

Torture and Abuse in Women's Penal Colony No.4, Homel

Public inquiry

**“We used to love
standing there,
looking out to-
ward freedom”**



Contents

Summary	3
Showcase Colony No.4: The Chasm Between the Image and Reality	6
IK-4, Official Version	6
The colony through the eyes of female convicts	8
Quarantine Unit No. 8: "They didn't give you enough, I would shoot people like you..."	8
Unit Activists	10
Obligations, distribution commission	12
Daily routine:"... one week you live by the first shift schedule, and next week — by the second shift..."	14
Living conditions in the units: lice, freezing cold and bidets	17
Meals.....	20
Clothing.....	21
Correspondence, Packages, Visits, Calls:"The Wait for Letters Was Very Difficult..."	23
Calls	25
Family visits (short and long term).....	25
Slave Labor in the Women's Colony	28
Factory	28
Cleaning the Premises, Plowing, and Duties	33
Medical care	37
Political prisoners	40
Infringements and penalties	44
Punishment Commission	45
Infringements	46
Punitive Isolation Cell	48
Specific illegal punishments as the know-how of IK-4	50
Provocations	52
Psychological pressure	55
Emergency situations in the colony	58
Maria Kalesnikava	59
Colony staff	61
Head of the colony and his deputies	62
Operational Officers	68
Heads of units	76
Other Staff Members	78
Conclusions	83



Фото: Женская исправительная колония в Гомеле. Источник: Правозащитный центр "Весна"

SUMMARY

"... the penal colony made a great impression on me. Probably with its concentration of hate. And when you see those people and realize that everything you did, you did for them, too. You realize that it's not that they don't need it, you're... well you're not even an enemy, actually, you're just like a goofball, a fool, a holy fool for them. They don't understand why you did it. They just don't get it. Perhaps this was the revelation for me — that this is what reality is. Just because you were lucky enough to live in a beautiful world for 40 years next to beautiful people doesn't mean the whole world is like that. The world is different, and diverse..."

The main purpose of this study is to review the situation of women who are held in detention in Correctional Institution "Penal Colony No.4" of the Department of Corrections of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in the Homel region.

According to official information, penal colony No.4, aka IK-4, (located on Antoshkina Street in Homel) is a modern correctional institution with an infrastructure designed to meet all the needs of female inmates: a canteen, a club, a gym, a bathhouse, a hairdresser's, a medical building with ultrasound equipment, qualified personnel, and comfortable dormitories for the prisoners. The colony has a separate building of the Baby Unit, where children of female convicts are housed.

Pro-government propaganda journalists have repeatedly devoted their reports to this facility. They claim, IK-4 has created a perfect atmosphere and conditions for misguided women to serve their sentences. The colony is frequently visited by various government officials, MPs, representatives of the Prosecutor General's Office, the Department of Corrections of the Ministry of the Interior, and public monitoring commissions under the Ministry of Justice.

For the purposes of this study, the authors examined 20 interviews* (1,818 pages of text) with former female inmates who served their sentences in IK-4 between May 2021 and February 2024. The average sentence served by these women is 15.7 months. The cumulative duration of these women's experience at IK-4 amounted to 314 months. All of them were unlawfully convicted after the 2020 presidential election in Belarus and recognized as political prisoners.

Former inmates talk about [living conditions in the units](#), and the atmosphere created by the facility administration, as well as its "rules and codes of conduct". A separate chapter is devoted to how and where [female inmates work](#), as well as their remuneration.

After 2020, the population of Penal Colony No.4 changed markedly with the arrival of political prisoners there. Women convicted of ordinary criminal offenses have been joined by women who have suffered for their civic stance, forcing the colony administration to change the "correction" system that had been established for years.

It is no secret that since the times of the USSR, the attitude of "criminal" convicts to political prisoners has been respectful, except when prison authorities forced them to "press" political prisoners, beat them or make their existence unbearable. The staff of IK-4 also adopted such policy. This takes the form of placing women convicted on political grounds in units with women convicted of murder and other serious crimes; organized [provocations](#); inciting convicts against each other; and encouraging snitching.

Experts describe in detail the different stages of colony time — from [quarantine](#) and the [schedule of the day](#) to possible [violations](#) and [punishments](#).

The authors of the document examine the unprecedented cases of torture and ill-treatment of convicts on the example of political prisoner Maria Kalešnikava, who suffered a perforated stomach ulcer in the colony and has been kept incommunicado for more than 1.5 years now. Why is nothing known about her even to her relatives for a long time? Why is she being hidden from the public? These questions are far from rhetorical.

Political prisoner Natalia Hersche was only able to escape from this hell

* Interviews for this inquiry were provided by the Human Rights Center "Viasna" and the International Committee for the Investigation of Torture in Belarus.

through the intervention of the Swiss government. Like another political prisoner, journalist Volha Klaskouskaya, she was repeatedly placed in the punitive cell for months with multiple chronic illnesses. The released women tell their stories about the role of the colony's [medical staff](#) in maintaining their health.

Who created such conditions for women convicts and why are political prisoners subjected to abuse and sophisticated torture quite purposefully and deliberately? A large section of the investigation is devoted to the [staff](#), where former prisoners recall their relationships with representatives of the colony administration, their professional and human qualities, and their working methods.

The publication does not address the physical and mental health consequences of being in prison, as their severity can only be assessed by specialists. Obviously, the experience of incarceration affects a woman's future life, including difficulties in socio-psychological adaptation, misunderstanding in relations with family and others, family discord, etc.

The inquiry's [conclusions](#) are straightforward: Belarus is in violation of numerous international standards regarding the incarceration of women. Experts are confident that following a comprehensive reorganization of the penitentiary system in the Republic of Belarus in line with international standards — should such changes take place in the future — its primary goals will shift towards the reintegration of convicts, reducing recidivism, and enhancing public safety, rather than suppressing dissent.

The authors of this research acknowledge their responsibility for the information they disclose to the public in this publication. Hundreds of female convicts remain in captivity, and regardless of whether they are political prisoners or not, the unnecessary disclosure of their names may lead to new difficulties and problems for them, including punishments such as the widely used Article 411 of the Criminal Code*. Therefore, all personal data from the interviews has been removed, and any information about other convicts is also presented anonymously.

* Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus, Article 411: "Malicious disobedience to the requirements of the administration of a correctional institution implementing a sentence of deprivation of liberty shall be punished by imprisonment for a term of up to one year". <https://spring96.org/ru/news/112446>



Photo: Correctional institution "Penal colony No.4"

SHOWCASE COLONY NO.4: THE CHASM BETWEEN THE IMAGE AND REALITY

IK-4, Official Version

The correctional institution "Penal Colony No.4" of the Department of Corrections of the Ministry of the Interior of the Homel region is located at the address: 3, Antoshkina Street, Homel. Here, women who have received prison sentences for the first time are serving their time under standard conditions of a general correctional facility.

The facility is designed for more than 1,700 people*. It has its own hairdresser's shop, canteen, clubhouse, and gyms for the prisoners and the colony staff. According to the administration, the facility also has a hotel house for relatives. In total, there are six dormitories for the inmates. There is a new bathhouse, a new medical unit with ultrasound equipment and qualified personnel, a separate building of the Baby House for children of female convicts. All of which, according to the staff, is envisioned in the house rules.

