. Those for whom there was no longer any space at the detention facility on Okrestina Street in Minsk were usually taken to Zhodino. Being transferred to Baranovichi was a novelty.

The prison staff looked at us with interest. They probably thought they were going to be brought some drug addicts, but here were decently behaved beautiful young women. We were put in an old wing of the building, where a part of the prison had survived from tsarist times. There were 17 of us in a 19-person cell. High ceilings, three-tier bunks, damp and semi-gloom... but the food turned out to be fine. For dinner, we ate a really tasty bake with pleasure.

Every morning at Baranovichi began with a deafeningly loud national anthem. The guards admitted that they had designed this special reveille specifically for those detained during the protests.
Lena tried to read Erich Fromm’s “Escape from Freedom”, but she couldn’t focus in the noisy cell. Almost twenty women with ages ranging from 18 to 56 laughed, cried and shared stories from their lives.

– We were in cell number 95, so we called ourselves “Kvartal 95” (“Studio Kvartal 95” is a Ukrainian television programme popular in post-Soviet countries – translator’s note). In general, everything felt a bit like a children’s summer camp, only it was dark and grey and there were bars on the windows. We shared everything. We were constantly thinking up new ways to entertain ourselves. One of the women, a professional mountaineer, taught us various useful breathing techniques. We also did some exercises.

A few days later, Lena was taken to a room where a police officer began questioning her about how quickly she would pay her fine. The amount to be paid was substantial – over 500 dollars. She said that she would pay as soon as she could.

– Then he said: “All right, go to your cell. You’ll get out on the eleventh [of September]”. The door to my cell opened and a shout suddenly rang out: “Take your things and go to the exit!”. I didn’t know what was going on. First, they wanted to escort me out through the main entrance, but the management started shouting that they couldn’t take me that way, so we walked through some cellars that led out to an inner courtyard (that day, an inspection team was arriving from Minsk).

Lena was transferred from the prison wing to a temporary detention facility, also in Baranovichi, and at the weekend, she was taken back to Minsk.

– I thought you could only end up in a punishment cell for bad behaviour. But I had behaved calmly and hadn’t argued with anyone. For what [was I being punished]? They said I was singing songs, that my cleaning was sloppy… That’s not true. They must have received an order from above.

– The punishment cell was on the first floor. The floor was tiled, there was no hot water, and the cold water was running from a rusty tap, as if it was outside.
There’d been a sink there once, but it had been taken away. The “residents” had adapted a rubbish bucket to replace it. The toilet reeked and instead of a bunk, there was a narrow wooden shelf that was folded up at six in the morning (there was no mattress or blanket). During the day, it was only possible to stand, or sit on a chair about twenty centimetres wide. The walls were covered in the names of political prisoners and opposition organisations. Below the window, someone had scratched out a small cross. That night, for the first time, I cried from resentment. The hardest thing is to be there alone. I was even ready to sleep on the floor, but in a shared cell. The loneliness was unbearable.

After lights out, Lena was taken to an office space. The police officers there wanted her to “express her remorse” on camera. They pinned a microphone to her blouse and asked: “What can you tell the people who are going out to protest?” Lena said everyone should do what they thought was right. Seeing that they weren’t going to get what they wanted out of the journalist, they returned her to the cold cell. Shortly afterwards, the journalist’s temperature had risen to 38°C. They gave her some paracetamol. Her body was itching all over. A paramedic advised her to calm down: “It’s just stress.”

Lena spent five days in the punishment cell.

Throughout her second period of detention (the second 15 days), she was let out for a walk three times, but was not allowed to wash even once because “prisoners are not taken for a shower on their own”. Three weeks after she had first been arrested, her hair was full of lice and her body was covered in rashes, small scabs and a layer of dirt.

– When I got out of the cell, I didn’t want to think about anything. It still seemed to me that I would soon be asked to sign another charge sheet. When I saw how many people were supporting me and heard all these words of gratitude, I realised that I can’t give up. Freedom has given me new strength and motivated me to do even more. And, of course, I will continue working. I am sure that, by working as a journalist, I’ll be doing something good for the country and people.

– I still can’t acknowledge that this really happened. It reminds me of a nightmare from which I haven’t quite woken up. When I was in prison, I thought for my family’s sake, I won’t go to the protests any more. That’s it. But after I got out, when I saw how many people were supporting me and I heard all these words of gratitude, I realised that I can’t give up.

With these words, Alena Dovnar both completed her work placement and began her career in Belarusian journalism.

Catarina Andreeva
On 10 August, Sergey Gerasimovich, a journalist for the Belsat channel and member of the independent Association of Belarusian Association of Journalists, was arrested in Minsk. The journalist is also a freelancer and cooperates with other media outlets.

Our colleague, who was beaten and tortured following his arrest, was put through sheer hell. What Sergey experienced during his detention at the notorious detention centre on Okrestina Street is hard to take in. After he was released, the journalist had to undergo rehabilitation, both physical and psychological.

His story was one of the first in a report by the Minsk-based Viasna Human Rights Centre. The journalist has also explained what happened to him in interviews with foreign media outlets. Even though I was an eyewitness to Kiev’s Maidan in 2013 and 2014 and reported on those events, it was very hard for me to listen to Sergey’s stories. Initially, the law enforcement officers didn’t know if Sergey was an activist or a journalist. He had gone to the protest against the falsification of the presidential election results to take some photographs. His only intention was to perform his professional duties. This is probably the most harrowing story out of all those I have described in this book.

The journalist was detained by the police late at night in the centre of Minsk, near the Yubileiny Hotel. During his arrest, he was brutally beaten.

– I was walking and talking with some other journalists when the cars on the avenue started honking and I raised my arm (in support of the protests – trans.). At that point, some OMON officers started shouting: “Come here!”. I walked towards them and the nightmare began. They dragged me into a police prison van, ordered me to lie “gob down” and immediately started thrashing me with their batons. I was probably the unluckiest of all the detainees, because after we’d driven about 30 metres, they threw me into a minibus that also contained seated OMON officers, and they also ordered me to lie “gob down” on the floor. I was beaten again, and when we reached Nemiga metro station, I was returned to the prison van and beaten with batons again – Sergey Gerasimovich recalls.

After this, he was taken to the detention centre on Okrestina Street, where he spent three days, after which he was released “due to the expiry of the administrative detention period”. Throughout this time, he was regularly arrested and held in inhuman conditions.

While the journalist was being tossed from one vehicle to another, he lost his press ID. During his detention at Okrestina, the prisoners were admitted inside through a “corridor of glory”, during which all the prisoners had to run the gauntlet past a line of law enforcement officers, who beat them with batons. Not for the first time...
Later, when I had been forced to kneel by a wall with my face to the ground, various strangers began talking to me. They questioned me about where I’d been going and other

After the “registration” procedure, I was put in cell number 7. I wasn’t there alone. There were 21 other people with me in a cell designed for six – Sergey recalls.

– Incidentally, there was a mixed bunch of people in there with me: ordinary demonstrators, doctors; Vladislav Sokolovsky was there as well – the DJ who put on Tsiō’s song Changes in Kiev Square, for which he was sentenced to 10 days of detention. Vladislav had been transferred to us from the punishment cell, where he’d virtually spent five days in his underwear. There was nothing there apart from a chair bolted to the floor, a hole in the floor serving as a toilet and a wooden bunk, which was only lowered for the night. The bunk was not lowered every day, so he sometimes had to sleep sitting down. He said that chlorine was poured on the floor to irritate his eyes. So when he saw us, he was pleased to at last see some people.

The presidential elections were held in Belarus on 9 August 2020. The beginning of the election campaign was marred by the arrest and detention of opposition candidates and their supporters. At the time of writing (the end of October), mass protests and strikes against the falsification of the election results

such baloney. This interrogation lasted about an hour. They then ordered me to get up and run while I was bent over with my “gob to the floor”. Again, they lined us up along the wall and ordered us to remove our underwear, yes, to strip naked. We had to squat and they beat us across our soft tissues. A female doctor was standing by, watching all of this. She found it amusing.

– After the “registration” procedure, I was put in cell number 7. I wasn’t there alone. There were 21 other people with me in a cell designed for six – Sergey recalls.

The editor-in-chief of the Nasha Niva portal, Yegor Martinovich, interviewed Vladimir Sokolovsky after he was released. Subsequently, the journalist’s flat was searched and he was charged with defamation himself (you can read Yegor Martinovich’s story in this book – author’s note).

The editor-in-chief of the Nasha Niva portal, Yegor Martinovich, interviewed Vladimir Sokolovsky after he was released. Subsequently, the journalist’s flat was searched and he was charged with defamation himself (you can read Yegor Martinovich’s story in this book – author’s note).

– I vividly remember one awful moment when some woman was led out into the corridor, and I observed what was happening through a crack in the “feeding hatch” (a metal window in the door through which food is served. It is not shut tight so it is possible to see the corridor through it. In this way, we saw and heard prison staff recording her and shouting obscenities. They asked her why she went out to the protest with a “No to fascism!” poster and if she even knew what fascism was. The woman answered with terror in her voice that she knew because her father had been in the war. She added that what the police officer, a representative of the law enforcement agencies, was doing was, in fact, fascism. So by then we in the cell knew that she wasn’t a young woman if her father had fought in the war. At that point, the police officer started beating her, shouting that what he was doing was sadism rather than fascism. His actual words were: “What I’m doing is sadism, not fascism, you scum”. Then he literally kicked her into a cell, but the woman still managed to shout back that she would go on hunger strike. I can’t take that in, I don’t understand that. I also don’t know why protestors and journalists were so cruelly treated during the first days after the election – Sergey said.

The editorial team of the Nasha Niva portal interviewed Vladislav Sokolovsky after he was released. Subsequently, the journalist’s flat was searched and he was charged with defamation himself (you can read Yegor Martinovich’s story in this book – author’s note).
have been going on for three months. According to official data, Alexander Lukashenko, who has ruled Belarus since 1994, won, with 80 per cent of the vote. However, the opposition do not recognise these results, accuse the authorities of rigging the election and are demanding that Lukashenko resign, free all political prisoners and hold new elections. The best attended demonstrations take place on Sundays. Tens of thousands of citizens have been participating in these.

– I’m a journalist and I specialise in investigative journalism. My colleague Stas Ivashkevich and I were preparing a report on election fraud. When all this started, we could never have imagined that the repressions would be so cruel. We thought that people would make a bit of a fuss, the police would come out to maintain the peace, in extreme cases, half-heartedly pursuing the ardent few and that would be that. No one could have known that they’d start shooting and killing people (we wrote earlier about Natalia Lubnevskaya, who was shot in the leg by a law enforcement officer – author’s note). Information even appeared in the media about cases in which activists were hanged. In other words, some of the people who demonstrated were murdered – the journalist says.

– In any case, there were many guys in custody with me. On the last day of my stay at Okrestina, we had 40 people in a cell of 20 square metres. Thank God, we had a sink and tap. We got bread a couple of times. Once we were brought porridge cooked in water. It was kind of bluish and I didn’t manage to eat it. After three days, I was released, because the maximum allowable time for awaiting a trial had passed – the journalist explains.

Naturally, after his period of detention, Sergey took some photographs of his injuries and asked for help. Intriguingly, one of his psychologists had worked as a volunteer doctor in east Ukraine, where he had provided psychiatric care to soldiers from the Ukrainian army.

– At first, it was really hard for me. The beatings of the detainees were appalling. We received a few visits from an officer (most probably the governor of the detention centre or his deputy), who said: “Oh, why do you give these villains such a thrashing, life has already punished them enough…”. And when he left, they beat us even harder. They took us out to the prison yard, told us to kneel and shouted “Tops up, pants down!” and then they beat us. I think they damaged my kidney when they were tossing me between the minibuses and the prison vans. I was passing blood in my urine.

– New detainees were brought in every night. I can still hear the rumbling of the gates opening before the prison vans drive in and they start throwing people out of them. The beatings were particularly vicious after midnight. I remember people shouting and crying – women, men, that was of no concern to them. They beat everyone until people started defecating.

– On the night of 13 August, they began interviewing us and promised that we’d be released. Around 2 a.m., I was escorted out of my cell with some other people. They asked me to sign a charge sheet and promised to let me go immediately. Of course, I didn’t sign anything. I just wrote in the margin that I had familiarised myself with the content. The document stated that I had been arrested on 11 August on Surganova Street, though I was actually arrested on 10 August – the journalist explains.

– A little later, we were taken out to the yard. And that’s when I realised that the whole nightmare was only just beginning. People were lying on the ground along the fence. And OMON officers were beating them with batons and shocking them with tasers. They were beating people ferociously until they lost consciousness. To be honest,
I was a little lucky because I’m a journalist and me and my kidneys had already taken a beating. One of the OMON officers said: “I’ll ‘process’ this one myself”. He came up, threw me to the ground, struck me a few times across the backside and knees and shocked me once. And that was it. There was almost a comedy moment when he asked me how old I was. Hearing I was 37, he pondered for a moment and asked: “Why are you going to protests at 37 years of age?!”. Clearly, he was too young.

They’d got it into their heads that the protestors were drug addicts and prostitutes aged 16 to 20 – Sergey remembers.

Sergey stresses constantly that during the first days of the protests, there were very many people in the cells, including a whole host of random people. It appeared that these people had just been arrested by law enforcement officers on the way to the detention centre. According to Gerasimovitch, that’s exactly what was happening. Some of those he spoke to had never taken part in a protest. They had just popped out to the shop for some cigarettes or groceries.

They accused him of throwing a Molotov cocktail. Although it later turned out that no one had thrown any Molotov cocktails. Someone burned a tyre once – he says.

