

Dear all,

Belarusian human rights NGO ‘Centre for promotion of women’s rights’, acting in good faith in accordance with principles of human rights, and free from politically motivated stands, expresses its deepest concerns about the ongoing police violence and other violations of human rights in Belarus after the Presidential elections 2020.

Acknowledging the fact that our organisation has an excessive mandate on women’s human rights, nonetheless, we, as human rights lawyers, cannot stand aside from what is happening in our country. The information on the current situation on human rights in Belarus which you can find below has been made possible to collect, analyse and deliver to you by using scarce and limited opportunities to access the Internet through VPN services, as of evening of 11 August.<sup>1</sup>

We urge you to use your mandate to spread the awareness on human rights violations in Belarus as well as pressure the Belarusian government to eliminate and prevent any further violations of the international human rights law through your campaigns and activities.

### **Non-access of independent observers to the election monitoring process**

Presidential elections were held in Belarus on 9 August 2020. Early voting began on 4 August and ran until 8 August 2020.

On 22 July 2020, Central Elections Commission limited the number of short-term observers on the voting stations to three and five persons at early voting and main voting days respectively.<sup>2</sup> The decision was explained by the need to prevent the coronavirus spread. However, this measure led to the fact that observers representing independent human rights organizations and alternative candidates were barred from monitoring the electoral process at the voting stations.

For example, the campaign “Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections” accredited 798 short-term observers. However, only 93 of them (11,5 %) had a *de facto* access to monitoring but for a limited period of time which did not cover all voting days and vote count.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, short-term observers were subject to pressure and persecution from the side of voting commissions, militia and in some instances – their employers. Some were arrested and fined.<sup>4</sup> The inability of independent short-term observers to monitor the process **severely undermined the transparency** of Belarusian presidential elections.

According to the Central Elections Commission Lukashenko won the elections with more than 80% votes while Tikhanovskaya received only 9,9%. Ms Tikhanovskaya did not

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<sup>1</sup> The current version of the report is as of 14 August 18:35

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.rec.gov.by/sites/default/files/pdf/2020/post115.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Belarusian Human Rights Centre ‘Viasna’, Belarusian Helsinki Committee, Presidential Elections 2020, Preliminary analytical report based on monitoring findings, pp. 8-11 (in Russian), <https://elections2020.spring96.org/ru/news/98937>

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*

recognize the elections results and stated that according to her data from voting stations she received around 70-90% votes.<sup>5</sup>

According to the words of the representative of the Platform 'Holas' ('Voice' in Belarusian language)<sup>6</sup> more than 80% of its registered users voted for Ms Tikhanovskaya and less than 10% for Mr Lukashenko.<sup>7</sup> Voters also published the photos of final voting reports from a number of voting stations all over Belarus that did not falsify the results. They showed that Ms Tikhanovskaya got more votes than Mr Lukashenko.<sup>8</sup> The following facts proved that Presidential elections in Belarus were falsified and Mr Lukashenko got the power in an illegitimate way.

### **Police brutality**

After the election stations closed at 20.00 on 9 August 2020, people all over Belarus started to gather at the streets of Minsk and other cities to protest peacefully against the election fraud. During the first day of the protests, according to the Ministry of Internal Affairs more than 3 000 people were arrested all over Belarus.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the peaceful character of the protests, the Belarusian police used excessive force against the demonstrators. The following less-lethal weapons were used: tear gas, flash-bang grenades, water cannons, rubber bullets.<sup>10</sup> In addition, the police extensively used batons to beat unarmed demonstrators who could not pose any resistance while law enforcement officials were effecting the arrest.<sup>11</sup> Flash-bang grenades that were used against peaceful protesters in Minsk are of Czech origin and have an etiquette in the Czech language.

