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## Human Rights violations in Belarus : how to forgive, but not forget

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## Human Rights Violations in Belarus: How to Forgive, but Not Forget Christian Vision of Belarus

“No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment,” the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states in Article 5. No one could have expected that, in the calm country of Belarus, peaceful protests in 2020 would be faced with such violence. However, the atmosphere of terror and suffering still dominates the European country of Belarus, with the deaths of dozens innocent people, more than a thousand political prisoners, and almost 50,000 detained, searched, arrested citizens during the political crisis. Political prisoners often undergo secret trials which deprive them of their right to a fair trial: sentences for participation in peaceful demonstrations and expressing one’s opinion are disproportionately ruthless. Conditions of detention of political prisoners in both administrative and criminal cases are degrading. Violence and torture become a daily routine. Access to health care is limited. Those who are persecuted simply for expressing their opinion and indignation at tyranny, violence, and lawlessness in Belarus are subjected to grave restrictions in exercising fundamental human rights and freedoms, including the right to freedom of religion and belief.

In this chapter, four stories of four Christians will be told—three of them in the third person. Two protagonists—Orthodox Raman Bandarenka and Roman Catholic Vitold Ashurok—were tortured to death, one in the yard of his own house and the second in a prison. Another Roman Catholic, the mother of five children, Volha Zalatar, is serving her term of four years in prison. A father of seven children, Evangelical preacher Sergiy Melianets, survived torture and is free, so he will give his own testimony in the first person.

On 9 August 2020, after the presidential elections, Aliaksandar Lukashenko, who has been the president of the Republic of Belarus since 1994, claimed to win again, with more than 80 percent of the vote. The atmosphere in which the presidential campaign was run was marked by arrests, intimidation, and threats against alternative candidates, political activists, and journalists.

At the same time, in Belarusian society, which previously was fragmented and politically rather passive, surprisingly, initiatives of solidarity started to grow drastically and spontaneously, which nourished a genuine democratic movement. Never before had the democratic movement had so many hopes to overturn the authoritarian regime.

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, an ordinary woman who has never participated in politics, was accidentally registered as a candidate for the presidency and became a democratic leader of Belarus. She described the foretaste for a future fraternal community of solidarity in “Fraternal Society: A Vision for a New Belarus,” her letter to the Holy Father Pope Francis as a response to his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*:

We also look to the future and dream of the future, but our vision of the new Belarus is a vision of a fraternal community of solidarity and mutual assistance, which we have experienced ourselves and continue to experience now, and which feeds our hopes for the future.

Despite all the repression and violence, the protest continues to be peaceful; moreover, the spirit of mutual help and solidarity grows in it, as leaven in the dough. Our eyes have already seen, our ears have already heard, our hands have already touched, our mouths have already had a foretaste of the society that Belarus could be. We know what we want and what we aspire to—a new brotherly, united, inclusive Belarus, one that already exists in city quarters in which neighbours did not know each other yesterday and today gather to drink tea, treat each other with cake, sing and dance together.<sup>1</sup>

### **Raman Bandarenka: “I am going out!”**

One of the examples of such a neighbourhood was the so-called Square of Changes in Minsk, a courtyard where unknown artists painted a mural on the wall of a ventilation booth, depicting two sound engineers who became symbolic figures on 6 August 2020, on the eve of the elections, when they played the song “Peremen!” (“Changes!”) at the official pro-Lukashenko event. Due to its rhetoric demanding change, this song by the Soviet musician Viktor Tsoi became one of the unofficial anthems of the democratic movement in 2020. Kirill Galanov and Vladislav Sokolovsky raised their hands with white ribbons and with signs of the democratic movement while the song was on,

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1. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya’s letter to the Holy Father Francis, Bishop and Pope of Rome, inspired by his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, “Fraternal Society: A Vision for a New Belarus”, 4 November 2020, <https://tsikhanouskaya.org/en/events/news/f46df99254de4dd.html>.

making them symbolic figures of the protest. The mural became known and attractive to the supporters of democratic change. Many people went to the mural to take a selfie. The locals regularly hold musical concerts, lectures, and workshops at the courtyard and decorated the space with national symbols. Since mid-August 2020, the authorities have waged a war against this mural, removing it repeatedly. Local residents recreated it every time after the state-induced vandalism.

