

## **Input by Olga Karatch, Our House**

**To the Web-Seminar „Kampf für Menschenrechte: Der gewaltfreie Protest in Belarus“, 17.12.2020, organized by the Federation for Social Defence, gewaltfrei handeln e.V., Sozialer Friedensdienst Bremen e.V. und Foundation Threshold**

### **The political context and the processes that are going on in Belarus today.**

As you know, since August 9 our peaceful protests have not stopped, more than 30,000 people have been detained and suffered repression. There are more than 1,000 criminal cases for peaceful participation in protests, more than 300 children at risk of being kidnapped from their families, more than 200 children punished for participating in protests.

These are just some external and visible signs of what is happening.

What's going on inside Belarus?

What's new in Belarus today if we compare it with Belarus, for example, in 2019?

### **1. The political context and the processes that are going on in Belarus today**

#### **The awakening of historical memory and the awakening of a huge interest in the historical events that have taken place in Belarus over the past 100 years.**

In Belarus, there have always been some taboo topics about which our society remained silent. It was impossible to discuss publicly.

Of course, the biggest taboo topic is concerned the Stalin's repression. Today people begin to unfreeze and have begun to talk and remember this issue. And this is a very painful topic for Belarusians. The topic of Stalin's repressions is very much connected with what is happening in Belarus today. The Belarusian society asks itself a question: how did it happen that Belarusians kill Belarusians? How is it that my neighbour from the police can rape my child or me? How did it happen that my relative tortures and kills peaceful people? We all grew up together. We are all so close. And this question today is the most important one. Therefore, if we are talking about the support of the Belarusian people today, then this is not only help / solidarity to the repressed people, although it is certainly needed. But, first of all, what I expect from you and other our international friends is the help in going through this very difficult, very sensitive and painful path of restoring historical memory in Belarus. I want to ask you to help and hold our hand, because (again) this will be a very difficult path and a sensitive process for all Belarusians.

#### **Transgenerational trauma and work with historical trauma.**

This process is very much connected with historical memory, and over 100 years in Belarus there have been a lot of traumatic events that were not reflected and lived through. These are Stalin's repressions, Holodomor in some regions of Belarus, World War II, repressions after the war, Chernobyl, mass participation of Belarusians in the war in Afghanistan, and this was not the choice of Belarusian guys, they were sent there by the Soviet government, then the collapse of the Soviet Union, mass emigration of Jews from Belarus, then Lukashenko, and already then abductions and murders of politicians, followed by abductions and murders of businessmen. And so on and so on. Today, more than ever, we need to start working with our historical traumas, but we need to start it very carefully and supportively so that the Belarusian nation is not traumatized again. This is a very difficult and sensitive process, because inside the Belarusian nation there is a lot of hidden aggression, pain, grief, but unfortunately, if we want

to build a European country, we must, in some forms and methods, return to everything that happened here these years. But this is very difficult.

**The idea of inevitability of punishment for murderers and criminal enforcers (who is responsible for tortures) has become very important for the Belarusian society.**

We do not want to arrange lynching. We do not want to start a war, but we want all murderers and criminals to be judged honestly, openly and fairly. That is why the question of the court in The Hague, the Belarusian Nuremberg trial (*as it is called in Belarus*), punishment is very popular in Belarus, and we, Our House, of course, respond to this public request and these public expectations. 4

**Our common house is Belarus.**

When Our House was created in December 2005, with moderation by the BSV, we had a very simple idea: Belarus is our common home, we are very diverse and we must all live together. Today it turned out that it is not easy. I would say that it is even impossible today. There is a very strong polarization in Belarus due to the fact that one side uses very brutal and bloody violence: torture, rape, and bullying. That is, probably, the Belarusian people would somehow understand if during the protests security forces simply beat someone. But it was precisely the torture, rape and humiliation of the detainees in Belarusian prisons that caused a sharp rejection of Alexander Lukashenko. Yesterday Alexander Lukashenko called on the protesters to "live together." But this is no longer possible. Alexander Lukashenko has become absolutely toxic for the Belarusian society. But that's not even the biggest problem.