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On 10-11 August 2020, the second night of protest, the police used the same tactics which included detentions, beating and using the abovementioned less-lethal weapons. In some locations the peaceful character of the demonstration was affected. It was reported that on 11 August people, in a few instances, threw fireworks and Molotov cocktails into the

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<https://www.dw.com/ru/%D1%81%D0%B2%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%BB%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%85%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B2%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%8F-%D0%BE%D0%B1%D1%8A%D1%8F%D0%B2%D0%B8%D0%BB%D0%B0-%D1%81%D0%B5%D0%B1%D1%8F-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%B1%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%BC-%D0%B2%D1%8B%D0%B1%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B2-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%B7%D0%B8%D0%B4%D0%B5%D0%BD%D1%82%D0%B0-%D0%B1%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81%D0%B8/a-54507833>

<sup>6</sup> The platform was designed in the form of a chat-bot in Telegram messenger as an alternative means to count real numbers of votes at the elections

<sup>7</sup> <https://news.tut.by/economics/696053.html>

<sup>8</sup> <https://news.liga.net/world/news/tsik-belarusi-zanizil-golosa-za-tihanovskuyu-v-tri-raza-chestnye-lyudi>

<sup>9</sup> <http://spring96.org/ru/news/98894>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/08/belarus-election-protests-police-crackdown/>

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<https://www.golos-ameriki.ru/a/svoboda-there-are-protests-started-in-belarus-cities-omon-in-minsk-are-detainin-g-people/5536747.html>;

<https://www.euronews.com/2020/08/10/belarus-election-hundreds-detained-amid-protest-as-early-results-indicate-lukashenko-lands>

<sup>12</sup> <https://twitter.com/BFreeTheatre/status/1292615631527743488>

police lines.<sup>13</sup> Amnesty International delegates said they had not witnessed any protester among the crowds they observed resorting to violence.<sup>14</sup> Even if there were separate instances of demonstrators resorting to some degree of violence, this does not justify the indiscriminate character of the police excessive force. MIA stated that more than 2000 people were detained on the second night of protests.<sup>15</sup>

Protests continued on the third night on 11-12 August 2020. During the afternoon of 11 August 2020, before the start of demonstrations law enforcement officials committed the so-called “preventive” detentions of those who seem to be “suspicious”.<sup>16</sup> The third night of protests can be characterized by a more severe crackdown on journalists: the police beat journalists, threatened to break their equipment. It was reported that the camera’s screen of TUT.BY journalist was broken. The police also took away journalists’ USB drives and forced to delete images.<sup>17</sup> The peaceful character of protests was disrupted as protesters started to throw bricks at the police. It was also reported that as the police were chasing the protesters and started to brutally detain them near apartment blocks where they tried to hide. In one instance the dwellers threw a door at the police from the window in an attempt to stop it.<sup>18</sup>

As previously, the police continues to use less-lethal weapons in the absence of any threat from the side of the protesters. Moreover, there were reports of the police brutally detaining children and passers-by, directly targeting people on the houses’ balconies who were expressing their outrage towards detentions in their yards. The cars were a matter of special attention of law enforcement officials. They damaged cars that signalled in solidarity with the protesters, broke their windows. The drivers were brutally beaten and detained.<sup>19</sup>

There were also reports and photos of law enforcement officials using ambulances to get closer to the protesters’ crowds.<sup>20</sup>

The police brutality caused a number of injuries and even deaths among demonstrators. As reported by the Ministry of Health on 11 August 2020, more than 200 people are being treated from injuries received from less-lethal weapons used at the demonstrations.<sup>21</sup> According to human rights defenders, on the night of 10 August 2020 a demonstrator was killed by a paddy wagon that ran over him.<sup>22</sup> The government denies the information.<sup>23</sup> MIA recognized that on 10 August 2020 at around 23.00 a demonstrator died.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> <https://ria.ru/20200811/1575621466.html>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/08/belarus-election-protests-police-crackdown/>

<sup>15</sup>

<https://www.dw.com/ru/v-belarusi-zaderzhany-bolee-dvuh-tysjach-chelovek-za-vtoruju-noch-protestov/a-54527126>

<sup>16</sup> <https://meduza.io/live/2020/08/11/belarus-tretiy-den-protestov-hronika>

