

Individual testimonies of torture and other ill-treatment

Katsyaryna Novikava - bystander

Katsyaryna Novikava told Amnesty International that she was detained by riot police in the centre of Minsk on the evening of 10 August while walking to a supermarket. She spent 34 hours at the Centre for Isolation of Offenders. Katsyaryna saw that the entire yard of the facility was filled with arrested men who had been forced to lie down in the dirt. Inside the Centre, dozens of men were told to strip naked and get down on all fours while officers kicked and beat them with truncheons. Katsyaryna was also forced to kneel and listen to the screams of other victims.

Katsyaryna was placed in a four-person cell with 20 other women, where they slept on the floor. They were not provided with any water or food for the duration of their detention and were denied access to doctors. Multiple women she was jailed with told Katsyaryna that they had been threatened with rape by police officers.

Katsyaryna was not told until about 22 hours after her arrest that she was accused of participating in an unauthorized rally. Before she was released early in the morning on 12 August, she was told by police officers, "We have all your data. If we see you here again, we'll kill you."

In spite of the threats, Katsyaryna lodged a complaint with the Investigative Committee demanding investigation and justice. However, more than two months later, there is still no decision on that complaint. Recently, police sent her a letter denying that she was even arrested by AMAP in the first place.

Zhenya Velko – LGBT+ transgender activist and protester

Zhenya was detained on Saturday 26 September, during one of the women's marches in Minsk which have been taking place regularly on Saturdays since the post-election protests began. He is an LGBT+ transgender activist and was detained along with other activists by unidentified men in masks who took him to an unmarked van. Throughout his two-day detention under administrative charges, unidentified law enforcement officers ignored Zhenya's passport gender (male), constantly forced him to confirm his gender, spoke insultingly about his gender and ridiculed the LGBT+ flag found in his bag.

"They had a camera in their hands and filmed me. When they heard that my name was Yevgeny Dmitrievich, they began [to mock]: 'Look, haha, this is a man'. Someone asked: 'Have you already done the operation, haven't you done it?', etc. All this time, the people who were transferring me from van to van were laughing and saying 'imagine, this is a guy! Look, check it out, this is a guy, I'm in shock', etc."

Together with the women detained on the march, Zhenya was taken to the Leninsky police station in Minsk. "When searching my belongings, they found the sanitary napkins, the rainbow flag and then said 'well, everything is clear then what kind of guy you are.'"

Police tried to get Zhenya to sign a protocol but he refused. "They threw a protocol in my face and said that 'men like me are not needed in this country and what kind of man am I, a pitiful sight.' They tried to convince me to sign [the protocol], but I didn't." Zhenya was forced to give his fingerprints with threats and misinformation about his rights: "I was forbidden to sit down, I could only stand. They read some laws from the phone, according to which I supposedly must give [fingerprints]. I repeated that it is illegal, that I refuse. Then they said that 'my fingers will roll away by force in another place.'"

Although Zhenya's mother could see the geolocation of his phone in the police station, officials denied he was there, stating that there were only women there. Soon after, Zhenya and the other detainees were taken to the Akrestina detention centre in Minsk (notorious for the numerous accounts of torture and other ill-treatment of its former detainees).

"We were put by different walls, I was the only one with a male passport and everyone laughed at this. I was told to undress to my underpants, I had a strap made of elastic bandages with me [across my chest]. I told the nurse that I was transgender. She began to ask questions: who I was before, what is my previous surname, whether I am going to do operations, etc."

Next, Zhenya was transferred to a prison in Zhodzina, 50km outside of Minsk. He had not had time to replace the elastic bandages to his chest and was subjected to further insults.

"They shouted, poked [my breasts] with a baton, said that they would 'teach them how to behave'. I was forced to strip to my underpants in front of everyone. When I said that I am a transgender person and I have breasts, they said 'we don't give a fuck, since you called yourself a guy, take off your clothes'. After that, I was again put apart from everyone and I stood there the longest. They asked questions: 'You are not Evgeny, but Evgenia, but what is your name in your trans circles and what is in your panties?' When they discussed 'where he or she should be assigned' (they didn't address me normally, only 'he-she'), they announced several times that they would conduct a full examination of me, they said that they would examine me 'in a special way', and then they repeated several times that 'bitches like me should not live, so I need to be taken out into the yard and shot [that they will do it now].'"

Officers threatened to put Zhenya in a cell with men who would 'teach him a lesson' although he was eventually placed in a cell on his own. All his belongings were taken away from him, including hygiene products and warm clothes and the prison authorities refused to give him a parcel delivered for him.

Zhenya's trial was on Monday 28 September. He was fined under Article 23.34 of the Belarusian Code of Administrative Offences (violation of the organisation or holding of mass events) and released. Zhenya told Amnesty International that he has been deeply affected by this traumatic experience and is now focused on his recovery.

