

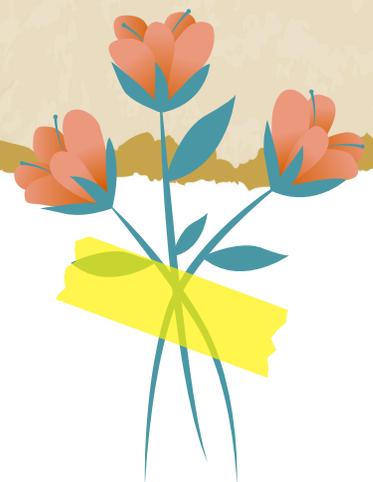
Older people, including those in their late 80s, have expressed their dissent with the government of Belarus from the outset of mass protests in August 2020. Older people have even organised their own marches, known as Wisdom Marches. The authorities have not hesitated to crack down on these initiatives. They have arrested hundreds of older people, kept them in very cold conditions without seating or water for many hours, and detained some of them for weeks. No provisions have been made to protect older people in detention from the risk of contracting Covid-19 – instead they have been transported to police stations on packed buses and forced into overcrowded detention facilities.

In Belarus, following the disputed presidential election on 9 August 2020, hundreds 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. 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 an increasing number of peaceful protestors are being prosecuted under criminal charges and sentenced to long prison sentences.

The shocking government clampdown on dissent in Belarus demonstrates a blatant disregard for human rights: women, children, artists, older people, athletes, students and academics, trade unionists and other groups have all been targeted. In its #StandWithBelarus campaign, 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.

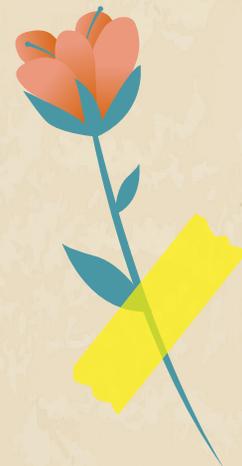
Amid the biggest human rights crisis in the country's modern history, Belarusians are astonished at the cruel and cynical treatment of the older generation. Amnesty International has received reports of older people suffering from illnesses such as cancer, heart and lung conditions, who were ill-treated and imprisoned for weeks. Dissenting older people have been targeted for acts like taking a photograph of red and white candy, or for walking down the street on their own with a small red and white flag.

This briefing tells the stories of four older people who have all suffered at the hands of the authorities. Their last names have been omitted for security reasons.



VALYANTSINA, 89 YEARS OLD, AND HER DAUGHTER LYUDMILA, 68 YEARS OLD

“It happened during a Pensioners’ March on the 14 December 2020. We were standing on Independence Square when suddenly two big buses arrived and riot police jumped out. They surrounded us from all sides and started squeezing us together. One older woman fell ill but that didn’t stop them from squeezing us further,” 89-year-old peaceful protester Valyantsina told Amnesty International.



“Eventually we found ourselves in front of the bus doors and were told to go inside ‘to get our documents checked’. I took out my passport and asked the men to check it right there. But they forced us onto the bus.”

After a few minutes the bus was packed to capacity. Even though all the arrested protesters were older people and more at risk of serious health complications from Covid-19, no precautions were taken. No one even tried to check any documents, instead people were taken straight to a police station half an hour drive away. The bus windows were covered with plastic and it was impossible to see outside.

Valyantsina was detained together with her daughter, 68-year-old Lyudmila, who suffers from claustrophobia.

“On the bus I felt very scared and made my way to the front so that I could look out of the driver’s window. One woman pulled a bit of plastic off the window and a riot policeman shouted obscenities at her,” shares Lyudmila.

Once at the police station the older people were marched into two vehicle depots where they were kept for over seven hours. During that time no seating or drinking water was offered and people were taken to the toilets accompanied by police escorts. There were no attempts at social distancing measures. Everyone was searched and people’s belongings, including shoe laces, belts and mobile phones, were taken away.