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>18</sup> <https://telegraf.by/obshhestvo/v-minske-zhilcy-doma-skinuli-na-omon-dver/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://meduza.io/live/2020/08/11/belarus-tretiy-den-protestov-hronika>

<sup>20</sup> <https://news.tut.by/society/696387.html?tg>

<sup>21</sup> <http://spring96.org/ru/news/98974>

<sup>22</sup> <https://spring96.org/ru/news/98922;>

<https://meduza.io/short/2020/08/10/avtozak-sbivaet-protestyuschego-v-minske-fotografiya>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.dw.com/ru/centr-vesna-soobshhil-o-pogibshem-vo-vremja-protestov-v-minske/a-54507397>

<sup>24</sup> <https://spring96.org/ru/news/98954>

According to their version, it happened since the explosive detonated in his hand.<sup>25</sup> However, journalists on the scene denied it. Independent mass media “Nasha Niva” published a video where it is shown that the flash grenade exploded right in front of the demonstrator. It was thrown by the police directly into the crowd of protesters.<sup>26</sup> The numbers of victims of police brutality on the third night of protest is yet unknown.

MIA stated that officials detained 1000 persons during the third night of protests and 6000 persons all over the country overall during three days of demonstrations. However, Nasha Niva believes this number may be seriously underestimated.<sup>27</sup>

Journalists of different mass media,<sup>28</sup> including foreign ones,<sup>29</sup> are being arrested and deliberately targeted by the police.<sup>30</sup> Human rights defenders provided that around 50 journalists who covered the protests were detained.<sup>31</sup> In addition, bystanders and passers-by were being brutally beaten and arrested according to videos on Belarusian mass media Telegram channels.<sup>32</sup>

The last two days of the protest have been of a peaceful character and there have been no mass detentions.

**The use of excessive force by the Belarusian police is in direct contradiction to the United Nations Human Rights Guidance on Less-Lethal Weapons in Law Enforcement. Police brutality violates the following human rights of Belarusians under International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights:**

- Article 6: right to life. Police brutality led to the deaths of two peaceful protesters (directly on the scene. There is no yet information about people who died in hospitals from injuries).
- Article 7: right to freedom from torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. Unlawful use of force by Belarusian police causes physical and mental suffering which amounts to ill-treatment.
- Article 9: the right to liberty and security of persons. The arrest and detention of peaceful protesters is arbitrary.
- Article 19: the right to freedom of expression. People are prevented from expressing their dissatisfaction with the electoral fraud.
- Article 21: the right of peaceful assembly. The limitations on the right are unlawful since the Belarusian government failed to meet the requirement of:
  - a) Necessity. Even if the use of fireworks and Molotov cocktails on the second night of demonstrations proves to be true, the de-escalation of the situation could be achieved through peaceful means. There were other reasonable

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<https://www.euronews.com/2020/08/10/belarus-election-hundreds-detained-amid-protest-as-early-results-indicate-lukashenko-lands>

<sup>26</sup> <https://meduza.io/news/2020/08/10/v-minske-protestuyuschiy-pogib-pri-popytke-brosit-bombu-v-spetsnaz>

<sup>27</sup> Nasha Niva, Telegram Channel, @nashaniva

<sup>28</sup> TUT.BY News, Telegram channel, @tutby\_official; <https://news.tut.by/economics/696095.html>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.dw.com/ru/v-minske-zaderzhany-troe-zhurnalistov-telekanala-dozhd/a-54503243>

<sup>30</sup> <http://spring96.org/ru/news/98951>

<sup>31</sup> <https://zona.media/online/2020/08/10/belvybary-2>

<sup>32</sup> Nasha Niva, @nashaniva; TUT.BY News, @tutby\_official

alternatives available other than resorting to the use of force. It must have been also ceased as long as it was not necessary. Nevertheless, the police used it in a widespread manner. People were violently beaten by batons although they did not resist.

