



**“WE BAPTISE YOU IN THE NAME
OF SAINT ALYAKSANDR LUKASHENKA
AND THE RIOT POLICE”**

**AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL**



Students and teachers across Belarus started the academic year on 1 September 2020 in a country that had been radically transformed by events over the summer. They were at the heart of the peaceful protests and started the new term with marches across the country and other manifestations of dissent, including picketing, wearing the colours of the 'opposition', singing protest songs and reading poems.

For those participating in the peaceful protest movement, the cost has been high. On 27 October, Alyaksandr Lukashenka called for universities to dismiss them.¹ It was an explicit instruction to academic institutions to intimidate and prevent those trying to peacefully exercise their human rights from doing so.

Across Belarus hundreds of thousands of people had taken to the streets to protest the results of the widely-disputed presidential election on 9 August 2020. The incumbent Alyaksandr Lukashenka claimed a landslide victory, while Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya emerged as a popular candidate for protest voters. The authorities unleashed an egregious and violent crackdown on peaceful protesters and others expressing dissent. Riot police have used unlawful force against peaceful protestors and thousands have been detained solely for protesting peacefully. Allegations of torture and other ill-treatment in detention are widespread. Over 30,000 people have been detained under administrative legislation for taking part in peaceful demonstrations and over 3,000 have been prosecuted under criminal charges related to mass events and protests, with hundreds already sentenced to terms of imprisonment.

People across the country continue to express their dissent peacefully, and reprisals against them continue. The shocking human rights clampdown in Belarus demonstrates a blatant disregard for human rights: women, children, artists, pensioners, athletes, students and academics, health workers, trade unionists and other groups have all been targeted. In its #StandWithBelarus campaign, Amnesty International has spoken with activists, local human rights defenders and individual rights holders who have been targeted to try and capture the breadth and scale of violations taking place and illustrate the pervasive nature of government repression.

The targeting of politically active students and teachers is not a new tactic of the Belarusian authorities or educational establishments. But the scale of harassment, persecution and violence against them is unprecedented since Belarus' 1991 independence – and the same holds true for all who speak out against the government in the context of the presidential election.

As of 17 May 2021, according to the independent Belarusian Students' Association, at least 466 students have been detained, almost a third of whom are women. Many have received periods of administrative detention or fines averaging 120 Euros in a country where the average monthly salary is 420 Euros. At least 153 students have been arbitrarily expelled from universities and many have fled to neighbouring countries, fearful for their safety. Forty-two are suspects in criminal cases and six have been sentenced to terms of imprisonment.²

The cases in this briefing are far from unique. Rather, they illustrate the broader picture of academic life in Belarus today for those unwilling to bow to the authorities' efforts to silence them. Despite the widespread and systemic violations of the rights of student activists and academics, they continue courageously to express their dissent. They are a central part of the broader protest movement which has swept the country.



¹ <https://belsat.eu/en/news/lukashenka-wants-opposition-minded-students-out-of-universities/>

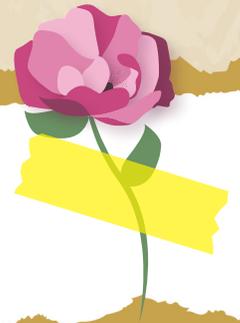
² https://zbsunion.by/en/news/pressure_on_students accessed on 14 May 2021
(these numbers continue to rise)

KANSTANTSIN

(not his real name)

Kanstantsin is twenty-one years old and in his final year at the Belarusian State University of Informatics and Radioelectronics in Minsk. He and his friends had become increasingly active in the months leading up to the presidential election, attending opposition meetings and participating in bicycle protests. Although many of them were detained and sentenced to periods of administrative detention, this did not deter them and they continued to be active.

Kanstantsin told Amnesty International that “no one imagined how it could be so brutal, that there would be such repression.”



Kanstantsin was detained on 13 September 2020 during one of the weekly Sunday mass protests in Minsk. Riot police jumped out of a van, grabbed him by the hair and punched him in the chest, shouting “what are you doing, devil?” They threw him into a police vehicle along with other protesters and took him to the central police station where, in the courtyard, officials took the details of those detained. When Kanstantsin told officers where he studied, they responded “not anymore.” And when leaflets of protest songs were found in Kanstantsin’s rucksack, he was asked “so you’re an activist?” and questioned further about protest meetings. A sticker identifying him as an activist was placed on his back, and he was soon surrounded by five masked men in black plain clothes who started to punch him repeatedly.

