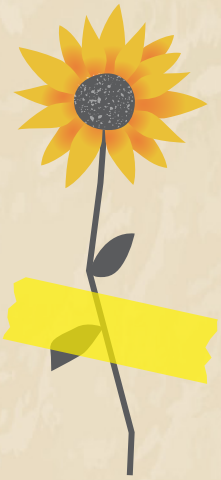
#STANDWITHBELARUS

‘WE KNEW THAT OUR TURN WOULD COME SOON ENOUGH’

PERSECUTED ARTISTS IN BELARUS

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL



Actors reading lines to an empty space on stage, musicians performing at an outdoor kids' party, a woman singing a lyrical folk song – joyful and light-hearted images that have become the symbols of confronting repression. Today, they have also become symbols of courage and solidarity, as hundreds of Belarusian artists are being targeted by the government for their artistic expression of dissenting views. Some have been fired from their jobs, others have been detained and tortured, yet others are languishing behind bars awaiting trial and facing long prison sentences.

Four lives, four very different stories. This briefing is about Belarusian artists who have continued to create and speak out.

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

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

In the wake of the disputed election results, hundreds of artists and other cultural figures in Belarus have publicly expressed their dissent. Musicians, painters, poets and actors have experienced unrelenting repression from government departments, including the security forces and administrative bodies. Some have been fired from their jobs, others have been arbitrarily detained and tortured. Many are facing criminal charges and are languishing behind bars awaiting trial with the prospect of long prison sentences. Those criminal charges include, for example, inciting hostility on the basis of racial, religious or social affiliation, where the authorities and riot police are considered to be the injured party.

The power of Belarusian artistic protest is still strong, and growing day by day even in the face of ever-increasing intimidation and repression by the authorities.[1]

[1] This briefing was prepared with the help of the Belarusian Cultural Society (https://twitter.com/BYCULTUREFUND; https://byculture.org/), an association of over 1,500 Belarusian artists, that has provided us with a detailed database of artists. While preparing this publication Amnesty International spoke with seven artists who have faced persecutions, or their family members, in January 2021.

VOLA SEMCHANKA – AMATEUR FOLK SINGER AND DANCER

'My life has changed drastically, and I have too. When the persecutions against me started, I was panicking. After my first detention I felt scared to come home, I slept at friends' houses most nights. Now I'm used to living with this constant sense of danger. We are all ready to become victims of state persecution at any moment,' Vola Semchanka told Amnesty International.

Since October 2020, Vola has faced multiple arrests and fines for her artistic expression and her participation in peaceful protests in Mahilyou, a city 200 km east of Minsk. She has been detained twice and spent 10 days in detention altogether.

The first arrest happened on 2 October when Vola was riding her bike. The police took her to the police station where she was charged with participating in an unsanctioned meeting after which she was moved to the detention centre. She only managed to notify her family members of her arrest and whereabouts through a friend, after being allowed to share the location of her abandoned bicycle.

Upon her release from the detention centre, seven days later, Vola was taken back to the police station where she was charged with participation in other unsanctioned meetings. While at the police station, police officers threatened Vola with extended detention and hinted at future possible problems at work and in her personal life. After that, the police drove her away in an unknown direction.

'Eventually they dropped me off outside my house, but that whole drive I had no idea where they were taking me and felt very scared. I kept telling them to stop and let me go but they didn't pay any attention' Vola says.

The second time, Vola was detained for three days and charged for 'protesting with a song'. That happened after she had attracted the attention of the police by standing on the side of the road singing a lyrical Belarusian folk song during a peaceful protest.

Vola continues to be targeted in her workplace, the Mahilyou State Theatre, where she is the head of the literary department. The former director had refused to fire Vola and other dissenting artists in his theatre and, in turn, was fired himself. The new administration has launched a campaign of harassment against Vola – she is forced to attend various disciplinary committees to discuss her dissenting opinions and many of her work responsibilities have been taken away.

Music is something that Vola passionately clings on to in this difficult time.

‘I’m all alone in this far-away place
And nobody will come to visit me…’

She sang those lyrics in detention.
She continues to sing them at home now.

ILLYA YASINSKI – ACTOR

On 15 November 2020, actor Illya Yasinski from the Republican Theatre of Belarusian Drama in Minsk was walking down the street on his own when he was suddenly attacked by a group of unidentified men in balaclavas.

‘They beat me up silently and methodically – first on the street, then in a minivan where I was put on the floor face down. After that, they transferred me to a police wagon and there the beating continued by policemen in uniforms,’ Illya told Amnesty International.

When eventually the actor was taken to the police station, his ribs were fractured, he had a head injury and was unable to move properly. An ambulance that had arrived to pick up another injured protester also took Illya to the hospital.

In his hospital ward, five of the six beds were occupied by beaten and bleeding protestors. Some said they faced criminal charges and were therefore handcuffed to their beds. Ilya heard their stories, including from a young man who said he had been run over by a police van. The police accused him of throwing something at another police van and he said they stained his face with paint. He thought this was done in order for the police to easily identify him and press criminal charges against him later.

