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State Violence and Pains of Punishment: Experiences of Incarcerated Women in Belarus in the Aftermath of the 2020 Protests

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Abstract

State violence against Belarusian women involved in protest activities after the fraudulent presidential election in 2020 and onward has been unprecedented in the country's history. Women's activism has challenged the patriarchal authoritarian regime, which was ill-prepared to deal with women. However, after a short period of adaptation by the repressive institutions, women became their "special clients." With reference to gender-sensitive academic research, we investigate diverse forms of state violence against women and analyze how they perceive their experiences of incarceration for political reasons. This article is based on available datasets, a series of nine semi-structured interviews, and insights from participant observation. The research reveals that Belarusian women incarcerated for political reasons fall under the "demanding clients" category: they comprehensively challenge the state-sponsored brutal patriarchy and expect the repressive apparatus to meet their specific needs. These women experience multidimensional physical discomfort and psychological pressure, including targeted offensive and dehumanizing elements. At the same time, incarcerated women do not feel ostracized by society; they share the feeling that their "crimes" are supported by civil society, and they endure the pains of punishment as targeted violence from a state fighting cynically for its own survival.

Keywords: gender; repression; pains of punishment; political protests; Belarus

Introduction

In Belarus in the summer of 2020, mass protests against the authoritarian incumbent Alyksandr Lukashenka and the state violence used to oppress these protesters attracted a lot of international attention. They inspired an extensive body of academic research focused on post-electoral protest and mobilization (Onuch et al. 2023; Way and Tolvin 2023; Stykow 2023; Douglas 2023; Moshes and Nizhnikau 2021; Bedford 2021, and others). The ongoing political repression in Belarus is not only distressing from a humanitarian perspective, but is also highly instructive in numerous aspects, especially those pertaining to the civic activism of women and female-targeted repression by an authoritarian state. In the history of contemporary Belarus, the events of 2020 provoked a highly repressive authoritarian reaction and became the first case when state violence, previously focused almost exclusively on men, was extended and adapted against politically engaged women.

Violence in politics serves as a strategy to maintain positions of power, and repression targeted at women is an expression of male-privileged patriarchal positions and domination. In light of this

gendered state violence, we explore the unprecedented wave of women's activism in Belarus in 2020 and onward, raising questions about the role of women in protest mobilization, the specificities of their targeted repression, women's reactions, and their perceptions of this violence. We observe how the authoritarian state is "engendering" its coercive institutions and practices through variable usage of repressive practices.

Highly repressive reactions to the post-electoral protest immediately after the presidential election, which took place on August 9, 2020, were directed primarily against male protesters. However, when the regime – with the aim of "cleaning the field" – beat and arrested many protesters (predominantly men), the way was paved for a new wave of protests seeking to de-escalate the violence and putting an emphasis on peaceful actions, which attracted lots of women and broadened their civic participation. As women engaged in more diverse political and civic activities, Lukashenka's regime, through a variety of repressive instruments, engendered its coercive institutions and tailored them to suppress women. In parallel, Belarusian women also expanded their agency and found new tools for solidarity in response to state violence. In this article, we analyze the state violence directed against Belarusian women involved in protest activities in 2020 and onward and women's reactions – the pains of punishment – toward this dramatic and harsh experience.

Research on civic mobilization underscores the role of women (Atkeson 2003; Johansson-Nogués 2013). The activism and leadership of women in authoritarian environments have attracted particular research interest (Hensman 2005; Ziemer 2020). In the broad area of political participation, several publications (Gaufman 2021; Navumau and Matveieva 2021; Loucas 2023) have addressed the issue of women's protest activities in Belarus. Grančaiyova and Kazharski (2022) use a gender perspective to compare the 2020 Belarus protests with the Arab Spring in Egypt and reveal that, in both cases, authoritarian militarized hegemonic masculinities articulated through authoritarian body politics suppressed women's activism. Issues of women's agency in early 21st-century Belarus are addressed in research focusing on changes in national identity and shifts in nation-building practices (Gapova 2021 and 2023; Paulovich 2021). In her book, Shparaga (2021) described the phenomenon of feminist solidarity ("sisterhood") that burgeoned in Belarus in 2020. However, the ensuing changes in the logic and infrastructure of state violence developed and implemented by Lukashenka's regime in reaction to creative fast-track developments in women's political engagement in Belarus have not yet been analyzed. To address this gap, we set a goal to investigate the engendered repressive practices of the authoritarian state and the experiences of women incarcerated for political reasons.

Our thesis is that at the beginning of mass mobilization, the authoritarian regime was unprepared to deal with newly active women, who astutely used this window of opportunity to engage in politics. However, when the state expanded and engendered its violence, women became "special clients" of the repressive institutions. We investigate how the state reacted toward these active women and how women who have been incarcerated react to and perceive the state violence. We pose two main research questions:

- How have women incarcerated for political reasons assessed the regime's policies toward protest and civic activities?
- How do women perceive their own experiences endured during incarceration? How do they see and perceive themselves as "special clients" of repressive institutions?

This empirical data-driven study is based on several sources of information. It refers to available databases and datasets – state-run official databases and those produced by civil society organizations (CSOs), which use materials from Belarusian official and independent (oppositional) media and social media. It utilizes a series of semi-structured interviews with Belarusian women imprisoned for political reasons.¹ It also uses participant observation as one of the authors of the article is personally involved in various Belarusian civil society initiatives (including those related to the

support of political prisoners), and both authors have been and are part of informal networks supporting female political prisoners in Belarus.

We start the article with the framework of analysis based on the concepts of “state violence” and the “pains of punishment.” In the empirical part, we investigate practices of state violence against politically active women in Belarus in 2020 (during the presidential electoral campaign and its aftermath) and provide a brief overview of the repressive infrastructure in Belarus. We then analyze the attitudes and experiences of Belarusian women incarcerated in 2020–2021.