Throughout this time, Sergey’s family and colleagues were looking for him. But they couldn’t find him for three days. His name wasn’t on any of the lists. Later, when his detention period expired and he was released, some volunteers helped him contact his family.

– For the first two weeks, I was waking up with blood in my mouth. I had bitten my tongue out of fear and only then had I woken up. The other day, I dreamed again that I’d been taken to a cell. After all, it was possible to endure it physically, but hearing the cries of women and men, how they were tortured… That’s unbearable, like your brain being raped. And, I want to stress this, the beatings started in the dead of night when something was going on in the city or when a lot had already happened and the journalists had gone to prepare their stories.

At that time, there was no one anywhere near the detention centre. That’s when they took people out to the yard and started beating them. It sometimes seemed to me that people were being burned there and it’s impossible to listen to that – Sergey recalls sadly.

Gerasimovitch believes that everything should have been filmed from the air at that moment and shown to the world.

– I’ve been to Majdanek in Poland, on the outskirts of a Polish city. There was a Third Reich death camp there. There was a memorial there made from piles of shoes. They symbolised the people who had been burned. And at Okrestina, there were boxes piled with mobile phones. In all likelihood, that, for me, will be a symbol of Okrestina – the journalist says.

The Oktyabrsky district court fined him 540 roubles (ca. £240). He was convicted of participating in the protest on 11 August. Later, however, the municipal court overturned the
decision and sent it back to the lower court for further consideration by a different judge.

These days, Sergey reminds himself of everything and analyses what happened. He has come to the conclusion that he could have been held for so long because of a white bracelet. Thirty metres from the place of his arrest, he had been given a white bracelet with the logo of a sports company. It resembled the ones being worn by the protestors.

– In Ukraine, there are many parties. But here, in Belarus, our society is divided in two at the moment. There are people for and people against Lukashenko. And that’s that. No one is indifferent. And we journalists cover all of this, though it’s not easy. After my detention, I was scared to go to the protests for a while. The first time I went, my loved ones accompanied me. What more is there to say? After my detention, I went to my summer house for two weeks. I stayed there for a while, then worked things through with a psychologist. I attended a protest again at the end of August. I took a few essential things with me in case I was detained. I was supported by my loved ones and colleagues. Then I somehow got back into the rhythm of my work. What else can I do? Life goes on – Sergey said.

It took a while to gain Sergey’s authorisation for this article. I interviewed him at the beginning of October and we agreed on the final wording at the beginning of November. Sergey was still feeling the effects of the beatings and had also contracted coronavirus. He said that his family, colleagues and friends also became ill. Many of them had pneumonia.

– By the way, now, after 100 days of protests (16 November – author’s note), the situation is becoming more acute again. People are saying it’s all beginning again. People are being taken directly from Okrestina to intensive care units. They are incarcerating the Olympic champions who signed a letter against the use of force, cutting off the sewage system in their cells, introducing homeless people and coronavirus sufferers to their cells, not giving them water. As a matter of fact, this is not only happening to athletes. They have put so many doctors in there that every cell has its specialists (neurosurgeons, oncologists, surgeons).

Soon it’ll be possible to open a hospital at Okrestina – the journalist jokes sadly.

Nazariy Vivcharik

Photo: Belsat.eu
“When I was hit with a bullet, I said ‘ouch’ and ran on”.

Irina Arekhovskaya’s story

The independent photographer Irina Arekhovskaya worked right through the hot summer of 2020 and half of the autumn virtually without any breaks. In August, she was shot. A rubber bullet passed through her rucksack and “press” vest. The journalist was invited to file a complaint with the Investigative Committee. Shortly afterwards, her flat was searched. Irina has left Belarus for a while.

“My life has been divided in two: before and after 9 August”

– Before the elections, all my plans – seeing a doctor, resolving personal issues, and so on – had been postponed until later… During the election campaign, we were working in a very tense atmosphere, but it appeared that this would all be over soon, the elections would be held shortly and we would return to our old lives. However, things couldn’t have turned out more differently. There was a point when we all realised that all our personal issues should actually have been sorted out before 9 August. My life has been divided in two: before and after 9 August…

The journalist suspected that the situation could turn extremely brutal, so she did some advance research on the deployment of water cannons and tear gas and what items her first aid kit should contain in the event that such special means were used. Ira decided to spend the night before 9 August away from home. Many colleagues were taking such precautions because they expected the arrests to start from first thing the next morning.

– I spent the night at friends’ in the Sukharevo district. They went to vote and suggested they would take some photos at the polling station. What I saw in these photos shocked me. Huge queues to the polling station had formed. That’s when I thought: that’s it; these are our elections. Then I got on with some tasks and didn’t manage to vote myself. I was taking photos all over the city for a few hours before the polling stations closed. More and more people appeared. By the evening, it appeared that everyone who lived in the neighbouring flats had congregated outside their polling stations. Then prison vans began pulling up. However, nothing much was happening at first, so the law enforcement officers were just observing – the photographer remembers.

Indeed, as the voting was coming to an end, OMON soldiers arrived at some polling stations. They arrested independent observers and secretly escorted out members of the election commissions through emergency exits.

– When it got dark, I went to the centre. I was walking towards the Minsk Hero City monument, when I suddenly heard explosions and gunshots. People covered in blood began running towards me. They were choking and tears were flowing down their cheeks. All this happened so quickly that I didn’t understand at first what was happening. I tried to get to the area around the monument. I was asking people what was happening, but no one was able to explain that to me. Suddenly I saw law enforcement officers with shields. I took a few photos of the shields from the front, but didn’t manage to find a way through the cordon. I headed back to the flat we were renting, but law enforcement officers were blocking off access to the building. I had to sneak my way in through some backstreets and jump a few fences… In the end, I reached the flat and observed people being arrested until five in the morning.

That day, the authorities blocked mobile internet, and Wifi was not working in many homes either. Journalists were telling people about the developing events by telephone or meeting each other on the run. By the next day, it had become clear that the protests were not going to stop there.
On the barricades

– By the evening, access to the centre of Minsk had been restricted. First, I took some photos near Nemiga metro station. He told me that he had a daughter of my age and had gone to the protest for her sake. And now he would also protect me. He accompanied me to my destination and was really helpful for

were protests were being dispersed. Then I decided to go to the barricades near the Riga shopping centre. I had heard by then that one of our colleagues had been stunned by a grenade in another district. I’d read up a lot on this, so I knew you have to open your mouth during an explosion. I was therefore trying to work with my mouth open. There were no taxis. I got to Riga by standing in the street in my “press” vest and raising my arm. A moment later, a car pulled up. A man got in with me. He wanted to get out on the way. He told me what side the special equipment was coming from, attempted to shield me and led me away when the gas was released. Then I lost sight of him…

On the evening of 10 August, the protest behind the barricades by the Riga shopping centre was dispersed three times. When Ira got there, the demonstration had already been dispersed once and people were rebuilding the barricade they’d improvised from rubbish bins in the middle of the road.

– This was a really anxious moment. The calm before the storm. As I began taking photos, some people in my frame began lifting, carrying and mounting something. And then a water cannon appeared. I ran away. The barricades filled with gas and the first stun grenades were thrown at the demonstrators. I stopped a car again. Some really cool guys were sitting inside! They had everything – masks, a first aid kit. They picked me and several other people up, washed our eyes, fed us bananas and drove us home.

“There was only a little blood”

In the morning, Ira went out to buy a helmet and a vest protecting her from rubber bullets. Such merchandise was selling well, so most of it had been sold. People had realised the time had come to protect themselves. While in the shop, the photographer was also given a free metal plate that could be tucked inside her vest to protect her from baton blows.

– On the third day, I was heading with a group of colleagues in “press” vests towards the Pushkinskaya metro station, when someone stopped us to warn us:

“Don’t go there! They’re beating up journalists. They’re smashing cameras and taking out their memory cards!”

We turned back and decided to follow the crowd to Sportivnaya station (the next stop on from Pushkinskaya – ed. note). We took up a position on a hill and observed what was happening.
After the chase, Ira checked for injuries. The bullet had hit her in the backside. There was only a little blood. The bullet had passed through my backpack, trousers and vest, which had slowed it down a bit. It was also a really “good hit”. So I was lucky. There was also a hole in the bottle that had been in the outside pocket of my backpack. The helmet also got hit. That means they shot me more than once. The distance between us was 15 or 20 metres, no more, but the police officer was shooting on the run, which couldn’t have been too comfortable for him either.

Ambushed photographers

– It was impossible to return home or get to a hospital: there were police cordons everywhere. The only road that was open ran towards Kamennaya Gorka metro station (the last stop on the metro line – translator’s note).

On our way, we saw protestors being dispersed. People were running and being shot at. Explosions could be heard. I took a few photos from the car. Another one of our colleagues was at Kamennaya Gorka. We discovered from him that the situation was very bad: police officers and soldiers were stopping cars, smashing their windscreens and hauling out passengers. We headed towards the Green shop. People were constructing barricades there. Some men had intercepted the police’s radio signals and were listening to the conversations. It was clear that they would break up the protest there as well at any moment.

We photographers were caught in an ambush, so all three of us jumped up onto the roof of Burger King, which gave us a panoramic view of the scene below.

I saw the demonstrations being broken up and heard law enforcement officers issuing dreadful commands:

“Squash those fucking rats! Put the boot into the cockroaches!”

Then they started stopping cars trying to enter the city, right in the middle of the road. They dragged people out, searched them, forced them to put their hands up. They shot at any cars that didn’t stop. We were in a very prominent position, but tried not to be too obvious.

Suddenly, something lit up over our heads. My colleagues said:

“Oh, a shooting star!”

But I have good eyesight. I saw a drone hovering over us. We lay down on the roof, trembling. The drone flew off to sweep the yards for protestors. At some point, something else was glistening over us. The guys said it was a drone. However, my good eyesight told me otherwise:

“No, boys, it’s a meteor.”

The August Perseids. I managed to make a wish. What was it? What anyone in my position would have wished for… The photographers lay on the roof for a long time, scared to move, or even...
cough, for fear of attracting the attention of law enforcement officers. A few hours later, they finally climbed down. Ira had come down with a cold that evening and went to bed with a temperature.

**Searching the victims’ homes**

A few days later, Irina received a phone call from the Investigative Committee. She was invited to present herself to write a statement on the actions of the OMON officers who had chased her.

– I’d gone to the hospital to have my wound looked at, so they’d found out about me. I wanted to report the bullet injuries. Suddenly, I had a mark, a circular bruise. The doctors at the hospital were really kind, calling us all “sweethearts” and “honeys”. So many people had been injured and beaten that there was a queue out into the street. A large crowd of the injured had also gathered around the Investigative Committee building. Some of them arrived on crutches.

I was met at the entrance by a guard holding an automatic rifle. He was wearing a bulletproof vest and a balaclava. My first impulse was turn round and leave. But I eventually made it inside. They placed a single piece of paper on the table in front of me and said: “Write.”

I was dumbfounded. I asked what I should write. A statement. So I wrote everything down in my own words. The investigating officer was so friendly, as if she empathised with my situation...

And that was it. I didn’t receive any information for a month. I was then informed by letter that the case had been sent back for revision. Two months later, some investigators came to search my home.

In October, Irina was working on a project on victims of violence. Some of the people she was focusing on had already left for Poland and the journalist had managed to make it there to interview them:

– Mum rang me in the morning and said that our flat had been searched. I didn’t know where to turn. The search was superficial: the officers realised that I wasn’t living there. Nothing was seized. They left with nothing. I’d been lucky again. A search warrant had been issued on 15 October, I had left the country on 17 October and the search took place on 19 October. So they could have come round earlier, while I was still in Belarus - Arekhovskaya explains.

They did not leave behind any documents apart from a report on the search, which contained article 293 of the Criminal Code (the organisation of mass disturbances). Three paragraphs were immediately mentioned – 1, 2 and 3.

– My mum said that I was a suspect in a criminal case. When I’d recovered from the shock, I asked her why she thought so. She answered: “Because they never search the flats of witnesses.”

Mum suddenly became gloomy. The stress was getting to her. However,
Ira has decided to stay in Poland for the time being.

The police officers released pepper spray into the room through the peephole.

After the events of August and her illness, it was not difficult for Ira to return to work.

I just picked myself up and went in to work. While I'd been ill, women had come out onto the streets carrying flowers and the first Sunday march had taken place. Everyone was in the same mood: “We’ll win!”

My colleague told me:

“Ira, you won’t understand anything until you come out into the city.”

And indeed, I went out and understood everything...

But no matter how hard the photographer tried to compose herself and emotionally distance herself from the events around her, it wasn’t easy.

– It was the GUBOPiK officers who really got me trembling. They didn’t look so much like law enforcement officials as thugs with police batons. Even now, when I’m not in any danger, I’m triggered by anyone in a black mask or a dark minibus – the journalist confeses.

– All that time, I’d been lucky. I was like Kolobok – always escaping from everyone (Kolobok is the protagonist of an East Slavic fairy tale; a small round loaf who runs away from the grandparents who want to bake him – editor’s note). Sometimes, it was a really close thing. When did I realise that they’d broken me? There was a flat where many of my colleagues would come to send materials to their editors. It was a great place and the owner was really cool. She fed us various delicacies. We made ourselves a kind of office there. Belsat was broadcasting live from there when the protestors were marching below the windows. At one point, some law enforcement officers turned up and started knocking on the door, then literally gouging away at it. They broke off the peephole and released pepper spray into the flat. I had left there five minutes before they arrived. This story completely broke me. I imagined how it must be to be a caged animal. That’s just how I felt. I took a few days off. My internal energy reserves were depleted.

Irina took photographs during Maidan in Kiev in the winter of 2014, just before the police opened fire. She confesses that it was much easier to work there. She makes clear that what was happening at Maidan was bound by logical, clear principles.