They took his phone and demanded the password, which he gave them. Kanstantsin had deleted information from his phone on the way to the police station so the men re-installed the Telegram messenger app and demanded his password, which Kanstantsin refused to give. He was hit again and told “We’ll take you to the fourth floor and we’ll get the password from you.” On the way to the fourth floor he was forced to bend forward with his arms high behind his back. He agreed to give the password but nonetheless was pinned against a wall by two of the men while a third kicked him repeatedly on his thigh in the same place, and a fourth held his phone up to him demanding his password. Konstantin soon realised that his mind had blanked and he was unable to remember his password – he gave a wrong answer three times. He believes the officers interpreted this to be a time-wasting trick. They kicked him again. Kanstantsin said,

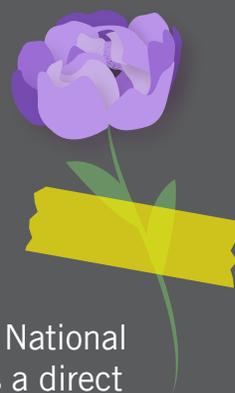
“It was like a dead-end for me. It was painful. It was a hopeless situation. It became darker in my eyes. I passed out. Then I heard them say that I’d changed colour, they put me on the ground, they poured cold water on me and said “We baptise you in the name of Saint Alyaksandr Lukashenka and the riot police.”

Kanstantsin was carried to the first floor and left there amidst a group of protesters who were being questioned. He received no medical attention. He told a police officer that he had been beaten, but hours later when he received his official charge sheet there was no mention of the beating. He refused to sign the charge sheet and was told instead to mention it in court.

At about 4am on 14 September Kanstantsin was transported to the notorious Akrestsina temporary detention centre in Minsk, which has become synonymous with torture. On 15 September, in a 15-minute court hearing held on Skype with masked witnesses, he was sentenced to 10 days administrative arrest. He repeated that he had been beaten and lost consciousness but the judge advised him to report this information upon his release.

Within two hours after transfer back to his cell, Kanstantsin was taken to a room where two men asked why he had lied in court about being beaten. They told him to withdraw his allegations on video and to admit he had made them as “hype and PR.” When he refused he was shown articles of the Criminal Code and threatened that he would be charged the next day if he did not cooperate. Kanstantsin conceded and filmed the video. The next day he was taken to the Investigative Committee where he was told he was a suspect in a criminal case, under Article 342 of the Criminal Code of Belarus (“organisation and preparation of actions that grossly violate public order”), provided with a state lawyer, and further questioned. Kanstantsin served his full administrative detention and was released after ten days. The criminal case against him remains open at the time of writing.

ANASTASIA BULIBENKA



Anastasia is 19 years old and was a second year student at the Belarusian National Technical University when she was expelled in the late autumn of 2020 as a direct consequence of her activism or, as her mother told Amnesty International, “for speaking her mind.” After returning to university on 1 September, Anastasia was detained twice during student marches and had been warned several times by the university Rector that she was under observation. This did not deter her from her activism and engagement with the Belarusian Students’ Union, one of the oldest youth organisations in the country.

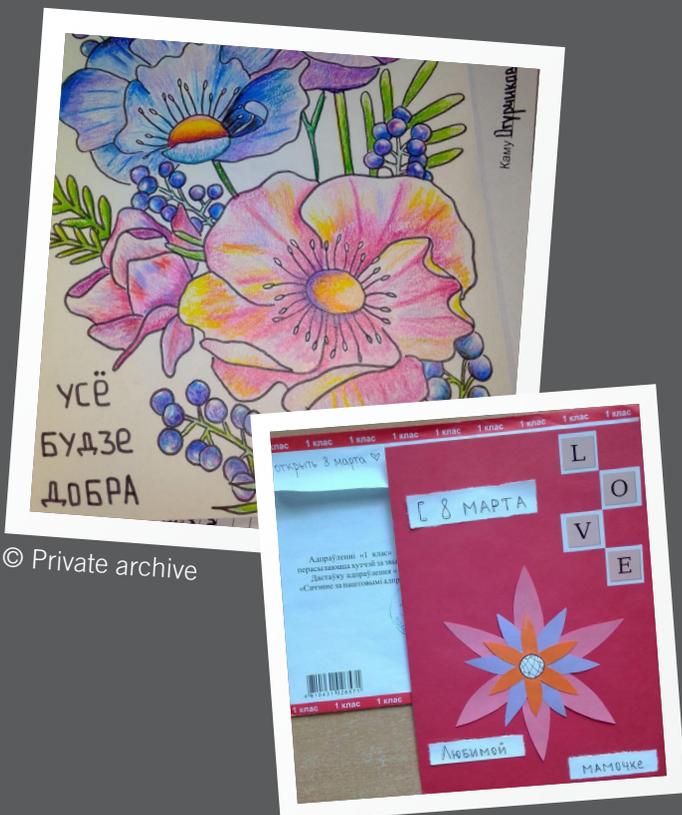
On 12 November 2020, Anastasia was sleeping in the apartment she shares with her mother when she heard a voice telling her to “get up”. She opened her eyes to see six unknown men standing around her bed, They had forced entry into her apartment. Anastasia is one of eleven students whose homes were raided that day, along with the office of the Belarusian Students’ Union. The date has since become known as ‘Black Thursday.’

