

SPOTLIGHT ON BELARUS

ON THE GROUND DURING THE PROTESTS

On the weekend of March 25-26 a wave of peaceful protests took place across Belarus that were met with mass arrests and police violence. Some eight hundred protesters were detained. Of these, 28 were criminally charged while the rest underwent administrative penal proceedings or were released without explanation. The nationwide demonstrations which began in February stem from the introduction of the widely unpopular Presidential Decree on the “Prevention of Social Dependence” also known as the “law against social parasites” that penalises several categories of unemployed persons through the levying of taxes. The protests, the largest seen in Belarus since the Presidential elections of 2010 has seen hundreds of journalists, civil society activists and political dissidents arrested and detained. Civil Rights Defenders was on the ground to monitor the crackdown and this report is compiled from first hand testimonies and observations of what transpired during these protests in late March.

MARCH 25 PROTESTS IN BELARUS

Roughly seven hundred protesters were detained on March 25, five hundred in Minsk alone, but most were released during the day. Their release was overseen by monitors at nine police stations. Random arrests were made in the streets, both at the main protest and at spontaneous protests, and bystanders leaving metro stations and shops were also detained.

On the morning of March 25 I visited the Viasna office where monitors were gathering. I was accompanied by Lars Bungler from Libereco, Dzmitry Salauyou and a man named Kostja. As the people working at Viasna feared an imminent raid on their office, they arranged a meeting at the apartment of Ales Bialiatski. Vlasta from the International Partnership for Human Rights introduced herself and asked us to accompany her to the courthouse to witness proceedings against young Green Party activists who had been arrested the previous day. When we arrived the court was closed but some of the parents were convinced that their children were inside.

Our route back to the Viasna office via Akademia Nauk was cordoned off by the police so we crossed the road to get a better view and saw only a handful of civilians, but also a special unit of several hundred officers stopping people from joining the protest. Vlasta messaged us at this time to say that the Viasna office had indeed been raided. Everybody had been detained and a bus was parked in front of the building. We sat in a café across the street where we could monitor the bus. Shortly afterwards, we were told that all the people in front of Akademia Nauk, journalists included, were being violently detained. The evening news reported that the police had beaten a detained British journalist. Since Akademia Nauk was closed to the public, people began organizing in groups across the city, but all were violently dispersed. Later in the afternoon after the monitors had been released, we attended some spontaneous protests, but the route to October Square was still cordoned off by thirty to fifty officers.

We made our way to Sovietskaya Police Station where some hundred and seventeen people (according to official figures) had been detained outdoors in

the snow. From here we moved on to Akrestina prison, as we heard that people had been taken there. We saw two trucks for detainees, one entering and one leaving the prison. The monitors informed us that at least one case of violence against detainees had been reported from each police station. The most brutal example was the case of a diabetic middle-aged man who was beaten in front of other detainees and left without medical care or any other assistance.

STORMING OF THE VIASNA OFFICE – A WITNESS ACCOUNT

At 11:25 on March 25, Omon Special Forces stormed the Viasna offices shouting “milicija” (“police” in Belarusian). They raided each room providing no explanation. The six people in the first room were forced face down on to the floor with their hands behind their backs and the forty or so people in the next room were pushed against the walls with their hands up. The men were kicked by the police and a witness claimed to have banged his head on the floor while being shoved and showed us the marks. Alexei, the lawyer for Viasna who opened the door, was injured. The journalists’ equipment was taken from them, thus preventing them from streaming any content.

The fifty-seven people in the apartment, excluding the owner Ales Bialiatski, were taken to a white bus with no police markings where their mobile phones were confiscated. A 15-year-old girl who lives in the building was arrested while leaving her home and put on the bus with them. Bialiatski was left inside with several police officers. The bus drove the detainees to the police station, and then on to a gym. They were not physically abused, but taken one by one and told to go through a door and wait there. In front of the gym one of the detainees witnessed security lines like those seen at airports. Since the detainees were allowed to pass around the lines, the witness suspected that this was in preparation for a large intake of people.

Inside the gym three women sat at a table registering the names and surnames of the activists. As the detainees entered one by one, police searched their pockets, shoes, and belts and undressed men down to their t-shirts. No more documents or computers were confiscated, only mobile phones. The detainees were not asked any further questions. When they arrived there were ten people detained in the gym, who were still there when they left. The activists were detained inside the police gym for one and a half to two hours, after which they were told they could take their phones and leave. No other explanation was provided. On their way out, they saw about forty people with their hands on the wall.