– At night, everyone fought with the law enforcement officers, and then retreated for a while. When a stampede broke out and I was being crushed on all sides, I began crying out that I was losing consciousness. At this point, everyone around stopped and agreed to create a corridor for me and the other journalists. During the first months of Maidan, everything was much more civilised. There were certain rules. But when there are no rules, when you can get sentenced to three days today, fifteen tomorrow and the day after, get beaten around the head with your camera, it’s impossible to know how to behave.

First Ira gave herself two weeks before returning to Belarus. Then two months. In the meantime, she has started attending photography classes in Poland.

– I can see it’s getting worse in Belarus rather than better. In my situation, it basically makes more sense to wait and work from here. I’ve spoken about this a lot with my husband… My future is still tied to Belarus and I really want to return home. I still check the weather forecasts for Minsk.

How have these months I spent working at the protests changed me? I’ve certainly grown professionally. And personally too… I’m glad I know now who the Belarusians are. Maybe that sounds pathetic, but it’s true.

Ihar Ilyash
“They arrested both of us. I ended up in hospital, and my wife, in detention”.

Ales Levchuk’s story

Ales Levchuk and Milana Kharitonova – a married couple from Brest – were arrested during the protests on 10 August, and then again, on 11 November. They cooperate with the Belarusian press agency BelaPAN and the satellite TV channel Belsat.

On 10 August, they spent over 10 hours at the police station. In October, the situation was more serious. While they were being held at the Leninsky District police station, they began to feel ill. Whereas Ales was taken to hospital after the symptoms of a chronic illness grew more severe, Milana was refused medical assistance. She remained at the station. After three days in custody, she received a warning from the police and was released. Their story is shared by Ales Levchuk:

– I’ve been working as a journalist for 19 years. I cooperate with the BelaPAN agency and Belsat, a TV channel to which the Lukashenko regime has denied accreditation for the whole twelve years of its existence. The journalists have been fined time and again for working without it. For example, I paid 16,000 dollars last year for working without accreditation. But even accreditation doesn’t provide any guarantees, because, at any moment, you can still get a beating, have your equipment destroyed or be thrown in jail. One journalist was beaten over the head with his camera so severely by the police that his equipment didn’t survive. After this incident, he wasn’t permitted to see a doctor.

On 9 August, the elections were held and by the next day several journalists had been arrested. These were some of the first arrests to take place during the protests following the election. Ales recalls that filming was not permitted even when journalists arrived at polling stations with accreditation.

– They told us: “You are welcome to make a complaint to whoever you want!”. We tried several times to go live, but they kept interrupting us. One police officer began threatening us. On 10 August, we made another attempt to go on air, but OMON officers arrived and took us to the Brest Region police station, where we spent three hours. This passed without incivilities or threats. Then they took us to the Leninsky District station. At the time, this was the most awful place, but they treated us more or less normally.

Earlier, several hundred people had been beaten in the sports hall, and by the time they brought us there, someone had given instructions to get everything cleared up immediately so no journalists would see any evidence. Then, we were returned to the first police station. We saw people being beaten with batons. A three-person cell contained 40 people. Thank God we weren’t beaten, but we had no idea what would happen to us. Actually, this was an abduction in all but name because we were held for nine hours, from 6 p.m. to 5 a.m. – Ales explains.

After that, his phone rang. According to the journalist, he reached for the device, but it was immediately confiscated, and when he asked the officer to return it to him, they feigned ignorance. The reporter emphasises that the sound of
people crying out as they were being beaten never stopped. And all this was accompanied by piano music. The local paper Vecherny Brest even published an article on a 65-year-old musician Alexander Ivachev, whose apartment is on Sovetskaya Street, near the local police station. Alexander placed a piano on his balcony and played patriotic songs as a column of demonstrators walked down Sovetskaya Street during the protest rallies on 9, 10 and 12 August. The musician later had to flee the country to escape persecution.

– I also remember that the sound of exploding grenades and cries of “Fascists!” could be heard. When dawn broke and there were only a few police officers left in the police station, the boss came and told me to get ready to go home. We were just on the point of leaving when he suddenly shouted, “You’re not fucking going home, you’re going to prison.” We were charged with alleged hooliganism. There was no proof that we’d committed any crime of that sort. In the end, they let us go anyway. They probably wanted to break us psychologically. But I still think we were lucky because the following day two of our colleagues were beaten and really did end up in jail – the journalist recalls.

The second arrest, which took place on 11 October, took a totally different course. The journalists went out to cover that day’s protests and were heading towards a small group of people when a police van pulled up to them and both Ales and Milana were arrested.

– They took us to the police station. First, they spoke to us and then the order was given for us to be just put in a cell with those who had participated in the protests. Afterwards, I was taken away by ambulance while my wife remained in custody for 72 hours. By the way, the ambulance took a long time to appear because the doctors feared they would not be let into the station premises. And when they were finally let in, the police didn’t then want to allow them to take me to hospital. They didn’t let us go for some 40 minutes – Ales says. – I had to leave behind my passport, telephone and press badge. My lawyer was only able to pick up my things from there by signing a document at a notary’s office, and because I didn’t have my passport, I couldn’t sign anything myself. It was a vicious circle.

Milana Kharitonova’s story was covered in various media outlets. This is what she told Komsomolskaya Pravda about her prison stay:

– There were eight of us in a six-person cell. The first night, I and another girl slept on the floor on something that could charitably be called a mattress […] I didn’t receive any packages because my family didn’t manage to get anything to me on Monday and on Tuesday, they were told that packages are only accepted on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

The journalist was released after three days, on 14 October around midday. When she left, she received a document from the police warning her against participating in any more unsanctioned mass events.

– We have an underage child, so according to the law, my wife shouldn’t be held in custody, but today in Belarus no one pays attention to the rules. And it’s not only journalists they treat like this. They arrest one person after another until there’s no one left to go to the protests. A while ago, we reported on a court case. This was after we’d been arrested. A police officer approached us and told us not to film. He asked if we really thought we were out of danger after
that arrest and prison term. The town is small, so everyone knows one another here. You see, hardly any laws are in force these days. It seems to me that the same is happening in the occupied territories of Ukraine – the journalist claims.

At the time of our conversation, on 29 October, seven journalists were serving a prison term. The violence employed by the law enforcement agencies during the protests had led to hundreds of people being beaten, at least five people losing their lives and dozens suffering injuries. The European Union has approved sanctions against Lukashenko and his closest collaborators. The Belarusian nation is still demanding that the dictator Alexander Lukashenko peacefully cede power.

These days, journalists always carry around spare underwear and socks, a mug and other bits and pieces. They can catch us and put us in jail for any reason at all. Most arrests are on Fridays, so there are not enough journalists at liberty to cover the weekend protests. Several entrepreneurs and cafe and restaurant owners are also protesting about the situation in society at large. After this, the tax authorities come to inspect their business premises and many have been forced to flee the country. Now the borders have been closed to foreigners. The authorities are saying this is a response to the coronavirus, but sometimes Belarusians are being refused entry as well – the journalist says. Recently, nine students were expelled from a Brest university and the boys were drafted into the army. Those who don’t support the authorities are fired from their jobs or expelled from educational institutions and factories, and top athletes are being removed from Belarus’ national teams.

Creating reports is much more difficult now for Ales and Milana because at any time they may not return home from work.

– We’re still working, but appearing at the protests these days is dangerous because there are genuine journalist “hunts” at these – Ales claims. – The rallies are mainly taking place in Minsk. That is where most of the protest actions are focused, but people are also going out onto the streets in Brest. For example, on 13 September about a thousand people gathered at one of the city’s main crossroads. They danced, sang and shouted various slogans. The officers on the scene received instructions from the Ministry of Internal Affairs to use a water cannon against the demonstrators.

As the Ministry explained later, they did this to restore the normal functioning of society and keep the roads safe.”

– These days, we wonder whether to go to work and take the risk or stay at home. It’s nice there’s been a wave of solidarity. Thanks to such people, I’m still receiving plenty of information.

– Have you thought about changing your profession?

– No. The problem is a single person. With the departure of Lukashenko, who lost the election, life will return to normal in Belarus. He and his security forces are committing genocide and waging war against their own people. The enemy assumes the form of power, but it is we who must prevail. Naturally, [as journalists] we don’t take part in the protests, but we gather information and show how things really are. But when I say “we will prevail”, I’m thinking about the people, because if nothing changes at all, there’ll be no journalism in the country at all, and there’ll be no place for us in this country. And if, God forbid, this happens, our country will turn into another North Korea – Ales says.

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The journalist was in Ukraine in 2014 during Maidan. He says he gets the impression that it is much tougher on Belarusian streets at the weekend than it was during the Ukrainian revolution, even though when they were fired on there, this resulted in a “real bloodbath”.

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“If you croak, you’ll be doing me a favour”.

*Evgenia Dolgaya’s story*

Evgenia Dolgaya is 28 and cooperates with various media outlets, including the international press. She also has her own Telegram channel, in which she writes about ecology, feminism and gender. At the beginning of August, she interviewed Svetlana Tikhanovskaya for Japanese television. After the elections, a wave of violence swept through the country. The people who emerged from the detention centre on Okrestina Street in Minsk had been beaten black and blue. Throughout this period, Zhenia was collecting information on the torture and persecution of dissidents in Belarus. She published several stories on her channel of victims of the brutality shown by the Belarusian security forces.

“A August was very tense. A couple of days after the election, women dressed in white came out onto the streets. In effect, a women’s protest movement was born. They began coming out every Saturday, and I became very interested in reporting on what I was observing. I believe the brutal actions deployed by the security forces were mainly triggered by Telegram posts, in particular the disclosure of the personal data of people actively participating in the repressions”, says Zhenia.

Later, she would be charged twice with “participating in an unauthorised gathering”: for marching on 29 August and coming out to protest in a panda costume. At the time, the authorities’ attention was focused on the IT firm, Panda.doc, whose owner, Mikita Mikada, had offered to help law enforcement officers who had resigned their posts on their own initiative. Some of the firm’s senior managers had ended up behind bars on trumped up charges and the rest had immediately left the country.

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There are no laws in force. And when someone makes a complaint, it gets noticed. Yesterday we spoke to a man who made a complaint only to be beaten by the police afterwards. They’re somehow keeping track of everything – the journalist says. – I remember 2017, when Milana and I were preparing a story and both of us got arrested. Various violations occurred, so I wrote a complaint. After being fined, I was told on camera that I should make fewer complaints. Just to keep power, Lukashenko and his entourage are prepared to maim and kill. And that’s exactly what they’re doing.

*Nazariy Vivcharik*
“You are how you resist”

At around 5 p.m. on 9 October, Evgenia was returning home from a shopping trip: it was her goddaughter’s birthday party the next day and she had bought her a couple of presents: a toy porcelain set and doll’s pram. While she was waiting at a bus stop, she noticed two strange men in civilian clothes who were evidently watching her.

That Friday, her nine-year-old daughter Sasha’s music class had been cancelled. The girl’s father was supposed to collect her from school earlier than usual and take her home. Father and daughter were walking towards Zhenia, when two men suddenly came up to the journalist and said: “Evgenia Dmitrievna, come with us”. They were GUBOPiK officers (Main Directorate for Combating Organised Crime and Corruption. This is currently one of the main organs responsible for political persecution in Belarus. Its remit includes the repression of journalists and opposition activists – author’s note).

I saw that Sasha was scared and beginning to cry and tremble: ‘Mum, who is this?’ I said: ‘Sasha, don’t worry’. I turned to the officers and told them they were scaring my child. But they replied: ‘We can be much scarier. You should be thanking us for taking you in so gently. Let’s go to the police department.’

At the Partizanski district police department, the GUBOPiK officers disappeared and ordinary police officers took their place. The way they behaved with Zhenia did not seem much like a routine interrogation. In fact, the officers were overzealous. Her earrings were immediately taken away and her shoelaces pulled out. “At first, they latched on to an Instagram photo in which I was standing holding a banner with a quote from song by the band Krovostok:

Be bad, baby, resist the system,
Resist no matter what.
You are how you resist,
And hardly anything more.”

“They said: ‘Admit it was you who coordinated the column of protestors. It was you who was leading them, wasn’t it?’ I answered ‘No, that’s not true’. And they countered: ‘Everything is recorded on camera. It’s better to confess straight away’. Then they began shouting and blackmailing me, saying they would search my home in front of Sasha, frame me for something and take away my child. They called someone and asked: ‘Find out if there’s anyone from the orphanage who can come for the child’” – Zhenia recalls.

“My friends called the front desk to ask if Evgenia Dolgaya was there. And the cop looked at me ostentatiously and told them that they didn’t have any such person with them.”

“Take off your pants and squat”

On Okrestina Street in Minsk, there is an all-purpose prison complex. A new building stands alongside the old temporary detention facility. People arrested for infringements end up in the first building and the second one is designed for people being tried for crimes. However, during the mass repressions that are currently taking place, both parts are being filled with “political” prisoners. Even if someone has only been sentenced to a few days of detention, they could soon find themselves being prosecuted in a criminal case.
Anyone who has spent time in custody at Okrestina knows that the conditions in the new building are a little better. Some light renovations were recently carried out and the latrines do not smell quite so bad. However, the old building is said to be a living hell. That is precisely where Evgenia Dolgaya ended up.

“When I was brought in, I was met by a female warder who conducted a body search and said: ‘Take off your pants and squat down’. She then took me for half an hour to a ‘glass’ – a tiny box where I was supposed to wait to be allocated a cell”, the journalist recalls.

“The cell was very cold. Earlier, they had told me to take off my sports top: ‘What if you used it to hang yourself?’. I was left in thin top covering my bare body. After a while, my nose began bleeding as my blood pressure fell.