- b) Proportionality. The use of force must have been aimed at specific individuals threatening public order. On the contrary, it had an indiscriminate character. Law enforcement officials did not minimize the possible incidental impact of their use of force since journalists, bystanders and passers-by were directly targeted. Moreover, the police must have used the least harmful means to restore public order - presumably batons, but in no way rubber bullets.

### **Detained persons**

During first 5 days of the protests it was extremely difficult to locate persons who were detained during the protests. They were loaded into paddy wagons and taken into various police stations. The phones of the police stations and detention centres were either overloaded or turned off. In violation of the Code of Administrative Court Procedure, the police did not inform close relatives of a detained person if someone from their family was detained, which made it almost impossible for them to locate his or her whereabouts. The search for a detained person reminded of a twisted and wicked quest of spending hours on the phone and waiting near detention centres in hope to get any information. Lists of detained persons are given only at the requests of relatives who are waiting by the detention centres, it is not widely and freely available. The procedure of collecting names and personal information of detained persons by the police is not effective and not centralised. On 14 August 2020, after several days from the start of detentions, the Ministry of Internal Affairs launched a helpline where relatives of detained persons can obtain information on their whereabouts. Nonetheless, there are still missing persons who are frantically searched by their family as they were not informed by the police on their arrest. The failure of the police to timely inform relatives of the detained persons violates article 9 of the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights.

It is very difficult to obtain centralised and timely information on trials of the protestors. Relatives of the protestors have to call all courts because the police do not provide any information on where and when the trial will take place. Due to the high number of detained persons, it is extremely difficult to get information from the courts as phone lines are constantly busy and there are no printed lists of detained protestors who were already tried available at courts. They are read out aloud by court officers right in the court building. It is reported that trials last about 2-3 minutes each and remind a 'court conveyer': judges hand out identical administrative protocols to the detained persons themselves and read out measures of punishment and make no effort to look into evidence and make a fair decision. The majority of the protestors are given fines and detention up to 15 days. As convicted persons are taken away after the trials, their relatives still may not know where his place of detention is as the court does not provide such information. Their right to fair trial and right

to defence and legal assistance is violated, according to article 14 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

As of 14 August, after Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Belarus Aleksandr Barsukov visited detention centres in Minsk late at night, he ordered to 'release everyone' by today.<sup>33</sup> He also stated that there were no beatings by the police.

Surprisingly, after he left, detention centres started to release persons, even those who were tried by court and received up to 15 days of detention, which proves absence of independent and fair court system in Belarus.

### **Conditions of detention**

Human rights defenders indicate that conditions of detention amount to ill-treatment and torture. There were records that people stood for 28 hours before they were located in the cell.<sup>34</sup> The officials place around 30-50 persons in one cell designed for four people. People can only stand there. They deprive them of food, water, sleep, walks and a possibility to go the bathroom for days. Sanitary products (toilet paper, soap, pads etc.) are not provided. Women having menstruation were told to use their T-shirts.<sup>35</sup>

The officials refuse to provide detainees with mattresses for sleep. Even if they allow to take it, mattresses are dirty and have lice. The cells are disinfected with chlorine to such extent that eyes and throat start to ache.<sup>36</sup>

Despite such cruel treatment that certainly affects physical and mental health of detainees, they have extreme difficulties to access medical care (*i.e.* are denied to receive it).<sup>37</sup> In the town of Gomel a 25-year old man Aleksandr died after being detained. In the cell he asked for a doctor because he had cardiac insufficiency and tachycardia. According to doctors Aleksandr was firstly delivered to psycho-neurological hospital as law enforcement officials allegedly believed his cries for medical help could be explained by psychological symptoms. However, doctors in the hospitals stated that Aleksandr had a huge stress and he was in need of namely medical help. Aleksandr was delivered to the second hospital in the state of clinical death.<sup>38</sup>

The police beat detainees, even children,<sup>39</sup> on a regular basis.<sup>40</sup> People report they heard detainees screaming from pain.<sup>41</sup> There were instances of the use of a stun gun.<sup>42</sup> Officials also threaten detainees with physical violence and humiliate them.<sup>43</sup> There were