The colony is often visited by various government officials, MPs, representatives of the Prosecutor General's Office, the Department of Corrections of the Ministry of the Interior, public monitoring commissions under the Ministry of Justice** and, of course, propaganda journalists to create an ideal picture of humane treatment of women prisoners and excellent conditions for them. A

* According to unconfirmed reports, from 2020 to 2021, about three thousand people are serving sentences in the colony. <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/koloniya-kuda-otpravili-kolesnikovu/31662163.html>

** NGO representatives are not included in public monitoring commissions.

few years ago, a major overhaul of several buildings was carried out for this purpose, and high-ranking visitors are usually brought there.*



Photo: Representatives of the Ministry of Justice in IK-4



In the photo: A stand on the territory of IK-4 with photos of samples of the colony's sewing products — mostly work-wear

Official representatives are informed that the garments produced by female prisoners not only sell well within the country, but are also being exported abroad.

* https://minjust.gov.by/press/news/politicheskie_partii_obshchestvennye_obedineniya_i_drugie_nekommercheskie_organizatsii/ispravitelnyu_koloniyu_4_v_gomele_posetili_predstaviteli_obshchestvennykh_nablyudatelnykh_komissiy/

The colony through the eyes of female convicts

"Everything is wrong there. There's no correctional process, they just mess people up there..."

"You're in a group setting all the time. Everything is done there to suppress you, so that you feel like a lame person and maybe not even a person at all."

Quarantine Unit No. 8: "They didn't give you enough, I would shoot people like you..."

"It was evening time, and you were super exhausted, hungry, completely drained. I couldn't think straight anymore. I perceive the overall system under which this transportation of prisoners takes place — with dogs, shouting, carrying belongings without help, at a fast pace... What is happening is also a form of torture. Even a healthy person would struggle to endure it, and there are people of different ages and physical conditions going through this. They don't make any concessions there, so it's pretty hard for the nervous system and the physical one too."

After being transferred, female convicts are placed in a quarantine unit, where they spend about two weeks. During this period, they have no communication with their families.

"Quarantine here is not related to COVID or something. It's an intimate quarantine... to teach how to behave properly in the colony: how to tuck up the crib neatly, correctly; how to jump up just when someone in shoulder straps comes in; how to say hello in choir, and so on and so forth. A 14-day training, essentially."

The stay in quarantine takes place in a closed building with a separate courtyard. The standard procedure for admitting new arrivals is inspection of belongings (with special attention to profiled persons on preventive record), showering, uniforms, and assignment to sections and beds.*

"They give you this terrible, absolutely awful quilted jacket, this dress, this suit, and these shoes that you can't even fit your feet into. It just

* Only the top bunk (second tier) was assigned to political prisoners on the bunk beds.

so happened that I got a new pair, but they were so stiff and absolutely terrible...."

"Inspections are a form of art in the prison system. All your belongings just scatter in every direction: this is not allowed, that is not allowed, this can't be kept. And everything is just tossed into a bag and sent to storage, where it simply rots if parents or relatives don't pick it up. And it might just stay there for several years."

The quarantine unit has its own small canteen where women take their meals. Some of them work in the kitchen, from where they carry heavy tanks and cans of food into their building.

In the first days, convicts undergo a medical examination in the medical unit: blood test, fluorography, examination by a dentist and gynecologist.

Time in quarantine is occupied with endless cleaning of sections, corridors, and the grounds, studying the internal rules and the daily schedule.

"And constant drills on internal regulations. It's a whole big book — a compilation of various idiotic laws and rules, starting from prohibitions against keeping fish and plants, and ending with restrictions on running on the roofs... But the real horror is that you had to memorize all of it and take exams on it."

During the time spent in quarantine, various staff members from the security department, the head of psychological support, and the head of the correctional process engage in endless conversations with the inmates.

"We have been interviewed many times during the 2-week quarantine. This is a regular procedure: as soon as a person arrives, especially a person labelled as an extremist, they invite her for conversations, ask about the conviction, and how she plans to serve her sentence."

During the conversation, he started from a distance, but the main message was that they had a report on me from Valadarka pre-trial detention center, which was negative, and if I behaved as described in that report, my time here would be unbearable. If I behave appropriately and listen to the administration, I can avoid certain issues. (During the conversation with the Deputy Head of the Colony for Operational Activities, S. S. Kavalou.)"

Threats of punishment begin already during quarantine. Practically from there, an inmate can end up in a punitive isolation cell for very minor infractions: getting ready for bed earlier than 30 minutes before bedtime, showering outside of schedule, etc. Moreover, violations in quarantine are summed up with violations received later when in the unit.

"And it gets to the point that if a badge is sewn incorrectly by even a centimeter, or even less, by millimeters... In quarantine, they might not impose a severe punishment yet; perhaps they will just issue a warning if it's not sewn neatly or correctly. But in the unit, if you are a political prisoner, they would register a violation of the rules, if the measurements don't agree by a centimeter. Well, it is true not only for political prisoners, but particularly, for political prisoners."

Quarantine unit is the place where provocations and "setups" begin.

"But they already listed for me, during my time in quarantine, how many times I gave cigarettes to someone, how many times I shared things, like pads, plus a note, and some other stuff They said that this is worth at least 30 days, maybe even more, of a punitive cell."

Before placement from quarantine to a unit, convicts are offered to join one of the sections of their choice — depending on their preferences and ability to sing, dance, draw and so on. In accordance with this placement the inmates are then given duty assignments.

Unit Activists

"Some of the housekeepers start to act harshly, telling the unit activists things that the operational officer never said... This way they will get more bonuses, and so on. Well, they start provoking, pushing, not solving problems, delaying the solution of some issues..."

Pressure on political prisoners is exerted not only by the staff of the colony but also by the "activists" within the units. There is a certain hierarchy in the units, which is built by the colony staff. Unlike the "caste" system, which is typical for male correctional institutions, there is no division of convicts into any strictly defined groups in IK-4. Only the "activists" group can be distinguished in the units — these are convicts who cooperate with the colony administration.

"... we didn't have any divisions by caste... There were different conditions, "perks" from the administration, various conditions of serving the sentence, and they could even receive medical leave... the activists, starting with the housekeeper."

Inmates from the "activist" group perform various functions (e. g. escorting other inmates when moving from the living area to other areas), primarily reporting on the situation in the unit to operational staff and exerting control over both political and other inmates. Representatives of the "activists" head the unit sections.

The "housekeeper" is appointed in each unit. As a rule, the housekeeper of a unit is an inmate who performs organizational, administrative, informational and other functions as instructed by the administration. For this role, an inmate is selected who agrees to comply with all orders of the colony administration and operational officers (both those directly assigned to specific units and higher-ranking officers). In addition to certain powers (appointment of persons on duty in coordination with the head of the unit, determining where inmates' belongings will be stored), the housekeeper of the unit receives other privileges from the administration (does not work in a factory, does not perform chores, etc.).