The doctor – a slim young woman with grey curls – confirmed that Zhenia’s blood pressure was very low, but when the journalist asked for a blanket, the doctor barked: “You’re not allowed one!”. The journalist was not given anything even though the neighbouring cell in which her blood pressure was taken was crammed with blankets and mattresses. She had to make do with a bare iron bunk. The doctor added as a ‘goodbye’: ‘What can I say? You haven’t come to a sanatorium… Women sometimes get their periods earlier here. There’s not a thing I can do about that!’.

“The warder who returned me to my cell whispered: ‘Don’t even think about it. It won’t work. I’m not calling an ambulance’. At that point, I stopped, looked him in the eye and said really loudly: ‘I’m going on hunger strike!’ He replied: ‘Go ahead. If you croak, you’ll be doing me a favour’.

“The cell really stank. The conditions were unsanitary, to say the least. They brought us a filthy rag and yelled at us to wash the floor. I asked for a doctor, but she didn’t arrive until the evening. She gave us two valerian pills. Then were taken from our cell for a very strange talk”, Zhenia says.

“The Information Security Committee”

An unimpressive man of unremarkable appearance introduced himself as “a member of the Information Security Committee”. There is no such committee in Belarus. In all likelihood, he was a standard investigator. Although our conversation took place in a normal office, he shut Zhenia in a “cage” and turned the key in the lock three times. He then suggested they have a “friendly chat”.

– Which journalists do you know personally?
– Many...
– Why do you work for Belsat?
– But I don’t work for Belsat!
– You’ve broadcasting live from there.
– That’s not true!
– Do you know that your friends are trying to destabilise the situation?
– …
– Do you know you’re the one who’s organising the women’s marches?
I'm a Journalist. Why Are You Beating Me?

– Give me a break!
– You’ve been publishing appeals on your channel.
– What appeals?
– You’ve been sharing links to Belsat and Radio Svoboda reports. That could be called an appeal.
– No, that’s just news.
– Why don’t you publish normal news?
– In my view, that is normal news.
– Incidentally, what have you been writing about ecology recently?
– That many people are beginning to have thyroid problems because of the radiation.
– (he jots down in his notebook: “thyroid problems”)

Zhenia laughs as she recalls the dialogue with the investigator, but it was no laughing matter at the time.

Many less prepared people would have broken down and agreed to testify against themselves. But not Zhenia Dolgaya. The journalist invoked art. 27 of the Belarusian Constitution, which grants people the right of refusal to testify. The investigators left empty-handed.

The third day of the hunger strike began. During breakfast, the prison governor appeared at the feeding hatch in civilian clothes.

“He tried to persuade me to eat something. ‘Eat a little soup, please! Or here, have my phone, ring your family and ask them to bring some pills. We’ll pass them on to you!’

What’s worrying you?’ They measured my blood sugar level: it had fallen to two, so very low. The doctor asked the governor for me to be brought a blanket. The governor asked: ‘Well, what else do you want?’ I say I want a clean pillow without lice. And one for my cellmate too. And that I want to go fora walk. They brought clean sheets: ‘Will you eat a little soup now?’: But I stood my ground.

I declared that my hunger strike would continue until they let me out. Shortly afterwards, all the prisoners were let out for a short walk.

Apart from being hungry, Zhenia was also dehydrated. During the day, she had only accepted two glasses of liquids a day. A guard occasionally leaned into the window:
– Come here, beautiful, what do you fancy? I’ll make you a very good coffee, my own. But you’d need to eat a government sausage in return.
– Eat your own government sausage!
– You’re so stuck up!

On Sunday night, no one banged on the door with a baton. Early on Monday morning, a few hours before the trial, Zhenia and Olga were brought some mattresses.

A spoiled weekend

According to Zhenia, the prison staff were constantly squabbling amongst themselves over how to handle her hunger strike because no one wanted an “incident” on their shift.

“They came for me around twelve, but the trial wasn’t held until six in the evening. Apparently, they didn’t want me sitting in a cell.

I felt very bad and everything was swimming in front of my eyes. I heard them whisper: ‘Another hunger striker is all we need... What if she fucking dies on us!’.

While I was waiting for my turn, I saw people who’d been beaten coming out of the courtroom with proud faces. As they were given prison time, they laughed in the cops’ faces.
Zhenia was found guilty and fined 810 Belarusian roubles (about £240).

“When I got back home, my daughter was returning from school with her granddad. She saw me and ran to hug me. Mother’s Day was approaching (14 October in Belarus – translator’s note) and they’d been making cards at school. Sasha gave me a heart cut out of paper. She’d drawn black barbed wire, with a beast next to it and signed it ‘OMON’. Inside, were the dates of my arrest and release.

“Did I cry, even just the once? No, not once the whole time I was in custody. I didn’t want to show them I could be broken. Even though I was in physical pain: my backside was bruised from sleeping on iron bunks. But I did finally cry when I learned that my parents had neither come to the police department on the day of my arrest nor stormed the detention centre in an attempt to get a package to me. They turned up at my goddaughter’s birthday party as if nothing had happened. They said they could hardly not come when people were cooking!”


Catarina Andreeva

“I thought I was going to a protest, but found myself in a war”.

Volia Ivashenko’s story

“Students at protests; journalists and TV presenters in custody” – announced the headline of one of Volia Ivashenko’s press articles. Until recently this journalist worked for the Komsomolskaya Pravda newspaper, for which she mostly wrote about social issues. But the focus of her texts had begun to change in recent months to take account of the tumultuous events taking place in her country. In fact, the complex political situation in Belarus means that it has become impossible for journalists who are based there to avoid crucial issues like the protests or Coronavirus. So Volia, who worked for “Komsosolka” for seven years, began writing about politics as well. However, this change of priorities in journalism was not the only challenge Volia and her editors faced. The state-owned monopolistic Belarus Printing House stopped printing two independent Belarusian newspapers – Komsomolskaya Pravda and Narodnaya Volya – citing “equipment malfunction”. The real reason for their refusal to print these papers was that journalists from both those publications were attempting to write objective articles about the protests and the brutality being employed by the law enforcement agencies.

These media outlets continued to operate despite the problems, though they faced constant staffing shortages, because journalists were being detained by the police or suffering injuries while reporting on the protests.

– A stun grenade was thrown in my direction, unjustified force was used against journalists and protestors...

So-called law enforcement officers from that day onwards, and even now, behave like members of a gang who have declared war on peaceful protestors...
Even today, my colleagues and I need the help of doctors, including psychotherapists. Fortunately, I’m getting better. I’m currently being helped by medication, but until recently, I was in a really bad state. I didn’t sleep for almost two months. I was so tired I was almost hallucinating – Volia says.

Psychologists are saying that the recent events in the country have led to virtually all Belarusians displaying symptoms, of varying intensity, of post-traumatic stress disorder. It should be taken into account that apart from the political crisis, the country is also suffering from an economic crisis, which has led to many Belarusians losing their jobs and livelihoods.

– Belarusians are a patient people. As a rule, they say: “I’ve suffered but not as much as other people”. In other words, they are ashamed to speak about such things. They say they need to be strong. I was also feeling bad: my back was hurting, I couldn’t bend over, I struggled to walk because of my leg injuries. But I was constantly calming myself down by repeating at least they didn’t shoot me; they only threw a grenade… – Volia recalls.

Until recently, this journalist represented the independent Belarusian newspaper Komsomolskaya Pravda. On 9 August, the day of the elections, all her colleagues were working at the places where the day’s most important events were unfolding. They knew that literally anything could happen. That day, the journalists, for their own safety, were working on the streets in special vests marked “press”, with badges identifying their employers, their ID cards and certificates from their editors confirming they were carrying out their professional duties. But all these precautions turned out to be meaningless because, as Volia makes clear, the peaceful protests began to resemble military, rather than political, events.

– Fortunately, on 9 August the law enforcement officers hadn’t received orders to seize journalists. That all started the next day. On 9 August, we were still able to get some work done. So many people were being detained and brutally beaten right in front of us that it looked like a scene from a horror film. It was like a nightmare. My brain didn’t want to interpret these events as real. It was too much of a shock… Even though we journalists have seen a lot and are not easily surprised. Before our eyes, people were practically dying, stun grenades flew past. Enraged law enforcement officers chased us away from the scene. It was so scary that as they approached, we just ran for our lives. We came back later – says Volia.

– One image stuck in my mind and went on to haunt my dreams every night: before my eyes, some police officers beat a young man so severely that he collapsed and fell down right next to me. He was covered in blood, in a state of shock and mumbling inaudibly. I ran up to help him (I was carrying bandages and a first aid kit with me). I tried to lift him up and saw at that point that he had a gaping head wound, which was bleeding. He had no weapons or harmful objects on him.

He’d just been beaten because he’d joined a protest rally against falsified election results.
– I had just started bandaging his head so he wouldn’t lose too much blood while waiting for the ambulance when

another grenade flew in our direction. I grabbed hold of this man and my colleagues grabbed me. I remember we handed him over to some doctors.

I must have been running on adrenaline for some time because I was later able to pass on information about the situation to the editorial team.

(On 9 August, Belarus began to experience constant interruptions to the internet. It became impossible to upload videos and the YouTube platform didn’t work either. According to my Belarusian colleagues in Minsk, the internet was completely disconnected at 6 p.m., local time. The internet returned after a few days – author).

It turned out later that Volia had been walking around for some time on a foot that contained broken bones. The problems with her back, which psychologists have classified as psychosomatic, didn’t begin until she got home.

– I was trying to record everything I saw. Imagine this huge avenue, a huge number of protestors, violence all around, and then, in the middle of all this, a huge vehicle – a police prison van – is driving at people and running them over. Neither I nor my colleagues had ever seen anything like it. I know what happened in Ukraine and Armenia. I’ve written about that. But I’d personally never seen anything like this. From 10 August, the police refused to allow the injured to get to ambulances. People who’d been beaten were basically left in the street, bleeding and writhing in pain. They also began beating and arresting journalists and those who remained in the crowd couldn’t let their editors know what was happening anyway because there was no internet – Volia recalls.

That night, on her way to the editor’s office, the journalist saw police officers shutting ordinary passers-by in prison vans. Many people were injured. Nevertheless, at the time of writing, not one criminal case has been instigated in Belarus against the law enforcement agencies routinely employing violence and unjustified brutality against peaceful protestors.

– 9 August was scary, but it later turned out that much worse was in store for us. Almost every journalist at our newspaper was detained or received threats relating to their professional activity. Many of us had to go through arrests, trials and detentions. For nothing. Just for doing our jobs. And this lawlessness continues to this day – the journalist states.

– The day after the election, it turned out that Komsomolskaya Pravda was the only newspaper that had managed to write about what had happened. Can you imagine? Only one newspaper in the whole country. I’m not talking about the state media outlets. They were publishing as normal, but that was because they weren’t writing anything about the protests. Our complete print run (about 150,000 copies) was sold out in about two hours. After several days of working almost round the clock in military conditions and without any internet at all, the printing house that has a monopoly on printing in our country informed us that they wouldn’t be printing our next issue. They told us their printing press had broken down. We got given the same story when we went there to get the next
I'm a Journalist. Why Are You Beating Me?

Intriguingly, an internet search for Volia’s articles will also turn up an article she wrote for the Belarusian Association of Journalists at the end of 2018. In this, she shares some advice with her colleagues on how to get to tackle emotional burnout.

She has positive things to say in this article about her colleagues, team and publication and takes a light-hearted look at the difficulties of her profession.

I am particularly struck by how much Volia has changed since then when she tells me how she was still able to assist her colleagues despite her broken ankle and how she went out “into the field” to film and carry out her professional duties. Her need to inform society objectively about what was happening turned out to be very strong.

– How did you manage to get the newspaper printed under such conditions?

– We started getting it printed near Moscow. The costs were astronomical. When the special forces learned that we’d managed to print a new run, the authorities banned the sale of our newspaper all over the country. So even though we’d solved the printing problem, we weren’t able to distribute it. It was scandalous. People were printing our articles from the internet and we were creating an electronic version of the newspaper. People were going to protests with our cover stories in their hands. This irritated the authorities as they wanted to completely snuff us out.

And that’s how it’s been for two months. One of the directors, a Belarusian woman, was removed from the editorial board. So Moscow decided to save the business to show Belarusians that they wouldn’t be supporting the protestors. The Russians may have saved the newspaper, but they’ve lost their staff. Just the other day, I quit. I don’t want to be a person who starts off with the protestors and then crosses over to the other side of the barricades.

The insanity in our country is multiplying day by day. Even those journalists who have young children are ending up in custody, though this is forbidden by law. Not that the law is ever consulted these days. It’s difficult to get used to the fact that the law no longer works. My colleagues have been charged with allegedly leading a column of protestors and urging them on. Even though none of this ever happened.

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We’re working with a lawyer and providing evidence, but the judges don’t pay the slightest attention to that. I don’t know how this will end – Volia admits.
The journalist is currently looking for a job and doesn’t want to leave Belarus.

– I don’t want to flee my country. I want to be with my people. It’s tough for almost everyone these days.
And those who are being arrested at protests are not only receiving custodial sentences, but also being fined about 800 roubles (£230). That’s two month’s wages for someone living in a small town.

– In my opinion, Belarusians have already reached the point of no return. They will protest to the end. The most active protestors now are students, women and doctors…Even pensioners and people with disabilities are going on the marches – Volia said.

After leaving her job, Volia received many telephone calls from restricted numbers. These callers didn’t identify themselves and warned her to keep way from journalism, hinting that they could deprive her of her parental rights (she has an underage child). In spite of everything, Volia hopes that the journalists who have left their jobs will be able to combine their talents to create a new independent publishing project.