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<sup>33</sup> <https://www.kp.by/daily/217169.5/4269983/>

<sup>34</sup> <https://news.tut.by/society/696444.html>

<sup>35</sup> <https://news.tut.by/society/696444.html>

<sup>36</sup> <https://news.tut.by/society/689017.html>

<sup>37</sup> <https://news.tut.by/society/696444.html>

<sup>38</sup> <https://news.tut.by/society/696437.html>

<sup>39</sup> <https://news.tut.by/society/696377.html?tg>

<sup>40</sup> <https://news.tut.by/society/696375.html?tg>

<sup>41</sup> <https://news.tut.by/society/696444.html>; <http://spring96.org/ru/news/99003>

<sup>42</sup> <https://news.tut.by/society/696608.html?inst>

<sup>43</sup> <https://news.tut.by/society/696375.html?tg>

records of threats to hang<sup>44</sup> and shoot detainees.<sup>45</sup> Some photos of injuries caused by the police brutality can be found on the links below.<sup>46</sup>

Women are subject to gender-based violence in detention. One woman was threatened with a group rape,<sup>47</sup> another one that she will be “put on the bottle”.<sup>48</sup>

There are reports from lawyers that they are denied access to their clients for already two days. It is also reported that the administration of the detention centres in Minsk refuses to take parcels from relatives with food, toiletries and clothes to the detained persons.

**The abovementioned facts clearly indicate that Belarus subjects people to inhumane treatment and, in some cases, even torture. It goes in flagrant violation with Article 7 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Articles 1-2 of the Convention against Torture, the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules).**

### **Strikes**

As of 14 August 2020, a number of plants and state-owned enterprises stopped working and went on strike with demands of fair counts of the votes.<sup>49</sup> On the first day of the strike, people who gathered outside of plants to show solidarity for a strike were brutally detained by the police.<sup>50</sup> Some workers on strike were also reported to have been detained and taken out of the buildings by the police.<sup>51</sup> Limited or absent access to the Internet made it almost impossible for the workers to coordinate their efforts. However, later on some workers on a strike managed to enter into a dialogue with the city administration. In violation of article 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, article 8 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, article 41 of the Constitution of Belarus, workers are threatened to be fired by the administration of plants and enterprises if they do not resume their work.

### **Women in a political opposition**

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<sup>44</sup> <https://news.tut.by/society/689017.html>

<sup>45</sup> <https://news.tut.by/society/696444.html>;

[https://www.facebook.com/169531409778846/posts/3321901031208519/?substory\\_index=0](https://www.facebook.com/169531409778846/posts/3321901031208519/?substory_index=0)

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[https://ria-m.tv/news/205151/v\\_seti\\_pokazali\\_ujasayuschie\\_snimki\\_izbitiyh\\_lyudev\\_v\\_belarusi\\_foto\\_18.html](https://ria-m.tv/news/205151/v_seti_pokazali_ujasayuschie_snimki_izbitiyh_lyudev_v_belarusi_foto_18.html);

<https://news.tut.by/society/696608.html?inst>

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/embed/aGspTZbZK9w>

<sup>48</sup> <https://news.tut.by/society/696375.html>

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30777837.html>;

<https://www.currenttime.tv/a/v-belarusi-rabochie-vakhodyat-na-zabastovku/30781716.html>

<sup>50</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/169531409778846/posts/3313391798726109/>

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*

On 10 August the main opposition candidate Svetlana Tihanovskaya entered the Central Election Commission to file a complaint. She was held there alone for several hours, as her lawyer and a representative of her election team Maria Kalesnikava were asked to wait. After that, Ms Tihanovskaya left the building from another exit.<sup>52</sup> At her press-conference on 10 August 2020 she said she had no intention of leaving Belarus.<sup>53</sup>

