



Public Association

The Union of Belarusian Writers

220012, Minsk, K. Chornaha Street, 31–906, Belarus

Tel: + 375 17 200 80 91, www.lit-bel.org, ubw.office@gmail.com

The **Union of Belarusian Writers** appeals for international solidarity to stop violence directed against peaceful protesters and to hold free, fair and transparent new elections in Belarus.

Minsk, Belarus - August 16, 2020

An Appeal to Europeans and Citizens of the World: Please speak out about Belarus, write about the tragic situation here, and relay this appeal to the national leaders of your country with your demands for timely and effective political responses against the perpetrators of torture and election rigging in Belarus.

The Union of Belarusian Writers, invoking the principles set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, calls on all literary organizations, journalists and other cultural figures to express their solidarity with the people of Belarus.

At this critical moment for the Belarusian people, we ask you to help disseminate information about suspected large-scale election falsification and the recent escalation in indiscriminate acts of violence against our country's civilians. You will find more details in the attached appendix titled "Voices of Belarus".

We urgently call on you to raise attention and contribute to the independent charitable project [BY HELP](#) that is helping victims of these mass assaults. As of August 14th, the initiative had already collected more than USD 2,000,000 in donations from around the world.

For its part, the Union of Belarusian Writers has already demanded that the Belarusian authorities immediately stop the violence against peaceful protesters, release all citizens arrested during the 2020 election campaign, reconstitute a credible Central Election Committee, and hold a free, fair and transparent election under international observation.

*The Secretariat of the Union of Belarusian Writers
Minsk, 16 August 2020*

About the Union of Belarusian Writers

We are a professional creative community of Belarusian writers. Our Union is based on the principles of freedom of speech and self-expression. We strive to protect authors' rights and to develop, popularize, and promote Belarusian literature as an integral value for society that is essential to the existence of the Belarusian nation. Founded in 1933-34, the Union of Belarusian Writers is the oldest creative organization in Belarus. Its members include, among others, the Nobel Prize winner Svetlana Alexievich and the well-known writers Uladzimir Niakliaeu, Raisa Baravikova, Uladzimir Arlou, Anatol Viarcinski and Ales Razanau. For further information, please visit our webpage at lit-bel.org or contact us directly at ubw.office@gmail.com



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VOICES FROM BELARUS

Since peaceful protests against a rigged election began in Belarus, the government has unleashed terrible violence against its own citizens, including children. The authorities have imprisoned demonstrators and are subjecting them to horrible conditions beyond comprehension.

Aliaksei Liavonchyk, chief coordinator of the [BY HELP](#) project that is supporting Belarusians who have suffered the effects of this repression, collected the following interviews and statements.

“Yesterday until midnight (and then from 1 a.m. until 4 a.m.) I sorted through messages about prison conditions. The mildest scenario was people being deprived of food and water for three days. Prison cells were filled with tear gas. Fifty people had to fit into a space of 10 square meters. Detainees were piled on top of each other and not allowed to move for hours. In the morning, they were driven from their cells and forced to undress. Those who oversaw the detainees commanded them to squat down and began beating them. There was at least one case of injury to the rectum – someone was raped with an object. There were many more of these terrible stories: constant beatings, dowsing detainees with cold water, and other inhumane persecution,” Liavonchyk reported.

Working with journalists, Liavonchyk gathered interviews, statements and observations from those outside prisons around Minsk. The following **Voices from Belarus** are just a few selected cases that have been confirmed by witnesses and documented with pictures.

[Dmitriy Morgunov](#), an entrepreneur from Minsk:

“... the police cut holes in their trousers and shorts and threatened to put a grenade up into their intestines.”

“Two riot policemen decided that I was a terrorist. Maybe it was because I was wearing a biker jacket. They pushed me down into a basement. They harshly beat my legs and body with batons while loudly demanding that I tell them who paid me how much to participate in the protest. They asked me, ‘Why have you, a terrorist, shut down the internet across the country? Why are you undermining peace and order in Belarus?’ They beat me so badly that I almost passed out. They pulled me into a gym and said that they would continue the beating later. I was rescued by a more or less sane riot policeman: he dragged me into a different corner where I could lie down, half-alive.”