State Violence and Pains of Punishment of Incarcerated Women

Violence in politics is a “strategy to keep positions of power” (Albaine 2015, 151), and when targeted at women, political repression is an expression of male-privileged position and patriarchal power in society. Political violence against women represents an effort to silence them, pushing them out of public life and political expression into the private realm (Elshtain 2020). Political violence against women denies their positions as equal subjects (Biroli 2016). It can manifest itself as “physical, sexual, psychological, symbolic and economic aggressions and constraints” (Biroli 2016, 585) to intimidate women and deter them from political engagement, imposing additional costs on their careers, individual well-being, family life, and, in the most extreme cases, can risk their physical integrity and lives. In this light, we explore Belarusian women’s experiences of political repression, which derive from the state-sponsored perception that those persecuted, detained, and imprisoned women have intruded into spaces that generally belong to men.

We focus on the perceptions and attitudes of women who have experienced incarceration for political reasons. According to Wacquant, prisons are “kindred institutions of forced confinement entrusted with enclosing a stigmatized category to neutralize the material and/or symbolic threat it poses for the surrounding society” (Wacquant 2000, 377). Our research, therefore, contributes to the expanding academic literature where institutions of incarceration (prisons, pre-trial detention centers, penal colonies, etc.) have come to be seen not as marginal peripheral sites but as windows onto (or even organizing principles of) modern social, political, cultural, and even economic orders (Ackermann 2015; Turner 2016; Nikartas and Jarutienė 2022).

This study deals not so much with clearly identifiable changes in the institutionalized outputs (revised content of laws, rules, and procedures) as with modifications, ongoing adaptations, and extensions of practices that occur in any functioning organization and among relevant actors. As Shchurko (2022, 29) underlines, empirical research must challenge macro-narratives about political protests that focus solely on leaders and political institutions and occlude embodied experiences and multiple forms of dissent that emerge in response to state violence. The shift to daily lifeworld and micro-practices contributes to a more nuanced understanding of both state violence and civic protest.

Concepts of “pains of imprisonment” and “pains of punishment” emphasize the burden of imprisonment and capture the perceptions and experiences of incarcerated people. These two terms are widely (and often interchangeably) used in prison studies and encompass the various forms of physical and psychological suffering resulting from a custodial sentence (Nikartas and Tereškina 2022). Introduced by Sykes in 1958, the term “pain of imprisonment” has subsequently been applied to an increasingly diverse range of contexts, populations, and activities (Haggerty and Bucerius 2020), while the interactions between gender, imprisonment, and the world beyond the prison are seen as non-linear, taking diverse shapes and directions.

The characteristic feature of the pains of imprisonment is that they are deliberately caused by a society that punishes individuals (Sykes 2007, 64). Five key deprivations characteristic of prison life can be distinguished: deprivation of liberty, of goods and services, of heterosexual relationships, of autonomy, and security (Sykes 2007). Hayes (2015) extends the scope of the concept and underscores that the “pains of punishment” identify negative consequences, both inside and outside of prison walls. Following Hayes, we define the pains of punishment as “a personal experience of

physical, mental, or emotional suffering by a penal subject, arising from the punishment by agents of a justice system” (Hayes 2018, 239).

Sexton (2015) distinguishes two major categories of punishment: concrete (absence of material things such as showers, air ventilation, appropriate heating, sufficient space, etc.) and symbolic (the loss of autonomy, identity, connections with their friends and families), noting that the two are not mutually exclusive, and the punishment may have concrete, symbolic, or indeed both dimensions. Research shows that, compared to men, incarcerated women may be more sensitive and receptive to partner influence and childcare needs (Nikartas and Tereškinas 2022). Crewe and co-authors (2017) emphasize the issues of particular saliency to incarcerated women: loss of contact with family members; power, autonomy, and control; psychological well-being and mental health; and matters of trust, privacy, and intimacy.

Gender-sensitive academic research distinguishes “pains of punishment” endured universally (stigmatization, shame, the inconveniences caused by incarceration, etc.) and those highlighted explicitly among women (stemming from complexities of their social environment – relationships with partners, children, and other family members). For instance, Nikartas and Tereškinas (2022) observe that in contrast to previous studies (conducted in Western Europe with its more robust culture of gender equality), the experiences of Lithuanian women sentenced for criminal offenses do not fall under the category of “demanding clients,” as the research participants belonging to the deeply entrenched patriarchal culture do not expect that prisons – as specific state institutions – could and should meet their needs and provide them with assistance. Our research is focused on Belarusian women incarcerated for political reasons; and rather different perspectives on the functions of repressive state structures toward their “clients” are plausible.

Belarus 2020 and After: From Selective and Targeted to Mass Repression

The political regime in Belarus began its descent into authoritarianism shortly after Lukashenka’s accession to power in 1994. For almost thirty years, the authoritarian leader widely used repressive practices against political opponents and democratic initiatives. Intending to stiffen democratic potential, the authoritarian regime extended the scope of state violence, frequently resorting to arrests and the imprisonment of disobedient activists and employing various marginalization strategies against the political opposition, civil society organizations, and their leaders.

Since the mid-1990s, numerous instances of the use of direct physical violence against the most vocal participants in protest actions and prominent public figures² have been reported in Belarus (Amnesty International 2001). The prominent outburst of extreme violence happened in the country during the presidential campaigns of 2006 and 2010 when mass protests against falsified election outcomes were heavily suppressed. In 2006, up to 1,000 individuals were arrested during street protests following the election (OSCE 2006), and later 34 people became political prisoners (Radio Liberty 2006). In 2011, *Human Rights Watch* reported that 639 people were beaten, detained, and arrested during the post-electoral protests in 2010, and 38 became political prisoners (among them, 3 women) (2011). In 2006 and 2010, the absolute majority of the “clients” of state-sponsored physical violence were men. Evidently, the number of politically prosecuted men and women in Belarus was much higher than reported by the regime and indisputably documented by its opposition. Notwithstanding, these observations allow us to claim that until 2020, women in Belarus had been relatively marginal “clients” of direct state violence.

