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Strong at the Broken Places: Women Political Prisoners in Belarus

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Peaceful Women's March against violence on August 29, 2020 in Minsk, Belarus.
Photo: STRINGER/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock.[1]

Introduction

Six years ago, beginning in May 2020, a momentous presidential election campaign in Belarus spurred unprecedented mass protests against unfair elections and state-led political violence. The government responded by an all-encompassing crackdown on freedom of expression, assembly, and association. Around the February 27, 2022 constitutional referendum,[i] citizens protested again against Russia's invasion of neighboring Ukraine, which was aided by the Belarusian regime. According to the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Belarus, Belarusian society lives under the shadow of the August 9, 2020 election, as repression against dissent and anti-war views has continued unabated.[2] The weaponization of anti-extremist and counter-terrorist legislation against everyday civilians has facilitated politically motivated arbitrary arrests and detentions. This report focuses on how repression affects women political prisoners as part of the wider campaign of state terror in Belarus.

Post-electoral crackdowns have occurred in other hard authoritarian regimes such as Iran, Nicaragua, and Venezuela as well as autocratizing regimes such as Georgia. It is crucial to document the experiences of women political prisoners and other vulnerable groups in these difficult settings to better understand the societal effects of political persecution, necessary remedies, and pathways to justice and accountability.

Political Context of Post-Electoral Repression

Women have constituted a propelling force in the Belarusian pro-democracy movement by leading the 2020 opposition election campaign[ii] and participating in Women's Marches and protests against violence.[3] Women who have participated in protests, expressed anti-war views, or demonstrated acts of solidarity with political prisoners—such as sending letters, aid packages, and micro-donations—are often met with severe repression. These crackdowns target women of all ages and walks of life, in addition to journalists, human rights defenders, and civic activists.

At the end of May 2026, there were 112 women political prisoners in Belarus out of a total of 854.[4] From 2020 to March 8, 2026, at least 1,917 women were convicted on politically motivated criminal charges—in a country of nine million—and 469 were sentenced to imprisonment in penal colonies.[iii] Altogether, since the beginning of the 2020 presidential campaign, Human Rights Center "Viasna" has identified 4,655 political prisoners.[iv] Beginning in early 2025, US officials have negotiated several waves of releases of political prisoners, who were forcibly

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[i] This referendum removed the country's commitment to remain a nuclear-weapon-free zone, among other changes to the Constitution, allowing for the possibility of hosting Russia's nuclear weapons ("Belarus and Nuclear Weapons," ICAN, February 2022, https://www.icanw.org/belarus_and_nuclear_weapons).

[ii] For the analysis of the 2020 election campaign, see Alyena Batura, "How to Compete in Unfair Elections," *Journal of Democracy* 33, no. 4 (2022).

[iii] "164 Women Behind Bars: What is Known about Political Persecution of Women in Belarus," Human Rights Center "Viasna," March 8, 2026, https://spring96.org/be/news/119763; Another 9,400 were subject to politically motivated arrests and fines based on administrative code during the same timeframe.

[iv] Statistics as of June 8, 2026, for regular updates see <https://prisoners.spring96.org/en>; according to Human Rights Defense Center "Viasna," these numbers are likely underestimates, as the Belarusian state has pivoted to concealing repression.

expelled to Lithuania and Ukraine. On March 19, 2026, the majority of those newly released were allowed to remain in Belarus for the first time.[v]

Political prisoners in Belarus have been systematically subjected to inhuman conditions of detention, ill-treatment, and torture, according to the UN Group of Independent Experts on the Situation of Human Rights in Belarus.[5] This report focuses on the experiences of women political prisoners, drawing on public statements of women included in the recent releases negotiated by the US government, interviews by independent media conducted in 2025-2026, and interviews and analyses conducted by human rights defenders that indicate patterns of violations since 2020. The goal of the report is to shed light on the experiences and mistreatment of women political prisoners, and it does not seek to provide a comprehensive account of the grave human rights violations in Belarus. In particular, this report centers on purposeful denial of medical care and medications, inhuman conditions in punishment cells, arbitrary extensions of prison terms, the disruption of communication with family, the use of children to blackmail parents, and forced labor in women's penal colonies in Homiel and Zarechcha.