Following a search of her home, Anastasia was arrested and at the time of writing remains in pre-trial detention in Minsk. All the students were charged under Article 342 of the Criminal Code of Belarus (“organisation and preparation of actions that grossly violate public order”) which carries a prison sentence of up to three years. The trial started on 14 May and is expected to continue until mid-June 2021.

Since her daughter’s arrest six months ago, her mother, Aksana, has been granted only one 45-minute meeting with Anastasia; her numerous requests for more meetings have been refused, including during the trial. Aksana has been told she will be able to meet with Anastasia again only after the end of the trial. She says she wishes she could see her daughter during the trial to offer words of support.

During their only meeting on 3 March, the two were observed throughout, separated by a thick plastic screen, with bars on Anastasia’s side, and they talked through a large, heavy phone handle. They were unable to touch each other and Aksana noticed how Anastasia was very alert to her surroundings, avoided talking about her case, and instead enquired after her mother’s health and made small talk. Aksana stated,

“For me, the whole world stopped and I just looked at her ... She is a grown up now, the child was completely gone from her face. And she wrote this to me later in a letter saying, ‘I left our home on 12 November as a child and I will return as an adult.’ It was so important for me to see her, to know she is OK, eyes don’t deceive. And still now, I hold that image of her face in my mind.”



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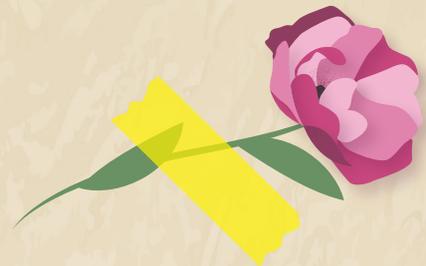
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Aksana writes to her daughter daily and she told Amnesty how much letters of solidarity have supported Anastasia, including those from abroad. Even if the letters contain just one sentence it helps her to know that there is life beyond the concrete walls of the detention centre and that she is neither forgotten nor alone. Nonetheless, many letters, including those of Aksana, are not passed on to Anastasia. Ahead of the trial her lawyer confirmed that Anastasia had not received any letters for two weeks. The communal television has been confiscated to ensure detainees are unable to access news or information from the outside world, other than through their lawyers.

Aksana has prepared everything for Anastasia's return but dreads that her daughter may be sentenced to a prison term which will allow only one visit and the receipt of a parcel every three months.

“They stole my child, half a year of her life. I always kissed her goodnight and greeted her good morning, and we talked over tea, discussed our day, watched cartoons at the weekend, and had pancakes on Sunday ... I always say, these are our children. They didn't kill, rob or insult anyone, they used their voices and their voices were stolen. They opposed violence and for that they've been in prison already for six months, for their honesty, their courage and their bravery”

TSIMAFEI



Tsimafei is from Vitsebsk, a city in the northeast of Belarus, and he studies at the Technological University there. Like hundreds of others, he has been targeted for his activism by both the authorities and his university. He was an election observer during the August presidential election which, he said, passed without significant incident. However, on his first day back at university on 1 September he was detained when classes ended due to his continuing participation in the protest movement.

Tsimafei had been gathering signatures outside Vitsebsk State University to demand a meeting with local officials when, around 6pm, a police vehicle arrived and he and two others were detained. They were taken to the local police station where their phones were confiscated, thereby preventing them from informing anyone of their whereabouts. He was asked by a police officer if he would continue with his actions and he responded that he wasn't doing anything wrong and that his actions were legal. He was charged under Belarus' Code of Administrative Offences (“violation of the organisation or holding of mass events”) and released, but later received a fine which was upheld on appeal.

On 27 October, he and nine other students posted a video appeal to the authorities on social media, expressing, amongst other things, their concerns about the continuing violent crackdown against peaceful protesters and harassment of students, and calling for the release of all ‘political prisoners’, investigations into all allegations of torture and other ill-treatment, and new elections in-line with international standards.³

³ <https://t.me/belsat/27417>

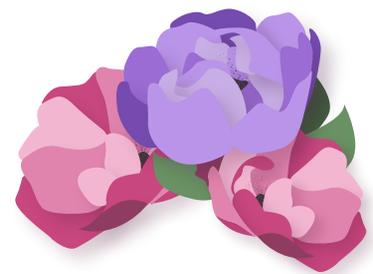
Over the next few weeks Tsimafei and the other eight students were all called for questioning at the regional police station in Vitsebsk, under Article 369.3 (“violation of the procedure for organizing or conducting mass events”). In a 29 January court hearing three of the students were sentenced to a fine, and one sentenced to five days administrative detention.