Alongside referencing the idea that direct, physical, and harsh repression is not always essential in an authoritarian state, Bedford (2017) demonstrates that since 2010, instead of the direct use of force, the Belarusian regime manipulated public opinion through such means as censorship, co-optation, and propaganda. Simultaneously, the decline in displays of sheer force was compensated for by increasing fines and other penalties incurred by political opponents and civic activists such as pressure in the workplace, difficulties in pursuing a career, including problems with employment and promotion not only in the public but also in the private sector.

Before the presidential election in 2020, Belarusian authorities used their previous electoral repressive experience and prepared themselves for the campaign: they arrested democratic leaders, engaged in the discreditation of election observation initiatives, and launched intensive pro-Lukashenka communication. However, this internalized toolkit of repression appeared dysfunctional and yielded unexpected outcomes. Within the new and challenging authoritarian regime context, including the COVID-19 pandemic, “the three graces” of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Maria Kalesnikava, and Veranika Tsapkala (who replaced their male counterparts who have been engaged in the anti-Lukashenka presidential campaign since spring 2020, but had been arrested in May–June 2020) led an innovative electoral campaign. The campaign and performance of the female leaders gathered an unexpected level of popular support by Belarusian standards. As a result, according to expert evaluation and national observers, Tsikhanouskaya received the votes of more than half of the actual voters (*Voice* 2020). However, the Belarusian electoral authorities unscrupulously declared that Lukashenka was re-elected with 80.1% votes (Central Electoral Commission 2020).

The falsification of election, fixed by observers’ manipulations of election results, triggered protests in the country the night after the election. For the next few days, people protested on the streets (largely peacefully but responding to the violence of police in case of direct encounters). The police, in turn, used brutal violence against the protesters, applying stun grenades, rubber bullets, and tear gas. Thousands of Belarusians were detained and then heavily beaten in the police premises, and at least two were killed (*Human Rights Watch* 2020). During the days of after-electoral violence, authorities shut down the Internet in the whole country in attempt to prevent the spread of information and coordination of the protest rallies.

Meanwhile, members of the female political trio faced different types of security challenges, because of direct threats to their own and their family’s security. Veranika Tsapkala fled the country on August 9, 2020, without waiting for an official announcement of electoral results. On August 11, 2020, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya was forced to leave the country. On September 11, 2020, Maria Kalesnikava, who refused to leave the country, was arrested and later sentenced to 11 years in prison.

However, even without clearly identifiable leadership, the post-electoral period brought a new wave of protest mobilization to Belarus. When the Internet was switched on and Belarusians learned about the brutal and unprecedented state violence against the people, a need to reshape the protest strategy appeared. A new form of women’s creative and peaceful actions unexpectedly appeared on the public scene. On August 12, women gathered in solidarity chains in Minsk and some other cities. Exercising their new social role, women of different ages, professions, and incomes formed a united protest group that became vocal and visible in pro-democratic peaceful protest activities and later produced a famous image of the “female Belarusian revolution” (Navumau and Matveieva 2021).

The inspiring example of Belarusian women together with popular discontent with the falsified outcomes of the election, post-electoral police violence, and the formation of a cross-cleavage coalition, specifically with the commencement of the workers’ strikes and some initial elite defections (Onuch et al. 2023), were among the reasons people mobilized for the most extensive protest actions in the history of Belarus. Starting from August 16, 2020, regular mass protest rallies took place in the country until November of that year.

Until October 2020, in parallel with massive Sunday protest rallies, women’s marches occurred on Saturdays in Minsk and other cities. Noticeably, the authoritarian regime was unprepared for such developments, and neither Lukashenka himself nor Belarusian officials or secret services had a clear vision of how to deal with these new types of peaceful mass protests in general and female protests in particular. In the first days of the women’s actions, state security and police officers were perplexed, and women could act without risk of being heavily physically repressed. Belarusian authorities needed time to understand the new situation and revise their reactions toward protesting women. On September 12, 2020, for the first time, the women’s march was unscrupulously

repressed by *silaviki* (law enforcement officers), and since then, the oppression spiraled until the women's marches ceased. In the late fall of 2020, the Belarusian authorities managed to suppress mass protests throughout the country using the diverse toolkit of repressive instruments.

After that, mass repression against all those who dared to question the dominance of the authoritarian regime started in the country and continues until today (October 2023). In August 2022, Belarusian authorities announced that during a period of two years (since August 2020), they had opened more than 11,000 criminal cases of an “extremist character” (*Zerkalo 2022a*), which concern cases focused on Lukashenka's opponents, civic activists and initiatives. Several thousand individuals in pre-trial detention centers (including state security facilities and KGB facilities) have been investigated for criminal offenses. Formally, the terms of criminal investigation might extend up to 1.5 years, although they can be prolonged in practice.³ Many protesting Belarusians arrested since August 2020 have been held on administrative charges that allow their detention for up to 15 days. However, in practice, the terms for detention are much longer.⁴

Thus, in the late summer and early autumn of 2020, the Belarusian authoritarian regime moved from the use of manipulative violence, policies of co-optation, and coaxing of disloyal citizens – with some elements of targeted repression of the most vocal political opponents and the periodic use of mass physical violence – to the mode of full-scale daily physical violence and massive repression oriented against the country's entire population. Under such circumstances (massification and broadening of the social base of the protesters), women became targets of state violence, practically on an equal footing with men. Women, for the first time, became novel “clients” of the repressive apparatus in Belarus. However, a heavily male-centered, authoritarian regime does not possess a comprehensive infrastructure or a comprehensive strategy for treating women who, according to their patriarchal views, are not supposed to be in the public sphere and go to prison because of public protest actions or other public activities.

