

Arrest and Detention, Anna Komar

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Translated from Russian by Stephan Sveshnikov, October 12, 2020.

On September 8, 2020, as a column of peaceful protesters was marching from the Komarovskiy market in the direction of Nezavisimosti' Prospekt, we were surrounded by people in military uniform and plainclothes and pressed against the wall. I didn't see everything, and so I will only recount my experience and that small area around me that I saw.

Right away we organized into a chain, linking arms, I was standing in the first row. We shouted, sang Kupalinka, chanted "Go Away," "This is our city," "You are a human," "Help," and some other things. Officers in uniform, law enforcement, came up to us and asked us to "give up [otdat']" the young men who were standing behind us. We answered that we wouldn't give them up, and so several times. They began to tear apart our chain by force and take away the men, and along with them the women. Some people resisted, fell to the ground, I was one of them. At some point, apparently, they were given the command to take everyone, because they started packing girls and women into the buses en masse, they took away two of my friends, and I realized that I can't leave or surrender, even though there had been that opportunity. Apparently I was already worked up and not controlling myself; I was emotionally and loudly declaring in the face of several officers that they are violating our rights, among them freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of expression. They didn't touch me until a really aggressive "bull" came; with the words "Enough, you're fucking annoying me [Vsyo, ty menya zaebala]" he grabbed me by the elbow and led me to the bus. I didn't resist, I didn't have the strength.

In the bus I was riding in it was calm, as much as it could be in those circumstances. They didn't forbid us from using our phones for calls or messages, gave us some water, talked to us. What they talked about -- that, of course, is a separate topic, a whole chapter for a book in the style of Kafka. One of the officers talked about how he goes to confession and how much of a believer he is. Another asked, with a feeling of superiority, what the last book we read was ... One of the girls whispered to an officer, to which he responded, "Okay, I remembered you, they'll let you go." They let her go, because I didn't see her in RUVD [Regional Department of Internal Affairs].

At the Pervomaiskaya RUVD they were obviously not prepared for us, which proved that arrests on this scale had not been planned in advance. First their paper ran out, then their printing cartridges, then the report templates.

They took our temperature as we entered, and those who had a high temperature -- I was among them (apparently, it was raised because of stress) -- were the first to be sent to have the report written up. They were getting ready to let us go. The investigator wasn't mean, but he believed that we aren't in the right. He called us and what we were doing "kindergarten."

In general, they treated us normally there, took us to the bathroom when we asked, some people were taken out to smoke. Naturally, they asked us right away to turn off our phones and didn't give us our personal items. But they allowed a book and water, and also minimal hygienic products such as napkins. All night we sat in the gym of the RUVD of Pervomaiskiy Raion. True, the fact that the youngest of the OMON [special forces police detachment] was openly flirting with one of the detained girls -- a lyrical metaphor of the ongoing abuse - - threw me into righteous indignation.

After the report was finished, they took my temperature again, which by that time was already normal. After that I was taken into the gym, where everyone else was. All of this lasted from 8pm on the 8th of September to 3-4 in the morning on the 9th of September. There were about 30 of us detained, 50/50 men and women, that was only from one bus, the rest went to other RUVD and there were other proportions and they were treated differently.

Around 3-4 in the morning our personal belongings were gathered into boxes, we were formed into several columns, put on a bus, and taken to a Temporary Detention Center at Okrestin. Until the very end we kept waiting for them to let all of us go. They only released women who had children under 16, and they also took away a woman on the ambulance who had diabetes and didn't have her medication with her.

On the morning of the 10th I had my hearing, they gave me 9 days of arrest, articles 23.4 and 23.34 of KoaPRB [Belarus law codex] - disobedience and violation of the rules for organization of mass gatherings. The judge read everything from a piece of paper, most likely she already had the verdict ready and simply read it. I didn't plead guilty, saying that it wasn't an unsanctioned protest and that my rights had been violated. The hearing took place over Skype. My friends and family, as it turned out, were waiting at the courthouse of Pervomaiskiy raion, from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., but no one told them there that I had already been found guilty. The officers in the corridor in front of the cabinet where the Skype-hearing took place were unpleasant -- they said offensive things, brought up political topics, tried to hurt us [zadet'] in all sorts of ways

and to put us down even more, including when I was crying after the sentencing was read. One of them said he wished girls would show up here more often, because we live up their weekdays... Too bad that I didn't record all of it, I already won't be able to remember everything.