The biggest shock Dmitriy experienced was the behaviour of one police officer her colleagues called “Kristina”. “She walked from man to man, intentionally pushing our legs apart to sadistically strike our groins with a baton. She beat men’s testicles. This woman punished one man’s genitalia while standing on his legs. He later told me that his whole groin was black and blue with bruises. Kristina was about 30 years old, with blond hair and of average height. She wore a police uniform and a protective mask.”

As Dmitriy explained, most people he met in the gym of the Frunzenskiy police department remembered her cruelty. He was then packed into a small room with seven other men. During his confinement there, the group of eight received a single bottle of water. “Not giving us water is pure fascism,” he noted.

Dmitriy was then moved to a prison located on Okrestin Street. There, everyone was forced to kneel and put their arms behind their backs and their heads on the floor. They had to remain in that position for almost five hours. There were many people who had been beaten; they simply could not hold themselves up and fell to the ground. An ambulance came to take away those with the most serious



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fractures and other injuries. However, a local doctor came and said: “there is no need to take them to the hospital; I will take care of everyone here.”

Dmitriy says that there was no free space in the prison and around one hundred people were crammed into something resembling a hut outside the main building. There was just a ceiling and a cold concrete floor. Many people were shirtless, some had torn clothes, and many were barefoot. Everyone was cold at night. We had to sleep in shifts. There were roughly 20 places for people to perch while the other 80 had to stand.

Dmitriy noticed one interesting detail. At least a quarter of those with whom he was detained in the hut (about 25 people) had their trousers cut from behind. He did not understand why they had holes in the area of the buttocks. He was told that the police had cut their trousers and shorts there and threatened to put a grenade up into their intestines.

Dmitriy says that among those with whom he spoke, he did not encounter anyone who had built barricades in the streets. Nor had anyone fought with the riot police – these were ordinary people. One was caught near a department store; another while walking in a park. Others had been dragged from their cars.

[Vadim](#), arrested for simply being outside:

“You just have to sit and wait. Because the prison is overcrowded, you cannot sleep or even lie down. If you start asking questions, they start beating you.”

Vadim was arrested while hanging out with friends in the street. “Can you please block me,” he says to people as we talk to him near the walls of the prison. He wants them to stand behind us so no one can see that he is being interviewed. Throughout the 17-minute conversation, he was frequently scared that somebody was watching him.

“When we arrived at the prison, the car doors opened, and riot policemen were standing in a line. As you made your way toward the main building, they beat you up from the left and from the right. It is some sort of entertainment that they enjoy.”

Vadim often replaces the word “we” with “you,” probably trying to distance himself from what happened to him.

“The policemen scream, ‘Get a f*cking move on’. The atmosphere was like a drunk man beating his loved ones in a flat. We were ordered to stand by a wall and kneel down for two or three hours. Why did we need to be like that for so long? As I understand, most spaces were occupied by other prisoners. Then we were moved to a different room, with four walls and a cage. This happened at 3 a.m.”

As Vadim recalls, the police met any requests with violence and aggressive treatment. “If you started asking questions, they started beating you,” he says. He stayed silent most of the time and remained untouched. The requests of the others were very modest; food, water, a doctor.

“For the first 48 hours we were not given any food; people were screaming, ‘I want to eat’. After spending two days in the cell, some got angry. They banged on the cell door and asked for food. We heard them being beaten in response. In my cell, everyone remained silent. Most of those who sat with me were adults, up to 50 years old, and did not suffer so much.”

Prison life, Vadim continues, can be described in a few words: “You just have to sit and wait. Because the prison is overcrowded, you cannot sleep or even lie down.”



“At one point, we had a newcomer” (Vadim thought this was someone who had just arrived); his jeans were covered in blood, which he said was his friend’s. The second person who came was coughing blood.

In our interview, a reporter asked, “Have you been tried yet?”

The response was, “I was not really even officially there. Nothing like a court appearance took place. I was arrested, detained and imprisoned.”

Someone from the crowd asked if Vadim needed help getting home, to which he replied that he still wanted to spend some time near the prison with others.

[Aliaksei](#), a 22-year-old detainee:

“I am concussed – they hit my head pretty hard.”

22-year-old Aliaksei told us how he and his friends were picked up on their way home. Although they had seen police cars, they decided that their walk wouldn’t be problematic because they hadn’t broken any laws. However, they were stopped and searched.