Belarusian Infrastructure of State-violence via Women's Prism

Belarus has an elaborate system of repressive institutions and instruments. In keeping with other authoritarian regimes, the Belarusian government does not provide reliable official statistics on imprisonment. The latest publicly available data provided to the international community covers the year 2018 only, when there were 345 prisoners per 100,000 population in Belarus. The percentage of female prisoners was 10.8% (compared with the average 6.9% female population in the global prison population and 6.7% in Europe) (Fair and Walmsley 2021). With an indicator of 30.1 female prison population rate (meaning number of imprisoned women per 100,000 of national population), Belarus is among the countries with the highest female prison population rate. For the sake of comparison, the same indicator is 7.7 (or 4.2% female prisoners) in Lithuania, 27.1 (or 8.4% female prisoners) in Russia, and 38.2 (6.5% female prisoners) in Turkmenistan (Fair and Walmsley 2022).

Belarusian authoritarian authorities do not recognize the very fact of the existence of political prisoners in the country; however, human rights defenders produce corresponding statistics based on international standards for defining political prisoners. According to the human rights center Viasna (Spring), as of October 2023, 1491 people are recognized as political prisoners, and among them there are 165 women (11.1%) (Viasna 2023). After 2020, Belarusian women sentenced for political reasons were mainly sent to the Homel colony. Many sentenced women were sent to open correctional facilities.⁵

In a country with a population of 9.4 million and where capital punishment is not abolished, there are as many as 16 prisons and correctional colonies. Their regimes are of 2 categories: general and strict. There is also one juvenile colony, three correctional settlements (for people convicted of minor offenses), 30 open correction facilities (colloquially known as “the chemicals,” or *khimiya*), and 3 cellular-type prisons for the most severe offenders. In addition, people might be placed under

house arrest, sent to open correctional units, or subjected to compulsory psychiatric treatment.⁶ People convicted for political reasons could end up in any of these facilities (Palot 2020).

The repressive infrastructure in Belarus is ill-suited to women, as most detained and sentenced people have always been and are men. Despite the high rate of women's imprisonment, Belarus has no special pre-trial detention facilities for women. Men and women are held in the same buildings (one of the best-known is the Valadarka pre-trial detention center in Minsk), with cells for both genders in the same corridor. Detention centers have no special hygiene or medical facilities for women or men. The most evident deficiencies in the detention centers are the following: overcrowded cells (eight inmates can be held in a cell designed for four people), lack of hot water in the cells, toilets inside the cell (with no door at all or with a plastic curtain as a symbolic substitute), cells without adequate heating, light, or air ventilation; frequently, the shower is available only once per week. Women who have been held in the pretrial administrative detention centers (in Akrestina in particular) refer to them as "places that should not exist" and underscore that criminal detention centers have better conditions than administrative ones (Zerkalo 2022b).

The situation in penal colonies also falls short of international standards (FIDH 2008). Women serve their sentences in a penal settlement (IKP-21 in Vetka District) and two penal colonies (IK-4 in Homel and IK-24 in Rečyca District). Like all prisoners, women must work in correctional colonies (Viasna 2015). Women political prisoners who have served their sentences share testimonies of the brutal conditions in the colonies. For example, they testify that political prisoners are forced to work more and harder than other prisoners; they are more restricted in receiving money transfers, correspondence, and meetings with their families; they are more frequently placed in an isolation cell; they are segregated by being forced to wear a yellow triangle on their clothes, and so on (Viasna 2023).

In late July 2022, a post describing Kalesnikava's incarceration in the Homel colony was published on the personal FB account of Elena Makarova (who lives in Israel). The message was widely circulated for one week in social media (more than 3,500 likes, 260 comments, and 785 shares).

She [Maria Kalesnikava] is a professional flutist who works as a dressmaker in the prison. In shifts of 8 hours, 15 minutes a day could be spent reading books. Half an hour – for a walk. 18 people in the cell – in bunk beds. 17 criminals and only Masha is a political prisoner with a yellow coat for clothing. (...) In each cell – one political prisoner; they are forbidden to communicate among themselves during the walks. Parcels are allowed 4 times per year, 50 kg each. Her father brings parcels, but she does not see him. Meetings with her father – once in three months, for an hour – through the glass. 10 minutes a week, she could talk to him on the phone, but if an eavesdropper does not like what is being said during the conversation, the conversation is interrupted. Friends tried to hand over her children's flute; she was shown it, but she was not given it. She asked for sheets of music. Twice, it was possible to send them, transcribed by hand, inside a letter. In recent times, letters from friends do not reach Masha. (Makarava 2022)

According to human rights defenders, Maria Kalesnikava faced severe pressure in the penal colony, which has an impact on her physical condition. Thus, in November 2022 (after ten months of imprisonment in Homel), she survived a severe deterioration of her health that caused hospitalization. She was taken to the surgical department of the Homel Emergency Hospital and operated on for a peptic ulcer and peritonitis. A few days later, Maria was transferred back to the colony medical unit, where she was allowed to meet her father (and the photos from the meetings were published in the Belarusian state media). It is known that hospitalization was preceded by disproportionately harsh treatment in the punishment cell. Human rights defenders also reported that from late March 2023, Maria was placed in a stricter security cell (Viasna 2023). As specified in the testimonies of her sister, Tatsiana Khomich, since February 2, 2023, when Maria's family

received the last postcard from her, the famous political prisoner is *de facto* isolated from the world with no news from her (BBC 2023). Alongside physical deprivations, deprivation of contact with the family is evidently one of the harshest pains of punishment.

Interviews: Interviewees, Context, and Topics

A series of nine in-depth, semi-structured interviews (see Table 1) with Belarusian women who have been incarcerated between 2020 and 2021 were conducted for the purposes of this research. All the interviews, except one, were conducted online via Zoom by the authors of this article during the period from September 2021 to March 2022. In this study, the confidentiality of all interviewees was maintained. All interviewees emphasized the sensitivity of the topic and their statements. The selection of the interviewees was not random, and it was not induced by any considerations of statistical representation relative to the actual size of the population (the actual size of people detained for political reasons in Belarus is unknown, and it fluctuates as some people are released and new people detained). The authors either knew the interviewees or had been in contact with potential interviewees through mutually trusted sources.