"... There was a housekeeper in each unit. Naturally, she worked for the administration, and reported everything that was happening in the unit. All the operational information, the whole life of the unit, who did what. Who didn't do what."

As a rule, there are three sections in a unit:

1. assistance in organizing the life and leisure of convicts;
2. organizing inmate labor;
3. protection of the rights of inmates.

"If you join this section for everyday life and leisure, then your duties are limited only to this, for example, you might be on duty in the section, and you can participate in all sorts of cultural events in the club, perform, sing, or dance. If you are in the Rights section, which is the protection of the rights of convicts, you are only on gate and table duty, it has nothing to do with the rights of convicts and their protection, you just do the gate and table duty. It doesn't affect anything at all, because you're on duty everywhere anyway, except you have to sew a triangle on your sleeve with the name of your section."

Each section has a chairman, who draws up duty schedules for the section's areas, accompanies other inmates when walking somewhere, organizes the inmates' leisure time, and so on.

"... They, every one of them, is engaged in their own areas, but what they have in common is that very often, I emphasize, not always, but very often they are people who, well, probably, deliberately try to set up political prisoners, well, and ordinary prisoners, too, if they or the colony administration don't like them..."

For such cooperation, the "activists" of the unit receive certain privileges and concessions from the staff.

"The [duty schedule] was also compiled by the activists and approved by the head of the unit, and, as I noticed, the people close to the administration, they were never doing any duties..."

"... the "activists", a couple of people, well, they also cooperated with the operative staff, with the administration of the colony ... They were privileged too, they could get sick leave, lie down there. They didn't do the inventory work either..."

Each inmate's clothing has a badge and armband (there can be three, meaning an inmate can be in all three sections). The armbands are the designation of the section, the badge is a photo, an article of conviction and the date of birth. If the convicted person is on preventive record, the badge and armband are yellow. Inmates classified as persistent offenders (with two infractions, including placement in punitive cells) do not have armbands.

Obligations, distribution commission

In quarantine, great emphasis is placed on training in the Internal Regulations — if a convict fails to pass an exam on her knowledge of them, she runs the risk of being sent to a punitive cell rather than to a unit.

"At that time, I still didn't understand where everything was going, and then it started. I said I would not turn down the job, secondly, I said I would sign off on the duties. Just to get out of quarantine. Those who do not sign off usually go straight to the punitive cell."

The "extremists" pass the obligations test separately and must learn all 8 points by heart. They are examined in a separate office, while the process is filmed on camera.

"... is to be diligent in labor, to treat the property of Correctional Facility Number 4 with respect, and to participate in grounds cleaning and self-maintenance. Well, something there to try hard... , to take the initiative to eliminate bad habits, to do your best to pay for the damages caused by the crime. So these are 8 paragraphs that you just kind of sign and thereby undertake to work in the factory, yes, do this forced labor. To participate in inventory work, in all the duties and so on..."

One of the inmates shared an interesting story. When several dozen political prisoners arrived at the colony at once, the administration was somewhat perplexed. Before them, there were 1 or 2 "extremists" in each unit. Just in case, they were banned from almost everything that had previously been allowed in quarantine.

"That is, the maximum we could do was to clean the section and the floor in the corridor. And absolutely all representatives of the colony's administration had conversations with us. Sometimes there were 2 or 3 meetings a day. And these meetings were all fairly monotonous, manipulative, in an attempt to figure out what exactly we didn't like about the state policy. Always the same question: what were we lacking that made us take to the streets, do we feel remorse, have we admitted our guilt, and are we planning to write a petition for pardon to the President of the Republic of Belarus? "

After two weeks of quarantine there is a assignment commission headed by Talstiankou*, the head of the colony, and all the other unit supervisors. Everything that happens is also filmed.

"Then came the assignment. Assignment is when everyone gathers — the entire administration of the colony — there are plump women and men with important looks, smiling, and you enter, standing at attention, reporting your name, date of birth, article, and so on, and so forth. They look at you, depending on the your article they might laugh, they might humiliate you. Many girls were humiliated. That's how the assignment in the colony goes: you stand there listening to all this, you are assigned a unit, and you leave."

* The head of the colony in 2021.

Daily routine: "... one week you live by the first shift schedule, and next week — by the second shift..."

According to former women prisoners, life in the colony runs strictly on a schedule. Two work shifts determine what inmates are to do during a given time period. Below is a chart reflecting the main elements of the daily routine (times may vary slightly).

Chart 1. Daily routine at IK-4Notes

1st shift	Activity	2nd shift	Activity
6:00	Wake up, hygiene	6:35	Wake up, hygiene
6:30	Breakfast	7:00	Inspection
7:00	Line up for work and inspection	8:10	Breakfast
7:30-12:00	Work	After breakfast	Distribution of medicines
12:00	Lunch	9:30-10:30	"Vector"
12:30-14:30	Work	10:30-11:30	Free time
14:30-15:00	End of work, return to unit	11:30-12:20	"Vector"
15:00-16:00	Free time (coffee and tea)	13:10	Lunch
16:00	Line up and inspection	14:00	Line up for work
16:30-17:30	"Vector"*** - watching a special show in the educational space	15:00-16:30	Work
17:30	Distribution of medicines (if needed)	16:30	Break
18:00-18:50	Free time (coffee and tea)* "Vector"	After break	Work
19:10	Dinner	18:00	Dinner****
20:00-20:30	Evening inspection of prevention group	21:50	End of work
20:30-21:30	Free time*** (change into own clothes)	21:50-22:20	Evening inspection of prevention group
21:30	Preparing for lights out	22:30	Preparing for lights out
22:00	Lights out	23:00	Lights out

* Vector is the internal television of the colony. Mostly, they show what happened in the club — meetings, lectures, or amateur art competitions. There are also lectures by Alcoholics Anonymous. And a movie would be broadcast on Sundays.

"... Most often, these are either propaganda films of some kind, like the "Editors Club", and broadcast again and again. It's all in repeat. They showed us a lot about Tut. by. They loved all sorts of "confession" stories, and Azaronak. Or about Belarus' achievements: how wonderful our military industry is, how we've triumphed everywhere, how we're integrating with Russia in every possible way, and how everything is just great. We had to sit there and watch. At the same time, you're not allowed to read, not allowed to write, not allowed to sleep or even to close your eyes. Because the housekeeper walks

around and checks it. If they catch someone with their eyes closed, they write it down in their notebook, and it can be perceived as a violation — you have to sit there and watch."

***"These breaks between the "Vector" shows are the only time for a snack or something else that you can have. At any given moment someone might come in and say, now we're all carrying boxes somewhere, or come up with some other "entertainment" — the punishment is that you're doing some useless nonsense instead of having that hour to rest."*

****"If you couldn't eat at dinner, if there was some bad food or something else, then you won't eat until the next morning."*

Among **leisure** activities in the colony there are a gym, a library, a needlework group, and church. Inmates are allotted about three hours a day to do this, but at the discretion of the administration, this time can be spent cleaning the grounds or following other orders.