“It was during January 2021 that the repression escalated” Tsimafei told Amnesty International. On 16 January, three men arrived at his flat but he didn’t answer the door. They went to his mother’s workplace and told her that Tsimafei was suspected of “threatening the life of an employee of the Ministry of Internal Affairs online” – a crime which carries a prison sentence of up to five years. His mother rang him and the men returned to search the flat, confiscating his computer hard drive and his phone.

Tsimafei was arrested and spent the next three days in detention. He told Amnesty that the conditions were harsh: the cell was very cold with no hot water, and that the cell light was left on day and night with detainees forbidden to lie down during the day. As he was about to be released, three days later, he was stopped at the exit and told that further administrative charges had been brought against him for repeatedly violating public assembly laws in connection with the video he and other students had filmed. In a court hearing by Skype a few hours later he was sentenced to another seven days administrative detention and returned to his cell. The judge ignored Tsimafei when he pointed out he had university exams in that time. He was finally released on 26 January.

Tsimafei’s university withdrew his monthly stipend, reprimanded him and threatened him with expulsion if there were any further “incidents”. He was called for questioning several times both by the Prosecutor’s Office and the Investigative Committee for questioning, before the criminal investigation against him was dismissed on 16 February. He told Amnesty:

“The harassment was unprecedented for me. I understood what the responsibility for my activity could be, although I imagined even worse scenarios. I also consider that the pressure from the university is a violation of my rights and this has no place in the modern world. I am still interested in the question: where does such hatred for their citizens come from?”



KATSIARYNA

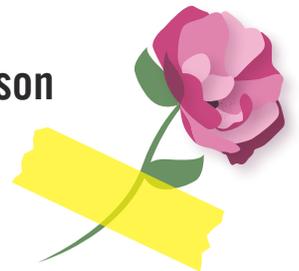
(not her real name)

Katsiaryna was a teacher at the Belarusian State Economic University but could not continue as such following her participation in the protest movement.

Katsiaryna had not been politically engaged until the presidential election in August 2020. She described 2020 as a “crash year for our country.” She states that social media has made information more widely available than in previous years and has exposed brutal police violence against peaceful protesters even during the election campaign period. In a country where offline media are under tight state control and censorship, Katsiaryna explained that the spread of images and videos on social media “made it harder for the authorities to hide their crimes.”

Like many in Belarus, Katsiaryna started protesting in the immediate aftermath of the election. She told Amnesty International:

“Until that summer I believed that politics was just for one person [Lukashenka] in our country. But now, I joined other girls with white flowers and dresses in response to the police violence. For a week I didn’t leave my home without flowers.”



As the new academic year started, Katsiaryna saw no contradiction between continuing to peacefully express her dissent and working as a teacher at the university. While many teachers avoided the issue of the ongoing protests, Katsiaryna started to engage with students who were also active. In October, a small group of female students and teachers held flowers and walked across the university campus. They were not holding any political signs or symbols. The university administration came out to photograph them and told them they shouldn’t be there. When they asked why, they were told it was a “mass event without permission” which is an offence.



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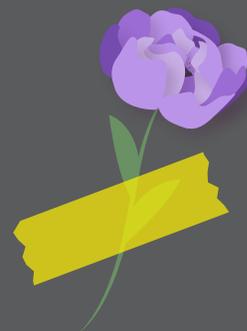
Katsiaryna felt increasingly ill at ease with the pressure she and the students were subjected to from the university administration. The latter she believed to be cooperating with police who, at the university's request, were detaining students who had participated in protest actions.

In early November, she co-wrote an open letter to the university administration. She helped to gather 180 signatures from teachers and other staff, stating their opposition to the continuing police violence, and calling for renewed free and fair elections. The letter was posted around campus and on social media.

Soon enough, many of the most respected professors were personally approached by the Rector and told to remove their signatures from the letter. Additionally, the Vice-Rector wrote to the police asking them to bring Katsiaryna and her colleagues in for questioning because of the earlier walk through campus.

“When the university tried to give me a summons for questioning at the police station, I refused to accept it, which further infuriated the university administration.”

Increasingly pressured and no longer able to continue her activism while working at the university, Katsiaryna felt her only option was to resign. She did so on 12 November. She told Amnesty, “It was important for me to resign because I was scared that the situation would only get worse for myself and my students if I stayed.” The Head of her Department didn't want her to leave and offered her a role teaching an online module which she wanted to accept, but the university Rector accepted her resignation to prevent her from taking on the new role. She now teaches privately, including to students who have been expelled or have left the country as a result of the harassment they have suffered. She continues her activism.



JOIN OUR SOLIDARITY ACTION

- 1 Take or create a picture of a flower.
- 2 Write a solidarity message in support of Belarusian students and teachers.
- 3 Post this image on your Instagram, Facebook or Twitter.
- 4 Tag @amnesty and we will share.
- 5 Use hashtag #StandWithBelarus.