“Next to me there was an elderly man whose belt was taken away. He felt ashamed at having to constantly pull his trousers up. And it was bitterly cold there. I couldn’t feel my feet,” remembers Valyantsina.

At 10 in the evening Valyantsina and Lyudmila were told to go home and await trial.

“I wasn’t sure how we’d get back – it was late and dark. But as soon as we turned the corner, we were met by my granddaughter, great-granddaughter and many volunteers. We hugged our family for a long time. And the volunteers offered us hot tea, pies and chairs to sit on. I’ve never met such wonderful people in my whole life,” says Valyantsina. A month later Valyantsina and Lyudmila were charged with attending ‘an unsanctioned meeting’ and fined the equivalent of two monthly pensions each.

For Valyantsina this experience of detention brought out other painful memories:

“In summer 1941 my father said something critical about the Communist Party. A few days later he was arrested, declared an enemy of the people and executed in secret. We were told that he had died of heart failure and only found out the truth nearly fifty years later. As a family of the ‘people’s enemy’ we were not allowed to receive even meagre war-time food rations and we starved. I was ten years old and in summer I sold sorrel leaves at a market 30 km away from home. If I was lucky, two days of work allowed me to buy one small loaf of bread for all of us....”

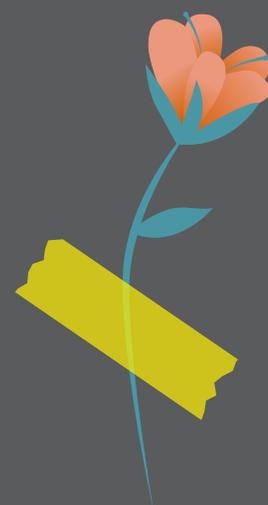
Valyantsina pauses and begins to cry.

“Now I am living through another era of terror. People are being tortured and some are killed. Those who expose state crimes are imprisoned. The authorities do whatever they please with people. They get away with anything. There’s no law”.

TATSYANA, 58 YEARS OLD

Recently retired Tatsyana spent 40 days in detention.

Tatsyana became an activist in the run-up to the presidential election and volunteered in presidential candidate Viktor Babaryka’s campaign. When Babaryka and other candidates were barred from the process and imprisoned, she supported Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya’s candidacy. After the election Tatsyana participated in peaceful protests, including Wisdom and Women’s Marches, and was detained and fined multiple times.



Her first detention came during a Women's March on 12 September 2020. When riot police charged at peaceful protesters, Tatsyana tried to help two young women escape and was, in turn, arrested. She was released but later fined for participating in 'an unsanctioned meeting'.

The second time she was detained on December 6, 2020:

“They pushed me into a minibus and there one riot policeman tried to hit me because I didn't sit in ‘the correct way’. Another riot policeman stood between us and I was spared a beating,”

Tatsyana tells Amnesty International.

During an unfair trial which took place in Akrestsina detention centre via Skype, Tatsyana was sentenced to 22 days in detention for attending an 'unauthorised meeting' and purportedly disobeying a police officer – an accusation she disputed. The main case witness testifying against Tatsyana was a man in a balaclava who couldn't remember the details of her appearance. After the verdict Tatsyana was transferred from Akrestsina to Baranavichy detention centre.

“When we were brought to Baranavichy, we were so horrified by the conditions that a few women started crying. It felt as if we suddenly found ourselves in a dirty cave. And there was an unbearable smell everywhere – it seeped into your skin,”
said Tatsyana.



“We were not allowed regular showers and in order to practice basic hygiene, we filled little plastic bottles with water, warmed them next to a radiator and washed in a corner. We called that a shower”.

Some of Tatsyana's cellmates took part in peaceful protests while others were simply passing through the city and inadvertently got caught up in the protests. In the first week of detention Tatsyana and her cell mates had long conversations about their lives, but as time went on, the atmosphere became subdued and the women fell quiet.

A week before her release Tatsyana was suddenly told to pack up her belongings and go. No one explained the reasons for Tatsyana's early release, especially as her detention sentence had been upheld on appeal.