Both female and male political prisoners are subject to many of the same forms of mistreatment, yet women political prisoners often experience gender-based harms that exploit their specific vulnerabilities. For example, women political prisoners are systematically denied access to basic gynecological and reproductive medical care and are deprived of sufficient menstrual care products, soap, and water to maintain proper hygiene.[6] Prior reports have documented gender-based insults, threats of sexualized violence, frequent targeted strip-searches with degrading comments or presence of male guards, and lack of privacy in showers and toilets.[7] In addition, some types of ill-treatment may affect women differently based on gender-prescribed family roles or social status. While both imprisoned fathers and mothers suffer from separation from their children, mothers are often targeted with psychological coercion as primary caretakers or because of their supposed failure to live up to societal expectations around womanhood and motherhood.[8]

Experiences of Women Political Prisoners: Abuse, Maltreatment, and Isolation

Purposeful Denial of Access to Medical Care and Medications

There are accounts of systematic and purposeful denial of access to necessary medical care for political prisoners. The inhuman conditions that political prisoners are subjected to—unbearable cold in punishment cells, poor nutrition, lack of sleep, psychological torture and stress—result in deteriorating health behind bars. Yet, when political prisoners face illness, whether minor or life-threatening, prison authorities intentionally deprive them of access to medical care.

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[v] Some political prisoners had been pardoned beginning in July 2024 and fled the country. Following negotiations with the U.S. representatives in 2025, 3 detainees were released and transferred abroad on February 12, 14 – on June 21, 51 – on September 11, 123 – on December 13. Out of the 250 detainees reportedly released on March 19, 2026, at least 15 were transferred to Lithuania and 235 remained in Belarus. Some of the released were foreign nationals. Despite these releases, arbitrary detentions in Belarus continue.

A striking example of such mistreatment is the experience of Maryia Kalesnikava, one of the 2020 opposition electoral campaign leaders. Kalesnikava was held in a punishment cell in Penal Colony 4, where she developed a perforated ulcer—a life-threatening medical condition that she had not previously exhibited. As she lay in pain on the floor for hours, medical care was delayed until she eventually was hospitalized for emergency surgery. This surgery ultimately saved her life, but the conditions in the cold punishment cell likely caused this medical emergency. Afterwards, Kalesnikava could not recover for a long time because specialized care was lacking. Altogether, she spent 19 months in solitary confinement as a punishment for fabricated violations and three years cut off from communication with the outside world, including her family.[9]

Victoryia Kul'sha, a former political prisoner jailed for leading protest car rallies, was also denied access to medical care in women's Penal Colony 24 in Zarechcha, a place she described as "hell on earth." Kul'sha stated that everything in the prison was done "to inflict the most harm" using psychological and physical abuse, including beatings. In her experience, the only way to stop the abuse was to show a threat to life by going on hunger strikes. Nevertheless, during several hunger strikes, one of which lasted for 49 days, prison medics delayed care until her kidneys stopped functioning properly. In another instance, Kul'sha was never taken to a women's health clinic to receive necessary gynecological treatment that was not available in prison. Furthermore, she pointed to the scarcity of dental care, even though dental issues among prisoners are widespread. When, after five years of incarceration, her sentence was about to be extended by another ten years on arbitrary charges, she feared she was being killed and that she would eventually die in prison.[10]

Reproductive medical care for women political prisoners is also limited: for example, Karyna Pratashchyk learned that she was pregnant only after her release because prison doctors did not take basic steps to identify her pregnancy. While pregnant, she performed hard labor—moving heavy rocks—and frequently fell ill. Upon learning the news, Pratashchyk feared that her maltreatment in prison may have affected her pregnancy.[11]

Inhuman Conditions in Punishment Cells as a Targeted Penalty

Political prisoners are specifically targeted for additional punishment on technical or fabricated grounds by being placed in punishment cells, under much harsher conditions. Torture by cold and sleep deprivation results in the deterioration of women's physical and mental health. Other punitive conditions include prohibition on receiving letters and parcels from relatives, which cuts off vital support for prisoners while inflicting suffering on their families.[12]

Palina Sharenda-Panasyuk described conditions in the punishment cell as psychological and physical torture that made her feel helpless:

> *The light is on day and night. Hot water is on for 20 minutes a day. You are under video surveillance. It is humid and cold and impossible to sleep. There is no mattress or blanket, only bare wooden planks. No walks. 10 minutes [a week] to take a shower.*[13]

Natallia Dulina, a 60-year-old professor, recounted that enduring the cold in the punishment cell was her most difficult ordeal. She characterized the inability to sleep due to the cold as "cruel treatment akin to physical violence." Moreover, the guards took away Dulina's glasses despite her being severely near-sighted, causing her to fall several times while trying to warm up by walking. Dulina described feeling absolutely defenseless and having lost control over her sense of space.[14]

