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‘The political crisis in Belarus is not resolved and people are still detained’

Tatsiana Khomich on her sister and opposition leader Maria Kolesnikova's health, repression in Belarus and the country's role in the Ukraine war

Your sister, the jailed Belarusian opposition leader Mariya Kalesnikava, has recently undergone surgery and was admitted to intensive care. How is she doing and what happened?

Maria is now conscious, but her lawyer is not allowed to see her. We don't know when she started to feel bad and we don't know the reason for her operation or her diagnosis. Unconfirmed sources say Maria might have had a stomach perforation. By now, our father was able to talk to a doctor at the hospital in Gomel. The police were present at the conversation. Maria's condition is still serious, but the doctors said that the operation was successful. We do not know more details; our father is also denied further information.

When her lawyer last visited Mariya on 17 November, she told him that she could face penal solitary confinement. Since 22 November, he has been trying to visit her but was repeatedly refused, because Mariya allegedly did not give written permission – in solitary confinement, she is not allowed to write or even have a pen. As he was told then, Mariya was in penal solitary confinement due to her alleged abuse of the rules and for ‘impolite treatment’. Previously, when asked if there was any impolite treatment on her part towards anyone, she replied to her lawyer that *there was none and will never be*.

Your sister has been in prison since 2020; last year she was sentenced to eleven years in prison for an alleged 'conspiracy to seize power', among other things. How do you keep in touch?

We mainly have contact through the lawyers who visit her periodically, usually for 30 Minutes to one hour once a week. At these meetings, they share news about what is going on in Belarus, in the world and family news. Since she was transferred to a penal colony in

January this year, she can make phone calls and talk to our father who is in Minsk. Until August, I was able to have some video calls with her. I talked to her six times this year. It's usually really short calls, five to six minutes, not more. We are not allowed to speak about the political situation, be it in Belarus or abroad. Since August, however, I cannot reach Mariya.

What helped Mariya is receiving letters from all around the world. She knew that her fate was closely watched and that she was supported. One day in October 2020, she received 400 letters at once. But in the last months, this stopped. She now receives letters just from close relatives. All the letters to her go through censorship. This is not just the case for Mariya but for all political prisoners since spring this year. More so, letters from political prisoners are no longer delivered. Although Mariya writes more than 100 letters every month, only our father and I receive them, others do not. But Mariya keeps fighting and keeps writing letters all the time.

The Belarusian Coordination Council, the government in exile, appointed you as the representative for political prisoners. Can you describe your work?

During the presidential campaign in 2020, I was already active with the campaign of Viktar Babaryka and later supported the campaign of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. When Mariya was detained after the election, I started to advocate for her release in September 2020. I spoke to parliamentarians and celebrities, mainly from Germany, to support Mariya. They wrote letters to the Investigation Committee, to prosecutors' offices and to the court on different occasions during the investigation of her case and her detention to appeal for her release. We also organised a number of public campaigns to inform about her health situation.

At the time of Mariya's arrest, there were around 70 political prisoners, a few months later there were already hundreds. I understood that it was not just about the release of Mariya – her release will not resolve the political crisis in Belarus. There are other political prisoners that need to be heard. So, I started to advocate for the release of all political prisoners and to spread the word about the situation in Belarus. Together with the organisation Libereco, we reached out to parliamentarians from many countries to involve them in media campaigns and make them the voices of political prisoners in Belarus. In the last two years, I spoke at the Helsinki committee (the Human Rights Committee of the United States Congress), at the European Parliament, the Council of Europe and at different other European parliaments. The work to remind people about the situation in Belarus and the political prisoners there never ends. From

February it became even more difficult because now a lot of attention goes to Ukraine. It is important to support Ukraine, but the political crisis in Belarus is not resolved and people are still detained.

What would have to happen for all or at least some political prisoners to be released?

Right now, it doesn't look like Lukashenka is generally willing to release more people, although some political prisoners have indeed been released. Two months ago, a Radio Free Liberty journalist was released together with a few others. Eventually, all political prisoners could be freed, though this may take a long time. Major negotiations can only begin if Lukashenka decides, at some point, to give in to the pressure of the sanctions or to break away from Russia. The Russian troops in Belarus, however, are likely to make it difficult to withdraw the sanctions.