After that, three of them were dragged into a car and beaten. “They punched us with their hands, kicked us, and used batons, while cursing all the time. They did not explain why. What they were saying was undecipherable. They told us that we were fascists, we had sold out our motherland, we were mercenaries, we were controlled from Poland, we were traitors, we should be lined up against a wall and shot. Afterwards they took us to the central police department and continued beating us. I am not sure whether they were the same policemen who’d caught us: they all wore masks and did not use names.”

He said that those detained were forced to lie face down on the ground in a large room; their hands were tied behind their backs, and they were beaten again. The police were screaming something like, “Where are your weapons; you were going to kill us, weren’t you!” “Then they made us lie down in a corridor and started kicking us. There were many there, around 20 for sure. They then went to write a report. I started feeling bad; my heart hurt and my blood pressure increased. An ambulance was called, and I got sent to the hospital. Now I have a doctor’s report that says I have a concussion – they hit my head pretty hard. Nobody returned my stuff; they took my money, my apartment keys. I asked them to return them to me, and they said they’d found nothing.

The policemen also forced him to unlock his phone, to “log on and write something from my address.”

[A 40-year-old resident of Homel](#)

“They then chained me to a window with handcuffs.”

A 40-year-old resident of Homel was riding home on his bike. He got caught 100 meters from his house. “They arrested me near McDonalds. They started beating me right away and used abusive language. They asked where I’d put the 50 rubles I’d been paid for the protests. They sprayed pepper spray into my eyes and hit my head against a doorway.”

“They transported me to the police department. There, a group of very aggressive policemen took me to the gym and threw me to the floor. They continued beating me and being disrespectful. They then chained me to a window with handcuffs – this happened in the gym. There were around 20 people there just like me.”



“The policemen were watching what was happening around the country and laughing. It seemed to me that they became even more aggressive after watching the videos. When I tried to get up, they knocked me down. I started to lose consciousness. An ambulance took me to the hospital. I had a traumatic brain injury and other injuries.”

[Uladzimer Charauha](#), a resident of Hrodna

“Momma, I don’t want to die,” said the five year old girl as her mother was taking her out of the car.

The Hrodna residents Uladzimer Charauha, his wife Ira and their five-year-old daughter were driving home in the city. Near Dziekabrystau Square, the traffic started to slow down. Some cars were honking their horns. Charauha did not use his horn, nor did his car have any symbols on it. But suddenly five men in black uniforms jumped out of a taxi in front of them and started hitting his car with their batons.

Scared for his family’s safety, he moved into the next lane. When his car was alongside the taxi, somebody hit the windshield with a baton, shattering it. At the same time, a military vehicle barged into his car. Glass rained down on the passengers. Uladzimer jumped out of the car and was hit on the head with a baton. He started bleeding profusely.

He tried to tell them that there was a child in the car. “I couldn’t call the ambulance myself because I was bleeding badly and my phone wasn’t working,” he recalls. He was detained and interrogated for the entire night, then released. A man nearby took his child to the hospital. The girl’s head had been injured; now her face is heavily bandaged. The doctors diagnosed an internal head injury. Her mother remembers the child saying, “Momma, I don’t want to die,” as she took her out of the car. Now she is scared of going outside.

Summary of the political background

In May 2020, the campaign for the next presidential election began in Belarus. The election was scheduled for August 9, 2020. From the start it was feared that the authorities were preparing large-scale vote rigging. Only government representatives were allowed to serve on regional election committees; the participation of all independent representatives was blocked.

The situation deteriorated. The authorities arrested the two most popular candidates – banker Viktor Babaryka and blogger Siargei Tsihanouski. They also threatened a third candidate, former head of the High Technologies Park Valer Tsapkala, with possible charges.

In the weeks leading up to the election, the organization Reporters sans frontières (RSF – Reporters Without Borders) reported election-related repression after the authorities arrested a number of journalists for covering demonstrations and rallies held by opposition candidates. According to RSF, foreign media were also obstructed in order to limit independent reporting.

When the candidates began collecting the signatures required under Belarus’s election law, their campaign teams were subjected to harassment and numerous arrests were made across the country. Other politicians and civic activists were also arrested. All of them, as well as the imprisoned candidates, are recognized as political prisoners by domestic human rights organizations and Amnesty International. A total of more than 1,000 persons are reported to have been preventively arrested prior to the election.



