

“I went to the protests because I saw with my own eyes how the authorities were shooting people” – Elizaveta Poltorak*, a participant of Minsk’s peaceful protests, on her decision to fight for an honest future, the KGB’s detention of her brother, and solidarity

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Elizaveta, you moved to Belarus from Uzbekistan at the age of 16. To what extent were you involved in the social and political life of Belarus?

I was always an absolutely apolitical person. I don’t have any great knowledge in this area and I never participated in any opposition movements. Until now I saw all opposition movements as a form of national self-isolation. I supported the idea of world peace and, of course, I never harbored any nationalist views.

I clearly understood that something was a little “off” in our country. This I explained to myself, for the most part, as a consequence of the “power vertical,” which is focused on pursuing the personal interests of the ruling authorities. The lack of freedom in Belarus always troubled me. We are a very heavily policed country. There are an enormous number of policemen even in ordinary times. There seem to be a lot of police around, but of course when you need help, they can never do anything. When it comes to domestic violence, you practically have to be killed right off the bat for them to come and help you.

It also worried me that we are so strictly controlled, for example, in the choice of how to run a business. These are holdovers from the Soviet past, when your business would succeed if you had “protection” from the state, and if not, you would have a tough time competing with those who did have “protection.” I was also ashamed when Lukashenka, as ignorant as he is, called women’s feet “hooves” and the people “sheep.” This made me angry too, but I never participated in the opposition.

Everything changed, though, when the pandemic appeared. When it was necessary to do something to save people, our president told us that “viruses don’t exist—do you see them? No, and I don’t see them. They don’t exist.” He left the doctors to deal with this problem on their own. And instead of giving some kind of support, the government, on the contrary, called on people to go to work and held parades that they forced people to attend “voluntarily,” all while the virus was spreading. And then they asked us “why are you wearing those muzzles?” That is when I realized that the government was not on the same side as the people, but rather that it would pursue whatever economic objectives it had while deceiving the population. Long before that I thought the government ought to change. But from that moment on, most likely,

came the realization that it was “now or never.” Because “26 years is a long time, but 5 [more years] is even longer.” That is when I made the irreversible decision that I am for change.

What were your expectations for the elections? Did you think that they would be, to put it mildly, not the most honest?

Yes, it was predictable that the authorities would draw up a victory for Lukashenka. But maybe if they had given him 52% or 53%, or even 56%, then maybe there wouldn't have been the kind of protests that we have now. It's possible that people would have believed it and said, “well, there are fewer of us, it means that we are not united enough nor single-minded enough in our choice.”

The last time around, Lukashenka won easily, because there wasn't a unity candidate that we could vote for; and I did not vote in those elections because I didn't see the point. The other candidates were all simply pawns of some kind. But this year, I saw good candidates and well-run election campaigns from Viktor Babaryka and Valeryi Tsapkala. Those two people drew my interest and I gave my signature for them [to be registered as candidates—Ed.]. It was like a breath of fresh air, a light at the end of the tunnel, and I wanted to vote for these candidates. Unfortunately, they did not give us the chance to and, unfortunately, we knew even then that they wouldn't. The first wave of indignation came when they arrested Babaryka, having fabricated an investigation of him in just two days. That is what sparked my—and our—desire to somehow resist this and not simply acquiesce to it the way it had been earlier.

I wanted to believe with all my heart that everything would be done honestly, that it would be beautiful. But after they arrested Babaryka and later barred Tsapkala from running, I understood that there would clearly be no honesty here. Nevertheless, I fulfilled my civic duty: I went to the polls and voted for Tsikhanouskaya's team (the unified ticket of Babaryka, Tsapkala, and Tsikhanouskaya). My vote was obviously for Tsikhanouskaya. My family and those closest to me all voted the same way I did. I don't know anyone in my circle that would have voted for Lukashenka.

I closely followed the course of the elections at my precinct where I myself voted. Among those of us *who were voting for the unified camp and for Tsikhanouskaya as the leader of that camp, we had a general agreement that we would fold our ballots into a funnel or into an accordion.* Since the ballot boxes were transparent, one could see how many ballots were folded into a funnel and how many into an accordion. It was clear that unfolded papers could be counted on one hand. I saw that people came out to vote; so many people that I have never, ever seen lines like that in Belarus and I came to Belarus at 16. Earlier, I saw empty voting sites, but this time the turnout was unbelievable. And when we saw that [Lukashenka had won] 80% during the first round, that was a major shock. The first wave of indignation spread.

Why, in your opinion, did people come out to say their piece this time? Why did you come out?

