

Andrej Dynko

Sacrificial therapy

Letter from a prison in Minsk

I am writing these lines on Monday at 11 pm. With luck, these notes will reach the office of *Nasha Niva* just in time to be printed. The lights are out, but the prison is not sleeping. It is as loud as a jungle in the night. Voices and even laughter can be heard from the cells. The sounds of the prison remind me of a summer camp for children. During the day the prisoners play chess (with figures sculpted from bread), "mafia", battleship, and solve crossword puzzles. When the night comes, it is time for verbal games. Prisoners recall the riot police and guards they have met, and tell spicy jokes about the dictator and his camarilla, state radio hosts, and sergeants who were gathered from all corners of the Belarusian capital to Akrestsina prison in Minsk. "Calm down, motherf*****!" – the guards remind the prisoners about their existence, but the buzz doesn't get any more quiet. There is a lit bulb in a small window above the door. It gives me enough light to write.

An hour ago, the guard told the guys in the cell opposite us that 300 more arrested are being taken to Akrestsina. It sounds unreal, it's difficult to believe him. Who can joke like that after a whole week of continuous arrests? We heard of the last big transport of prisoners on Saturday. First there was a rumour that a 15 000-strong protest march was heading towards Akrestsina. Two hours later the interior minister Navumau confirmed this in his interview with Belarusian state radio. The prison met his words with chants of "Long live Belarus!" accompanied by rumbling and clanking at the radiators. Barely warm now, they are totally cold during the day.

We sit in a new prison building, not yet completed, but already full of those arrested in the square and around it. There are 8 of us in a cell designed for 5, and, by using a method of proportion, we try to estimate the number of internees. We have no idea how many cells there are in the old prison building. There are about 40 in the new one. How many of us are there? In the dinner list we put our numbers as 327, 329... Five

hundred? Six hundred? Belarusian state radio, the only means of information we have, doesn't tell us anything about the numbers of the arrested – a clear sign that the number is huge!

I was standing with my hands back, facing the wall, in the reception of the old prison building, and Aliosha Yanukevich (deputy chairman of the Belarusian People's Front) was speaking to me from behind the steel door. There is Yury Sidun, Andrej Tserashkou – a total of 11 prisoners in his cell. The old building is warm, but stinks like a homeless tramp. There are no single beds here. As I stand in a line to be searched, I can hear the voice of Anatoly Lyabedzka (chairman of the United Civic Party) in cell number 4, he demands something from the guard. And isn't it the baritone of philosopher Akudovich that I hear from the sanitary check room?

On Saturday we will receive the new issue of *Nasha Niva* along with the packages from our relatives. Using the cardboard packs of the toothbrush, we will cut it into separate pages, and I will be amazed to see the advice of the experienced Alpinist Akudovich for those who want to survive in the tents. Did I really hear the voice of my brother?

Two of the prison buildings are completely packed. Enzymes are fermenting in the cells. Obedient citizens get used to prison. There is no depression. We know about the newly arrested and about the widespread protest on Freedom Day (25 March). The prison greets with rumbling applause the people who are chanting "Long live Belarus!" and "Hanba!" ["Shame!"] near the Akrestsina prison gate. My inmates discuss the best ways to suggest the idea of a solidarity movement to their colleagues at work – for example, the people outside could begin to have 2 meals a day, as prisoners do, until everyone is released. The guys read in Valer Bulhakau's column in *Nasha Niva*: "Be ready for everything, but don't give in".

We are proud to receive packages from the outside. Some women have not chosen the most convenient husbands for themselves. We are glad to see that the people who came to Minsk from other regions also receive packages. We were just as glad during trials, when we saw our lawyers and human rights activists – present, but unable to change the verdicts.

The prison unites. There are a lot of us, and we watch as our optimistic power catches the attention of convoy guards. The novices stare at us, start talking. Some even flash V-shaped fingers through the peepholes of our doors – and this is our victory. "Why so sad, guys?" asks one of them. "Over there, in the women's cell, there are syringes and porn magazines" (shortly after the tent camp dispersal, Belarusian state television showed the images of the tent camp, allegedly full of drug accessories and porno publications). We burst into laughter.