Today in the morning, on 11 August 2020 it was reported that Ms Tihanovskaya was taken to Belarusian border with Lithuania by authorities where she has crossed the border to Lithuania.<sup>54</sup> Ms Kalesnikava reported that she received information from an internal source that a number of ‘high-ranking representatives of power structures’ entered the room where Ms Tihanovskaya was held at the Central Election Committee.<sup>55</sup> There is also unconfirmed information, which could be fake, that Ms Tihanovskaya was shown a video of her children in Lithuania and a video with her husband, Sergei Tihanovski, who was tortured in prison and was threatened to be killed. There is also a strong assumption that she was forced to record a video by the representatives of power structures where she reads a text from a paper asking Belarusians to end violence.<sup>56</sup> This assumption is shared by the President of Lithuania Mr Nauseda.<sup>57</sup>

We express our deep concern and we firmly believe that Ms Tihanovskaya was subject to threats in a cruel and inhumane way and was put under pressure from the government of the Republic of Belarus and forced to make a choice of either leaving the country or putting her family at risk.

Obstruction to the exercise of the right to be elected by the citizen of the Republic of Belarus is a crime that is punished under art. 191(1) of the Penal Code of the Republic of Belarus. Thus, Belarusian authorities have failed to protect Svetlana’s right to be elected as guaranteed by domestic law and CEDAW, art. 7(a). They also fail to exercise due diligence with respect to investigating and punishing persons responsible for the acts of psychological violence.<sup>58</sup>

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<https://tjournal.ru/analysis/197221-tihanovskaya-pokinula-belorussiyu-s-prizyvom-ne-protestovat-veroyatno-ee-vynudili-uehat-i-zapisat-obrashchenie-glavnoe?from=rss>

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<https://www.dw.com/ru/%D1%81%D0%B2%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%BB%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%85%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B2%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%8F-%D0%BE%D0%B1%D1%8A%D1%8F%D0%B2%D0%B8%D0%BB%D0%B0-%D1%81%D0%B5%D0%B1%D1%8F-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%B1%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%BC-%D0%B2%D1%8B%D0%B1%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B2-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%B7%D0%B8%D0%B4%D0%B5%D0%BD%D1%82%D0%B0-%D0%B1%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81%D0%B8/a-54507833>

<sup>54</sup>

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/11/belarus-opposition-candidate-lithuania-protests-svetlana-tikhonouskaya>

<sup>55</sup> <https://www.svoboda.org/a/30778057.html>

<sup>56</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-53733330>

<sup>57</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/tut.by/photos/a.198103840254936/3313312625400693/?type=3>

<sup>58</sup> CEDAW, General Recommendation No. 35 on gender-based violence against women, updating general recommendation No. 19, para. 24



On 8 August 2020, Veronika Tsepka, a wife of ex-candidate Valeri Tsepka and an active member of the united election team of Ms Tihanovskaya, also left Belarus to Moscow out of safety concerns.<sup>59</sup> Her husband Valeri Tsepka left Belarus with their children after they received information from the internal source that the Prosecution office was going to take their children away.<sup>60</sup>

Additionally, there is evidence supporting the tradition of repercussions towards Belarusian women who show active citizenship. Ms Vitaliya Naumik from Grodno, Belarus, has been unexpectedly visited on 17 June 2020 by state guardianship office after her husband, Mr Vladimir Naumik, was detained on 29 May 2020 by the police when he was passing by the point of gathering signatures supporting Svetlana Tikhanovskaya's candidacy at Soviet square in Grodno.<sup>61</sup> Such an ungrounded control from the side of state guardianship office towards the Naumik's children has a very high likelihood of being a part of politically motivated cases where the punitive and deterring measure for active citizenship is a removal of a child from parental custody. Unjustified separation of children from the family, which has a particularly devastating and harmful effect on children, is a measure of repercussion which backfires severely at women, and which has been practiced by Belarusian authorities in regards to active citizens before.<sup>62</sup> We fear that the authorities may use these tactics and use children as an act of reprisal and manipulation towards women in political opposition or women-protesters.