During Illya's time in hospital, his theatre continued to perform the play he was meant to be starring in. In the play, Ilya's character sits in a wheelchair and in Illya's absence an empty wheelchair was brought on stage. A voice announced: 'An actor Illya Yasinski was supposed to sit in this chair. But he has been detained, beaten up and is now in hospital. Today's performance is in solidarity with our colleague'. Then the performance went on as planned, except all actors addressed their lines to an empty wheelchair and a voice backstage read Illya's lines on his behalf.

Neighbours also mobilised in support of Illya – they wrote letters to him in detention and supported his family while Illya was recuperating in hospital.

'Our mindset has changed. Suddenly everything has become ours – and we feel responsible for all of it too. Our local yard, our neighbourhood, our city, and, of course, our country,' said Illya.

Illya returned to acting as soon as he was able to move freely again.

'We are continuing to perform in plays and at the same time the battle between good and evil continues in real life. Evil has masked faces, it uses weapons against peaceful protesters, against women, even against children, and it tortures and beats people up silently. While good sings songs, carries flowers and promotes non-violence,' he says.

ANDRUS TOKINDANG – SINGER, SONGWRITER AND ARTIST

Artists told Amnesty International that the repression throughout Belarus over the last six and a half months has led to feelings of fear and anxiety but also hope, illustrated by a wave of community initiatives and solidarity actions. One of the most well-known are the so-called 'yard concerts'. Organised on communal lawns in front of big Soviet era buildings, these concerts have taken place in hundreds of neighbourhoods and become a symbol of Belarusian peaceful resistance.

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Minsk-based singer and songwriter, Andrus Tokindang, and his band, Reha, have participated in yard concerts from the very beginning.

‘I had never seen so many people smiling at each other anywhere before. At some point political slogans were dropped and these concerts focused purely on solidarity and creativity. Nevertheless, in October the government launched a crackdown on them too. We continued to perform regularly. So we knew that our turn would come soon enough,’

Andrus shared with Amnesty International.

To prepare for possible arrest, Andrus and his band wore extra warm clothes to guard against cold prison cells. Before each performance, local residents planned the band’s possible escape routes. What the musicians didn’t expect was that the crackdown would happen after a concert dedicated to children’s art – one of the only events that had been officially permitted by the local housing authority.

On the evening of 7 November 2020, children unveiled a street painting of a Christmas tree and, for a couple of hours, Reha entertained the young crowd with a range of kids’ songs.

The band left the yard in high spirits and got in a taxi, but as they turned the corner, they were surrounded by armed riot police. They were taken to Akrestina detention centre where they were charged with participating in unsanctioned mass meetings and given 15 days administrative detention each.

Andrus spent his entire period of detention in Akrestina. The detention centre was overcrowded and there weren’t enough mattresses for everyone, so for the first three nights Andrus had to sleep on the bare concrete floor. While in detention, three of the four band members developed symptoms of COVID-19. One of them became very ill and was eventually transferred to a hospital.

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Andrus had a pen in his cell and was able to draw portraits of his cellmates – those drawings show tired and dishevelled people sitting still, deep in thought. Their silence and immobility are poignant and every face tells its own story of pain and anticipation.

'There was a scientist, an engineer and a businessman in our cell. To fill time, we gave lectures, told jokes and supported one another as much as we could. Outside our cell we heard Akrestina guards who cursed each other. We felt more free and joyous in our dreary cell with not enough mattresses and no hot water than our guards who had all the power over us,'
said Andrus.

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ALYAKSEI SANCHUK – AMATEUR DRUMMER

On 4 November 2020, furniture repairer Alyaksei Sanchuk was learning a new rhythm on his drums at his band rehearsal in Minsk when suddenly a group of masked riot police stormed into the garage. They grabbed six of the band and took them to the Akrestina detention centre. Hanna, Alyaksei's wife, told Amnesty International that Alyaksei was beaten up and forced to unlock his phone.

Alyaksei was sentenced to 15 days in administrative detention. He had previously been detained and fined a number of times, before and after the presidential election – first for campaigning for the opposition presidential candidate Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya and then for participating in post-election peaceful protests.

On the day of his scheduled release in November, Hanna and their eight-year-old daughter were anxiously waiting at home for Alyaksei's return. But he never arrived. Instead, he was charged with organising mass riots, transferred to the Valadarskaha detention centre and is currently facing up to three years in prison if convicted.

Alyaksei's arrest and pending criminal trial shocked Belarusians and inspired flash-mobs titled 'I Was Learning the Rhythm' performed by musicians from Belarus and other countries.

His wife is struggling financially and is helped by the local community. She told Amnesty International, 'Before this time, Alyaksei had been arrested twice. Every time he returned home from detention he told me that he was doing it for us, for our future. We are very scared but we are also very proud of him. Our daughter keeps saying: 'In a couple of years they will write about my dad in books. But I really want to see him now'.

JOIN OUR SOLIDARITY ACTION

1 Take or create a picture of a flower.

2 Write a solidarity message in support of Belarusians.

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

4 Tag @amnesty and we will share.

5 Use hashtag #StandWithBelarus.