We came out because we really saw a candidate for whom we wanted to vote and they didn't give us the chance to; they threw him in prison. Because we saw how they were trying to

deceive us step by step. Because we don't have the ability to tolerate this lying any more. I can't remember why I did not go to the protest on August 9—probably because I didn't expect that people would simply come out until the end of the elections. I voted and went off to do yoga or something else. Already on the 9th there was no internet.

On August 10, I saw how on the 9th they had viciously shot at the peaceful people who approached the police and special forces with good intentions: they cried "The Police are With the People!" and "Lay Down Your Shield!" I also saw that with my own eyes in the shootings my mom had taken. It just so happens that my mom works at an organization with an office close to where it all began—near the Victory Obelisk and the Yubileiny Hotel—and they were in the very first row, so to speak, watching how it all unfolded. They were afraid to get close to the windows, but my mom took a few photos. And when she came home and showed it all to me, I could not believe it. For what? How does this happen? I could not believe that they could just arrive and start shooting people. I did not believe it then and, truth be told, I can't quite believe it now; but *I saw with my own eyes how the authorities were shooting people and from that moment I understood that there was no turning back. The next day I consciously went out to the protests because it doesn't have to be this way.*

Of course we did not simply expect that they would bring out the security forces; we *knew* that they would do so, because Lukashenka was constantly telling us he would. The "mustachioed one" was telling us from the TV that he would brutally disperse any gathering. But what happened was not simply brutal. It was murderous.

And once they began massively detaining people it became even more clear that there was no going back. I came out because I was scared for those people. It was scary to think about what would be done to them and what they wanted to do, how long they would be sentenced for if no one tried to free them, if no one demanded their freedom. It was necessary to prolong the protests so that the authorities would have nowhere to put detained protesters. We thought, let them take more and more so that some kind of improbable collapse takes place. And that is what happened. On the 13th, the deputy minister of Internal Affairs came to Akrestsina street and gave an order to free those who had been detained. Obviously, they did not free everyone at once, but they started to gradually release them.

Furthermore, I went out because I understood that it is "one for all and all for one." I felt that if three or four others came out, that would also be good. But each person ought to stand up for his or her civic position. I simply regarded it as my obligation to go out. I wanted to demonstrate my vote and look at those other people who had voted like me. And I wanted to see those other 80% who had allegedly voted for the incumbent president.

I did not see another path. My brother, my sister, my parents, and my friends—none of us saw another way. How could I choose to stand to the side? Why am I living in this country if everything is all the same to me? *It was a moment of taking a civic position, a moment of taking responsibility for what would happen next.*

Please tell us about the atmosphere at the very beginning when you came out and how did things progress from there?

We came out spontaneously, because there was no other way to connect except by mobile phone. And since we did not have internet, no way to connect apart from the phone, we called up friends and agreed to meet along the lines of the metro. We came out to the metro stations closer to us and from there we went to the center. We clapped and sang the Viktor Tsoi song “Changes,” which has taken on a second life—we demand change! And we also sang the unofficial hymn of the Babaryka, Tsapkala, and Tsikhanouskii team, “the walls will crumble, crumble, crumble...” There are Polish and Russian versions of this song. Russian is more common in Minsk, so we sang it in Russian.

But we were not singing for long. Closer to the center we were blocked by a barricade. Within 15 minutes of our joining the huge crowd, a rumor began to circulate that the riot police were arriving. And within five minutes they really did come and without any warning they began to shoot tear gas, concussion grenades, and rubber bullets. Everyone began to scatter. It was truly terrifying. We ran through courtyards because we thought they wouldn’t throw grenades there. But they threw grenades anyway. I saw how those things exploded on the roofs of houses. One grenade fell and exploded within 15 meters of us. It just so happened that I was looking in the other direction and, having merely heard the boom, I understood that it was quite close. All in all, we ran faster than sprinters.

Our friend group had agreed in advance that if we got scattered and if what happened on the 9th were to repeat itself, we would meet up in a designated location. It happens that my sister lives not far from the demonstration site, and we gathered at her place. From her building, from the 18th floor, we watched everything that was happening with heavy hearts and with horror, because in all of our lives none of us had ever had to see such things with our own eyes. Your Minsk at dusk—explosions, smoke, and people crying out. Now I can talk about it, but at that moment I couldn’t even speak; I was simply choked up. How could this be? *How could you shoot into crowds of peaceful people, who are not shooting, who are not attacking, and who are unarmed?*

What do your parents think about the fact that you, your brother, and your sister are participating in the protests? Did they try to talk you out of it?

Of course my parents are worried sick. But they see that trying to prevent us from going is pointless. On the one hand, they are very worried, but on the other hand, they very much support us and share our aims. When I don’t have the strength to go, for example, I go anyway because my brother and sister are going. Because it’s better for me to be near them and to somehow monitor the situation. And then my parents can’t control the situation themselves. They of course always try to call, they watch the Radio Liberty streams, the Belsat streams to find out what is going on in the city and to keep us informed over the phone. When you go to the protest, the internet doesn’t work or works poorly.