National dialogue is not possible at the moment. Moreover, I cannot imagine anymore how we all can live together in one country. You know that Our House has a very principled position - we talk with all structures, except for the KGB. But there is no escape from the KGB and our various volunteers of course have many relatives in the KGB. Today KGB officers very much complain that they are inundated with denunciations from Belarusian citizens, supporters of Alexander Lukashenko. Moreover, a characteristic feature is that they are overwhelmed with denunciations that relatives, supporters of Alexander Lukashenko, write about their relatives, very often about children and grandchildren.

And here I again remember the Stalin's repressions. I don't know how to live together in one country, when the deputy confidant of Alexander Lukashenko makes porn with his daughter for eight years and sells it on the Internet. I do not know how we can live in one country when the largest pedophile network in Europe is organized under the roof of the presidential administration.<sup>1</sup> Now there is no time to talk about this in detail, but I want to remind you that today there is a GULAG in Belarus, and Lukashenko actively uses slaves, including the children slaves in Belarussian prison.

And I really look forward to support along the way, to find an understanding of how we can build one country with these people.

**A very serious reassessment of views and values is taking place in Belarus now.**

If earlier there was a very patriarchal thinking, now after the presidential elections in 2020 we see a huge interest in gender equality issues, in feminism, liberal ideas, social-democratic ideas, Belarusian women's awareness of their value, in solidarity, liberty. The Belarusian society has realized the value of standards and human rights.

---

<sup>1</sup> Nash Dom recently published a video with English and German subtitles on the pedophilia cases; [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3zz1FD6mA\\_0&t=1s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3zz1FD6mA_0&t=1s)

## **The value of communication and the value of family and friendships.**

Belarusians have always been very isolated. If a Belarusian went abroad - for economic or political reasons - then, as a rule, s/he tried to pretend that s/he did not know such a country "Belarus" at all. For this reason, the Belarusian diaspora have always been very weak. But today the Belarusian nation suddenly has realized the value of communication, cooperation, support, etc. This process takes place at all levels - at the level of an apartment building, where people unite, to go out into the courtyards, dance, sing, organize actions, at the country level, at the diaspora level, absolutely everywhere. This is very impressive.

## **Gigantic mobilization of people.**

I have never seen this and I think I will never see it in the future. It looks like an explosion, when mobilization and activation is going on absolutely at all levels. Our House has always specialized in advocacy campaigns. And there were always certain patterns in how it had to be organized. At a minimum, it was always necessary to spend several months or even six months to start mobilizing people to solving a problem. And now people are so fast that we can't keep up with them. They want to do more and faster, so the old team of Our House is under a lot of stress, because now we have to speed up and speed up our work.

## **Officials at the local level try not to draw attention to themselves because they do not understand what is happening.**

This gives us tremendous opportunities to change the situation at the local level. We do not speak publicly, but now there are quite a few cases when at the local level it was possible to agree and resolve very specific practical issues.

## **2. Our work**

I would like to share with you today the results of our recent work so as to reassure you that there is a progress and that the process does not stop for a minute. Of course, this is not all that we are doing. Nevertheless, it is worth bringing to your attention certain steps that the team of "Our House" is taking.

### **Help people inside Belarus.**

We created the urgent action system "Owls". Why Owl? I do not know why but mostly we receive the requests for the urgent help at nights. So, people are in connection 24 hours per day and 7 days per week. To date, Our House volunteers have sent 211 food parcels to repressed Belarusian citizens inside Belarus, paid the work of 116 lawyers in criminal cases, as well as paid fines and a day's cost in prison (€5) to 57 Belarusians, mainly, of course, under article 23./24. Fines are not exactly our priority, as I said, but these are those unfortunate citizens that did not receive help from anyone and, of course, we could not leave them behind.