"By the end it turned out that the political prisoners were banned from the gym, you could use the library but not visit it, just ask someone to bring books, and you couldn't attend the needlework group. You could sign up for groups, but you get expelled from there, there's a ban on you that says you can't go there. They could also put a ban, for example, on going to the club. It was done on an individual basis. Some officers forbade such things to all political inmates in their units. I was transferred to unit 19t, where I was allowed to go to the gym. There were units with a complete ban on that. In one of the units, political inmates were forbidden to go to church."

Leisure in the colony consisted mainly of watching Vector shows.

"The total number of Vectors shows on Sunday was about four hours. Two in the morning and a long one in the evening. That is, four hours a day you just must sit and watch TV, while you can't read or write there, there's nothing, because you're sitting under the camera."

"I went to church, and I was allowed to go to the club. [name]... was not allowed to go to church and she spent a very long time begging the officer to allow her to go to church to put a candle for the repose of her relative. She's been begging for two weeks. But she could go to the gym. She was periodically granted permission and then had it revoked. How they chose who is allowed and who is not, for what reason, is also unknown."

According to the interviewees, three years ago, 5 books were allowed for each convict. They could be sent from home. Printouts of books were permitted. However, with the admission of political prisoners to the colony, this is prohibited. Currently, any educational literature and literature in a foreign language has been banned.

"For instance, if you've been there for seven years, you can't drill some words in English, you can't learn Polish. For example, I was prohibited from studying at a distance school offering various vocational courses by mail."

How do the inspections look like?

"... if you're not in a factory, they proceed in the same way: everybody lines up, those on preventive record always to take the very first line, any type of record, whether for political reasons or whatever. You stand in a row of 5 people, and so you have 5 people behind you, and, well, you form such columns. Then... you stand and wait for someone to check on you. The inspection consists of 2 parts: this is when they read you and when they count you. That is, they read you by cards, and that's what the officers do. They have a stack of cards, and I understand they have your picture on them, there's general information about you, there's like an article of conviction, the sentence, and if you are on preventive record, the card is yellow...."

The officers call the prisoner's last name, she takes a step forward and at the same time says her first name and patronymic. In addition to verifying inmate data, there is a quantitative check. This is done by supervisors who walk all over the colony and count the people in each unit. The numbers of the cards should match the data of the controllers. This process takes an average of 20-30 minutes.

For political prisoners, there is an additional preventive inspection between Vector shows, where some people don't have to attend. Inmates who are on the preventive record come to their stations to be checked.

"You have to go outside and wait for the controllers, the military, to come. The inspection starts at 8. If it was winter, they always came at 8:25-8:30. That is, you just had to stand in the freezing cold for half an hour and wait for them."

Living conditions in the units: lice, freezing cold and bidets

"The first aspect is that there may be different conditions of confinement.... there can be a hole in the floor, an old, stinky toilet with dried shit, or there can be a regular white toilet that you can sit your butt on. It may seem strange to emphasize this, but for psychological comfort, when you're running around and can't stop for a second, little things like this are important, so that you feel at least in some basic needs you're not humiliated, or dirty..."

The living conditions of prisoners in the colony depend on the building in which the unit is housed. The internal regulations officially allow washing on the so-called bathing day. And there is also an extra day, it's called a head wash day, when you can wash your hair. There are, for example, unit facilities that have one bidet for 80 people, but may not have a shower to a full body wash. Some units do have showers, but you can't use them as you can only shower once a week.

The old shabby building of **Unit 15**, for example, has no showers, according to former inmates. There are 4 sinks for the whole unit, one foot washbasin. There are 5 toilets on the ground floor, but one is reserved for the head of the unit. That is, 4 toilet bowls for the entire unit and one bidet. That's the kind of amenities 80 women have to make do with. The dining room is also very small and during meals women cannot fit in there, they have to eat in other utility rooms, including the washroom. The washroom has two washing machines and a table for household items.

"And the duty person rushes to the toilet, and has literally a minute to clean everything there, before the head of the unit enters it. But most often it happened as follows: someone shouts "toilet to the head," and the woman on duty goes to kick everyone out of the toilet. No matter what you were doing in there, you come out of there, the person on duty cleans everything up, and then stands there for a minute to half an hour and makes sure no one enters the toilet. Because the unit head might say she needs the toilet and then get worked up or whatever, or ditch it, or just forget about the fact that there are 90 or 100 people people there waiting for when they can go to the toilet."

Unit 16 is damp and moldy, very cold; in **Unit 14** it looks like it has not been renovated for a long time — the walls and floors are ragged, the plumbing is old and shabby.

"And there were toilet bowls and 1 bidet for 80 people. There were sinks and footwashers, that is, it was not to do a full body wash."

"After a month and a half... I was transferred to unit 14. I was shocked when I came to the unit. It was just some kind of squat. I thought Unit 15 wasn't great, but when I saw Unit 14 it was kind of creepy. You come in, there are ragged walls and floors. You come to the sink – there is a distance between the faucet and the sink... That is, it is impossible to wash your hair there. There are very old sinks that you won't wash clean. The layer of rust and all kinds of gunk in there could drive you crazy."

"I was thinking how do I wash myself, how do I go to the toilet because it's 5 toilet bowls facing each other and separated by a regular curtain. And just to go into the restroom, and there are people in there, you have to try not to trip over other people's knees. The spacers between the toilets aren't that wide, and you can see what's in there or who's in there. And that's basically it, you don't want to see it, but your side vision captures everything that's going on. It was simply impossible to go to the restroom; it was a constant struggle to endure."

Despite the fact that Unit 16 is considered an exemplary unit, and the administration visits it very often, the living conditions there, according to the women, were very poor. One, it's very cold. Old wooden windows don't keep the heat at all. There is no drying room where you can dry things. Jackets, shoes are stored directly in the section, there is a refrigerator and a very small stand with lockers* (1 for 4 people). The restroom has 4 stalls with toilets. One is allowed to use the shower. In general, Unit 16 is considered a "drug" unit because there are a lot of people in there who are sentenced under Criminal Article 328.

There are units with large storage lockers for the boxes of stuff that are arranged in 3-4 tiers. Some units have 2 meter by 2 meter storage rooms with small lockers that are hard to fit all the stuff in. Former convicts have somewhat better feedback on **units 7, 9** and **17**: they are quite warm and have better living conditions. There are showers with curtains and foot washers.

In unit 9, there are 2 separate rooms with a bidet, and a kitchen. There are 2 dining tables and chairs in the kitchen. Along the walls of the kitchen there are cabinets with lockers. They are made of metal and are designed so that you can store food in them, locking them with a key. But the administration must have access to their contents, and therefore they are should not be locked. There are 2 refrigerators in the kitchen. But each unit has its own way, there may be 3 refrigerators somewhere. A cabinet by the socket to boil water on. In some units there are kettles, in some others there are none and one has to boil water with coil heaters.

* a place to keep food products

Unit 19 and Unit 9 are located in the same building. That is, the conditions are identical there.

There is one significant drawback in **Unit 13** (located in a building called Bombay): it is very cold there. Despite the fact that the building is quite new and renovated, the windows are not inserted correctly and there is a constant draught in the building. According to the convicts, people are sent there as punishment.