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After the candidates had collected and submitted the signatures, the Central Election Committee (CEC) rejected outright several hundred thousand of them and did not register the most popular opposition candidates. Nevertheless, the CEC allowed Sviatlana Tsichanouskaya, the wife of political prisoner Siargei Tsihanouski, to be registered on the assumption that she posed no threat to President Lukashenko.

Although President Lukashenko managed significantly to reduce the pool of those running against him, Belarusian society united around Tsichanouskaya, a teacher and homemaker. The election teams of the two other most popular non-registered candidates joined and assisted her campaign. This merger allowed the many supporters of change to combine their forces and resources and unite behind Tsichanouskaya. As a result, her rallies grew larger by the day, beginning with several hundred participants in the first days and culminating with 65,000 supporters during one of her final events in Minsk.

In the meantime, the CEC issued a new regulation restricting the number of authorized observers inside voting stations to three. Other independent observers were only allowed to stand outside voting stations and were banned from entering the building and monitoring the voting process. The government also made independent opinion polls illegal.

During the early voting period, independent observers noticed a significant difference in the number of those who had actually voted and the number of those who were said to have voted by officials. According to the CEC, about 42% of the electorate voted early, leaving significant opportunity for falsification. The German TV programme *Tagesschau* reported signs of massive manipulation during the voting process.

On election day, August 9th, the CEC limited the number of people who could be inside voting stations, creating long lines. Inside the stations, most voting booths had no curtains. Thus, voters were deprived of their right to vote privately. After the voting process had been completed, not all commissions announced the election results and some were seen to leave voting stations in buses guarded by special forces and police, while people awaited the results outside.

In the evening, the CEC announced the preliminary results: the incumbent Alexander Lukashenko led with 80% of the vote, while Sviatlana Tsichanouskaya was credited with only 9%. These alleged results angered many voters, who felt that they did not reflect the real choice of the electorate. The Belarusian independent newspaper *Nasha Niva* published vote count lists that deviated greatly from the official results, showing Tsichanouskaya to be far ahead of President Lukashenko. “Honest People”, an independent initiative, announced that Tsichanouskaya had won around 85% of votes in stations where non-state observers had been present and monitoring.

The fraudulent actions of the government and the CEC sparked large protests in cities and towns across Belarus. On the evening of the election, the government shut down the country’s internet and this continued to varying degrees for the next three days, making it difficult for protestors to communicate and coordinate. From the very first hours of the demonstrations, police resorted to brute force and cracked down hard on protesters. Riot police and the military were called in and made indiscriminate use of flashbang grenades, rubber bullets, water cannons, and tear gas against crowds. Many peaceful protesters were violently beaten and received serious injuries. Such actions inspired large numbers of citizens to resort to non-violent resistance.



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Employing brute force and verbal abuse, riot police and SWAT forces attacked ordinary bystanders and pedestrians who had not engaged in any way with the protests. Those who tried to escape into the grounds of apartment complexes were chased down by the police. The police attempted to break into building entrances and dwellings in pursuit of them. In the days that followed, the security forces attacked and smashed cars that showed support for the protestors by honking their horns.

Over the last few days, more than 6,000 people are estimated to have been detained. A number of journalists, despite being accredited and clearly identified, are reported to have been beaten and apprehended in the streets. After being released from prison, many testified about being tortured while in custody. The abuse began when the arrested were shoved into police vans. There, the police punched men and women, kicked them, and used batons. Their heads were banged against walls. Many were handcuffed, forced to lie down and subjected to brutal violence. Some policemen deliberately aimed their blows at the prisoners' heads and groins.

As a result of these violent actions, two people have been officially declared dead. The whereabouts of a considerable number of protesters are still unknown. The number of people who have been tortured and killed may be significantly higher. Observers noted an enormous number of ambulances parked near prisons. As of today, more than 500 people who suffered torture in prisons, gunshot and fragmentation grenade wounds and police beatings remain in hospital.

According to data compiled by human rights defenders, more than 1,300 protesters have been charged with alleged crimes and saddled with large fines.

We are ready to provide further information or details and answer any and all questions upon request. Thank you for your interest and concern.
Contact us directly at ubw.office@gmail.com

The Secretariat of the Union of Belarusian Writers
Minsk, August 17, 2020