As an example, we fully paid for Andrei Novikov's lawyer. Andrei Novikov was detained on June 6 in the village of Prusy, in the Posavsky district of the Vitebsk region. He resided there with his wife and two daughters. His crime was telling the truth about the situation in Pastavy in the stream of the famous YouTube blogger Sergei Tikhanovski, collecting signatures for Svetlana Tikhanovskaya. Unfortunately, Andrei Novikov was also Russian citizen as well as Police Colonel. All this coincided with Lukashenko heavily promoting the Wagnerian case of Sergey Tikhanovski. Andrei Novikov turned out to be an ideal victim, and spent more than four months in a pre-trial detention center as a political prisoner. Then he was deported to Russia. Our House took full financial responsibility for Andrei's legal representation. I am very proud that I have been honoured to work with our organisation and follow this road together.

## **Work for the non-violence of Belarussian protest and for peaceful conflict resolution**

Today the YouTube Channel of "Our House"<sup>2</sup> is the most popular YouTube Channel in Belarus (except state media). Now we have about **30 million viewers**, more than **120.000 followers** and every video or stream has at minimum 200 000 viewers. We have the You Tube Silver Play Button for the number of viewers and followers. We are not media and we do not produce any news. But why are we so popular now? Our videos are devoted on how to protest in a peaceful way, how to survive under torture, we share our experiences under torture and detention and some very important tips.

And Our House is the first who is starting to speak about the transgenerational trauma and the historical memory. People listen and watch us because they are looking for the answers for the questions. Very often this is very taboo question. •

## **Universal Jurisdiction.**

As you are already aware, Prosecutor General's Office of Lithuania has launched an investigation into the beating and torture of a citizen of Belarus, co-owner of the capital's flower shop "First Tsvetnaya", Maxim Khoroshin which is great news. I am grateful to those of you who continue sending documents we are requesting. We have contacted the Lithuanian lawyers and spoken to the Belarussians who have become victims of torture. We have chosen two most severe cases based on which the lawyers will commence pre-trial investigation on Monday. Needless to say that Lithuanian lawyers are expensive, but the price corresponds to the quality of their work so it is worth paying. I am, therefore, grateful to everyone who continues supporting "Our House" financially. At the moment, "Our House" is making documents ready and trusts that the Prosecutor General's Office of Lithuania will initiate two new criminal cases before the New Year or at the beginning of January. Once the algorithm and filling procedures are established, we will submit other cases of offence, subject to the victim's consent, of course. We promise to keep you updated on the progress of the criminal cases initiated under the universal jurisdiction as well as the lawyers' work.

## **International Criminal Court in The Hague.**

As a matter of fact, quite a few organizations are talking about the International Criminal Court in The Hague but we could not understand what the procedure and problems were. Thanks to the amazing and incredible Dutch diaspora of Belarussians (who, by the way, live in The Hague) we have, finally, figured out all the nuances and found experts and lawyers who will assist us in preparation of all the paperwork for the International Tribunal in The Hague. I really admire Belarussians living in the Netherlands who really actively and enthusiastically help to move the whole process with their consistent step by step work. Even though, there are many nuances when it comes to The Hague, what is crucial for all of us to prove is that the crimes of the Lukashenko's regimes are systematic and deliberate crimes against humanity. We have discussed these questions several times, this Saturday as well. It has been agreed that the documents will be prepared in two ways. The first is investigation of the crimes against peaceful protestors and continue collecting paperwork.

The second is the situation with illegal sentences in Belarussian prisons, the situation with "children-328"<sup>3</sup> (most important) and slave labour of Belarussian prisoners. It appears that slave labour in prisons as well as illegal sentences are also of great interest to The Hague. For me personally, the situation with Belarussian children convicted under § 328 is especially important. I have repeated many times and it is my firm conviction that a lot of rot and dirt that is flooding the streets of peaceful Belarussian cities today comes precisely from closed institutions that society has not paid attention to for many years. I am referring to children's colonies, prisons, all kinds of boarding schools, as well as reception centers and medical treatment centers where

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/user/NashDomTV>

<sup>3</sup> "Children-328" are minors at the time of detention of convicted of minor non-violent drug-related offences (Article 328 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus).

the whole country will have to go at some point and bring order to those gloomy places. This work has already begun and, hopefully, will progress more actively from next week.