But her time at home was short. On 5 January 2021, less than a month later, Tatsyana was re-arrested while participating in another peaceful protest – she walked the streets of Minsk together with other peaceful protesters and shone flashlights. Once again, she was falsely accused of disobeying a police officer, sentenced to 25 days in detention, and transferred to Zhodzina detention centre.

“The authorities had just banned the delivery of parcels to prisoners on the pretext of Covid-19 restrictions. Those parcels, containing food and essential clothing, had been every prisoner’s lifeline. There was one woman who was brought to Zhodzina with a broken rib. Another older woman had cancer in remission,” says Tatsyana.

Both in Baranavichy and Zhodzina, prison guards behaved very differently towards detainees.

“One of the guards was kind to us. This person talked to us with a friendly smile, brought everything we asked for – for example, hot water or toilet paper. In our conversations we referred to this person as ‘ours’. Other prison guards shouted obscenities if they were asked anything”.

After being released from Zhodzina Tatsyana went straight back to activism:

“People are scared. Repression is growing. Only the most active protesters are still continuing. We record solidarity videos in forests, we walk around Minsk and shine flashlights at night. We are all desperately waiting for spring. Maybe something will change for the better then”.

YANKA LITVIN (PSEUDONYM), 83 YEARS OLD

“When I was about nine years old, my father took me to an excavation of a mass grave. That was the site where my uncle and aunt and their children were murdered by the Nazis. My father identified my aunt’s body by the cardigan she wore. It was a difficult experience and it left me fearing persecution and state violence my whole life,” shares 83-year-old Yanka Litvin.

After graduating from high school Yanka studied engineering and eventually earned a PhD degree. He had a successful career and was a talented sportsman who played in national teams.



“I was hungry for what life had to offer and was very proud of representing Belarus, of being a Belarusian,” Yanka says. “That’s why when the protest marches started, I knew that my place was with other peaceful protesters”.

On 20 December Yanka was walking down the street on his own. He held a little flag of the Pahonia, a historic Belarusian coat of arms, in his hand and had a bigger red and white flag tucked under his coat. Suddenly a car drove up and three police officers rushed out towards Yanka. They pulled his hands behind his back, bent and pushed him into the car. Later he was transferred to a police bus that brought him to a police station.

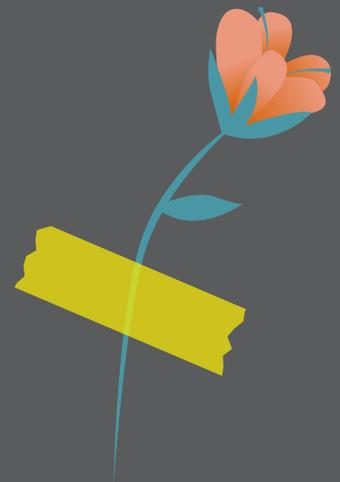
There the 83-year-old Yanka was made to stand facing the wall with his hands up for an hour and a half.

“A few steps away from me another detainee stood facing the wall. I showed him a hand sign and whispered ‘Long Live Belarus’. He quietly replied ‘Live Forever’. A few hours later I was released. I don’t know what happened to that man”.

For his walk in the centre of Minsk, Yanka was fined. In his administrative case Yanka was described as “a person without education” – something he protested in front of the judge.

Yanka’s arrest did not stop him from expressing dissent. He spends all his time writing open letters and warning the global community about the possibility of more state violence and police brutality on 25 March, Freedom Day in Belarus. In modern Belarusian history this unofficial holiday is associated with the arrests and detentions of people participating in peaceful gatherings. Many Belarusians were worried that this year in order to halt Freedom Day celebrations in public, the authorities would respond with violence.

“The authorities said that they would stop at nothing. And we are peaceful protesters – completely on our own against armed men. I’m really scared that there might be a bloodbath on 25 March or in the following weeks. I also hear that the Belarusian authorities are now building a concentration camp. I’m calling on the world to take measures to stop this violence. Belarus is situated in the centre of Europe. We need your help,” Yanka says.



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.