One of the locals was a young artist, Raman Bandarenka, whose college diploma work was a fresco in the canteen of the Orthodox national shrine at the Dormition monastery in Žyrovičy (Hrodna region). This Orthodox Christian is believed to be one of the painters of the mural.

On the evening of 11 November 2020, unknown people in masks came to the yard to remove the white-red-white ribbons which decorated it. Locals wrote in the neighbourhood chat about this and called someone to speak to the unknown vandals. The 31-year-old Raman Bandarenka replied, “I am going out!” A few minutes later, he was outside arguing with the unknown people, two of whom were later identified as the kickboxer Dmitry Shakuta and the president of the Belarusian Ice Hockey Association, Dzmitry Baskau, both of whom were close to the regime of Lukašenka. One of them aggressively pushed Raman so hard that he fell and hit his head on a children’s slide, while two other unknown individuals continued beating Bandarenka, then carried him by the arms and legs into a police minibus and left.

Bandarenka was admitted to intensive care and was diagnosed with a severe closed traumatic brain injury. He was in a coma and underwent surgery, then died the next evening.

The state propaganda invested heavily in discrediting Raman by alleging that he was intoxicated on the night of his death. The government attempted to silence a medical doctor, Artiom Sarokin, who told journalist Katsiaryna Barysievich from TUT.BY media that there was 0.00 percent alcohol in Bandarenka’s blood. Sarokin and Barysievich were both arrested and taken into custody and then sentenced to a prison term.

Many people around Belarus were shocked by the murder of Raman and began to get together spontaneously on the Square of Changes to lay flowers and light candles. Thousands came to his memorial in the Orthodox church of the Resurrection, and all over Belarus people lighted candles near Orthodox and Catholic churches. Memorial services were held and bells rang in memory of Raman. The youth band of the Evangelical Christian Minsk

Church, Grace, composed a song in memory of the young painter: “Go Out to the Courtyard.”

The regime struggled against keeping the memory of Raman alive. In the Square of Changes, the police destroyed the people’s memorial of candles and icons at the site of Bandarenka’s murder. The government attempted to silence two journalists, Katsiaryna Andreeva (Bakhvalava) and Darja Chultsova, who streamed live online from a window as police vandalized the people’s memorial. These journalists were sentenced to two years in prison. The government has also tried to silence Roman Catholic bishop Yuri Kasabutski and the press secretary of the Belarusian Orthodox Church, Archpriest Sergiy Lepin, for expressing their indignation with this act of vandalism in their Facebook posts. Both were called to the prosecutor’s office and issued with a warning for extremism.

Christians were and are still being persecuted for keeping the memory of Raman Bandarenka alive. A Catholic believer, Ala Rashchynskaya, was arrested on 13 November 2020 and detained for 10 days after she came to Merciful Jesus Cathedral in Viciebsk to light a grave lamp and joined a chain of people commemorating Bandarenka. Another Christian activist and member of the Christian Vision Working Group, Maksim Kavaleu, a Roman Catholic, was sentenced to 15 days of arrest. He was detained on 15 November 2020 in Minsk when he went to the Square of Changes to express his grief, light a commemorative lamp, and pray for Raman.

One year later, on 6 December 2021, an Orthodox believer, the musician Natalya Kopytko, was sentenced for five days for displaying a memorial candle—a sign of prayer and grief—in the window of her apartment on the anniversary of Raman Bandarenka’s death on 12 November 2020. On that day, law enforcement officers walked around the city and photographed all the windows with lit candles.