"Well, on October 1st the convicts, the women told me that "well, [name]... , you haven't seen winter yet, we'll cover ourselves with body-warmers in winter"."

When I went to bed, like all other women, it wasn't only a bodywarmer I had to cover myself with. I put all the clothes that I had on, because the room was unbelievably cold."

There are 2 showers in the unit. But – the inmates are forbidden to use them. One has to visit a bathhouse with poor conditions to get washed.

"There's a shower that's visited once a week, and you can only take it for 15 minutes, but that's from the time you enter the bathroom. The whole unit came in, that is, a lot of people. The unit is sent to shower. There are several shower stalls. And we were given 15 minutes from the moment we entered, that is, to undress, take a shower, dry off and get dressed. All this had to be done in 15 minutes, once a week. The rest of the time we were, shall we say, washing from a bottle over a toilet bowl, somehow we tried to adjust , but it was impossible... it's not the same as washing your hair in a shower. Moreover, after a shower, when you come out so steamed, warmed up, all wet, despite the fact that it is very cold outside, you still have to walk outside, if it was a shower before going to bed".

"I was in different units every month, that is, I changed 10 units, and different units look differently. For the most part, the sanitary and living conditions are bad in all units, i. e. it is bad plumbing and stench, it is also various insects, i. e. there are bugs, spiders, cockroaches, in most units there were body lice everywhere. In the evening, when I sat down to read, I would put on my reading glasses, which have a very high plus prescription. I specifically asked my parents to buy them because the lighting there was poor. With these glasses, I was able to see body lice on the pillow.

Women mostly had to take care of hygiene products themselves. Once a month, they were given household soap, one pack of pads and toilet paper.

"Sometimes there are no pads, sometimes there is no toilet paper. And sometimes there are no pads or toilet paper in the colony shop. Basically, it's just another way of rubbing your face in the dirt, reminding you of your place once again. It's not even about washing up, you've kind of gotten over that. Over the fact that you're just walking around dirty for two years. And you smear that dirt from one part of your body to another. And you can't properly take care of your menstruation there either. And to me, that's just so outrageous..."

Meals

In the colony, there are three meals a day according to a set schedule. According to stories from inmates who have been there since 2019, the food used to be terrible, and there were few products available in the store.

"Now, especially when all sorts of inspections come, there's plenty of meat, some kind of fish — though not the best quality — fried fish patties, morning porridges that are quite decent, butter 2–3 times a week, and eggs. Basically, the food is enough that you won't starve, even if you're not receiving much help from outside. The soups are more or less okay now. The meal plan is as follows: in the morning, porridge, usually made with milk, a piece of white bread, and tea. For lunch, there's a first course — soup — then a second course, then a drink, compote or starch drink, half a piece of white bread, and a piece of black bread. In the evening, there's also some kind of dish, a piece of white bread, and tea."

Basically, it's enough to get by. But, of course, it's canteen food, so it doesn't have any real flavor or culinary qualities, it's just the kind of plain food that you quickly get tired of."

Some women don't eat in the canteen; instead, they buy food from the store and rely on products brought by relatives. However, this situation doesn't apply to everyone.

"If you have fines to pay or are a persistent offender (have several outstanding violations), your spending limit is restricted to 64 rubles [around \$19], which is two basic values. If you don't have fines and aren't a "persistent offender" or obligated to pay, the limit is 192 rubles [around \$58], or four basic values. For me, 192 rubles a month wasn't enough. 64 rubles is practically nothing — you can't even buy cigarettes with that. Hypothetically, even if you had only two rubles a day, you could buy cigarettes and coffee, that's it. No sweets... You

also have to buy hygiene products and cosmetics with those 64 rubles. It's really hard to live on 64 rubles."

In the store, in addition to food, women can buy cosmetics, mainly from "Belita-Vitex," as well as wet wipes and toilet paper. Each unit is allowed three shopping trips per month, typically at the beginning, middle, and end of the month.

"Sometimes there's no toilet paper in the store, and even napkins are unavailable. Sometimes they buy up all the wet wipes and any paper products in the store, so they disappear quickly, and you have to go around asking who can lend you toilet paper. This has happened to me two or three times, and there wasn't any toilet paper for not just a couple of days, but for a week or two."

Very often, the food brought to the colony is close to its expiration date. This mainly applies to dairy products — cottage cheese, yogurt, kefir, and milk. The purchased products must be stored in refrigerators, and their expiration dates are strictly checked. At the same time, many women complain about food theft from the refrigerators.

For many women, the food provided wasn't enough.

"For about a month or three weeks, I had no food of my own at all except for tea. I really felt constantly hungry. When you go to the canteen, the food is extremely hot. While you're blowing on it to cool it down, you burn your mouth, and you don't have enough time to eat within the time allotted. Some of the girls seem to have iron mouths because they can eat it, but I couldn't. I lost about five kilograms in the first month."

"But since there's a lot of physical labor... you definitely won't gain weight from this; in fact, you're more likely to lose it. You won't starve to death because there are still calories. If you feel really hungry, there's always plenty of bread, and you can fill up on that. Many people don't eat it, though, because it doesn't taste good — it's kind of bland..."

Clothing

The entire colony population is required to wear a uniform. The uniform consists of a summer dress — pink with white flowers — and a headscarf.

"They also give us a suit — this includes a skirt, a shirt, and a jacket. It's a blue quilted jacket. If your sentence is longer than 5 years,

you're are to get 2 suits and 2 dresses, but for us, probably only those with sentences of 10+ years received 2 dresses and 2 suits. I didn't get them, so I ended up buying them separately in the store later.

In addition, they give you shoes. They're somewhat like ballet flats, with a flat sole. You also get boots, which are rough, like the kind factory workers wear — something like that. And they give you flip-flops as well."

You also get a few pairs of socks, one bra, and leggings (warm pants).

They also give you terrible tights, which everyone laughed at because after just one use, the knee stretches out so much that it reaches down to the ankle. And every time you put on those tights, at first they're at your waist, then they're under your chest, then over your chest, and eventually, you could tie a bow on your head with them. That is, they stretch so very well, very quickly. Brest sock and hosiery factory. And they give out uniform shoes. One can't opt out of what I've listed except for socks, bras, and tights. So you have to have on your hands a hat, a kerchief, a dress, a suit, a padded jacket and footwear. That's boots and shoes."



*Photo: Summer clothing for female prisoners at IK-4.
Source: belta.by*



*Photo: Winter clothing for female prisoners at IK-4.
Source: dson6cgvys1hu.cloudfront.net*

According to former prisoners, the list of clothes allowed in the colony includes 2 undershirts, 2 black T-shirts, 2 black long-sleeve shirts, 2 black sweaters, 2 pairs of leggings, 8 pairs of socks, 8 underpants, a nightgown or summer pajamas, winter pajamas, gloves, mittens, a scarf, and a hat. Fall shoes, winter shoes, summer shoes, sandals. A handkerchief, and 2 or 3 bras. Anything extra would be sent to the central warehouse. Clothes and shoes change, depending on the season.