## **To the UN**

“Our House’s cases have so far been submitted to the various UN structures with very good responses received. It must be noted that, due to UN’s specific requirements, including how the paperwork should look like, the process is rather slow. Obviously, collection of all necessary documents takes time as well. On the one hand, the reaction from the UN is very supportive and I am very grateful to the colleagues in the UN for such an assistance and such a willingness to communicate and cooperate. On the other hand, this reaction saddens me. It suggests that in reality the cases and documents are being submitted to the UN by not too many organizations. It is clear that no one would really pay attention to our eleven cases had 300-400 cases been submitted. It is a little worrying, therefore, that regardless of the large information campaign on the topic of all crimes being investigated, there are not many documents submitted to international structures. Let’s hope that at the moment various human rights organizations are collecting (maybe slower than expected) information and the flow of cases and documentation demanding an international response from the UN structures will begin soon.

## **World Organisation Against Torture.**

We contacted, or rather, we were introduced by colleagues from the UN with whom we work closely, to the World Organization Against Torture. We had a very constructive meeting, and we discussed a range of matters. I really appreciated to be around people passionate about Belarus’ future, and we agreed with them that our main focus are children. I have introduced them to a terrible situation of 16-year-old Nikita Zolotarev. The child has been under unbearable torture since August, this is more than four-month. I believe that the situation with this child is extremely concerning today. We agreed that the Organisation will be actively involved in the campaign to protect little Nikita and that they will involve all their contacts and methods to achieve freedom for this unfortunate child.

## **Children's hospice campaign and many other local advocacy campaign.**

Our House is conducting many local advocacy campaigns. I would like to share one experience with you. As you know, we have launched a campaign for a children's hospice<sup>4</sup> in Grodno and I want to thank the Belarusian diaspora, who actively supported it and sent petitions and appeals to various organizations. In addition, Our House made an agreement with another influential organization: Amnesty International, which began its own urgent action in defense of the children's hospice. This means that a huge number of people around the world who support Amnesty International began to write letters to Lukashenko and health minister Karanik demanding to stop the pressure on the children's hospice in Grodno.<sup>5</sup> Also, thanks to Amnesty International and our work with them, Baroness Arminka Helik from the British House of Lords appealed to the English Foreign Ministry and demanded that the English Foreign Ministry responds more actively and protects the children's hospice in Grodno. Also, our campaign for the children's hospice was supported by the European Parliament, and the deputies of the European Parliament sent their letters of protest to Karanik and Lukashenko with the same demand - to stop the pressure on the children's hospice in Grodno. Committee of the Rights of the Child at the UN is very actively engaged in the situation around the issue, and they are also preparing their own response to the campaign.

**I want to thank our partners and friends who help us. This is a very difficult situation as we all are aware. I hope that when the situation will change, we will all be able to announce**

---

<sup>4</sup> A privately-run hospice (the only of its kind in Belarus) that is threatened with closure. See <https://news.house/41119>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.amnesty.de/sites/default/files/2020-11/167\\_2020\\_DE\\_Belarus.pdf](https://www.amnesty.de/sites/default/files/2020-11/167_2020_DE_Belarus.pdf)

**names of these selfless organizations and partners who each day stand shoulder to shoulder with us in the fight for a new Belarus.**

**I also want to thank everyone who supports the work of Our House and sent and donated money. Thanks to you, we have the opportunity to help people of Belarus and support them. We will be together and Long Live Belarus!**

The Belarusian journalist and activist Olga Karatch is the founder of the Nash Dom initiative ("Our house).

Nash Dom currently coordinates more than 23 volunteer groups in various Belarusian cities. The aim is to change society without violence and to increase the influence of citizens on the decision-making processes of the government. In 2019, Olga Karatch received the peace prize "Peace Work on the Grassroots" from the Bremen foundation die schwelle.