We urge the international community to provide protection to women in political opposition in Belarus and spread our concerns globally. There are more women in political opposition who are still at risk in Belarus - Maria Kalesnikava, Volha Kovalkova - a member of the united election team of Ms Tihanovskaya, and other women of Ms Tihanovskaya's team or women with active political standing, who may face pressure, reprisals and illegal detention from the government.

### **Internet shutdown**

Around 2 o'clock on 9 August, on the election day, there were first reported problems with access to the Internet. The access has been limited throughout all territory of Belarus and remained to be so as of morning of 12 August. It was impossible to access any messenger, application, social media, website or emails. It was only possible to make calls and send SMS through GSM-connection, subject to location. In the locations of protests the GSM-connection is blacked out by the special police equipment so that it is impossible to make calls and send SMS.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2020/08/12/any-belarusian-could-replace-me>

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reuters.com/article/us-belarus-election/belarus-opposition-leader-flees-abroad-with-two-sons-ahead-of-election-idUSKCN24P1MV

<sup>61</sup> <https://news.tut.by/society/689229.html>

<sup>62</sup> See cases of a political activist and human rights defender Ms Alesya Sadouskaya, a political journalist and a wife of ex-candidate to President Mr Andrei Sannikov Ms Irina Khalip, an independent editor Mr Ales Lahvinets, a journalist of independent TV-channel Belsat Ms Larisa Shchiryakova.

<sup>63</sup> <https://www.wired.com/story/belarus-internet-outage-election/>

Numerous complaints filed to Internet services providers did not solve the problem as they reportedly cited ‘technical issues on the side of a superior provider’ and ‘hackers attacks from foreign countries’. However, there is evidence showing that the Internet was deliberately blacked out by the government.<sup>64</sup>

The reason behind it was voiced by the General Prosecution office at the eve of the elections. Platform ‘Holas’ (‘Voice’ in Belarusian language) which was designed in the form of a chat-bot as an alternative means to count real numbers of votes at the elections, was deemed to be illegal. The platform operates on the basis of Telegram and Viber messengers.<sup>65</sup> There is a strong correlation between the blackout of the Internet, the attempt to block the platform and mass protests.

The access to the Internet has paralysed life in Belarus and has made it impossible to communicate with each other, stay informed and seek protection in case of arrests of the protesters and ordinary citizens. We are convinced that the Internet is more than just a means of communication. Adequate access to the Internet has become a matter of human dignity and a human right, according to article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Its arbitrary shutdown at a national level has triggered a number of other human rights violations - the right to freedom of expression, the right to peaceful protests and the right to seek international cooperation, as international journalists and photographers experience problems with sending the acquired materials to their offices accurately and in time.

In the violation of the right to the Internet, we fear that the situation with human rights abuses may have not received global coverage. We feel the urge to share this information with you as the events we are facing right now are unprecedented in the history of Belarus. The appalling and disproportionate level of the police violence, threats towards women in the political opposition, illegal detentions and absence of fair trials, inability to locate detained or disappeared persons, brutal dispersal of peaceful mass protests is a cynical and bitter consequence of authoritarian regime and neglect of rule of law.

We fear that the continuing anti-democratic regime will imply dramatic consequences for the civil society in Belarus. In case of failure of a dialogue and peaceful resignation of the ruling power, there is a risk of severe and disproportionate measures and reprisals for peaceful protesters on the side of the government that will persevere in the future also for those, who show discontent with the regime. There is also a risk of backlash on Belarusian civil society and human rights defenders whose work and security will be put at risk if the international community does not agree to take a proactive and clear role on the situation with Belarus. We therefore call upon you to take the side of justice, rule of law and human rights and take urgent measures to call upon international community to protect Belarusian citizens from lawlessness and tyranny and monitor the situation in Belarus.

Sincerely,  
‘Her Rights’ team

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<sup>64</sup> <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2020/08/12/bye-bye-byenet>

<sup>65</sup> <https://news.tut.by/economics/695915.html>

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