'They were smashing me with batons': detained Belarusians tell of jail abuse

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/13/belarusians-accuse-lukashenko-regime-of-beatings-and-torture>

People detained in Belarus during the past few days of unrest have told the Guardian about systematic mistreatment and abuse, suggesting that guards and riot police loyal to Alexander Lukashenko’s regime have terrorised thousands of Belarusians caught up in the [crackdown on recent protests](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/13/belarus-tens-of-thousands-on-streets-challenge-lukashenko).

Those detained in police stations, jails and makeshift prisons spoke of ritual beatings, up to 55 women being crammed into a cell meant for two people and men who were kept in stress positions for hours on end. Leaked audio files and other testimony has corroborated the reports of widespread torture as Lukashenko tries to hold on to power.

One 31-year-old builder from Minsk, who asked for his name not to be used, described being arrested at 6pm on Sunday evening, a few hours before polls closed, after he filmed a column of riot police in central Minsk.

For the first few hours, he was treated well, but was then moved to a notorious holding centre on Okrestina Street on the outskirts of Minsk, where he was placed in a cell meant for four people that eventually had 21 men inside as more and more were arrested during the evening.

After two days, in which he was given water but no food and could hear the screams of people being beaten in the courtyard, he was forced to sign a paper with false information about where and when he was arrested. He was then given an 11-day prison sentence in a makeshift trial inside the prison. A few hours later, at 3am on Wednesday morning, he was told he could leave.

“They called me to the exit, but then in the courtyard riot police with their faces covered told us to lie down on the floor and then they started beating us. They were smashing me with batons all over my body. Then they were smashing me with fists. Then they told us to stand up to see if we could stand up. I didn’t really know what was happening.”

One of the policemen said: “I hope you don’t need any revolution any more,” before the men were released into the darkness. They were not given back their phones or other possessions.

[Numerous people](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/12/belarus-protesters-and-police-clash-for-third-night-as-eu-threatens-sanctions) had similar stories. Kristina, a business consultant from Minsk, was arrested on Monday along with her husband, while searching for her son who was detained by guards with automatic rifles earlier that evening.

At the same holding centre on Okrestina Street, she described being forced to strip naked on camera with 10 women. Later, she was taken to a room where 10 men, also naked, were forced to kneel on the floor while being beaten.

“I can’t say if it was with belts or with batons,” she said in an interview. “They told us not to look … I remember the sound of the strikes and their bruised backs.”

Many of the people she encountered were mothers and fathers who had been searching for their own children. One 17-year-old girl was detained together with her parents. “She saw them beating her own father in front of her eyes.”

The women were herded into a 10-metre cell for two that eventually swelled to 55 prisoners, some of whom had serious medical conditions such as diabetes. She was released at 5am on Thursday morning, and asked that her last name not be used because her husband is still in jail. “It’s a discovery for me that there are people with nothing human in them,” she said, her voice catching. “Even animals don’t do what they did.”

Audio [recorded outside the prison](https://t.me/nashaniva/9538) picked up the sounds of beatings and the screams of those held inside, while state television has made no secret of the abuse, broadcasting images of severely bruised detainees in a bid to scare people into staying off the streets.

Igor Rogov, an activist for Open Russia, an NGO run by former Russian oligarch turned exile Mikhail Khodorkovsky, was arrested on Sunday in Minsk and released on Monday. He described repeated beatings, which intensified when he asked to contact the Russian embassy. “My head still hurts, there’s a ringing in my ears, I’m concussed, a traumatic brain injury, a pretty serious one, the doctor said. I’m still limping, my legs and arms hurt, I have bruises over half of my body,” he said.

There has been violence across the country, and 25-year-old [Alexander Vikhor became the second fatality](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/13/belarus-protests-25-year-old-man-dies-in-police-custody-alexander-vikhor) of the past week when he died in police custody in the city of Gomel, his family told local media on Thursday.

Numerous journalists have reported attacks, even after identifying themselves and showing accreditation. Yan Roman, a journalist working for Polish media in the city of Grodno, said he had gone to the local police department on Sunday evening to report on people looking for loved ones who had been detained, when riot police drove up and began arresting everyone. He shouted that he was a journalist, but was kicked in the face by one riot policeman, and has lost four teeth. He was then held for 24 hours and released with a fine.

Nikita Telizhenko, a Russian reporter for the Znak website who was detained in Minsk on Monday, [wrote](https://www.znak.com/2020-08-12/prprpl?fbclid=IwAR23jF2MY3rB4nEr_9vHNq-HmGpfiE1SjgWVR7N_CL8HwN3s9pOzjT_avu0) a gruesome account of his time in detention. Men were stacked on top of one another inside the detention facility: “People were lying on the floor in blood, and we had to walk over them,” he wrote.