Two main criteria for selecting interviewees were applied: a woman (of any age and occupation) who was arrested either in relation to a protest or in relation to other civic activities after the fraudulent presidential election held on August 9, 2020. In the sample, we have both categories: women detained because of their direct participation in protests and those arrested because of their civic activism (journalism, human rights defense, etc.).

In the sample, several interviewees (six) were charged with administrative penalties, and others (three) were investigated in criminal cases. At the time of the interviews, at least three interviewees had lived abroad (in the UK, Lithuania, or Poland). All our interviewees had spent several days up to almost a year in pre-trial detention centers and/or prisons. One of our interviewees spent almost a year in Valadarka pre-trial detention center and was recognized as a political prisoner. Another was arrested for the second time and received the status of a political prisoner several months after our interview.

The interviews lasted 45 to 125 minutes. After the interview, one of the interviewees, the following day, contacted the authors to provide additional elements and precision regarding the issues discussed in the interview. The interviews invited interviewees to provide real-life stories supporting or illustrating their perceptions and arguments. In the text below, we provide quotes from the interviews translated by the authors of the text. Some quotes were slightly edited (for anonymity and clarity reasons). It is supplemented by materials published in Belarusian media or other open sources. The following sections are arranged by thematic categories, which we distilled by analyzing the content of the transcripts and our field memos.

We go in-depth only on the issues and illustrations directly pertinent to our research questions: how women who have been incarcerated for political reasons assess the regime's policies toward protest and civic activities and how these women perceive their own experiences endured during incarceration.

Initial Differences in the Repression of Protesting Men and Women

There are perceptible differences between the types, methods, and goals of state violence used against protesters in general and those targeted against women in Belarus. As our interviewees underlined, when the women's protest rallies had just started, the *silaviki* refrained from using physical violence against them. The violence of repressive structures was concentrated predominantly on men, not on women: "*The policy of the security forces was mainly to take men... in the first days, they really took more men... They only went after men. It was a little bit safer... well, for women*" (L-1).

The unpreparedness of the repressive apparatus to deploy violence against women played an essential role in protest mobilization. Encouraged by their success, the women began coming on the streets regularly. *“When the first actions occurred, it was really safe, no one was detained... the silaviki were there, they didn’t know what to do”* (T-1). Even if women were detained, they were released within several hours, especially if they had small children: *“In the beginning, women who had children were often released immediately. They charged them and let them go, and women were not getting sky-high fines”* (M-1).

The interviewees interpret those less brutal attitudes toward women and their protest rallies during early protest stages, mentioning not only the unpreparedness of repressive structures but also certain “class differences” between themselves and the *silaviki* and the strength of the *silaviki*’s patriarchal stereotypes, within which women are perceived as weak individuals who are incapable of any autonomous action. According to this stereotype, women always require leadership and protection, and they must have found themselves among the protesters only by mistake. *“Especially in September [2020], when they started detaining women, they did not understand what women were doing there. They saw that women they arrested were intelligent, educated, talking logically all the time... They were used to working with other categories of people”* (T-1).

Our interviewees observe that *“the window of opportunity for these innovative intelligent women’s protests”* (L-1) closed very soon; in a matter of a week or so – from late September to early October 2020 – the authorities changed their *“perplexed or neutral approach and started to detain and arrest protesting women indiscriminately”* (L-1). This change in the modus operandi of political violence occurred because the Belarusian authorities realized that women were highly mobilized, determined, and numerous and that they effectively amplified mass protests. The main government’s goal then became significantly curtailing the scope of protests. *“When protests started to be massive, that is, there were women’s marches on Saturdays, and they were very large, they started to take them [women] away”* (L-1).

This somewhat delayed violence against women protesters could also be explained by the observation that *silaviki* needed time to devise tactics, prepare themselves psychologically, and mobilize their resources targeted at disobedient women. As soon as they were ready, they started to suppress women: *“when they had already prepared themselves mentally, organizationally, and technically for these events, and they started doing it, there were already repressive measures, well-tested schemes, everyone knew how to deal with so many people in a conveyor belt. It seemed to me that it all depended solely on the preparedness of the law enforcement structures themselves”* (N-1).

Ultimately, state authorities and *silaviki* started to hunt all protesters, despite their gender, age, and physical condition. Aggressive physical violence was an expression of fear, attack, and defense deployed by *silaviki* in their agonistic behavior: *“at that stage there was no difference – everyone who was against them was perceived as an enemy, and it made no difference whether it was a man or a woman”* (A-1).

Specificities of Repressions against Women

The instruments of repression of men and women perceptibly differ when it comes to direct bodily or physical situations during incarceration. One of the interviewees, who was detained and heavily beaten during the very first days of mass protests, mentioned that the *silaviki* were looking for a pretext to beat her. They were *“sort of relieved”* to find out that she had a foreign (EU) passport, which provided them with a reason to label her a “feminist”: *“Oh, this one has an [EU country] passport, and there is feminism in [EU country], so she will take shit for everyone”* (V-1).

Prison guards also had different, less harsh attitudes toward women detainees than toward arrested men. One interviewee observed the less harsh approach of the prisons’ guards toward women when it came to food or other everyday essentials: women used to get more and better food than men: *“Women were treated more indulgently. For example, when there was some food, they gave us more tea or more fish”* (L-1). Another observed that guards were accustomed to dealing with men,

while they had little or no experience in dealing with women. They were unsure as whether detained women were more “women” (in need of support and sympathy as “the weaker sex”) or were more “criminal” (transgressing the existing norms and venturing into territories which are not for them at all): *“Mostly it is men are prisons’ guards, they are more on the same page with men... For them, women are people from another world – there is less empathy, more misunderstanding”* (L-1). Meanwhile, detained women experienced less direct physical violence. *“Men were beaten very badly. There were practically no women in our cell who were beaten”* (A-1). Gender stereotypes about the weaknesses and physical fragility of women were an important differentiating factor: *“maybe, they think that men are more dangerous and that women are weak, and maybe they also feel sorry for them”* (A-1).