Henadz Shustau – testimony from his family following his killing

Henadz Shustau was a truck driver in Brest, a city in western Belarus, 330 km southwest of capital Minsk. On 11 August, he planned to attend the protest rally in the city centre together with his friend Alyaksandr Kardukou. However, the rally was dispersed by police, and Shustau and Kardukou went to a nearby residential block. CCTV footage subsequently obtained and published by Mediazona (<http://mediazona.by/article/2020/09/21/shutov-cctv>), shows the two sitting on a bench. Three men, who the authorities later said were officers in plainclothes, stood several meters away; then they approached the bench. It is impossible to tell from the video what happened next: a tree hides the bench from the camera's view. Shustau's daughter, Anastasiya Baranchuk, told Amnesty International that local residents recalled the dialogue: one of the officers asked the men who they had voted for and Shustau answered, "For [Svyatlana] Tsikhanouskaya", the opposition candidate.

According to Baranchuk, her father was then told to kneel and to lie down. But as soon as he knelt, an officer bashed him on the forehead with a gun and then shot him in the back of his head. Witnesses reported hearing a total of three shots. Meanwhile, Kardukou ran away, chased by one of the officers. Shustau was taken to a local hospital, then transferred to a military hospital in Minsk where he succumbed to his wounds and died on 19 August.

The official version is different. On 12 August, the Ministry of Internal Affairs announced that "in Brest, a group of aggressive citizens armed with steel bars assaulted police officers. They weren't stopped by warning shots. The officers used firearms to defend their lives and health. One of the assailants was wounded." This description contradicts witness reports, the video footage, and the medical records that identified a penetrating wound of the occipital bone, which means that Shustau was shot from behind.

Shustau's family demanded an investigation into his alleged killing. However, on 3 September, the Investigative Committee sent them a letter stating that "there are no sufficient grounds for opening a criminal investigation under article 139" (homicide). Baranchuk believes that the only obstacle to identifying the person who shot Shustau and to bringing him to account is the lack of political will: "I believe they [the Investigative Committee] know who killed my father. <...> But they won't do anything about it. Only when things change in our country, will they punish him."

However, the authorities promptly opened a criminal investigation into "resistance to a police officer involving violence or a threat of violence". Kardukou was arrested in the

early hours of 14 August near his garage, his sister Maryna Paryichuk told Amnesty International. He remains at a pre-trial detention centre in Minsk at the time of writing. Available evidence suggests that Kardjukou has not committed the crime he is accused of and is prosecuted under false charges as part of the cover-up of the alleged killing of Henadz Shustau.

Mikalai

Mikalai (name changed on the survivor's request) went to visit friends in his city of Orsha, 200km east of Minsk, on the evening of the election, on 9 August. He left about 10pm and was walking through the centre and saw police barricades and people being beaten and detained by police. He decided to try to catch a bus but saw riot police coming towards him and the next thing he knew his hands were twisted behind his back, he was face down and told to turn off his phone and his rucksack was taken off him. He was detained and taken to the central police station where, on arrival, he and others were beaten by a group of up to 50 officers with truncheons.

He recalled the experience to Amnesty International:

“They began to beat us all. My legs are blue, I got hit on the head. One of the detainees with me had his kneecap knocked out. There were many screams, hysterics, minors were detained. Two doctors came to provide first aid but insulted us too, saying ‘what are you yelling about, you fool, you understand that you will be punished.’ We were made to stand facing the wall. There was a cell nearby, from which I saw officers carry a lifeless body. A girl in hysterical distress was brought there, there they seemed to be helping her. The doctors said she was underage.”

Mikalai said he was put into a cell with others at about 4am with iron beds and no bedding. He was questioned the next morning including being asked if he knew the national anthem and history. He and his cellmates were given a loaf of bread and made to drink water from a rusty tap. When he and the other detainees asked to inform their relatives where they were, they were told they had no rights. He recalled that at one point an audio message was played at the detention centre, which they were told was of Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya [opposition leader] allegedly calling on protesters to stop.

Mikalai's trial was on Tuesday and he was sentenced to ten days of “administrative arrest”. He says everyone was charged with the same actions—participation in an illegal assembly, chanting of slogans—regardless of their actual deeds. There were no witnesses and he was not allowed to familiarize himself with the case. During those days he says the police beat him more, intermittently, and verbally insulted him and the opposition leader using obscene language with sexual references.

One day when the detainees were taken for a walk, 30 of them were made walk in a space about 4m x 4m in the rain and cold. Only afterwards, Mikalai realised that this happened

because new detainees were being brought in and they wanted to avoid them sharing information. On another day, they were woken at 6am to the sounds of the national anthem. Lights in the cell were always on.

Before being released, Mikalai was summoned to the detention centre chief and asked to confirm that he was not ill-treated, which he did, out of fear.