Correspondence, Packages, Visits, Calls: “The Wait for Letters Was Very Difficult...”

“You ask them:

– What about the correspondence?

They answer:

– Nobody writes to you.

And what makes you think that anyone remembers about you at all? “

According to the Criminal Correctional Code of the Republic of Belarus, convicts can receive correspondence without restriction. All correspondence is subject to censorship*.

“And in the colony, I really started to receive letters from people who had also been writing to me to the Detention Center for a whole year, letters had two-digit numbering, that is, well, people numbered the letters they wrote, and I had not received anything before arrival at the colony. However, people continued to write... with no response from me, they wrote letters that ended up nowhere. But they continued to write, and not just short notes, but good, lengthy letters.”

According to former prisoners, **until January 2022**, correspondence to and from them was delivered in a normal manner. However, since January, the situation changed dramatically. Inmates began to find themselves in an information vacuum, with the administration allowing correspondence only with close family members.

“From about January of '22 they restricted correspondence, and only letters from close relatives began to reach me, and my letters reached nobody either. I tried to write to my girlfriends in different ways, and nothing reached them, to the point that even when I wrote my parents' name and address on a letter to a friend sometimes, and those letters did not reach my parents either.”

Many of the prisoners attribute the restriction of correspondence to the outbreak of war in Ukraine.

“... in February the letters stopped coming... everyone I talked to [among the political prisoners], they all had the same situation, that only the closest relatives could write them, and only some of their let-

* CRIMINAL CORRECTIONAL CODE OF THE REPUBLIC OF BELARUS. Article 85, parts 1, 2.

ters reached them. Since February 22, the letters stopped for everyone, that is, from strangers, from friends, well, from anyone. This is definitely not the decision made by our penal institution on its own. I talked to my associates from the men's colonies, and we found out that it all happened at the same time.

After the new year there was less and less correspondence arriving, that is, we immediately saw a very big difference. **The first ones to stop coming were registered letters.** That is, if before we all, all political prisoners could meet when receiving registered letters, because they were received separately, then at some point we just realized that there were no registered letters coming. Then the regular ones were gone. Slowly, gradually, and after the 24th, that is, after February 24th, zero letters altogether.

Women say that very often the administration uses the letters as an additional form of blackmail. For example, they force an inmate to confess guilt.

"Then, when they got a confession of guilt, they would let the situation go again, and again she would correspond normally, without any problems. That is, it is just another way to put pressure on a person, to break a person, they would use any means absolutely if they needed to do it."

Correspondence of a legal nature — complaints against the administration, for example, did not leave the walls of the colony.

"... all complaints about violation of the rights of the Criminal Correctional Code to the prosecutor's office and not only, which I sent from the colony, did not leave the facility. They were blocked by the responsible official who was in charge of this. With the exception of complaints to appeal the sentence."

In addition to the censors, who are obliged to monitor the content of correspondence, the heads of units do this on their own initiative — to put additional pressure on the convicts. They destroy many letters in front of a convict, arbitrarily interpreting their content, and many letters were destroyed without her knowledge.

"Danila Valiantsinavich Baranau discovered my soft spot — letters from my mother — and started systematically destroying them. He would come to the unit, call me to one of the sections and say, "So — a letter. I read it and something is wrong here." Me: "What's wrong with it?" — "There's too much cynicism. Quote, "cynicism." So you have to write without cynicism. We don't use cynicism."... So it looked like this: several letters were taken, weighed, which one was heavier, with

photos, postcards — and it was destroyed. Over 10 letters from my mom were destroyed in a row. That is, I had not received any letters from her for more than a month. And these were both photos and some postcards“.

Pshenichnikava liked to tear up letters, and even ordinary prisoners complained about her: “Either you do what I need or I’m tearing up a letter right now.

In my presence, the letter was torn up and an act was drawn up that it was liquidated, this sheet. And then, through my parents, I try to find out: what exactly did my friend write that was cynical? In fact, my friend said hello to the censors. And it’s perceived as “cynical“.

Calls

According to the Criminal Procedure Code, each convict is entitled to 4 regular and 2 video calls with close relatives per month. As punishment, the calls can be canceled.

“... The phones obviously have static on the line. At some point, when you start thinking it’s just paranoia, you begin to hear, on the other end of the line, not the person you’re talking to, but the voice of an administration employee who is probably sitting there monitoring the conversation to ensure it’s being recorded or to check what you’re saying. Because at any moment, as they themselves say, they can cut off the recording and end your visit with relatives.“

Prisoners note that by December 2022, two calls had been dropped, leaving one video call and 3 regular calls a month.

Family visits (short and long term)

According to the Criminal Procedure Code, convicts are entitled to 1 long and 1 short visit every 4 months. However, not everyone and not always succeeded in securing the prescribed visits. Visits are revoked for the most significant offenses by decision of the punishment commission.

Short-term family visits take place in a special building where prisoners also meet with lawyers.

“It looks like a long booth, so to speak, with handsets and devices next to each chair. There are many devices — I don’t remember —

6 on one side and 6 on the other. One side is for visitors, and one side is for the prisoners... if possible, they try to isolate political prisoners.

“Obviously, people are seated in certain places on purpose, so that the content of the conversation can be listened to, and this is not interfered with by extraneous sounds from those sitting next to them.

A **long-term visit** takes place in a separate cabin, there is a toilet and shower room, a kitchen, and guest rooms. One room has two beds, bedside tables, and a table. The duration of the visit is from 1 to 3 days.

Convicts must notify their relatives about visits by themselves. However, it often happened that they did not have time to do it, because the letter might stay in the colony for three days before it is sent out. Long visits could be limited or revoked by the administration — everything happens at its discretion.

“... I was not given a long visit for a very long time. Every month I applied for a visit, but they rejected it for some unknown reason. During my entire term, I was granted a long visit once, and I was granted it after I went to the head of the colony and asked why I was refused every month without explanation. The general procedure is that you should have a long visit once every four months. During the whole year that I was there, I had one.

“I was granted a visit for 24 hours. And there was such a rule: for the extremists who admitted their guilt, a 2-day visit was allowed; for those who did not admit guilt — it was only one day. But this is also a method of pressure.”

Many of the former convicts pointed out a tendency: as soon as they applied for a visit, they were sure to get some formal violation report — for untidy appearance, for example. Once a prisoner received 3 reports, she becomes a “persistent offender” (a prisoner who violates the internal rules more than 3 times). Once in this category, she is automatically deprived of a lot of things: 4 calls per month are replaced by 1 call, the limit of 6 basic values to be spent on a store becomes only 1 basic value. In addition, the convict is deprived of parcels.

“I saw the girls suffering, how many nerves it costs them and their families to get this visit, because the applications were lost, then they remained unsigned, then an officer would say that “you did not write anything”. Then the visit would be canceled, and the administration would immediately look for an excuse to make a report and gather the punishment commission to deprive the convict of the visit.

For the first six months, they simply denied me a visit. And then, right after the first visit, I had a punishment commission, and by the commission's decision I was deprived of visits, and I had nothing else until the end of my term."