Detained women also reflected on the eventual differences between male and female officers and prison guards. Some say that male officers behaved in a more humane way toward incarcerated women: *“The men somehow felt sympathy, they could bring us something, one brought us packages at an unscheduled time, at night, and they were laughing and joking around. In general, there was more support from the men than from the women who worked there”* (L-1). Others observed that female officers behaved in more brutal ways than their male peers: *“women are tougher than men in relation to incarcerated women. I also noticed that all the women who were in uniforms... were tough talking, yelling at you, and not giving you an answer... As if they could not talk normally at all”* (L-1).

One interviewee highlighted that women officers and guards tended to be more brutal because they tried to demonstrate to their colleagues (male officers) that they were truly and fully qualified employees of the repressive structures, valid members of the “club”: *“female supervisors are in an environment where violence is very much encouraged... To be on an equal footing with their male colleagues, they believe that they probably need to overcompensate, they need to be stronger, they need to be angrier”* (K-1). The apparent professional underestimation and lack of recognition of the club incite women-officers to behave brutally. *“There was an incarcerated woman who had one breast surgically removed that was still bleeding, and the female prison guard hit her so hard that she fell. I was there. One male prison guard made a remark to her: ‘Hey, why are you doing that?’”* (A-1).

In parallel, some interviewees mentioned that both male and female officers could be kind to the incarcerated women: *“once there was a shift supervisor who closed his eyes and said: ‘Go and get to the shower. Although as a man I cannot supervise you, but you go, I and no one will look at you”* (K-1). Another female officer brought warm clothes to the detained women: *“One employee, a woman, took some things for us from our relatives who were standing on the steps... We were very grateful to her because she probably went five times. And each time she came, called the name, and gave the things she was handed over”* (L-1).

The repressive structures in Belarus did not have enough capacity to accommodate many female prisoners. There was a lack of women among the staff who could perform bodily searches or deal with the female detainees in their everyday affairs. *“In the [pre-trial detention] center, there was a lack of female employees”* (L-1). This shortage of female guards limited opportunities for women prisoners to provide their basic needs (e.g., to go to the shower, while, according to the rules, female detainees should be supervised by female guards): *“They simply didn’t have enough of these women already, so there was nobody to bring us to the shower”* (K-1).

In the pre-trial centers and in prisons, patriarchal attitudes toward women prisoners are typical. Women are mostly observed to have reproductive functions. They are perceived as (future) mothers, and this is the main reason for treating them differently: *“In the women’s cells there are slightly better conditions... But I suspect that all this is because women are seen as some kind of... future prospective incubator for children... so they should be protected, not because they are women and therefore, they have special needs and require special attention, special treatment”* (N-1). Women are psychologically threatened by the argument that life in prison might harm their reproductive health. *“They use as psychological pressure, such threats as: ‘you’re 20, you’ll go to jail for 10 [years], and when you’ll get out, you won’t find a husband, you won’t have children, and in general you’ll destroy your health, and physically you might not be able to give birth anymore”* (M-1).

Within the patriarchal logic, women can be used as a tool of pressure on men or family members engaged in protests. One interviewee provided a story about the arbitrary arrest of the wife of one of the activists: *“women are often used to put pressure on their husbands, in many cases”* (N-1).

When it comes to the means and approaches of violence specifically targeted at women, first, they risk their children being taken away. *“Women are threatened with having their children taken away... Sometimes, they hint very unsubtly saying: ‘We will put you in the category of ‘socially dangerous situation’” or they indeed take your children away”* (A-1).⁷ Issues with children are very sensitive, and women are (reasonably) afraid to cause additional harm to them. Similarly, the other family members of detained women happen to be threatened and humiliated. In our interviews, at least two women mentioned that their husbands were beaten during their arrest.

Interviewees mentioned different types of problems faced during incarceration. Being in prison means a deprivation of normal physical and psychological life: *“you are taken out of your normal life... you are not considered a human being, and everywhere you meet denial... denial of basic, essential, everyday items”* (A-2). Our interviewees generalized that the whole repressive system in Belarus works on the principles of production of as many rules and limitations as possible, forcing those in prison to follow them. One of the most common grievances among those who have been placed in Akrestina pre-trial detention centers was inedible food (and, in general, a lack of food), unventilated premises, extremely hot or cold cells, overcrowded cells, and so on. One of the interviewees said that she would have preferred to be under criminal charges and to go to Valadarka pre-trial detention center, rather than being prosecuted under the administrative code and to stay in Akrestina (N-1).

One of the interviewees (A-2) mentioned that detainees were allowed to use only metallic spoons (no forks or knives); in the cells, there was a lack of hot water, lack of daylight, electric light was switched on for the entire 24 hours, lack of space and fresh air, no privacy, etc. Women who were incarcerated for a longer time complained about an almost total lack of healthcare services (basic dentist needs are met on a minimal level, while specialized gynecological or other examinations are completely unavailable). Even in severe cases of illness, appropriate medical treatment is not provided in a timely manner.

Physiological and psychological deprivations of women are especially severe regarding reproductive health issues. One interviewee (A-2) mentioned that women in prison experienced non-regular periods, or their periods ceased completely. In her testimony, young political prisoner Asya Bulybenka, who has already served her term (two years and six months) and has been released from Homel colony, shares experiences of humiliating and dehumanizing attitudes of the officers toward the incarcerated women during their periods: *“We had daily ‘naked’ searches, where we had to argue even for personal hygiene items. If someone had a period, you had to tear off the [hygienic] pad and show what was underneath”* (Zerkalo 2023).

Consequences of Incarceration

Evidently, incarceration has a diverse range of effects. When released, women must overcome physiological and psychological difficulties, as they have to heal and to re-integrate into “normal life.” Some of the former detainees have developed some sort of specific sympathy toward prison guards, and they engage in mental attempts to justify those who work for repressive structures: *“We behaved ourselves correctly, understanding that these were not the people behind the door who put us in jail, in principle, as they were just guarding us. I did not perceive them as my direct enemies”* (A-2).