Nazarý Vivcharík

“By the way, they took us to watch a propaganda film”.

Vadim Zamirovsky’s story

Vadim Zamirovsky has been a photojournalist for the web portal TUT.BY since 2013 and has worked in journalism since 2003. In his early career, he cooperated with such media outlets as Znamya Yunosti, the Minsk Courier, Belgazeta and the ITAR-TASS Photo Agency. Since 2010, he has co-organised the Belarus Press Photo competition. He is quite an engaging character with a calm voice who tells me his story in exact chronological order.

Vadim has worked with his camera outside Belarus as well. He was born in the North Caucasus and used to live in Yakutia. He moved to Minsk in 1991. His life’s motto is: “Always move forward.”

In 2014, he covered events at Ukraine’s Maidan. He also worked several times as a photojournalist in Donbass and was detained by the Russians when reporting from Crimea.

Since this year’s political turmoil began in Belarus, he has been arrested a number of times.

According to TUT.BY, “Vadim was carrying out his professional duties by photographing what was happening around the memorial to Alexander Taraikovsky, who was killed during a demonstration. The “We will not forget!”
inscription created by the people of Minsk was sprinkled this afternoon with a chemical reagent. The people who gathered there in the evening tried to remove road salt from the inscription. Vadim had barely managed to inform the editorial team that he had arrived at the site before he was brutally arrested by law enforcement officers. It should be noted that Vadim Zamirovski was wearing a blue vest marked “press” and a TUT.BY identification badge. He was driven around the city for 40 minutes in a police minibus and had his pen drives confiscated before being dropped off in the Sukharevo district.”

But this was not the only such episode.

– On 17 October, I was taking photos at a student protest. There weren’t many there, around 150 people. Nothing much was happening. A column of students moved off down Rumyantsev Street, turned into Kozlova Street and came out on to Independence Avenue. At that point several minibuses pulled up. OMON officers ran out of them and arrested the students, then Daria Spevak (who you can read about in a separate article – ed.), then me. There was no warning or request that we disperse. I had my press pass with me and was taking photographs while carrying out my professional duties. We were taken to a minibus, driven around the city for a while, then put in another minibus. No doubt for logistical reasons. It was pretty crowded in there, some 40 people, the guys were sitting on the floor. In the end, they stuffed us into a prison van with cells inside and began taking us to various district police departments – Vadim recalls.

– What did you look like at the protest?

– I was wearing a turquoise jacket and had a large press card identifying my employer round my neck. I was also carrying two cameras. I was clearly a photographer. No force was used on me – the photographer says.

He also recalls that he kept to the side of the column of students taking part in the march. But this precaution, and the fact he had clearly identified himself as a photojournalist, clearly made no impact whatsoever on the law enforcement officers.

We were then directed to a temporary detention facility, but before we were moved there, we had to fill out some documents. They looked like someone had been preparing them using a copy-and-paste method. Even so, they were full of mistakes. For example, in one document, my sex was marked as female and another one contained incorrect information about my education. My lawyer managed to get to the facility and was able to show me where to sign, and where not. Though such things have little bearing on the verdicts these days, which are all the same – Vadim said.

Afterwards, the journalists were moved on to the detention facility. On their arrival, they heard a series of instructions familiar to them all: “face to the wall”, “hands behind your back”. The group had been arrested on Saturday, so everyone was waiting for Monday, when the court was meant to issue its decision. They hoped three days of detention would be the end of it (in Belarus, a detainee should appear before court within 72 hours).
Vadim says that the trial took place by video link. They connected Skype and the photojournalist could see the judge on the monitor. Vadim defended himself, saying that he had all his paperwork to hand and was just following his editor’s instructions. However, his words had no effect. Vadim did not admit to any of the charges. The court was also informed that he had an underage child. Despite this, he was sentenced to 15 days in custody. He was found guilty of participating in an unauthorised gathering (art. 23.34 of the Code of Administrative Offences) and refusing to comply with instructions given out by police officers (art. 23.4 of the Code of Administrative Offences).

The photojournalist also shared his impressions from his stay at the police department and isolation centre on Okrestina Street. He has the impression that all the staff there are chosen for their ideological loyalty.

Incidentally, I went to Maidan in Kiev several times; I spent 3 or 4 weeks there. In other words, I’d experienced this story from the inside.

– By the way, they took us to watch a propaganda film. They’d cooked up a very contrived propaganda narrative. What’s more, some of the footage came from Maidan in Ukraine. There was still no decision from the court at that point, so we didn’t know whether we were going to be charged with anything. The group that was brought to watch the film contained various people, but I think everyone was having a good laugh because the propaganda was such poor quality. This was particularly obvious to the professional reporters.

– Among the detainees were people who had ended up there by chance. They’d just happened to have been walking past. One boy was on his way to an exhibition. Someone else was planning to go shopping. But as far as the prison staff were concerned, we were all enemies of the ideology. When we were all lined up in a row, one girl started to feel ill. She was standing some 5 metres from me and was about 20 years old. The other girls asked the young police officer who was guarding us to assist her, to find out what was wrong with her. I don’t understand why he couldn’t behave like a human being and call for a doctor who was nearby.

– They didn’t beat you there?

– No physical force was used against us. These days, most injuries are sustained during arrest. I was in a four-person cell. There was generally enough space. You know, like in a really bad hostel. We were there from Monday to Thursday. And on Thursday we were moved from Minsk to the city of Baranivichi. This was done before the weekend for two reasons. Firstly, to free up space for new prisoners. And second, in my opinion, out of pure maliciousness. Because Thursday is actually the only day when detainees can receive a package from their loved ones, and that is very important. After all, people end up in prison suddenly and they are completely unprepared for it. They have no spare underwear, toothbrush or any of the run-of-the-mill items needed for daily living. That’s why they’re allowed packages.

The prison in Baranivichi was the real thing – a huge old building. They treated us neutrally there. We didn’t sense we were political enemies, and therefore to be despised. I served out my 15 days there – Vadim recalls.
The photographer jokes that in Baranovichy he was already beginning to “understand prison slang”. They also issue a certificate there that can be shown to a ticket inspector, allowing people to get home. Vadim was picked up from the prison by his family and friends.

— Will you continue working in this profession?

— There’s little else I can do. It’s my job. I’m also trying to make up for lost time. I want to be up to speed with everything after being “starved” of information for two weeks.

Nazarły Vivcharik

“I haven’t felt safe as a journalist for a long time”.

Daria Spievak’s story

Daria Spevak, who is a reporter for the Onliner.by web portal, was arrested on 17 October while she was covering a student protest. She was charged with refusing to comply with the police’s instructions and participating in an unauthorised gathering. For this, she served a prison term of 13 days at the detention centre on Okrestina Street in Minsk.

Can you tell me about the circumstances surrounding your arrest? What were you doing at the time? What events were you covering? Were you wearing the identification markings of a journalist? And what about your accreditation?

A student march had been announced in Minsk for the 17 October. I received instructions from my editor to cover this Saturday protest. I sent a text about the unfolding events and some footage to the editorial team. The Onliner portal doesn’t require accreditation according to a decision made by Belarus’ Ministry of Information because we are an internet publication, which means we possess the status of a mass media outlet. The badge I was wearing around my neck that day contained all the required information: the word “press”, the name of the publication and my photograph, full name and position. My press badge is stamped.

I was wearing a vest marked “press” under a hoodie because people with such identification markings have recently been targeted by the police. According to the law governing mass events, a journalist must have a visible identification marker on their person. In my case, this was a badge.
At around 1 p.m., at the intersection of Independence Avenue and Kozlova Street, the arrests of those participating in the protest – the students – began. Several minibuses with blackened windows arrived at the scene. OMON law enforcement officers ran out of them and began grabbing students. A few minutes later, I heard officers shouting “journalists, the press” and I realised that they were also arresting us now. There was nowhere for us to go – we were surrounded on all sides by the men in black. A few of them came up on me from behind, got me in an arm lock and led me to the bus with the words “give me your phone”. None of the police officers introduced themselves or gave any reason for our arrest. But we’ve got used to this by now.

Who exactly carried out the arrest: OMON or police officers? Did you consider yourself to be guilty?

It was carried out by OMON officers – this is a police unit under the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Of course I didn’t consider myself to be guilty, and still don’t (an appeal against the court’s decision is still being looked into) – I was just doing my job. In the arrest report, I wrote without any hesitation that, in my opinion, the OMON officers were obstructing legal professional activity. And that’s a crime (art. 198 of the Criminal Code of Belarus).

What was the trial like? Were there any rights violations? Did you have a lawyer?

The trial was held on Skype (officially, because of the epidemiological situation). I was in a room at the temporary detention facility on Okrestina Street. I had two officers watching over me – a man in civilian clothes and a woman in uniform. It was not possible to speak to my lawyer face-to-face (even though the law provides for this). My lawyer was also not let into the building because of coronavirus, and we were also not allowed to communicate with each other by video link without the guards being present because, “who knows what crazy ideas could come into my head during that time”. The officers never left my side, allegedly for my own safety.

The trial passed quickly and was relatively predictable. Given the current state of the Belarusian justice system, there is no point in expecting a “not-guilty” verdict; we’ve come to understand this from experience. However, I didn’t think I’d receive a custodial sentence. Despite video recordings and witness testimonies, the judge still found me guilty of violating both articles of the Code of Administrative Offences and sentenced me to 13 days of detention.

What were the conditions like during your detention? Did you have access to clean water and normal food? What about packages from your family?

I served the entire 13-day sentence at Okrestina Street. Before the trial, at a temporary detention facility (TDF), and afterwards, in the isolation centre for offenders. The conditions are virtually the same, the only difference being that the TDF had wooden bunks and the bunks in the isolation centre had iron lattice bases.

My six-person cell contained exactly that number of people. The toilet was a hole in the floor (screened, which we were happy about), a basin with hot and cold water, bunks, bedside tables, benches and a table. We mainly drank water from the tap. This wasn’t normal drinking water, but it was bearable. They fed us three times a day. For breakfast, the centre staff brought us porridge (oatmeal, rice, pearl barley, barley, buckwheat or something else), sweet tea, and wheat and rye bread.
For lunch – soup (cabbage, borsch, rassolnik, pea, or something else), groats, strange non-descript cutlets, pickled vegetables and compote or kisessel. For dinner – groats and the same strange cutlet. Sometimes we got a sausage, but I wasn’t brave enough to sample it. They give out a lot of bread, and this began to show in some of the girls’ figures. So we were given something to drink twice a day, but not water.

We were not taken for a shower, though a schedule approved with a stamp hung in the cell (this contained “shower”, “daily walk”, etc.). Whether or not we went for a walk depended on the warder’s mood: sometimes we only managed to get out once every three days and at other times, three times a day. Packages were passed to us in good condition, but we didn’t get any letters. Though I learned after my release that dozens of them had been sent to us.

There was a problem with pills. I have to take medication every day. I had a few pills on me, which I took while I was still at the temporary detention facility. One pill and a few painkillers were all that was left when we were transferred to the isolation centre. I wasn’t allowed to take them with me. After the move, I told one of the officers that I needed prescribed medication and she recommended that I inform my family. I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. How was I supposed to inform my family when I was stuck there without any opportunity to contact anyone, even my lawyer?

How many of you were there in the cell? Did they torture you?

There were six people in a six-person cell. No one was tortured. I was relieved, but also surprised, they didn’t even beat us.

Did the law enforcement agents discuss any political issues with you? Did they want to convince of you of anything? Weren’t they aggressive?

On the evening before my trial, some GUBOPiK (Main Directorate for Combating Organised Crime and Corruption) officers came to the TDF. Even though I’d been arrested for violating articles 23.34 and 23.4 of the Code of Administrative Offences, the police officers didn’t once mention these paragraphs. The conversation began as follows:

– Events need to be covered from the perspective of both sides – one of them begins.

– We’re doing that – I say.

– Do you understand that the same is happening here as in Ukraine a few years ago?

– I don’t agree. The context and situation here are completely different to there.

– She’s got nothing interesting to say, bring in the next one – another officer concludes.
After the conversation, they record me on a telephone: I introduce myself, give my date and place of birth, state where I work and describe the circumstances of my arrest.

How safe do you feel as a journalist? Have you been covering the protests since you got out? Aren’t you afraid?

I haven’t felt safe as a journalist for a long time, and the situation has become extremely tense after what happened in Belarus in August. People wearing vests marked “press” are now being targeted by law enforcement officers and journalists are constantly being arrested. Reliable publications are being deprived of their accreditation and status as mass media outlets. I have already been arrested in Grodno, where I was working in a press vest. As soon as I arrived at the scene of the protest, all the reporters were bundled into a minibus and driven away to the police headquarters. Apparently, to get their documents checked. But they released us after three hours.

Since my release, I have covered the protests twice, but in “safari mode”, i.e. from a car or in apartments with windows looking onto the scene of a protest. It’s not safe for journalists to come out onto the streets, especially if they’ve already been detained by law enforcement officers.

At first, I was scared to go out at all, even to the shop. I couldn’t rid myself of the impression that a minibus would suddenly pull up and I’d be arrested just because I live in this country.

Have you thought about changing your profession?

No, I’ll continue conscientiously doing my job, until… they shoot me.

How long have you worked in journalism and were you ever charged with an administrative offence before the current events?

Officially, I’ve been working as a journalist for three and a half years (I graduated in 2017).

Earlier, when I was I student, I cooperated with various media outlets as a freelancer. These include Onliner, where I work now. During the 25 years of my life, I had never been charged with such an offence. Until October this year. (she smiles)

Maybe you have some tips you’d like to share with your fellow journalists? For example, how was it possible psychologically to bear the stress of being arrested and convicted?