Convicts can receive **packages from relatives** once every 3 months — up to 50 kilograms, and clothing packages — twice a year, but only from close relatives. And hygiene products could be put only in the clothing parcels.

*"I am an "extremist" who is on the terrorist list, which means I am not allowed to receive money transfers. This means that I can only receive money from my work in the factory. At the factory the salary is small, you can guess, I didn't get more than 25 rubles **about \$7** per month. 25 rubles is a very good salary for prisoners, most of the time you get 5 rubles **about 1.5\$**. And so you got 5 rubles a month, the clothing package came. And the next one can be only in six months, and you run out of sanitary pads. Inmates are not allowed to share, you might not be able to buy some at the store. What should you do? "*



Photo: Chairwoman of the Council of the Republic of the National Assembly of Belarus Natalia Kochanova at IK-4 during a working visit on August 5, 2021. Source: belta.by

SLAVE LABOR IN THE WOMEN'S COLONY

Factory

"The living conditions and work at the factory are like in hell.*

"In Penal Colony No.4 (IK-4), women work at a sewing factory called State Enterprise No.4. According to the authorities, State Enterprise No.4 is one of Belarus's leading manufacturers of special, work, and uniform clothing. The Republican Production Unitary Enterprise "No.4" is located on the territory of the women's penal colony. As of today, State Enterprise No.4 is a factory that has all the necessary organizational units for the production of sewing products, starting from model design and the creation of sample standards in the production laboratory, to serial (mass) production in sewing workshops."^{***}

The factory has several workshops, the main ones being the cutting workshop and the sewing workshop. A brigade system is established; each brigade is led by a brigadier, who is also an inmate. In addition, civilian employ-

* According to Article 98 of the Criminal Correctional Code of the Republic of Belarus of 11.01.2000 N 365-3 (hereinafter - CCC), everyone sentenced to imprisonment is obliged to work in places and at jobs determined by the administration of penal institutions. Convicts are engaged in labor in penal institutions, including maintenance work, and in production workshops of extra-budgetary subdivisions of penal institutions or at enterprises of the penal system, as well as at other enterprises regardless of their form of ownership, provided that proper guarding and isolation of convicts is ensured. No labor contract is to be concluded with convicted persons when they are engaged in labor. According to part 6 of the same article, refusal to work or unauthorized termination of work is a malicious violation of the established procedure for serving the sentence and entails penalties.

** <https://www.rup4.by/company/>

ees work in the workshop: a master — a professional seamstress who oversees the process; technologists who develop and teach how to sew new models; and controllers who check the quality of finished products.

"A master is someone from the outside. They are mostly women... They are seamstresses by education, I understand... They don't sew anything themselves; they just oversee the process."

Immediately after being assigned to a unit, following quarantine time, an inmate is sent to work at the factory. Only women who have reached retirement age are exempt from factory work. Initially, newcomers undergo a training process, the duration of which is formally set at 3 months for the sewing workshop and 4 months for the cutting workshop. However, in reality, after just a week, women are required to perform full-fledged work. By the end of the training, women are assigned the 3rd skill rank. Many inmates reported that there was a lot of shouting at the factory if they failed to meet the expectations; the working environment could hardly be called friendly. Many noted that the workplaces of those convicted under political articles are located in the workshop strictly under surveillance cameras.

"Almost no one pays attention to you; no one really teaches you. Everyone just yells, and keeps throwing tasks at you — they can literally throw items right at your head. They just throw your cut pieces, which you're supposed to sew — not bring them to you but throw them and say: "Do it."

Political prisoners are only seated where they are told to. The spot that is well-observed by cameras from different angles so that they can see what you're doing."

The factory sews clothes for security forces, employees of the Investigative Committee, the Ministry of Emergency Situations, the military, the subway, as well as for the inmate population of men's colonies.

"We sewed police uniforms, military uniforms, jackets for the internal troops and the KGB, then shirts for metro employees, shirts for customs officers, also for other colonies, and including our own — specifically uniforms for prisoners."

Work at the factory is carried out in two shifts. The first shift lines up at 7 a.m. and after inspection begins the workday at 7:30 a.m. , finishing at 2:30 p.m. The second shift lines up at 2:30 p.m. , starts work at 3:00 p. m. , and ends at 9:30 p.m. Each shift has one technical break of 10 minutes, and the first shift also has a lunch break, while the second shift has a dinner break. The factory operates a six-day work week.

"Getting to the factory — you have to stand for about 40 minutes; they walk you there, and leaving the factory is another 40 minutes; they may also conduct additional searches and personal inspections."

In reality, women were forced to work on Sundays, either framing it as training or as "extra duty." "Extra duty" refers to going to work by submitting a voluntary application, which in practice is sometimes "voluntary-compulsory." Through "extra duty," women sometimes had to stay at work after their shift ended. Many women applied for "extra duty" in an attempt to meet production quotas or to avoid conflicts within their units. Those registered as extremists, could not do the "extra duty", so they were brought to work on Sundays under a cover of "training". Thus, the workweek often lasted seven days, and women had no days off.

"Political prisoners were prohibited from taking "extra duty" because if they stayed to work the second shift, they would see people from the other shift. They didn't want political prisoners to see each other."

"So, working Sundays — they're framed as voluntary, like you sign the papers voluntarily, but like, let's say it's the same thing as putting your signatures in support of the presidential candidate, right? You volunteer to do that, but in reality, you don't — you do it under the threat of pressure. And it's very unpleasant. On paper, everything is fine; you agreed to work this Sunday, it was your own wish, but no, everyone around made a lot of effort to get you to sign the papers. Refusal to work was immediately... it was considered a serious infringement, and you were immediately placed in a punitive cell. If you didn't want to find yourself in a punitive cell, you went to work even on Sundays."

Lukashenko's Deputy Head of Administration, Olga Chupris, described the living conditions of prisoners in IK No.4 during her visit to the factory: "In some ways, it's even similar to being at home. Proper nutrition, activity rooms for sports, art, and handicrafts — of course, there is no freedom, but everything inside is set up so that inmates can stay healthy, develop, and feel like individuals. They can study, obtain a profession, and work."*

At the same time, women speak of the extremely difficult working conditions. In summer, it's unbearably hot, and in winter, it's cold. The women are not provided with comfortable clothing or footwear for work. The workshops are very dusty, and many fabrics are treated with chemicals that cause allergic reactions.

"It was dark there. For a factory, I would prefer more light. I felt like my eyesight got worse."

* <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/59025.html?c>



Photo: Deputy Head of Lukashenko's Administration Olga Chupris at the sewing production in IK-4.
Source: Newspaper "Na Strazhe."

Since we work with electric machines, safety regulations require shoes with rubber soles. Nobody was given such shoes.

... It's very dusty; you can barely breathe. The fabric is treated with horrible chemicals. Those who have allergies or asthma suffer terribly."

"In winter, it's very cold. There was a long period when, for some reason, there was no heating in the factory, and it was extremely cold. You can't work in a padded jacket because it's not allowed by the dress code, and you can't even throw on a scarf, for example, because it's a violation of the uniform rules."

"I work in a dusty factory where the temperature is 40 degrees. I'm sweaty, wet, dirty, and covered in dust, and I can't wash because if you shower on a day that's not designated as a bath day, a report will be filed against you."