At Okrestina it feels like the people working there have sadistic tendencies. The supervisor (female) who, looking me over -- I was stripping completely -- hurries me, the officer on duty on my floor, who first in a raised voice orders me to look at the wall and not to move my head, and then in a sweet little voice shares his sorrow, that when he was in the army he never heard any word kinder than "motherfucker," but he himself doesn't insult anyone until they start insulting him, etc.

The walls of the cells in IVC Okrestina are a horrid yellow color which starts to make you crazy, keeping in mind that the light is always on, the cell is small, and in it there's a toilet cabinet, where there are walls, and thanks be - a door, but from which it stinks and you can hear everything. The food is terrible, you can't survive on it for long. Thank you to the volunteers who contribute personal hygiene products, that way on the second day at least I could brush my teeth. Then they took us to TsIP [detention center].

On the 10th they transferred us to Zhodino, thank God they managed to gather and get me a transmission of clean clothes, paper and a pen, and food. Without extra food in Zhodino you can survive, they really do feed you well there, probably because it's the inmates themselves who are cooking. They even bake their own bread there, and by the way it's not the worst. But without clean clothes, shampoo, paper and a pen, and also books -- it's very hard.

In Zhodino we were "received" by unpleasant young people, who either felt their own power and for that reason behaved themselves so brazenly, or because they turned on alpha-male in front of the girls. It was very disconcerting and repulsive from their jokes. "Well, are you picking one for yourself?" they joked between themselves, meaning us, as we stood with our faces to the wall, not having washed for three days, tired, hungry, and humiliated. And their commander, who balanced between open aggression and cuteness, periodically snapping into extremes, kept starting it: "Want to look them over yourselves? No, don't, or else they might even like it."

They put four of us in a four-person cell. Three of us had 9 days, the fourth had 13 days, she had gone into the bus after her boyfriend. The cell was the color of the "Korovka" candies [caramel], 2 bunkbeds, a sink, a table, bench and shelves,

all screwed into the floor and walls. A bathroom without a door. The sink only had cold water. A small cracked mirror.

The routine in IVS [temporary detention facility] is terrible -- wake up at 6, from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. you're not allowed to sit on your beds, you have to fold up your mattresses. Luckily we weren't forced to do that, because in that case it would be unbearable there. But at 6 in the morning they turn on a bright day light which burns until 10 p.m., and at 10 p.m. they turn on a dim orange-red light. During the week which I spent there they took us to shower once, and offered one more time on the day that I was leaving. Same thing with a walk. To our questions and pleas about a shower and walk they answered us: "We will consider your request," "Maybe," "There are two of us, but there need to be four in order to take you," etc. But the top most repulsive answers -- "And what will we get for it?" and "If you behave yourselves well."

There's nothing to even say about respect, everyone spoke to us using the informal "you [*ty*]." Maybe they were a little politer to the women who were older, I don't know.

I spent the last two days in another cell, an eight-person cell, there were eight of us there and a window which didn't open. In order to breathe, we asked for the feeding slot in the door to be opened and kept the guards talking when they came in, so that the door would stay open for a little bit and we would get some oxygen. Then we came up with an engineering construction, with the help of which the window stayed open. But on the other hand there was hot water and you could wash your head in the sink. They only take care packages there once a week, on Wednesdays. So it's possible to get it only the day before they let you out or even miss that day entirely.

They let me out on the 17th. They had some kind of delay, maybe because there were a lot of people, a lot of us, and they -- they didn't handle it all very well. It was suspenseful to wait, what if they leave us for another couple of days (: But they let us out. There were many people to meet us, really! My friends told us that the vice-commander of IVS in Zhodino came out to them and was very nervous. Our crowds of support always make them nervous -- they can't understand that we have come with peace and that what moves us is solidarity.

I plan to appeal the decision of the court; that's necessary to record the violations.

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