When working as a journalist in today’s Belarus, it pays to be super pessimistic. In other words, to always be prepared for the worst. Then you won’t be quite so shocked by what is happening. The first few days were the hardest. I was seething with anger. I felt a huge sense of injustice and my only thought was that I was going to be confined within those four walls without fresh air for two weeks. Then you get used to it.
“We could knock on the door of any flat, knowing that the people inside would let us use their internet”.

Vsevolod Zarubin’s story

Vsevolod Zarubin is a journalist who works for the BelaPAN press agency and the TUT.BY web portal. He graduated from the Faculty of Design and Decorative and Applied Arts of the Belarusian State Academy of Arts. However, he was not able to work in the profession he had trained for. From 2009, he shot films for the media.

When we spoke, in mid-November, Vsevolod was taking a break from journalism. However, before our conversation, he had served a 15-day prison sentence.

Vsevolod shot videos for TUT.BY for 5 years. Most of these were posted on the YouTube platform.

– We made a programme called “People in the Studio”, in which we asked our guests awkward questions. At the beginning of the summer, we had to start working remotely due to quarantine restrictions. In July, we started covering political events in the country. We knew that we had to go to the protests and join the other journalists and photographers who were showing what was happening – Vsevolod says.

The tightening of restrictions following the introduction of a new media law in 2018 forced TUT.BY to reapply to the authorities to retain its status as a media outlet. The application was successful.

Recently, however, the portal’s media status was suspended, making it impossible for the journalists who represent it to perform their professional duties at protest rallies. Consequently, Vsevolod began working with BelaPAN, one of the largest press agencies in Belarus.

This is how Vsevolod describes the events of 14 July:

– I had a press badge hanging around my neck. I was performing my professional duties. I was not participating in unauthorised gatherings. I was working as a camera operator that day, but I was still arrested. The first time it happened was on 14 July. I was detained on that day with my colleague, Alexey Sudnikov, also a journalist. Let me remind you that this was the day on which the independent presidential candidates were not registered (the Central Election Commission refused to register the banker Viktor Barbariko, who was regarded as Lukashenko’s main rival, and the entrepreneur Valery Tsepkalo – author’s note). It was on that day that the law enforcement agencies began arresting people using brutal force, and we were targeted as well. Some police officers dragged us to one of their prison vans and forced us to lie face down on the floor.

The law enforcement officers took the journalists to the Oktyabrsky district police department. They released them two hours later after checking their documents.

– After that, I somehow managed to avoid getting arrested. A few times it was a really close thing. Three times I was rescued from the police by protesters. I wasn’t detained until 17 October. Maybe I sensed how the police would act at that particular moment. We are recording, so we are in the thick of the action.

These are not the kind of shots that can be taken from a long distance. When shooting a video, it’s important to be in the very centre of the event. We heard everything, saw everything, sensed passions running high – the journalist explains.

– How was the arrest carried out? Was your property confiscated?

– When the protests first started, we decided to film them on our mobile devices.
I recorded that. After sharing the material with my editors, I slowly began to move to another place. At that point, I saw six students blocking traffic by kneeling in the middle of the road. I wanted to film these young men being dispersed by law enforcement officers. I was completely alone. An OMON officer came up to me and asked me to show him my press badge, which was hanging around my neck. He looked at it and said, “Come with me”. They led me to a minibus and put me near the open door. From there I could see the police officers leading those students, sometimes very brutally. At one point, one of the OMON officers began shouting at a student and took a swing at him. I leaned out of the minibus and asked the officer to behave more calmly. He reacted very strongly and lunged in my direction, but his colleagues grabbed him from behind and advised him to leave it at that. They then told me to switch off my phone, which I’d already done anyway – recalls Vsevolod.

He says that he then spent some time in the prison minibus. After that, he was taken by police van to the Oktyabrsky District police department. The journalist remembers that many people were travelling in the van with him. Young women were sitting on the bench and young men on the floor. Hanging on a wall at the rear of the van was a Soviet-era Belarusian flag with the hammer and sickle. He says that this was not the first time he had seen such symbols in police vehicles.

– I don’t know why they do it, maybe for propaganda purposes. I also saw red-and-white flags taken from protestors being thrown onto the floor of vans and trampled on – the journalist says.

The infringements that Vsevolod allegedly committed were very similar to those attributed to many other journalists in Belarus.

Consequently, according to the law enforcement officers, he had been taking part “in a mass rally of citizens organised to discuss sociopolitical sentiments” and had “categorically refused” when police officers required him to leave a particular area. Vsevolod did not plead guilty, but such eventualities make no difference to the Belarusian judicial system. The court handed down a 15-day custodial sentence. The journalist was found guilty of violating two articles of the Code of Administrative Offences: 23.34 (participating in an unauthorised gathering) and 23.4 (refusing to comply with a police officer’s instructions).

Footage shot on a mobile phone doesn’t take up much memory so can be quickly shared with an editorial team. The quality was also sufficient for recordings that were going to end up on the internet. We shared our work with the Onliner web portal. We agreed to record footage on the unfolding situation no matter what the quality was. And the journalists at Onliner cut out the best footage to create a chronicle of events, which they shared online the next day. That’s why a phone was sufficient for TUT.BY’s needs. As for my arrest, it so happened that I was arrested more or less at the same time as Daria Spevak and Vadim Zamirovski.

At the beginning, there was a student march. The young people were walking in a column. Later, my journalist colleagues were arrested on Kozlova Street, and – The court proceedings were held, practically in the corridor, by Skype. Sometimes there were so many people in the room that it was dreadfully noisy and the detainees had to ask a few times what they were being charged with. It was impossible to hear anything because of the noise and weak connection.
I’m a Journalist. Why Are You Beating Me?

Vsevolod is also an artist and designer and completed a few drawings in the prison where he served out his sentence. He told us about his stay there.

– I had prepared everything in advance: when I was still at home, I packed a small suitcase with all the essentials so it wouldn’t be necessary to look for anything later. My family managed to get the most important things to me when I was at the police department, in particular – a toothbrush and warm clothes. After the trial, we spent a few days at the isolation centre before being moved on to the detention centre in Baranovichi.

Everything was planned in such a way as to ensure that we were transferred on the same day packages were received from our families. This was done on purpose to make things even more uncomfortable for us. Nevertheless, we were fortunate to have been arrested at quite a calm moment, so weren’t beaten or taunted. However, while we were being held at Okrestina Street, we felt all the police officers were very negatively disposed towards us... As if we were the enemy... Whereas in Baranovichi the conditions were worse, if not ascetic, but the prison staff’s attitude was much better – the journalist recalls.

According to the journalist, he and his co-detainees attempted to kill time somehow.

– You know, there was a whole wing designed for people like us. There were students there, actors, businessmen, journalists. We were joking that anyone who ended up in custody would certainly end up launching a start-up of some kind once they got out. What I mean is that anyone doing jail time is surrounded by many interesting people to speak to. It never got boring in there. We ended up in the “activists’ cell”, which many people had passed through. They’d left behind quite a library: from Darya Dontsova to Vsevolod Krestovsky. It was there that I read Krestovsky’s novel, “The Slums of St Petersburg”. This book contains a lot of “fenya”, a language used among thieves. It turns out that we’d been learning fenya on our bunks – the journalist laughs.

Two months before his arrest, Vsevolod was going to resign from his job. He had similar intentions a year earlier too, but these plans were initially thwarted by the coronavirus and then, by the political unrest that broke out in Belarus. The journalist decided to stay on in his job during these difficult times for his country. In November, his new employer was putting him under great pressure. Vsevolod was supposed to leave his job any day, but ended up being detained. He says this was an important experience for him.
Vsevolod has now changed industry and works in the IT sphere. He jokes that he is taking it easy now because the last two years have been tough.

– I’m definitely going to return to journalism, though there have been many long and difficult discussions at home about my work. I came to realise the risk involved in where I work and what I do. My wife was prepared for the fact that I could end up in jail – Vsevolod says.

The reporter also mentions the public’s attitude to journalists.

– All these events happening in our country arouse in Belarusians even more sympathy and faith in journalists. People see how complex our work is and what enormous pressure the independent media are being placed under. Suffice to say: during the protests, we could knock on the door of any flat, knowing that the people inside would let us use their internet, fix us something to eat and show us the view from their window – Vsevolod concludes.

Nazariy Vivcharik

“Europrisoners: the path to a new Belarus”.

Igor Korney’s story

Igor Korney, a correspondent for Radio Liberty’s Belarusian service, Radio Svoboda, received a custodial sentence of 10 days for “actively participating in the March of the Brave“. Although his time behind bars was a very challenging experience for the journalist, it was there in prison that he became convinced that Belarusians would soon be living in a new, free state.

Igor was arrested on 15 November. On that day alone, around a thousand protestors who had taken part in the weekly Sunday march ended up in Belarus’ detention centres and prisons. All in all, over 30,000 Belarusians have passed through the court and prison systems as a direct result of the repressions that started directly after the disputed presidential election.

Welcome to hell, bitches!

– During the March of the Brave in Minsk, the traditional Sunday round-up was taking place. The law enforcement officers led away anyone they could get their hands on – Igor recalls.

They began their day’s work by seizing demonstrators in the vicinity of Pushkin Avenue and concluded it by brutally breaking up a protest in the Square of Changes. Anyone was a potential target, regardless of their profession – they seized everyone, including journalists, who had turned up in large numbers.

– Welcome to hell, bitches! – the black-clad law enforcer muttered through his balaclava as he threw the next victim into a police minibus.
A packed bus drove up to a police prison van, which was loaded up with all the people from the minibus. Several flags lay on the ground by the van’s entrance. Once red and white, by now they’d turned a dirty grey.

– Stamp on them, you bastards!
– ordered a head in an oversized police helmet.

Igor and three other men were thrown into an upturned “pencil box” – a cage designed for two people inside the prison van. It was less than two metres high, a maximum of one metre wide and about half a metre long.

After they’d been on the road about 15 minutes, some law enforcement officers yanked the journalist out of the cage so forcefully that they tore off half his jacket sleeve.

Two girls were thrown into the freed-up space. Ten people were told to kneel in the narrow aisle.

After being told to lie down with their “gobs to the floor”, the detainees were showered with vulgarisms. The OMON officers clearly weren’t the most gifted of wordsmiths. Any attempts the prisoners made to elbow themselves into a position to look around were met with a dozen or so “educational” blows to the head. For the next half hour of the journey, they were all lost in their own thoughts...

Hands up, gobs down!

The journalist was in the first batch of detainees taken that Sunday to the Sovetsky District police department in Minsk. Over the next hour, prison vans were unloaded several more times, until there was no more space at the department for any more detainees.

Next, over a hundred “bandits”, including Igor, were told to stand facing a fence and garage wall in front of the police department. They were held there for several hours with their hands up.

– Then we were told to pull out our shoelaces and the strings in our jackets, unclip our hoods, take off our belts and throw everything in front of us. After a woman in uniform had taken down our personal details, we were taken to a building where our valuables were confiscated: money, telephones, watches, car keys, and so on.

After Igor and the other detainees had been searched, they were led out again into the street and positioned facing the wall. They stood there for another 12 hours. It was already getting cold outside. The temperature dropped below zero. Their hands froze.

– When, at the first opportunity, I tried to rub my hands together to warm them up at least a bit, I immediately heard a shout: “Why can’t you get it into your head? Hands up!”

An armed guard struck me in the liver region with professional accuracy.

Around 10 p.m., a table was placed in the middle of the yard. The detainees were called there one by one to sign charge sheets stating the signatory had “participated in an unauthorised street march in a group of people with white-red-white symbols”. The charges sheets could only be distinguished from one another by the time and place of arrest. Otherwise, they were identical. Anyone bold enough to state that the details in the statement were incorrect received a very blunt response:

“The court will deal with it!”

We then returned to the wall.
Once the last lights had gone out in the neighbouring buildings, a prison van pulled up to the police station. It took the journalists and some other detainees to a prison in Zhodino in the Minsk Region.

Everyone should step on the flag!

The nocturnal welcome at Zhodino was far from cordial, Igor says.

– Nonetheless, after standing 12 hours in front of a wall, running down Zhodino’s labyrinthine corridors with my hands behind my back was quite invigorating.

A white-red-white flag lay at the entrance to the room where the detainees were being body searched. It had obviously not been lying there for long, because it was still relatively clean. The prisoners refused to step on it, but some of them were deliberately being shoved in the back so they didn’t have any other option. The nervous guard was swearing like a trooper and threatening everyone that they’d be imminently “facing extra charges and getting an extra 15 days on top”.

After the detainees had been ordered to strip naked and everything they had come with had been searched, the journalist and the other prisoners were escorted to cell number 13 in their underwear.

– Other detainees who, just like me, were in their underpants, had been crowded into the cell. All in all, 20 people. And only 10 beds.

The cell looked something like this: two-tiered iron bunks without mattresses; in the middle, a tightly bolted crooked wooden table with metal corners; and two benches for six people. As for signs of civilisation, we had a haphazardly shielded latrine whose walls were splattered with faecal overflow, and a basin with running cold water. And that was it!

As Igor familiarised himself with his new cellmates, it soon became clear they represented a complete cross-section of Belarusian society: an IT boss, entrepreneurs of various kinds, a research assistant from an academic institute, a historian, a philologist, students – either already expelled or under threat of expulsion... Every third person was limping and many had black eyes or broken noses. Their sprinting skills had let them all down. Some had been marked out by the OMON riot police as possible ringleaders of the protests – one had something painted on his arm and another had “white-red-white” written on his forehead.

– Fatigue is taking its toll. Some have slumped onto the iron bunks, while others are just lying on the floor or have fallen asleep at the table. The conditions aren’t the best, but at least we’re not being forced to hold our hands up or behind our backs. A bright light burns 24-7. The nightlight is never used.