Despite the fact that my parents are worried and don’t want anything to happen to us, they know that we are the ones who will have to live in this country and in the world. They understand that it is impossible to keep things as they are. Just try to imagine forgiving and living peacefully under one roof with those leaders. Now it is absolutely unknown how it will all

turn out. It's not just my parents and all the parents of Belarus who feel stress, but parents throughout the whole world. My friends from Tashkent and those who lived in Tashkent and now live in other countries write constantly. They ask how we are doing, send us messages of support, and wish for our struggles to turn into something amazing. And I believe that it is bound to do so.

In our correspondence, you disclosed that your brother Dima disappeared, that he was detained. Please tell us about this and about how it was possible to find him.

Dima was detained on the 11th. We usually stayed together as much as we could, with our friends, my brother, and my sister, and we all went together. That evening, I did not go out because I was exhausted. I asked Dima not to go out as well and he answered that everything would be OK because he would go by car with his friends. They wanted to drive out there, honk their horns, and show their support for the protesters. They drove in and then wanted to pick up their friend who was not far from our neighborhood, Kammenaia Gorka. It was precisely on the 11th in Kammenaia Gorka that the special forces went on a rampage: mass clearances of courtyards, benches, and parks. Dima and his friends knew about that. They knew about it because they—just like everyone else—were part of the Telegram channel NEXTA, through which you could keep track of events. Everyone was detained indiscriminately, no matter if you were going to the protests or you were just minding your own business. The outrage reached its peak when they started pulling people out of their cars, smashing the cars, and dragging people out of them.

This is what happened to Dima. They were driving home after picking up their friend in Kammenaia Gorka and while they were waiting at an intersection, their car was surrounded on all sides by people in civilian clothes. They pulled at the doors but since the car was locked, they started hitting the windows with anything they could, including their pistols. The glass did not give way and Dima and his friends started driving away, after which those people started to shoot at them. According to the guys, they were aiming at their heads. They completely shattered the rear windshield, but the guys were able to escape.

They arrived in our neighborhood and parked the car in a spot that was somewhat hidden away. Having asked strangers for some scotch tape and plastic bags, they set about trying to patch up the giant hole where the rear windshield used to be. While they were doing this, three cars pulled up—three of the well-known blue minibuses—and a large number of officers jumped out. Dima and his friends had to figure out on their own that they were officers, as they were not wearing any kind of identifiable clothing. They were wearing black and they had black masks. These were not the riot police, this was some other unit, something along the lines of an anti-terrorist special forces unit. These forces searched the car and removed the cartridges with which they had shot up the car, probably so as not to leave any clues. After that, they were delivered to the KGB.

I learned all of this from Dima afterwards. That night, having spoken with him for the last time around 10:30 p.m., and later realizing that his phone had been turned off, I did not sleep, I was agonizing. I called friends and acquaintances, and no one knew anything. At 6 a.m. on August 12, I saw that they had turned on the internet and I began to search for Dima on all the social

networks. On Telegram I found some volunteer support from the “Viasna” group, which gave me the numbers of all the district Internal Affairs administrations: Zhodzina, Akrestsina—not the KGB, because, unfortunately, one should not call the KGB—and my sister and I called those numbers non-stop. No one picked up, though, and if they did pick up, they said there were no lists of those detained. It was only on August 12 at 4:00 p.m. that we called 102 and they told us that a list of the detained had appeared. Dima was not on the list... It was horrible to hear that because I already knew that 32 people had been killed in Kammenaia Gorka. I was gripped by panic and horror. God, what would I tell my mom, who is calling and asking after us? As if her heart hadn't already been weakened after COVID-19.

After some time had passed, they called me and said that Dima's name had been found on the list and that he is in Zhodzina. I went to bring Dima warm clothes. I got there but didn't see his name on the list. They told me that the list might not be perfectly accurate and that he could still be there. It was clear that the people at Zhodzina wanted to help and they took my care package for Dima. The next day, August 13, as I understood that Dima might not be at Zhodzina, I started once again to scan the lists that were being posted by Viasna and other groups. On that day Barsukov came and said that by 6 a.m. the next day, all those detained would be released and that none of the detained had been tortured. And at 6 a.m. on August 14, Dima called me from an unknown number and said that they would bring him home soon—the call came from a volunteer's phone.