Not only individuals but also parishes have experienced pressure due to memorial services for Raman. In Mahilioŭ on 13 November 2020, riot police obstructed a public prayer in his memory at the entrance to a courtyard of the Three Holy Hierarchs Orthodox Cathedral. In Homiel, the Roman Catholic parish of the Nativity of the Mother of God received a warning from the main department on ideological work, culture and youth on 18 November 2020 because a memorial with candles and icons was set up for Raman Bandarenka.

## **Vitold Ashurak: “I Have Always Believed that Belarusians Have Big Hearts!”**

On 20 May 2021, Over Ashurak, a 50-year-old believer and activist from the local community of Lida, died while serving a five-year term in the penal colony in Šklouf Vitold Ashurak, to which he was sentenced on 18 January 2021 by the Lida District judge, Maksim Filato.<sup>2</sup> He had been sentenced to imprisonment under two articles of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus: 342 part 1 (“Organization and preparation of the actions grossly violating public order, or active participating in them”) and 364 (“Violence or threat of violence against a police officer”). The trial was held behind closed doors at the initiative of the judge due to an alleged threat to state security. Ashurak was recognized as a political prisoner.

Ashurak was an active Roman Catholic believer and had actively participated in a local prayer group, which had publicly prayed the rosary since August 2020. He joined the Pompeian Novena, a traditional prayer practice using the rosary and lasting for 54 days. In the city of Lida, the novena was initiated by Irena Bernatskaya on 12 August 2020. Bernatskaya herself was under politically motivated arrest for several months in the spring of 2021 before she was forcibly deported to Poland. The prayer was held outdoors in front of the Farny Church of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. After Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz of the Roman Catholic Church in Belarus was prevented from re-entering the Republic of Belarus on 31 August, requests for his return were added to the novena. It was after this prayer that he was detained for the first time in August 2020 with a rosary in his hand.

After the death of Vitold Ashurak, his family and hundreds of people mourned his wounded body and his death. During the funeral in Ashurak’s hometown of Biarozaŭka, his parish priest, Fr Andrej Radzievich, gave witness to the dignified life of Vitold Ashurak. He described him as a person of light who enlightened the whole community and country. Indeed, he was a local environmental activist passionate about protecting God’s creation. He was a member of the Catholic faithful who was strongly committed to justice and peace.

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2. “Body of Jailed Belarusian Activist Reportedly Returned with Bandaged Head, but Family Silent,” RFE/RL’s Belarus Service, <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-political-prisoner-dead-bandaged-head/31273419.html>.

In memory of him, the Belarusian Greek Catholic community in Antwerp, Belgium, where many Belarusian political refugees live, has installed in their church a memorial cross dedicated to hero and martyr Vitold Ashurak and all victims of the regime from 1994 to 2021. His memory is also alive in his Catholic community in Białożytko.

## **Volha Zalatar: “I Am Here Because I Live by God's Commandments”**

Volha Zalatar, a sociologist, mother of five children, and local activist organized neighbourhood parties in their courtyard with tea and cakes. She was also an active member of the Roman Catholic parish of Mother of God, Protectress of Families, in district Żdanovičy in Minsk. On 18 March 2021 she was arrested and taken into custody for the alleged creation of an extremist group (part 1 of Article 361-1 of the Criminal Code), as well as parts 1 and 2 of Article 342 of the Criminal Code (organization and preparation of actions grossly violating public order, or active participation in them, as well as training in such actions) and part 1 of Article 16 (complicity in such actions).

Seventy Catholic priests from Belarus submitted written petitions to the investigative committee asking to end Zalatar's criminal prosecution. Two priests, including Zalatar's parish priest, Fr Alexandr Famianych, had submitted sureties for changing the measure of her restraint.