Another possibility could be some kind of transition, but I would say that right now this seems unlikely. This can probably only happen as a result of further pressure from sanctions or further protests in Belarus. But people are frightened and have been suffering under such huge repressions, that it is hard to imagine what would trigger another round of protests. People understand that any attempt can lead to imprisonment.

Of course, there could also be some kind of internal transition within the government. But there is no one who could follow Lukashenka, who just secured his lasting political influence with the introduction of the All Belarussian People's Assembly in the new constitution, which he heads.

After Lukashenka suppressed the protests following the presidential campaign in 2020, he initiated what he calls 'a process of change' which resulted in this year's referendum on a new constitution. What is your take on this new constitution and his proclaimed process of change?

No one believes that the transition forecasted by the new constitution will happen, not to mention resolve the political crisis. Therefore, the referendum did not get much attention. Because the referendum was held on 27 February, three days after Russia's attack on Ukraine, Belarusians used this occasion to protest against the war. They voted and then went to protest against Belarusian support of Russia's attack. However, the protests were not as big as in 2020; people protested locally, near election commissions in their hometowns or in their districts. More than 1000 people were detained.

In the beginning of the war, rail tracks in Belarus were sabotaged to make it difficult for Russian troops to move into Ukraine through the country. How is the attack seen in Belarus?

There were several attempts of sabotage, some of which were successful in disrupting railway connections. However, the government reacted brutally, dozens of people were detained and beaten, while some even got shot in their knees. Because of the attempts to disrupt the railway connections, the application of the death penalty was amended in May so that it can be applied in attempted acts of terrorism. This was done to scare people, so no one would dare to engage in acts of sabotage in the future.

In polls on people's attitudes towards the war, there are mixed answers. Some support Ukraine, some support Russia. Some support Russia but say that Russia should not have attacked Ukraine. Around 10 per cent of people think that Belarus should join Russia in the attack. But it is clear that overall, the opinions in Belarus are totally different from the opinions in Russia, where most of the population supposedly supports Putin. In Belarus, many people express their attitude against the war on social media – which is forbidden. Sentences are between one and three years, and there are many cases where people got persecuted. The war gave the Belarusian government one more reason to detain people.

So far, the Belarussian government withstands Russian pressure to join the war against Ukraine. Can the government hold this position?

No one knows. The situation changes very fast. So far, Belarussian troops are not in Ukraine, though there are more Russian troops in Belarus, where they conduct joint army activities. As I said, the general population does not support a Belarusian engagement in the war. I hope that the Russian authorities see and respect this. There are rumours that Belarusian authorities are afraid to send the army to Ukraine as they fear that the army would not comply. On the other side, there aren't that many Belarusian troops that could be sent to Ukraine so that it could drastically change the situation.

How can the political crisis in Belarus be overcome?

There are several approaches on how to resolve the situation. One of them is the introduction of sanctions against Belarus and against Belarusian authorities which would raise the pressure on Lukashenka. This could lead to negotiations with Western countries, though the huge number of political prisoners, the ongoing repression and the Russian troops inside Belarus are clearly major obstacles. So far, there is no sign that Lukashenka abandons his support for Putin and Russia.

But, at some point, this could happen. All the more since Belarus is becoming weaker and weaker.

In the past, Belarusian goods were exported to Ukraine and the EU. Minsk reoriented its trade to Russia and some other post-Soviet countries, but this cannot satisfy all the needs. No one can predict what will happen in the future, not even in the next month. But right now, it looks like Belarus is heading towards more dependence on Russia – which is not in the interest of Lukashenka. At some point, Belarus will lose its political and economic sovereignty and independence completely. This is also not in the interest of the Belarusian people – even though we have a close cooperation with Russia and even a union state for more than 20 years. But Belarusian people do not share the idea of a Russian empire. Russian propaganda actually did work well on the Russian people but not so much on Belarusians. And this is a reason for hope.

This interview was conducted by Alexander Isele.



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Tatsiana Khomich, sister of the activist and artist Maria Kolesnikova, is the representative for political prisoners of the Coordinating Council of Belarus of the exiled 'counter-government' led by Svetlana Tikhanovskaya.