Volunteers had been maintaining a round-the-clock watch at Zhodzina and Akrestsina; these were people with cars and time, they were medical workers offering assistance, dressing wounds and the like; they were also people who organized field kitchens, to which people were bringing medication, food, water, and whatever else they could. The Viasna volunteers were offering psychological support to parents whose boys and girls had been detained. These were amazing people. They were circulating lists of the detained, coordinating them, and working on the lists. When someone was released from detention, volunteers would help them. Everyone was released without their personal effects (Dima's things to this day remain at Akrestsina) and so they couldn't call anyone without their phones. As these fantastic, unbelievable people were maintaining a watch, when Dima emerged, this guy appeared and said that he would drive Dima home and gave him his phone. Dima called me and our sister Olesya right away and said that he is leaving Akrestsina and this volunteer guy drove him home.

Then a new wave of horror took hold of me, as I learned that people were leaving Zhodzina whole, since they were treated OK there, at the same time as Akrestsina was characterized by vicious brutality. I waited for Dima to come home worried about the shape he was in. When I asked Dima on the phone how he was, he replied, “compared with others, I'm doing great.” When he came home it was simply joyous—yes, he had abrasions and there were bruises on his forehead, black marks on his arms from the zip ties and cuffs, but all in all he was whole. And why was he whole? Because he was lucky. Lucky that he was not arrested by the riot police, but by another unit. The other units detain you roughly but without cruelty. He was also lucky that he wasn't taken to Akrestsina right away—at first they took him to the KGB and then to the Frunze district administration of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. He was also lucky that they took him to Akrestsina during the day and not at night, because the special forces officers beat people to death with truncheons at night. Dima arrived at Akrestsina during the day and he was

forced to kneel the whole time along with the other detainees, but the special forces did not run riot during the day.

Dima told us how when he was detained—while he was assuming the position of kneeling with his hands behind his back—one of the officers hit him on the head with his boot and he flew into the asphalt headfirst. Before he lost it from the impact, Dima heard another officer yelling at the one who had kicked him saying “what are you doing?” The cut on Dima’s head is from this blow, but it’s not a deep wound. While they were taking him to the KGB, they also hit Dima with electric shocks more than once. At the KGB prison, they tormented him with an electroshock machine, because they were trying to find out who had given them information, who paid them, where the cash was, who was coordinating it. Since none of this had happened, the detainees had nothing to say in response. In the course of one of these interrogations, one of the officers told Dima, “if you do the wrong thing or you refuse to do what you’re told, then we will make a drug addict out of you just like that; and you will go all the way down that path...;” all of it was just this kind of unpunished, completely uncontrolled garbage.

Then, after they took Dima to the Frunze district administration of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, he also managed to escape the strongest blows. When they brought him to Akrestsina and he ran the gauntlet—there is a practice where prisoners coming in off a transport are forced to run the length of a hallway bent over while guards beat them with truncheons—he ran through it so quickly, that not a single truncheon managed to make contact with him. He got off relatively easy, but he saw how others were beaten severely and overnight at Akrestsina he heard people’s screams. In spite of the fact that Dima’s injuries were relatively minor, we went to the hospital to register his injuries. And while we were at the hospital, we saw so many people who had been released from detention and it was terrible to see their injuries.

At that time, beginning on the 9th, my parents got out of town—they did not participate in the peaceful demonstrations. And the fact that they were out of town is a very good thing, because my mom did not see any of this. If she had found out that Dima had disappeared, then she might not have been able to survive it, or she would have survived it with dire consequences, because after COVID-19, her heart had been greatly weakened. Until we found Dima and made sure that he was OK, we did not tell our parents anything.

I know that you continue to go to protests. Tell us about the current atmosphere.

Yes, we still go out with a group of close friends; there we meet even more people right at the demonstrations. It’s a very good atmosphere: smiles and a common feeling. And when you see those people and understand that you are in the majority, you are seized with tears of happiness. Older people who can’t come out themselves support us from their apartment balconies. People who are quite up there—grandfathers with canes—they come out to the protests just to stand there, since they can’t participate in the marches They come out with a sheet of A4 paper, on which they have drawn red stripes with a pencil, the colors of the flag, to stand up and support us.

It is very touching when the babushkas support you: they don’t have any red-and-white flags, but they took two red and white towels or t-shirts and waved them. Some simply stand on their

balconies with raised fists to show you their full support. This is very precious. *The oldest ladies walk out onto the street with slogans written on sheets of paper: "children, we are with you!" and "children, we believe in you!"* All around you there are so many people who will give you a sandwich or whatever food there is, they will pour you tea or water and give it to you, and you will give something to someone else. It's a single, friendly organism. So from the 10th onward, I go out as often as possible, as often as I have the strength. And now I don't see any reason to stop, because otherwise, what was the point of come out here at all and risking your life?

★ *Name were changed to protect the anonymity.*