We are listening to the radio. We hear about the looming social crisis in France, and that as a result of Irish pubs going bankrupt, 1200 people have lost their jobs. We note the week-long silence of the "guarantor of the stability of the socio-economic course". The victory of Orange forces in the Ukraine becomes clear when we hear that the state radio is reporting Sunday and Monday long the alleged chaos at Ukrainian polling stations. The guys feel that there is a drop of our input in this victory. The Ukrainians noticed early enough what the Belarusian pals of Symonenko and Vitrenko are doing in order to stay in power. Nine times a day we hear the Belarusian Foreign Ministry wrathfully condemning US and EU interference in Belarusian affairs, and we know: they ask our release. Our guys spoiled the "elegant victory" of the regime. That is why Lukashenko is silent.

Before March, it seemed to me that the Republic of Lies (RB in Belarusian means Respublika Belarus, constitutional name of Lukashenka's republic; Respublika Brachni is abbreviated the same way) would live longer than its creator. In prison, I realized that everything could be over much sooner. I underestimated the force of the moral engine, which keeps the protests moving, and maintains the width of the social base for these protests. Differently from 1996 and 2001, those who went to the square this spring, knew what they were risking.

Who are my inmates? Mostly people who have been imprisoned for the first time in their lives. Mostly young 18- to 35-year-olds. A computer programmer from Minsk (born in the town of Braslau, in the north of Belarus); a DJ from Mahilyou; a sole trader from "Dinamo" market in Minsk (born in Russia, the son of a military officer, came to Belarus

when he was 17) – they are walking refutations of stupid nationalistic clichés. There is also a businessman in a cashmere coat, who is also a protestant priest; a worker and at the same time musician from Homel; a journalist from the newspaper *Belarusy i Rynok*, Vadzim Alyaksandrovich; and Minsk plumber with experience in the leadership of the "Young Front" youth opposition organization, also experienced in translating American cartoons into Belarusian.

Akrestsina cells are living a vibrant spiritual life. The preachers preach about ordeals which God sent to Joseph, dissidents with 20 years of experience tell about the deeds of past times. The younger prisoners don't know a thing about the protest spring of 1996. Members of "Zubr" (a "Otpor"- or "Pora"-like youth opposition organization) are our special troops – I have learned to recognize and value this only here in prison, where they show their knowledge and skills. There is no grief, no fear. There is a feeling of a fulfilled duty. "Who, if not us?" says the manager from Hrodna, who loaded the trunk of his Ford with ham, cheese, and tangerines and, at 6 am on 21 March, set off for Minsk. He reached the square, and was arrested there.

I was arrested on the morning of 21 March, after the first night in the square. I was not alone in the police bus – riot police loaded it with people who had heard about the tent camp on the Russian television channel NTV or on the Internet. The first reaction was solidarity. Only one was carrying a tent and a fishing-rod for a flag (subjects of Akrestsina anecdotes), all the rest were carrying food. One woman – 8 bread rolls and a vacuum flask with hot tea; another man – 40 sweet cheese curds. When I looked at him, I recognized my neighbor. We knew each other's faces, but had never said "Hi!" to each other before. In 1996, the courts fined people for scuffling with police. In 2006, they convict young women to 7 days on a plank bed without mattresses for a flask with tea.

When the shock of the first day fades away, these young women will be singing the NRM song "Balloon", irritating prison guards with their jokes, and ringing the melody of "Long live Belarus!" with a prison bell.

The inmates who were arrested later tell me that these were young

women who began chanting "We shall stay!" on the night of March 21, when Kazulin proposed to dissolve the tent camp. Milinkevich hesitated, the men remained silent.

One of the articles in the previous issue of *Nasha Niva* was called "The first day of the revolution". There was no revolution, there was a protest. I believe they had a moral rather than a political nature. If there are any reasonable people in power, they cannot help paying attention to the fact that two out of every three cars passing the square during the protests honked as a sign of solidarity with the protesters. People say, beginning on 21 March, traffic police reported the license plate numbers to police blockades further down the road. The drivers were stopped and fined two blocks away from the square. In the square itself, the authorities played the game of "democratic facade".