Released from incarceration women have a strong sense of guilt and gratitude toward members of their families: *“And men who want to protect their women, who are turned into sad persons, carrying packages to the detention center, and worrying every day about their loved ones, perpetually thinking in shock that ‘I’d rather be sitting there instead of her’... That’s a separate kind of sophisticated psychological violence and the consequences for my husband’s health now are serious because of the stress”* (A-2). Typically, former prisoners acknowledge a sense of psychological and

emotional vulnerability and the need for external support: *“During the first six months [after incarceration], you get used to it [normal life], you get re-used to it, you try to catch up, and then six months pass and you just get overwhelmed and, well, it’s not only my own experience, you get overwhelmed and at that point you really need a therapist”* (A-2).

Almost all women talked about psychological trauma: *“At first, I had a strong PTSD, I was afraid to leave the house alone... I felt as if everyone around me was being detained”* (K-1). When released, all interviewees took additional security measures against the eventual new instances of detention: they closed old and created new Facebook and other social media accounts, refused to meet some people, or emigrated from the country. Thus, they acknowledged that they have learned some positive and some negative lessons.

Women expressed various positions regarding the effects of prison on their civic and political activities. Typically, the interviewees expressed that they were ready to continue their civic activities: *“It’s not like I’ve stopped, I will continue, I won’t stop no matter what”* (A-1). Thus, incarceration exacerbated the sense of injustice and the willingness to fight the regime. Only one person in our sample, who had faced direct physical violence (she was beaten by police during detention), was less resolute in her willingness to oppose Lukashenka’s regime in an open and expedient manner.

Women’s Solidarity Networks as External Effects of Women’s Political Incarceration

Following Hayes (2015), two areas where the “pains of punishment” occur might be distinguished: inside and outside of prison walls. Solidarity is an important thematic line that emerges in almost all the interviews conducted within this research and in other available materials from Belarusian women who have experienced state repression (e.g., Bandurina 2022). Our interviewees highlight two types of solidarity: solidarity inside the prison (internal) and solidarity outside the prison (external).

The in-prison solidarity is conceptualized as some sort of “sisterhood” (Komar 2021; Shparaga 2021), with an emphasis on close and trustful relations between the women who were together in cells. The interviewees very positively refer to this camaraderie: *“A positive experience is getting to know people, especially those who happen to be with you in prison”* (K-1). The in-prison solidarity includes important physical and psychological dimensions when women support each other by “sharing and caring”: *“The girls and I who had sneakers took out our insoles to put them under the butt, and whoever was warmest dressed was directed to the walls, while those who were dressed the lightest grouped together in the center to keep everyone warm”* (V-1). Frequently, giving one’s portion of food to someone who is frailer is mentioned as an especially worthy sign of generosity.

Prolonged incarceration requires the creation of rules and an internal system of physical and emotional support which helps to survive in a hostile environment: *“What supported us, we sang songs and we danced. And at some point, it was very funny, because if you imagine minus 25 in the prison yard with a very mixed public: alcoholics, drug addicts and us – political prisoners – and we all are jumping up and down in this cold air in order to get warm, and actually you enjoy these movements of dance, coordination of movements, coordination with each other”* (A-2). Solidarity in the prison cell helps to avoid feeling lonely: *“Someone is always there for you, 24/7, you’re never alone, and you can always find a relatively safe person to get support”* (Nasha Niva 2022).

Solidarity from outside of the prison includes special networks, tools, and mechanisms of support for incarcerated people. Through these networks of external solidarity, incarcerated women are provided with additional food, clothes, beauty products, etc., which, to some extent, compensate for the deprivations that they face daily. Another important modality of external solidarity is letters of support to prisoners. Letters from outside are mentioned as one of the most vital expressions of support and hope which imprisoned women get: *“There were a couple of days when we had a huge volume of letters... I have a huge bag, I sorted them in boxes from strangers, from acquaintances, from friends, from family, and from my husband”* (A-2).

However, in some cases, women prisoners spoke about their partners' or friends' lack of support and solidarity. For instance, in her public interview, a former political prisoner shared her traumatic sense of personal betrayal that she experienced when one of the UN agencies in Belarus refused to provide her with a reference letter before the court trial (*Nasha Niva* 2022). On the contrary, institutional support from organizations (primarily non-governmental organizations or private enterprises) with whom they either worked or cooperated with before incarceration was especially valued.

Our interviewees frequently mentioned the vast external solidarity networks that aim to support women (and men) incarcerated for political reasons in Belarus. These networks have been and are an essential prison experience for incarcerated women, with exceptionally positive effects. These networks occur in different places and take various formats outside prison, in Belarus, and abroad. For example, in August 2023, a former political prisoner, Olga Gorbunova⁸ (who was sentenced to three years under home confinement and then escaped from Belarus) together with Belarusian independent media, and civil society organizations was among the initiators of an online fundraising marathon to support political prisoners in Belarus. During the marathon, they managed to raise more than 500,000 euros within two days under the motto "We care!" (*Novy Chas* 2023).

Conclusions

This article, through the lens of gender, analyzes state violence and repression in Belarus. In general terms, it contributes to the academic literature on politically motivated imprisonment, in which women as a particular social category have tended to be neglected, as most frequently such research engages with wide-ranging questions about the problems experienced by incarcerated people where men constitute the absolute majority.

In Belarus in 2020, women's leadership and massive participation in the electoral campaign and post-electoral protests represented a significant, visible, and vocal challenge to the authoritarian regime, which, in its deeply entrenched patriarchal ideology, underestimated women as political actors. Women's political activism perturbed the authoritarian social order, which thrives on the use and abuse of the idea that "normal" women do not engage in politics (i.e., they limit themselves to the traditional roles of mothers and family caregivers). In 2020, women's political engagement emerged as a new strategy to oppose Lukashenka's regime during the presidential campaign and in its aftermath. For the first time in Belarusian history, the repressive state apparatus faced massive women's political participation and had to develop specific forms of political violence and adapt women's incarceration practices.