We were awoken from our restless slumber by a warden who wordlessly opened the “feeding hatch” and slipped in four loaves of bread and the same number of aluminium mugs of tea. The sound also draws out the prison’s well-fed, thoroughbred rats from under the skirting boards for a spot of light breakfast...

The presence of lawyers and witnesses is optional

As Igor recalls, “the conveyor belt through the courts didn’t get going until Tuesday. The trials got off to a flying start because everyone who hadn’t faced trial within 72 hours would have to be released. There were not enough judges onsite, so the trials were conducted on Skype by judges from nearby towns. The judiciary unveiled a new strategy for a new season: jettisoning the unnecessary ballast of lawyers and making witnesses optional.

“Those who were being tried for a second time almost immediately received a prison term of 15 days. The prosecution threw in a ‘bonus’ charge based on article 23.4 of the Criminal Code – failure to comply with the instructions of a law enforcement officer. Any complaints about inconsistencies in the charge sheets around the place of arrest were ignored, as the out-of-town
I’m a Journalist. Why Are You Beating Me?

You Euroliterati are in your element!

According to Igor, Wednesday is the best day for prisoners.

– After all, this is the day when they may get parcels from their loved ones. These could contain 5 kilogrammes of food and the things they need most: a toothbrush, a shaver, slippers, lard, onions. In prison conditions, all such things seem like a real gift of fate.

Plus, it’s the only way of checking if your family know exactly where you are. Otherwise, there’s a total information blockade.

After his release, Igor discovered that when he had been serving his sentence, many family members and friends had written letters to him. None of them reached him.

According to the journalist, the everyday realities of prison life offer little in the way of variety.

– There’s a wake-up call at six in the morning. Almost immediately, a portion of porridge or oatmeal with sticky slime is slipped through the “feeding hatch”. Every time, we started berating the warder who’d brought the food, because he never gave us enough compote.

– I’m sick of you. You Euroliterati are in your element! – he retorted and reluctantly poured some compote into another glass.

Before lights out, we had to occupy ourselves somehow. Sitting on the bunks was prohibited under threat of the mattresses being confiscated. When we had finished all the books, we asked the wardens to at least let us look through the state-owned newspaper Sovetskaya Belorussiya. The response was categorical:

“This is not a fucking library!”

So we were only left with songs, heartfelt conversations and the belief that everything would come to an end soon and we would all be living in a new, free Belarus…

Volia Ivashenko.
Nasha Niva journalist Catarina Karpitskaya was sentenced to 15 days in custody simply because she was honestly performing her professional duties. Those two weeks will stay in her memory forever.

I began my working day at a march and ended it in the hands of the police

On 7 November, Catarina Karpitskaya was reporting from the Women’s March. This weekly protest has been held in Minsk every Saturday since the beginning of the protests against the disputed results of the presidential election.

– If you live in Belarus, you need to be ready to be arrested at any moment, especially in 2020 and even more so if you are involved in any way with journalism. Even so, I didn’t expect I’d be detained in such an undignified manner.

The journalist recalls that there were not so many people taking part in that day’s protest. She managed to shoot a video of demonstrators being arrested for Nasha Niva’s website, after which she headed towards a bus stop with a female colleague.

It wasn’t the usual yellow bus that picked us up from the bus stop. Instead, three men in plain clothes got out of a grey police minibus and told us to accompany them to “establish our identity”. We had no idea at the time that “establishing” this would take 15 days.

The police department and women branded with silver paint

The young women were brought into the Moskovsky District police department and forced to turn off their phones. They were not allowed to inform their loved ones that they’d been arrested.

– Before I turned off my phone, I managed to send out an SOS signal.

Most of the women arrested that day were released after questioning. The only ones left behind were those who had already been charged with a minor offence and journalists.

Catarina had all her personal belongings confiscated and was made to pull out her shoelaces. She was informed that her telephone had been seized and was transferred to the temporary detention facility on Okrestina Street.

– They “lost” my jacket. Clearly, they didn’t want to waste time and energy pulling the cords out of it. For the next two weeks, I only had a sweater to wear. Both outside and in a cell with a broken window.

There were about ten women with us. They were arrested simply because they’d been carrying bunches of flowers. Yes, yes, in Belarus, that’s a crime! Anyone who was too slow to comply with the police’s instructions had one of their arms marked with silver paint.

We came to understand that anyone who’d been marked in this way would be facing charges.

Catarina Karpitskaya’s story

“Cynicism, fishcakes and batons clattering along to the Belarusian national anthem”.

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– They “lost” my jacket. Clearly, they didn’t want to waste time and energy pulling the cords out of it. For the next two weeks, I only had a sweater to wear. Both outside and in a cell with a broken window.

The women in my cell were decent company: a German translator, engineer,
market analyst and a woman who’d quarrelled with her brother. However, the next day, which was a Sunday, when OMON officers traditionally grab hundreds or thousands of marching protestors off the streets, they begin to free the cells for “worthier” detainees.

What were you fed?

On the day we were arrested, we weren’t given any lunch or dinner, but anyway, it was impossible to eat what we were given later. For example, a fishcake moulded from bread and the bones of a fish of obscure species.

What were the conditions like in the cell?

Imagine having nothing at all. No personal belongings, food, combs, spare lingerie, books or crosswords. Nothing. What is more, you are completely unaware of what is going on outside. The nightlight never stops shining into your eyes. We taped it up with a few sanitary pads we had in our pockets. Some women pulled masks over their eyes to at least get some sleep. There was a large puddle under the washbasin, which kept leaking. At least it was warm at Okrestina. Sometimes even stuffy. Some much so that some people’s blood pressure jumped. Even I had a reading of 150, though my pressure is normally low.

Were you allowed to see any doctors?

– Only when we knocked long and hard on the door and asked for assistance. It took a while for them to come and then they would only give us a few aspirin (which cure everything at Okrestina) and walked off. No one thought to check again a little later to see if people were feeling any better. The gender disparity at the detention facility turned out to be a plus for us girls. Women were picked on less. They tended to take it out on the boys. When one of the male detainees asked why they hadn’t been given any tea, a brawny warder would whip out his baton and start yelling:

"On your fucking feet, you faggots! Fetch those fucking mattresses! From now on, you’ll be sleeping without them if you’re going to get wise with me! They fancy some fucking tea!"

Of course, not all the warders treated the prisoners that way. There were some who could take a joke.

According to Catarina, her trial took place in a noisy corridor via Skype, so she missed half of what the witnesses and judge were saying.

False witnesses and judges who couldn’t care less

After a few days, the trials began.

– The trials of the three girls from my cell took 10 minutes. Many people had been detained during Sunday’s march so there was no time for the judges to consider each case in detail. No one cared how the defendants had pleaded or whether there was any evidence for their innocence. All of them got 15 days.
The lights had been turned out, so I took the risk of washing my underwear and hair with a bar of laundry soap. When I’d finished, I was told I was being transferred. I had to put on my wet clothes. They took me to a new cell. There were five women in it. It later turned out that we’d been lucky because there were nine or more people in other similar cells. The window in the new cell was broken, so it was like being in a refrigerator. The warders ignored all our requests to somehow seal the window (we couldn’t do it ourselves because of the bars). We weren’t given any underwear. The girls slept in their jackets. And I only had my sweater, because I never got my jacket back. The window wasn’t repaired until the next night, at which point they told us: “Write later how good to you we were here.”

The apogee of cynicism and humiliation

The night after the trial, Catarina was transferred to a detention centre for convicted offenders.

We didn’t get a chance to eat anything. We had to just go.

I saw a guy whose trousers were covered in blood. So he’d been beaten. The prison staff were laughing at him: “Got your period?”

And when anyone looked at the wall in the wrong way, they would shout something like: “Life fucking getting you down?”

All that rush had been necessary to ensure that everybody could be packed into the yard for hours on end in sub-zero temperatures – even men in sweaters and jackets were losing the feeling in their fingers. Someone gave me his polo neck to help me warm up. It helped a little.

After ten in the morning, the detainees were ostentatiously driven out in prison vans past a crowd of relatives who had been queuing up outside the detention facility to hand over packages since the early hours. This was a Thursday, the only day of the week in which prisoners could receive food and other essentials from their families. Organising the transfer for that day effectively meant that the detainees would be forced to survive at least another week without their belongings. At Okrestina, this procedure had long formed part of a cynical tradition of taunting detained protestors. Baranovichi prison loomed up ahead for Catarina.

– When we were travelling to Baranovichi, the drivers around us honked their horns as a sign of solidarity. One of the detainees had managed to grab a piece of bread and fill a bottle with some tap water. Such things are a veritable feast for “article 23.34 veterans” (the article in the Code of Administrative
Offences pertaining to participation in an unauthorised gathering – editor’s note.

We passed round our haul so everyone could benefit. We couldn’t have cared less about coronavirus.

Our hairbrushes had been confiscated back at the police department, but one of the women had managed to smuggle one out and lent it to us all. For the first time in five days, we were able to brush the knots out of our hair. We also shared out all the sanitary pads we had. We refused to believe that we were going to be staying in such conditions. But some of the warders left some of the women in that hellhole for several more hours, hiding the fact from the inspection team. After being searched and doing a few naked squats, we are transferred to cell number 95, where there are 21 women and 19 places. Among the detainees were: a lecturer from Minsk State Linguistic University, a musician employed by the philharmonic, a pensioner, a student, a hotel manager, an SEO specialist, a teacher, a pastry chef, a PR professional, a designer...

The girls had a little food left over from previous package deliveries. Thanks to their hospitality, for the first time in 24 hours, we could eat something: nuts and biscuits. We’d arrived empty-handed, but with news from the outside that was more or less up to date. Then a real convict-style daily routine began. Like in a film.

I’m scared to ask what they fed you at Baranovichi...

– To be honest, it was much better than at Okrestina! The food there was not that far from homecooked. The menu was rotated – pea soup, oatmeal or buckwheat groats, pearl barley, cabbage, pasta or potatoes topped with something resembling a stew. At dinnertime, one or two plates of fish were served for everyone. I’ve never eaten fish that often before.

And the conditions?

We could only get cold water from the tap. We sometimes managed to get hold of a kettle and temporary power supply, but had to beg for them. We heated the water and mixed it with cold water in bottles. Then we washed ourselves over the vitally important hole in the floor, which was constantly clogged. By then, Baranovichi already contained many crosswords and books, even dominos and draughts. We played charades, “Mafia” and “What? Where? When?”. We sang the “Pahonia” anthem (a patriotic poem set to music – ed. note) and “Changes!”.

The six a.m. wake-up call combined the Belarusian national anthem, batons banging on the iron door and a shouted “Get the fuck up!”. The melody of the national anthem injected a special note of “patriotism” into the performance.
While the teachers were with us, we learned some Italian and English. We tried to remember poems and wrote them down. Someone was doing facial fitness exercises.

We somehow made contact through a gap in the wall with the guys in the next cell. We were shocked to discover that they had a guest… a rat. They’d named him Jerry. We missed living company so much that we would actually have been glad to receive a visit from Jerry.

On the 11th day of her prison term, Catarina was able to take a shower for the first time.

– The other prisoners had been in before us, so there was an awful stench, but such things didn’t bother us anymore. At such moments, you basically know you have 10 minutes to wash off all the dirt and under better lighting, you can see all those bruises left on your body by a few nights on three-tier iron bunks.

According to the journalist, the hours that passed the slowest were those leading up to the “bell”.

– The prison staff remembered I was a journalist and asked if I was getting bored. After all, I was in “such splendid company”. In fact, the girls from my cell were really great. All these people would have been able to do much good for the country over the course of that fortnight. Unfortunately, this country has decided to lock away the good…

Pens weren’t banned, but were constantly being confiscated and not passed on to us when they arrived in packages. We wrote everything in pencil.

The highlight of our week was the delivery of letters from our loved ones. This was a really festive occasion. The letters informed us about the latest news in the country.

Catarina was released on 22 November. She remembers that when she discovered how many journalists had been detained at the same time as her, it took away all her joy at being released.

– Remarque wrote that the police are most likely to arrest romantics. It turns out that we Belarusians are 300 per cent romantics. When you slow down for a moment and try to look in at everything that’s happening from the outside, it all feels like a movie.

And then you realise this is no film. It’s our Belarusian reality and we all have leading roles to play…

Volia Ivashenko
“Reporting in an armlock”.

Catarina Andreeva’s story

The Belsat TV reporter Catarina Andreeva on detentions, beatings in custody and her readiness to risk her life.

If someone were to ask me to recall when it all started for me, I would say: in March 2017, within the bare walls of a damp solitary confinement cell in a detention centre in Orsha. I was 23 and had just started working as a Belsat correspondent. Protests had broken out in Belarus. Initially, the protestors’ demands were limited to the abolition of a tax paid by anyone who was unemployed, but soon a wave of discontent with the political system was sweeping through the whole country.

The protests were not only taking place in the capital, but also in regional centres such as Orsha. I went there with a camera operator to do a live broadcast from a demonstration in the city’s main square. By the middle of the day, protestors had completely filled the square. As the protest was drawing to a close, we decided to “escort” local opposition leader Pavel Severinets to his car, thinking that the law enforcement agencies would not dare to arrest him on camera. But we had miscalculated. Both Severinets and my camera operator were arrested. I could not allow them to push my colleague into a car and drive off with him to some unknown location so I began to loudly protest.

When I tried to ask a warder what was going to happen to me, he responded with a “Happy Constitution Day!” and slammed shut the door of my cell. I think that night helped me to make an important life choice. I asked myself: “Am I prepared to give up my freedom for the sake of one report?”