I am sitting on a long wooden bench (which I also sleep on). It is 28 cm wide, I measured it with a pack of cigarettes. My inmates have their backs pressed against each other on the plank bed. The night is so freezing that they have to sleep reversed, facing each other's toes, bundling up their legs with their coats. The cold crawls inside through the iron-barred hole where the fire alarm is, which leads into the corridor. The chilly wind drifts through the chinks in the window with a matted reinforced glass – during the late Soviet times, such glass was used to make doors in the apartment blocks of multi-storied panel houses. Akrestsina is finally quiet. Socks dry on a radiator. "Kent"-butts stick out of the ashtray made out of bread – the only accessible building material. The brown wooden floor reflects the light of the bulb, a guard is coughing in the corridor, a small square window with the feeding-trough is oozing out on the tin-enforced door. If you don't suffer from claustrophobia, it is quiet and calm here. Everything is provided for you, nothing depends on you.

Being imprisoned feels like being pregnant: it's worrisome in the beginning, and in the end. Prisoners discuss which provocation awaits them at the prison exit. Almost everyone here has an acquaintance that is under politically motivated criminal investigation. It was especially painful to hear from Siarhej Salash (he was sent to our cell one night before court) that secret services stealthily put drugs into the home of

Kastus Shydouski, the museum conservator from Braslau. One can expect everything from this regime. The worst tricks of Soviet times are back, and the repressive machine has grown much larger.

The Soviet Union prepared itself for war with the outside enemy and invested in advanced missiles. Lukashenko's regime invests everything into fighting the internal enemy. That is why secret paramilitary units such as SOBR, "Almaz", PMSP, special departments of the Presidential Security Service, and the KGB have grown bigger and multiplied. Above them is the Security Council with **Viktar Lukashenka**, the president's son, who is in charge of it all. Internal troops have grown several times larger, in comparison to Soviet times. It seems like each of these structures is active around the square.

All arrests happened differently. One student told that "Almaz" soldiers collected the people they have arrested in the Yanka Kupala park, beat them unmercifully, and took them to Akrestsina, loaded on the floors of police buses in several human layers. "Zubr" and regional activists' phones were tapped. They were arrested as dangerous criminals on suburban trains or in apartments rented in Minsk for a day or two.

As far as I can tell from personal contacts, the regime will be able to rely on a thousand handpicked fighters from special troops for as long as it can pay their salaries. Elite units are being trained in the spirit of absolute devotion to the orders of their commander; the law is not important for them. The fighters feel totally comfortable falsely accusing other people of "cursing" and the like.

The construction of the repressive system is over. The "ideological vertical" substitutes itself with the party structure. It coordinates the indoctrination process of society and controls the behavior of the people. The "vertical" joins its ranks with the apparatus of secret services (ideology specialists often fulfill the duties of staff managers). Together they organize or forge the pseudo-election procedures. All this is orchestrated by the manipulated mass media. The protests are being strangled by law enforcement structures most eagerly – in advance, with courts, election committees, etc. – just affirming the decisions, which are approved from "above". The favorable economic state of the market

allows its participants to believe in its durability and, more importantly, in its fairness. Lukashenko's system will create unlimited spiritual corruption and propaganda idiotism. But in the beginning it is causing nearly totalitarian devotion in those who receive pecuniary benefits and ideological satisfaction. This can be seen in the example of Lidziya Yarmoshina, the chairwoman of the Central Election Committee.

We, the inhabitants of cell number 13, saw an example of this in another person. We didn't understand completely who he was. Neither have we understood why he visited us. It happened on Friday, 24 March, in the evening. It is important here to remember that on the night of 23 to 24 March, the tent camp was dispersed by force.