The interviews with women incarcerated for political reasons reveal that Belarusian incarceration institutions since late 2020 are undergoing a process of "engendering" their daily routines. Repressive structures in Belarus adapt and deal with women as their new "clients": they get accustomed and develop micro-practices tailored to deal with politically mobilized women who are detained in large numbers.

As for the "pains of punishment" and contrary to Lithuanian women, who serve criminal sentences (Nikartas and Tereškinas 2022), Belarusian women with experiences of incarceration for political reasons clearly fall under the category of "demanding clients." They comprehensively challenge state-sponsored brutal patriarchy and expect that the repressive state apparatus meets and responds to their specific needs (related to female physiology, communication with their families and friends, etc.).

In Belarus, women who are incarcerated for political reasons face diverse and sophisticated types of deprivation. They must deal with all five key deprivations characteristic of prison life, identified in Sykes' classical writings in 1958. However, women mostly underscore deprivation of autonomy (especially painful is the absence of any private space and control of letters from women's family and friends) and deprivation of goods and services. Meanwhile, in their interviews, the women hardly mentioned the deprivation of heterosexual relationships.

Along with Sexton (2015), we observe a prevalence of symbolic deprivation of identity when incarcerated women are dehumanized (they are not considered equal to male human beings and are particularly humiliated in the circumstances related to female physiology). While the field stage of research was conducted in 2021–2022, since that time, the numbers of incarcerated because of political reasons women has dramatically increased, and their “pains of punishment” potentially have become more diverse and intensive – not only in quantitative terms but also in their qualitative dimension, as, apparently, the regime persists in its obstinate patriarchal forms of repression. Our research shares the insights derived by Crewe and co-authors (2017), who – based on the study of life imprisonment for political crimes – emphasize the issues that are of particular salience to incarcerated women: loss of contact with family members, lack of agency, autonomy, and control; removal of psychological well-being, trust, privacy, and intimacy. These traumatizing experiences of women incarcerated for political reasons (and the repressive practices enhancing these “pains of punishment”) demand further research – not just from an academic but also from a humanitarian perspective.

Women incarcerated for political reasons as “new clients” of repressive structures acknowledge that the state apparatus grossly fails to meet their legitimate needs and treats women in unacceptably dehumanizing ways. Their “pains of punishment” are even more severe as they do not perceive their “punishment” as a society’s retribution for their “wrong” deeds but rather as an instrument of the unjust fight of the authoritarian state for its own survival. From their own internal perspective, incarcerated Belarusian women consider themselves innocent victims and acknowledge nothing positive in their experiences of punishment, as evoked through the example, provided by Hayes (2018), of Raskolnikov, who “is eager to suffer his punishment and may even look to derive something positive from it” (239). The experiences of solidarity (inside and outside the prison) – which emerge in response to the complex and devastating “pains of punishment” and which entirely escape the control of the repressive structures – are sources of healing and hope for women incarcerated for political reasons.

The internal and external prison solidarity networks might be considered gender-neutral and related to both men and women who are imprisoned because of the political reasons of the authoritarian regime. However, our research material suggests that, at least outside the prison, women are more active than men in these networks of support. The gender issues of in-prison and out-prison solidarity-based mobilization and attitudes toward it among politically motivated prisoners is a prospective dimension for further research.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at <http://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2024.10>.

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Notes

- 1 In our empirical research, we have followed principles and special precautions of research ethics, applicable in politically sensitive environments (such as contacting prospective interviewees with a trustful reference; keeping strict anonymity of the respondents, even if they do not require it; conducting interviews via the remote communication channels, which are available and acceptable for the interviewees; taking into account eventual “second thoughts” of the interviewees, if they have decided to share them with the interviewer a day or two after the interview; and so on). The interviews, based on the same semi-structured questionnaire, were conducted in Russian and Belarusian languages by two experienced researchers (both interviewers were living in Vilnius at the time of interviews).

- 2 According to the Amnesty International, in May 1999, the former Minister of the Interior, Yury Zakharenko, apparently “disappeared,” leaving behind his wife and two daughters. In September 1999, the chairman of the unofficial electoral commission, Viktor Gonchar, and a companion, Anatoly Krasovsky, apparently “disappeared,” leaving behind several family members. In July 2000, the whereabouts of the Russian Public Television (ORT) cameraman, Dmitry Zavadsky, also became unknown. These possible “disappearances” occurred at key political moments, and the Belarusian authorities have shown great reluctance to investigate the cases. Instead, they have accused Belarus’ opposition of staging the “disappearances” for the purposes of seeking international attention or have stated that the individuals concerned have been sighted abroad (for more on these cases, see <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur49/002/2001/en/>).
- 3 In fact, the thirty-two-year-old son of Viktor Babryka (Eduard Babaryka) has been held in a pre-trial detention center for more than two years before his court trial started (since June 2020).
- 4 For example, the beauty queen (Miss Belarus 2008), Olga Khizhynkova, spent 42 days in the Akrestina pre-trial detention center.
- 5 Several women (as well as men) who got to “khimiya” were able to leave Belarus – for example, editor and journalist Aksana Kolb.
- 6 For example, Maryia Uspenskaya, the widow of Andrei Zeltser, an IT specialist who was killed in his apartment during a shootout with KGB officers on September 28, 2021, was sentenced to compulsory psychiatric treatment.
- 7 In Belarus, representatives of the system of social services have the right to check families with children if they have grounds to suspect any mistreatment toward them. If the mistreatment is confirmed, the family is placed in the category of “socially dangerous situation,” which might result in taking the children away. This mechanism is often used to threaten politically active parents.
- 8 Olga Gorbunova now holds the position of a special representative on social issues within the Belarusian opposition United Transitional Cabinet. Her responsibilities include the issues of political prisoners and their support.

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