Zalatar was subjected to violence and torture during interrogations. She was beaten on the neck and head, choked, pressed to the floor, and beaten with truncheons. However, she pleaded not guilty on all counts. Her lawyer, Andrey Machalau, testified that he had personally witnessed the signs of torture on the woman's body: bruises on arms, neck, and buttocks. The lawyer tried to launch a criminal case, but the investigative committee refused to initiate a criminal investigation of abuse of office by the GUBOPiK employees due to the absence of a crime. According to the investigative committee, “Zalatar's claims about bodily harm inflicted to her do not correspond to reality since it was inflicted before her detention.” Instead, following the allegation of torture, the lawyer's license was annulled.

Being detained since March, Zalatar requested pastoral visits by a priest on several occasions. All requests have been rejected. Only on 2 June 2021 did the apostolic nuncio in Belarus, Archbishop Ante Jozic, make a pastoral visit to Zalatar in the pre-trial detention centre.

On 3 December 2021, Minsk City Court (judge Anastasiya Papko) found Zalatar guilty and sentenced her to four years in a general regime prison. The day before, Volha Zalatar made her final speech, in which she stated that all her words and actions were motivated by nothing but her beliefs, the desire to follow the commandments of God and make the world like the kingdom of heaven: “All my actions and statements are determined by love towards people and by hatred—towards lies and violence.”<sup>3</sup> She expressed her credo with the following words: “The case file contains a photograph with a poster that reads ‘Peace, love, freedom.’ I subscribe to every one of its words. I want peace for my country. I want love for God and people to reign in my country. I want everyone to have freedom of choice.”

### **Sergiy Melianets: “I Believe that Nonviolence Can Change the Course of History”**

“Electric trauma—the result of electric shock impact” is stated in the medical documents of Sergiy Melianets, a 40-year-old Evangelical believer and father of seven children. His shock on the evening of 10 August 2020 was not only electric; it was also shock from the level of violence one human being can apply to another, receiving pleasure from beating, torturing, and humiliating.

That evening, Sergiy and his two brothers, Mikalai and Aliaksei, went to the centre of the city to pray for Belarus. They were sitting inside their car near Minsk Performance Hall, ready to pray. Suddenly, two dozen SWAT officers in black charged toward them. The brothers were grabbed by the arms and head and pulled out to get on their knees.

One officer was yelling, “Who’s the organizer? What were you doing [at] this demonstration?”

“We are here just to pray!”—I told them the truth. They repeated the question: “What is your purpose here?!” I kept saying, that we just wanted to pray. In a moment I felt an electric current running through my body—it was a taser. I was stabbed: first, in my legs a couple times, then in my arm, after I was hit from the back in the heart area. My answer “We are here just to pray!” was the wrong one. And a “wrong” answer resulted in a taser shot, which was very painful.<sup>4</sup>

3. “Volha Zalatar’s Final Speech in Court,” 2 December 2021, <https://belarus2020.churchby.info/volha-zalatars-final-speech-in-court>.

4. “I remember the words of one riot police officer vividly: ‘I would burn all of you alive if I had a chance!’” <https://august2020.info/en/detail-page/161>.

They brought the brothers to a huge truck, with more detained people, and stood them against it. They tied their hand behind their back and had them stoop 90 degrees down and forward, using batons to spread the legs widely apart.

The words of one SWAT officer are still in my ears: “I would burn all of you alive if I had a chance!” Those are the words I cannot forget: “I would burn you all alive if I only had a chance or an order.” I prayed. And I believed that if God allowed me to be in such a situation, it must be for a reason.

Since childhood, Sergiy has had heart issues, specifically a mitral valve prolapse. At some point, when he was standing against the wall, he felt he was about to run out of oxygen. His heart started aching; he began gasping for air and was passing out. The officers, afraid that Sergiy could die on the spot, brought a doctor over.

After consultation the medics decided that I was being close to a heart attack. Tachycardia, panic attack, heart pain, cramps, low blood oxygen level. But the SWAT officers didn’t want to let me go. At the end, the doctor said: “If he dies right here, right now, what are you going to do?”