Some women are forced to endure these extreme conditions for a long time. Victoryia Kul'sha, for example, spent over a year altogether in a cold punishment cell. At times, prison authorities forced her to share the cell with dangerous and unstable inmates.[15]

Arbitrary Extensions of Prison Terms on Fabricated Charges

Prison administrations often arbitrarily prosecute political prisoners for fabricated or minor violations while in prison to extend their sentences. For those affected, the prospect of indeterminate, even endless, confinement can become a grave psychological torment. During her four years in prison, Victoryia Kul'sha was tried four times and, each time, was sentenced to an additional year in prison.[vi] She said that the feeling that she may never be released was the most difficult aspect of her detention, something she could never get used to or accept. As she was constantly told that she would never leave, Kul'sha began to believe it.[16]

Palina Sharenda-Panasyuk was in prison for over four years, as her term was unlawfully extended three times. She was told that she would never leave prison or see her children again. These threats, along with other maltreatment, were a way to force her to petition for pardon and to record a confession interview. According to Sharenda-Panasyuk, discrediting and forcing individuals to go against their values is an instrument of humiliation intended to break them.[17]

Journalist Katsiaryna Andreyeva was initially sentenced to two years in prison after her arrest during a live broadcast in November 2020. She was later sentenced to additional eight years on other politically motivated charges.[18] Andreyeva was released and forcibly transferred to Lithuania on March 19, 2026, while her husband, journalist Ihar Ilyash, remained behind bars.

Disrupting Communication with Family and Using Children to Blackmail Parents

The 41-year-old journalist Kseniya Lutskina had already been diagnosed with a brain tumor when she was arrested and sentenced to eight years in prison. Her condition steadily deteriorated, as the prison medics were not equipped to provide proper treatment.[19] Despite her illness, Lutskina recounted that the most difficult experience in prison was being separated from her young son.[20] Her requests for visits were denied and she was not able to see him until nearly two years after the arrest. Authorities continuously used the threat of termination of parental rights as the main instrument of psychological pressure, forcing Lutskina to plead guilty.[21]

[vi] Kul'sha was persecuted on the basis of article 411 of the criminal code on "malicious disobedience to the administration of the correctional facility."

Lutskina emphasized the grave effects of political persecution on underage children who experienced an irreplaceable loss of childhood because the government took away their parents. Reflecting on her unjust imprisonment, Antanina Kanavalava, an activist and a mother of two, said that she did not regret anything, except having been deprived of her children and time.[22] Reunification of political prisoners with their children after release is a complex experience. As Palina Sharenda-Panasyuk put it, "When you remember your children as young, and then you return when one is a teenager and the other was four and now is nine, it is hard to express what you feel."[23]

Limiting visits, phone calls, and letters is a way to sever political prisoners' connections with their families and to shatter their support systems. Maryia Kalesnikava recalled that, officially, she had the right to make one phone call per month to her father. In reality, however, she was not allowed to call him for the last three years before her release.[24] Victoryia Kul'sha spent a long time in the solitary confinement of the punishment cell, where she was deprived of family visits and phone calls. In addition, prison authorities destroyed letters addressed to Kul'sha right in front of her.[25] Katsiaryna Andreeva was denied a long visit with her husband shortly before he himself was detained.[26]

After cutting off communication, prison authorities worked to convince political prisoners that nobody cared about them and that they were forgotten.[27]

Forced Labor and Prison Maintenance Work

According to Palina Sharenda-Panasyuk, Belarusian prisons are a relic of the Soviet GULAG and exploit de facto unpaid forced labor of thousands of people.[28] This labor is another form of psychological torture for women political prisoners because they are forced to sew uniforms for the state security apparatus including prison administrations, police, the military, and even state-run children's militaristic clubs. Former political prisoners report that, at some point, the two women's penal colonies in Homiel and Zarechcha produced clothing for the Russian military.[29]

Maryia Kalesnikava emphasized that if she had been asked to sew uniforms for the Russian military, she would have refused even under threat of the punishment cell.[30] A 68-year-old activist Alyena Hnauk recalled that her fellow political prisoner had refused to sew military clothing and was repeatedly confined in the punishment cell for her defiance.[31]