Two men in plain clothes entered the cell. They were accompanied by the Akrestsina cops, all of them high police officers. The first person had blond hair and was wearing a mink hat. He had a piercing stare, with unblinking eyes. He could easily get the role of SS-officer in the "Belarusfilm" casting. He demanded that we tell him whom we were working for. He told us that they decided to go and check the cells, to see "what kind of people caused all these disturbances". "The minister of education and I are going to get all of you together for a chat," he told the youngest of us. Then he swooped down on our programmer, "What do you need? Don't you get enough money?" The exchange with the DJ ended with a short lecture, saying that:

1. Kazulin is a traitor and a Gapon priest; he doesn't have any supporters, except for those who accompanied him to the Palace of Railroad Workers on 2 March. Kazulin's aides wrote a program in which you can easily substitute the name "Belarus" for "Nizhniy Novgorod region";
2. Milinkevich is a mumbler;
3. We are used to making money, big money. While we were freezing, Milinkevich wined and dined his family in restaurants;
4. A country for the people is being built in Belarus, and no one has the right to question the will of 83 per cent of voters;
5. Any protests will be stopped severely.

At this point he appealed to another plain-clothes man, calling him "my university friend who is now working in Moscow".

The visitors vanished when Vadzim Aleksandrovich began to argue with them in Belarusian. The Russian "colleague" asked the Akrestsina director, "Which language does this prisoner speak?" "Belarusian", was the answer.

The visitors left, and we began to wonder who they were. We asked the guard, and he answered: "A deputy minister". But the ways and manners of the visitor did not resemble a deputy minister of the interior. He was more like a secret service agent. Or a special unit man. I spent a lot of time trying to recall where I had seen his face. Wasn't he sitting between A. Lukashenka, S. Sidorski, and M. Paulau during the "Belarus-Spain" tennis match? Yes, that's him! Lushnikau, chief of presidential personal guards! And what was this Russian secret agent doing together with this man in plain clothes? Does this mean that between 19 and 25 March there was a (were) Russian consultant(s) in Minsk? What an interesting turn.

What did this visit mean? Perhaps just a desire to see the "prisoners of war" with his own eyes. Who are they, who dare to challenge the empire? The most pleasant thing this man in plain clothes said was that nobody left the tent camp before the assault "except for our people".

It is getting light outside, which means that cell number 13 will wake up soon. I have to finish this letter: it is impossible to write when the inmates are talking, smoking, or satisfying themselves by your side.

The country made another step in the opposite direction of normality. The atmosphere of terror was created before the elections, and there were mass arrests during the March protests.

It doesn't matter anymore whether you break the law. You can be expelled, fired, beaten up, detained, or imprisoned any time you begin any activity that is considered to be oppositional.

The regime wanted to strangle the tent camp by blockading it, to take it over by starvation. The very essence of the regime showed itself by arresting people who were going to the toilet, by grabbing young women with thermoses, and by hiding the 'autozaki' — trucks for transportation

of detainees — behind the billboards reading "For prosperous Belarus!" For this regime, the television image outweighs everything else. The authorities locked up everybody they saw as potential organizers of protests; then they arrested everybody who seemed to stir up the protests. But the unexpected happened – three new people took the place of each one arrested, and people began to carry food on their bodies. Photographers documented a boy who, happily smiling, undressed and took down the sausages wrapped around his waist.

The existence of the tent camp inspired thousands of people to heroic deeds, both large and small. These deeds will stay with these people for years, lightening their hearts.

Sacrificial therapy – that was the sense of the 2006 protests. The regime understood that it had lost. They clumsily cleared the tent camp. This didn't help, so the authorities staged a truly primitive provocation on Freedom Day, March 25. This is my vision of these days, most of which I had to spend behind bars. Please forgive me if I am wrong.

Alaksandr Milinkevich said that after 19 March, Belarus would wake up as a different country – courageous and free. I was not sure then whether it was just a propaganda trick. I don't know what is happening out there, outside the prison walls. I don't know who is still free. I am spending these 10 days among people who have undergone sacrificial therapy, and these are bright days among bright people. Perhaps Milinkevich was right.

27 March, 11 pm - 28 March, 6 am