Finally, the ambulance was called, and he was brought to a hospital. The hospital was full of other injured people—all kinds of injuries and fractures.

One man had fist-size pieces of flesh torn out where rubber bullets had hit him. Another man was badly beaten while returning from work; he was covered in blood. A third guy was hit in the nose so hard that they couldn’t stop the bleeding. The fourth had his arm broken. The fifth had his arm dislocated when he was dragged into a police van. The sixth was covered in police stick marks, with a bruised eye and a damaged leg.

The doctor said that Sergiy’s condition had stabilized, that there were no places in the hospital and Sergiy should go home. He later found his brothers in Žodzina detention centre. Some months after, he was charged with a fine because of the blinds in his bedroom, which he had made white-red-white. He was also threatened with receiving a status for his family as “in a socially dangerous position,” by which he would have risked his children being taken out of the family.

## Conclusion

Sergiy's story didn't become a tragedy, as happened to another protestor from Homiel, Aliaksandar Vikhor, age 25. He had heart issues, was detained 9 August 2020, and was beaten. Those who were in the police van and at the police station with him said he was pleading for medical help but instead was receiving more and more hits. His ribs and sternum were broken. He went into a coma and died on 12 August.

Sergiy told witnesses that when the police officers heard his answers about prayer, they humiliated him. According to Christian Vision's monitoring,<sup>5</sup> the police often behaved particularly violently toward believers or people perceived to be believers.

For example, Vitaly Shatalau, a Roman Catholic, was detained and severely beaten in Mahilioŭ. Shatalau had multiple religious tattoos on his body, including a crucifix on his back and an image of St John Paul II on his inner elbow. The police officers asked him if he was a believer, and Shatalau gave an affirmative answer. The police then beat him so severely that Shatalau had to be hospitalized.

Another example is Andrei Shklenda, a musical instrument master from Pinsk. He was badly beaten at the Pinsk city department of Internal Affairs on 10 August 2020. Due to his appearance—a beard, long hair, and the fact that when he was beaten, he cried out, “Lord, save me!”—the police officers assumed Shklenda was a clergyman. They humiliated him based on his assumed priesthood and treated him cruelly.

Despite all this, Christians still believe in forgiveness. As Volha Zalatar said in her final words at her trial:

We are all children of God. Each of us has the capacity to make this world like the Kingdom of God where love reigns. Hatred, lies, envy, revenge and fear have no place in the Kingdom of God.

My heart is torn to pieces as the degree of hatred is growing, the amount of pain and resentment is escalating. What is needed is repentance and mutual forgiveness. This is the only way to stop the socio-political crisis in the country.<sup>6</sup>

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5. “A Monitoring of the Persecution in Belarus of People on Religious Grounds during the Political Crisis” (n.d.), <https://belarus2020.churchby.info/monitoring>.

6. Volha Zalatar's Final Speech in Court, 2 December 2021, <https://belarus2020.churchby.info/volha-zalatars-final-speech-in-court>.

In spite of everything, Christians still believe in nonviolence. As Sergiy Melianets says:

Still, I decided not to bear offence in my heart, I can say I forgive them. Yes, I want that they face trial and carry the punishment. But inside my heart I do not hold a grunge. I agree that we became an example for the world of a possible peaceful settlement of the situation. I believe that nonviolence can change the course of history. We fought against the evil with the weapon of good.<sup>1</sup>

But nonviolence and forgiveness alone cannot put an end to torture and suffering, stop bloodshed, heal the wounds, wipe away tears, set the imprisoned free, and bring those in exile home. Only the restoration of justice and of a proper rule of law, respect for human rights, and rehabilitation of the persecuted, naming evil by its name, will pave the way to lasting peace with justice and visibly imply that the suffering of innocent people was not in vain.

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1. "I remember the words of one riot police officer vividly."