Three years later, I would be asking myself a different question: “Is it worth risking my life for?”

Things heat up

– It has never been possible to escape persecution from the authorities while working at Belsat. Every time I applied to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for press accreditation, I was refused without any reason being given. However, both sides knew the reason for this. The state has a “monopoly” over the media, so commercial or independent news channels are not allowed to exist. Belsat has promoted democratic values since it was launched in 2007, so was immediately regarded as an unwelcome presence. Today, all journalists who are not loyal to the regime are categorised as enemies of the state and even if they have been granted accreditation and a press card, this will not prevent them from being detained.

Throughout the summer of 2020, the political situation across the country was getting tenser. By August, this tension had reached boiling point. My colleagues and I were prepared for the worst: we reminded ourselves of the guidelines we had been given about how to keep safe during protests, bought...
ourselves bulletproof vests (which only protect against rubber bullets, because that was all that was available), protective goggles (in case tear gas was deployed), helmets and anything else needed by reporters in the epicentre of events.

Personally, I had never had to wear a bulletproof vest. It’s much easier to escape without one.

On 9 August, I was in a great mood from first thing in the morning. The weather was clear and sunny and I went to work in a new suit. I was also wearing makeup and had recently had my hair styled. For the whole day, our crew was moving from one polling station to the next. The turnout was very high almost everywhere and queues of people wishing to vote stretched back hundreds of metres. Most voters were wearing white bracelets on their wrists (a symbol of support for the presidential candidate Svetlana Tikhanovskaya – editor’s note). Volunteers were serving people water and other drinks and offering stools to the elderly. Viktor Tsoi’s song “Changes!” burst through the windows of neighbouring buildings (the unofficial anthem of the Belarusian revolution – translator’s note).

Belsat’s live election coverage, which was anchored by studio presenters and included reports coming in from different parts of Belarus, was due to continue late into the night. In the evening, people had gathered around the polling stations to demand that the election commissions display an honest report of the count. Everyone wanted to know how many votes Svetlana Tikhanovskaya had won.

– We were recording an interview with an observer at one of the election commissions in the city centre when some minibuses appeared behind my interlocutor’s back and OMON officers jumped out of them. We recorded the final part of the report on the run. By that time, mobile Internet had already been blocked in Minsk, so we sent part of the report to the editorial office from a flat belonging to a guy who ran into a building with us. Incidentally, letting journalists into private homes would become good old tradition over the coming months.

Minsk becomes a hotspot

– Half an hour later, we went outside holding our breath and looking all around us. The preliminary results of the voting were already in: about 80 per cent for Lukashenko. People had begun to gather in numbers around the Minsk Hero City obelisk in the centre. At one point, the huge crowd turned around: before them stood a cordon of police officers with shields. Over the next twenty minutes, as we made our way through poorly lit yards, we heard the sound of explosions. The dark August sky was illuminated by pale flashes. They [the police] were getting closer and closer. We reached a three-metre-high fence. I tucked my microphone under my arm, climbed over the fence without any trouble and ran over the rail tracks to some residential buildings. Suddenly, a man ran out of the darkness. He had been wounded in the leg and his hands were trembling. He grabbed the camera operator by her press vest and asked her if she could get him to a safe place. I had some friends who lived nearby. When we had got to their flat, I dressed this stranger’s wound and he gave me a pen drive: “Please take this. I filmed a man being run over by a prison van”.

– I got home by four in the morning and managed to get a bit of sleep. But the previous night’s events were just the beginning.
At some point on the evening of 10 August, all the cars stopped on the wide Pirtyskogo Street. The drivers honked their horns and put on “Changes!”.

Then they got out of their cars in the middle of the road and clearly had no intention of going anywhere. Some of them clambered onto the roofs of their cars and unfurled white-red-white flags. Meanwhile, at the crossroads near the Pushkinskaya metro station, protestors were improvising barricades from billboards, flower stands, and even benches taken from the terrace of a McDonald’s. Theoretically, the protestors would be protected from law enforcement officers by the barricades on one side and by the column of cars that had created an “AutoMaidan”, on the other. Alongside the heavies in helmets stood some very young girls with flags draped around their shoulders. Their faces were painted white-red-white and they were singing songs and weaving garlands.

I recorded an interview with some guys who were dragging a rubbish bin towards the barricades. There was an electrifying tension in the air. I pointed my phone camera towards the lights of the security force’s vehicles flashing in the distance. “They’re still a long way off”, I thought to myself, but the next moment, something bright landed on the asphalt next to me. Flash. Boom. I can’t hear anything. Another flash. My telephone drops to the ground. My legs refuse to move. My helmet is too heavy. Shouting “Journalist!”, I ran into some building and collapsed on the stairwell, surrounded by people. Suddenly, a door on that floor opened: “This way, hurry!” That’s how I met Vera and Alexander. I crouched down on their balcony and connected to Belsat by telephone to report live on the events. At that point, the security forces started shooting at a flat a floor below. The smashing of breaking glass could be heard. The explosions and gunshots below the windows continued unabated for several hours.

We turned off the lights and lay on the floor – ten terrified strangers holding hands and drenched in sweat. As dawn broke, my female host brewed me some strong tea, gave me her dressing gown and made up the sofa for me.

Towards the end of August, a manhunt for journalists began. They were deliberately being targeted by the authorities and it became dangerous to appear at protest wearing a “press” vest. On 27 August, even before the protest planned for that day had begun, 50 journalists and photographers from the leading non-governmental media outlets were arrested.

Most of them were released a few hours later, but I and three other colleagues were detained overnight at the assembly hall in the Oktyabrsky district police department. Remarkably, the police officers had prepared some refreshments for the detainees: coffee, marshmallows, biscuits and stew. Then they began recording. “The blood of peaceful civilians is on these marshmallows!” – one of the officers said.

“...I’m going on hunger strike until you release me from my unlawful detention” – I added. The morning after my trial, I was released and a charge sheet alleging I had “participated in an unauthorised gathering” was sent back to the police for further processing.
A cold morning at Okrestina

“Get out! Face the wall! Hands on the wall, palms forward! Remove your shoes! Hands behind your back!”

The warder’s barked commands chase away any remnants of sleep. I’m standing in the corridor staring at the hideous grey-blue sheen of the wall. Next to me, four other women of various ages are standing in the same pose: the youngest is 21, though she looks like a teenager; the oldest is in her fifties. She became very anxious in the night because law enforcement officers had also arrested her daughter – “She’s quite short and her hair is closely cropped because she had chemotherapy. Maybe one of you has seen her?”

A little later, we are returned to our cell. Everything has been turned upside down after the “shakedown”. We need to put back the dirty mattresses and pick up the sanitary pads, brushes and tissues that have been strewn all over the place. I was allowed to keep my little tiger mascot with me. Now he lies in the dust on the floor.

“I wonder what they were expecting to find here.”

“Forget it, girls, let’s drink some tea. It’s almost getting cold. Help yourselves!”

– At that point, I was the only one to have received a package.

The scent of the chocolate biscuits my husband had so carefully arranged in a package blasted my nose and mingled with the appalling stench of the “toilet” – a filthy brown hole in the floor. I felt vomit rising in my throat. And so begins another morning at Okrestina.

... I was arrested along with the camera operator on 12 September while broadcasting live from the Women’s March. A minibus pulled up and OMON officers jumped out – by now this had all become a fixed routine. We were stuck at the police department for five hours talking with some officers about politics and the police’s attitude towards protestors. Seeing that they weren’t going to get anything from us, the officers stopped paying any attention to us and hunched over their phones, waiting for instructions from their superiors.

A police van with curtains drawn across its windows finally took us to the detention facility at Okrestina. The two officers who were escorting us, both very young and with a florid complexion, the very picture of health, glared at me askance as if I was an exotic animal. In the end, one of them couldn’t hold off any longer and asked me why I wasn’t at home. I change the subject:

“Do you realise that everyone hates the police now?”

“For what?”

“Because people come out of your prisons black-and-blue from the beatings.”

“So we’re just supposed to stand by and watch while they’re throwing Molotov cocktails at officers?!”

“He raised an eyebrow with interest at the word “housing”.
“Really? They just give you somewhere to live?”

Evidently, this was an important motivation (OMON officers are given flats as part of their service – editorial note).

We’re all in this together

– Dining at Okrestina is a special “pleasure”. I swallow a few spoonfuls of the sticky slime that they call “oatmeal” here, but my gag reflex kicks in. While I’m waiting for my next package, I plan to survive on grey bread dipped in water. If you roll it around in your mouth for a long time, it seems sweet. My general weakness is making me sleepy again. I lose track of time and suddenly, lunch appears.

“Fish soup, girls, come get your ukha! It’s fish day!” – the woman distributing the food rattles the bowls in the corridor. Again, I get some nondescript mush, a blue sausage and some inconceivably sour cabbage. Maybe, after a week of starving myself, I’d have wolfed it all down. But so far, I’ve only been able to handle the cabbage. But it didn’t stay in my stomach for long. At one point, I was startled to discover why the prison tea had such a strange aftertaste: a fat ant was floating at the bottom.

“Do we get anything to drink with a dinner?” – I asked.

“Stop that drinking! You’ve had enough,” – the woman distributing the food chortles good-naturedly.

– At night, I was transferred to a four-person cell. There were five of us in there, but anyway I was lucky: during the mass detentions, dozens of people were being stuffed into such cells. I share a bunk with Veronika, who is a vet. The top bunk is occupied by a designer called Diana and Elizaveta, a choir teacher. Next to her, lies Tatiana, whose sick daughter has also been detained.

“Actually, they arrested Vika first and I stood in front of the prison van and refused to get out the way – that was my child in there after all!”

– After lights out, no one wants to sleep. We talk all night: about politics, the future, our families, work and the plans that have no chance of reaching fruition over the next few days.

“A couple of days afterwards, my cellmates were sentenced to from 11 to 13 days in custody and transferred to the prison in Zhodino.

On 15 August, I was taken to the building adjacent to the temporary detention facility for my case to be heard by Skype. The witnesses – the officers who had been present at my arrest – didn’t show up. The judge, Alena Zhyvitsa, quickly acquainted herself with the case files, watched part of my live report on the women’s march, which contained no hint whatsoever of me being “non-compliant” and called a 15-minute adjournment to make a decision.

“All this reminds me of being in a hospital of some kind.”

“Yes, only we’re not the sick ones here.”

– This will sound strange to many, but becoming acquainted with that awful place from the inside was an intriguing experience from a purely journalistic perspective. Yes, stripping naked for the body search was humiliating. Yes, the mattresses were dirty and stank. Yes, the food was inedible. But every time the tears of despair welled up in my eyes, I was comforted by the fact that I wasn’t alone. I had new friends with me and the next cells contained doctors, artists, athletes and my fellow journalists. We’re all in this together.
I sat in front of the laptop screen for three hours. When the judge announced, “the charge sheet will be sent back to the police department for further processing…”, I couldn’t restrain my emotions and shouted out:

“Who is going to return those three days of my life to me?”

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– I was actually very lucky. In October, it was rare for journalists to be only held for three days. Increasingly, they were receiving the maximum term – 15 days.

After a short break in the countryside, I returned to work. When the marches (and their brutal suppression) take place in Minsk every Sunday, I get into the car with my camera operator and we follow the many thousands of demonstrators around the city. The dispersal of the protestors is largely handled these days by plainclothes ГУБОП (Main Directorate for Combating Organised Crime and Corruption) officers, with their bulletproof vests pulled over their sports jackets and batons at the ready. Sometimes, they replace their batons with ordinary wooden sticks. They smash up cafes where terrified people are hiding out and break into flats, shoving detainees’ faces into the ground, beating them, kicking them. Peaceful protestors are being targeted by officers throwing stun grenades and firing rubber bullets. Thousands are falling victim to the violence. At least eight people have been killed. So far, the law enforcement agencies are yet to face any criminal charges.

Yet civil society is facing brutal retribution on a daily basis: so far, around a thousand criminal cases have been instigated. The political prisoners of today are doctors, students, cultural figures, teenagers, professional athletes, people who just happened to be passing by. And, of course, journalists. At the time of writing, 17 of my colleagues are behind bars. Some of them have been beaten at police departments.

I am constantly receiving offers to go abroad, at least for a while, so I can wait in Poland or Lithuania for the danger to subside. How long am I prepared to continue working in conditions in which my freedom is shrinking by the hour? When every day begins with the news of more searches and detentions? I don’t know, I can’t answer that. But I do know that, for four months now, people in Belarus have been going out onto the streets with white-red-white flags and flowers of these colours. And that means that Belsat needs to make sure they don’t go unseen.

On 12 November, 31-year-old Roman Bondarenko died in an intensive care unit after failing to regain consciousness. The day before, he had been arrested for attempting to prevent a law enforcement officer from cutting through the white-red-white ribbons in one of Minsk’s public courtyards. He spent one and a half hours at a police station. When he was collected from there by ambulance, he was already in a coma. He had a severe head injury and a cerebral oedema. He had been beaten to death right before the eyes of the whole country. Over the next 24 hours, a public memorial drowning in flowers appeared in the yard. People still come there to lay flowers and prepare for Sunday’s “March of the Heroes”. We should be showing this on Belsat. That’s why I’m not going anywhere yet. As one of my colleagues says, we are being sustained by our rage.

Catarina Andreeva was arrested on 15 November on the thirteenth floor of a block facing the yard in which, only a few days before, masked bandits had beaten to death an opposition supporter. She had been reporting live from there on the pacification of the demonstrations that had been taking place at the site of the victim’s abduction. She and her camera operator Daria Chultsova have been charged with “organising and preparing actions grossly breaching the peace”, which carries a potential prison sentence of up to three years. A court have extended her detention period by two months. (translator’s note).