According to Maryna Zolatava, former editor-in-chief of the shattered independent media outlet TUT.BY, women work six or seven days a week and perform hard physical labor in their spare time. During winter colds, they are forced to clear the prison grounds by gathering snow into sacks and dragging them away or soaking up puddles with rags. Every day, they spend at least two hours outside in freezing weather, often wearing only thin prison shoes and clothing.[32] Hanna Kurys, a 23-year-old former student imprisoned for criticizing Russia's war against Ukraine, recounted that women had to move large carts of cement, sand, and rocks.[33] Lutskina emphasized the stark discrepancy between forced prison labor and the prior professional identities of women—journalists, bank workers, political scientists, and scientists, among others—who were imprisoned for their political views.[34]

Conclusion

Despite the dehumanizing treatment that released women political prisoners experienced, many find meaning in having survived ill-treatment for their values of freedom, fairness, and democracy. Ultimately, the political prisoners' experiences attest to their strength, courage, and resilience as much as they convey the cruelty of their tormentors. Having endured unthinkable suffering, they have the potential to serve as agents of transformational democratic and social change. The former political prisoner Palina Sharenda-Panasyuk expressed this poignantly:

> *I would tell all these people [political prisoners] that they are heroes, that they survived under unbearable conditions. They took to the streets knowing that not only can they be beaten but also killed. … Our heroes need to become the foundation of our revived nation—then our nation will be strong, principled, and courageous.*[35]

The egregious mistreatment of political prisoners is a symptom of absolute societal repression that defines the Belarusian regime. The political prisoners who are released in Belarus face an ongoing threat of repeat detention, struggle with employment discrimination, financial insecurity and government control and restrictions related to politically motivated "extremist" or "terrorist" designations.[36] In addition, they continue to experience an absence of freedom, effectively exchanging a smaller prison for a larger one. The international community ought to insist on the release of all political prisoners, the end of ongoing arbitrary imprisonment and political persecution, and the rehabilitation and protection of former political prisoners. Furthermore, the government must ensure safe and humane conditions for prisoners including access to medical care.

In addition, all released political prisoners should be able to stay in or return safely to their home country. Forcibly exiled political prisoners face the challenges of abrupt resettlement, often without resources, family, or passports.[37] The immediate needs of these exiled political prisoners include securing legal status, work authorization, bank accounts as well as shelter and financial support to cover basic necessities. They also require urgent medical and dental care to mitigate the damage to their health resulting from imprisonment. Additionally, many former detainees require long-term psychological support to process trauma from ill-treatment and cope with symptoms of PTSD and depression for those outside and inside the country.[38]

Former political prisoners often view their unique experience as an asset for civic engagement and democratic transformation. Nonprofits and independent media can help these individuals return to their professions, record their experiences in creative and documentary writing, and contribute to the democratic movement. Children and families of political prisoners also experience severe suffering and trauma—and should be supported in their own right.[39] International support in meeting these needs can take on many forms—from keeping a spotlight on the scale of repression in Belarus, to government support for the International Humanitarian Fund. Individuals can also play a critical role in supporting political prisoners and their families, including by donating to existing support initiatives and writing letters to those in detention.[40]

In order to ensure justice and accountability, the international community ought to continue supporting human rights defenders and international mechanisms—such as the UN Special Rapporteur and the Group of Independent Experts on the Situation of Human Rights in Belarus—in documenting and investigating human rights violations committed in Belarus since May 2020. These efforts, along with the recent investigation of alleged crimes against humanity by the International Criminal Court,[41] require ongoing international cooperation.

Implications for Regional Security and International Norms

For Belarusian society, prolonged repression following protests against unfair elections and post-electoral violence in 2020 has resulted in a human rights catastrophe, with hundreds of thousands of people fleeing repression, thousands of political prisoners, closures of independent media and nonprofits, and total government control. This intense crackdown has also served as a prelude and motivation for the Russia-backed regime's engagement in Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine in 2022. As talks escalate of potential further engagement of the Belarusian regime in the conflict, the international community must remember the underlying context of these security threats—the struggle of the Belarusian democratic movement to reclaim democracy, self-determination, and independence for their own country.

The plight of women political prisoners in Belarus also vividly demonstrates the dangers of other regimes in the region and elsewhere replicating the model of profound mistreatment of political detainees at scale to hold on to power, even after losing electoral legitimacy. Lest this cruelty become the new normal, strong international action is required to expose human rights abuses, demand an end to repression, and support those working to restore democracy and peace.

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