ALEXEI LOIKA'S ACCOUNT OF THE OFFICE RAID

At 11:25, a girl in a civilian clothes knocked on the office door. When it was unlocked two men pushed their way in. One was a large man wearing a black jacket, blue sports trousers, and a bandage over his nose. The men grabbed Alexei's hands and forced him down so violently that he hit his head and arms on the concrete floor. A police officer forcefully pushed his foot onto his head. They held him like this for ten minutes, then pulled him up and put him in the office corridor where they told him to keep his hands up, but the harsh fall had numbed his hands so much that he was unable to hold them up. Seeing that his hands were down, they hit him in the crotch with a baton. They gave him no explanation, just swore at him. After this he was treated the same as the others.

When they were released from the police station he saw an emergency vehicle outside and went to ask for help. The doctor diagnosed a concussion and hematomas and Loika was hospitalized. He had no idea how long he would need to stay in hospital and receive medication to boost his blood circulation. On Sunday, March 26, Loika sent an electronic complaint to the investigation committee of Minsk. Not long after a police officer called, asking him to withdraw his complaint. He refused and reminded the officer of their obligation to give a reply in accordance with Article 174. That afternoon, at around 16:00, the same officer came to the hospital and questioned him, not about his complaint or injuries, but about Viasna's office and whether the apartment was a private or official residence. They asked him his reasons for being there, the number of people who were present and who had invited him. His only reply was that he had come with the Head of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee for Human Rights.

SOVIETSKAYA POLICE STATION

We visited Sovietskaya Police Station from 19:35 to 20:00. We interviewed a monitor from International Partnership for Human Rights who was gathering information. According to police, 117 people were detained at the station. Monitors were prevented from seeing the lists and threatened, but believed the number could have been higher. The police registered the names and the fingerprints of detainees on arrival. Detainees had been held outside in the snow in temperatures of 0-2°C since 13:00 (seven hours for those detained prior to our visit). They were allowed to go to the toilet, but not to eat or drink, and were officially banned from making phone calls. Some calls were made, however, probably using extra phones. People were released in groups. Some were taken by bus while others went on foot. White vans drove the detainees, and they were gone for around fifteen minutes before returning. The vans looked like civilian vehicles and were white with white drapes in the windows. Monitors believed that at 20:00 there were still at least sixty people inside the police station.

IPHR monitors reported that there was at least one minor, a boy, in Sovietskaya Police Station. The police called his parents to fetch him and they were allowed to enter. The parents arrived at around 19:20 and picked him up. He had been there since 13:00 like everybody else. No other family members were allowed inside the station. Most people were released without charge; this was the first time a detainee had been released the same day without further proceedings and charges.

STUDENT PROTESTS, MARCH 26

On the evening of March 25, the Student Association of Minsk announced protests at October Square at 12:00 the following day. At 11:00 we went to monitor the situation in the square and saw the following:

- Some fifty police trucks positioned in the streets around the square. They were not visible from where the protests were about to take place.
- At least three green public transport buses full of police officers.
- Ten military vehicles behind the square.
- Special uniformed civilian police, military and what we concluded were KGB, strolling in small groups around the square.
- While making our way from the Old Town the police prevented us from entering October Square.

When the protests began at 12:00, at least fifty people and around thirty journalists were at the square. Police officers and Omon were walking among the protesters. At 12:05 two green police trucks drove into the square, picked up five to ten detainees, then circled the square twice before leaving. At least half the protesters left when the arrests began. People started walking from the square to the corner of the street on the left side of square. The green truck reappeared and picked up another five people. More people were detained as the protests started to disperse. Police officers searched people for no apparent reason and took them to the nearby buses. Since the tension was rising we entered the shopping mall behind the street where people were watching the events from the window. I was about to take up position to watch things unfold, but as I approached, ten to fifteen officers and a special unit barred my way. I backed off and watched them search and question journalists and other people. The action was over within thirty to forty minutes and at least twenty people were detained.

COURT OBSERVATIONS, MARCH 27

Following the protests in Minsk on March 25 and 26, around one hundred and fifty people appeared in court on Monday March 27. Fifty-three received prison sentences ranging from two to twenty-five days while others were fined. Viasna's journalist, Maryja Kastylianchanka, was arrested on March 26 when her apartment was raided. She

received a fifteen day prison sentence. She looked unwell on Monday and was very pale and weak. Police officers dragged her into the court. We attended the trial of a person who reported that he was receiving psychological treatment and could not fully follow the proceedings. He was granted legal aid on the spot but this is usually very poor and just a formality. A lawyer was engaged during the proceedings with no chance of preparing a case or talking to their client.

The Sovietski Court: there were around ten monitors and fifteen to twenty family members at the proceedings. Everybody had to state their names on entry. Monitors were allowed to attend some proceedings, but it was announced at the beginning that due to the large number of cases, some would take place in the judges' chambers. Since there are not enough chairs in these chambers, monitors would have to stand, which is not permitted. This effectively ruled them out from observing some proceedings.

The courtroom we were in had a metal cage, but these are usually reserved for criminal trials. The people we saw in the court were not sitting in the metal cage. At least one court prevented monitors from entering.