Production quotas at the prison factory are extremely high. The entire process of garment production is broken down to the second, and each woman must meet her quota, which is almost impossible. The output of each woman affects the entire brigade's performance and, consequently, their wages. However, the equipment at the factory is mostly old and constantly breaks down.

"You have to sew quickly and with quality, or else they yell at you and get angry. If you make a mistake, they can write a report against you, and you could end up in a punitive cell.

The quotas are completely incomprehensible; you don't know what they're based on. They demanded at least 60. I said, why don't you

sit down and try it yourself! Just lifting and lowering the presser foot three and a half thousand times, that alone is exhausting."

Many women also mentioned the horrible condition of the factory toilets: there were no stalls, they were broken, and the smell was unbearable. When the toilets were out of order, there was no water at the factory, which meant no drinking water or a possibility to wash hands. Women had to go outside to relieve themselves. When inspections visited the colony, the women were forbidden from using the toilets at all.

"Very often, the toilets at the factory didn't work. They were locked, and we had to go outside the factory grounds to use the bathroom... It was impossible to go to the bathroom, and the same applied to drinking water. There were drinking fountains, but when the toilets didn't work, the drinking water didn't work either.

Oh, I remember it clearly: when the inspections came, you couldn't get up at all, and the worst part was that they locked the toilets. You'd be sitting there, and even if you were desperate, you couldn't go."

Such slave-like working conditions, the accumulating fatigue, outdated and worn-out equipment, and unachievable production quotas lead to frequent injuries at the factory. However, industrial injuries are only officially registered in exceptional cases-- usually in the event of severe injuries. In other situations, women were not even taken to the hospital for professional medical assistance, were not given sick leave, and had to continue working with their injuries.

"They took me to the room where the masters sit. The masters treated my injury with peroxide, applied Levomekol (an antibiotic ointment), gave me a bandage, and that was it. Then I went back to work."

"... because everyone rushes you, yells, and the psychological environment is unstable, you can easily sew through your finger. And this has happened more than once, where people have stitched through their fingers, and then they try to cover it up, claiming it's not a workplace injury.

Firstly, the machines are old and worn-out, and the equipment is terrible. There are a lot of accidents. I saw a woman, just a week before her release, cut off three of her fingers with a cutting machine."

The wages in the colony are extremely low. Women report that they were only able to meet 30–40% of the production quota. Only if they took on "extra duty" shifts — something unavailable to political prisoners — and worked

overtime to meet the required quota could their wages reach triple digits. However, 75% of their earnings are deducted for living expenses, and if a woman has alimony obligations, an additional 20% is withheld, meaning a total of 95% is deducted.

"At one point, I earned about 140 rubles [around \$42] in a month, which was a personal record for me. From that, I received 25–30 rubles [about \$7–9]. I had that kind of salary for several months."

"In the cutting workshop, the pay is higher than in the sewing workshops. It depends on the percentage there. I think my smallest wage was 40 rubles [about \$12], and the largest was 119 rubles [about \$36], if I'm not mistaken. That's what was transferred to my account."

"My first paycheck was 0.44 Belarusian rubles [about \$0.13]. In the following months, the salary was slightly higher. Sometimes it even reached 2 or 3 Belarusian rubles [about \$ 0.6-0.9]."

Cleaning the Premises, Plowing, and Duties

"Everything is self-service. They are very proud that the colony operates entirely on self-service."

According to Article 101 of the Penal Correctional Code, prisoners sentenced to deprivation of liberty may be involved in unpaid work only for collective self-service, including cleaning and maintaining correctional facilities and the surrounding areas. Inmates are assigned such tasks in rotation during their free time from work. The duration of these tasks must not exceed 14 hours per week.

In addition to working in the factory for pennies, women are forced to perform various household chores, the list of which is very large. Often convicts simply do not have any free time, and after working 7 hours in the factory, they then perform other duties assigned to them by the administration until bedtime. Very often the compulsory labour exceeds the maximum 14 hours established by law. The way in which duty and other compulsory work is organised varies from unit to unit, adding stress and inconvenience to the transfer between units, often practiced with political prisoners.

"And, of course, in winter it went over 14 hours, because it's snowing, and you are, well all the time you are not in the factory, you are outside, you are shovelling the snow."



Inmates in colony No. 4 at the opening of the rehabilitation center. Homel, June 2021. Photo: screenshot of the video of Homel TV and Radio Company. <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/45480.html?c>

But everyone has their own duty schedule, in addition to that. There is a duty for everything, anything one can think of: gate duty, desk duty — you have to sit on the corridor for two hours. Duties on the corridor, on internal rules, toilets, then you also have to go to the club, you have to go to the industrial site every day, you have to clean the local area too.... you are always running somewhere... And then there's the cleaning of the section."

As a rule, duty schedules are drawn up by the unit's housekeeper. Approaches to scheduling differ from unit to unit. Thus, in most units, duties are shared by all prisoners in turn, i. e. , for example, the duty of cleaning the toilet is performed by each inmate in turn. However, in some units, one prisoner is assigned one type of duty, and she has to be on duty at all times, e. g. toilet duty.

There are the following types of duty:

- 1) gate duty (lasts 1 hour a day, a woman stands at the gate at the entrance to the local unit, records and reports to everyone on the movements of prisoners in the unit);
- 2) desk duty (lasts 2 hours per day, a woman sits at the desk at the entrance to the unit, answers the telephone, records and reports prisoner movements to incoming staff);

"If anyone in uniform comes to the gate, you are obliged to report from your record that hello, there are "this many" inmates in the unit,

at the moment there are this many here, this many there, there and there." So, in addition to the industrial area, gate duty. Every week one had to stand at the gate for an hour."

3) cleaning duty in toilets, sinks, corridors, "Vector", kitchen, wardroom, section, dining room, and closet.

"... Toilet duty. You are not supposed to leave the toilet, in principle, never come out of it. So, you have to scrub it, scrub it, and keep scrubbing it.

And for some magical reason, the political ones are on duty more than the others. So, when a person gets into a unit, because she is new, all kinds of duty are thrown on her."

4) Laundry duty (involves taking linen to and from the laundry);

5) potato and vegetable peeling duty.

"In unit 9, where I spent the last six months, officer Kuzniatsou established the rules that those who are on extremist record, do the potato, carrot, and onion peeling. There were times when we peeled potatoes and onions for 3 days in a row.

There were times when we had to peel 80 bags of potatoes. There are 20 of us, and we had just a couple of hours to peel it all very quickly with blunt knives.

One of the most difficult compulsory chores is cleaning the industrial area. Each unit is assigned a separate area of the colony's outdoor area, and they have to keep it clean and tidy — remove leaves, snow, sweep up the dust. It is especially hard in winter, when women are constantly cutting ice, shoveling snow, and carrying heavy bags of snow all over the territory. Often the administration's instructions look like mockery. Women remove puddles with rags, or carry heavy bags of snow from one place to another. Cleaning snow consists of collecting it in bags, which prisoners are not supplied with (they have to sew them themselves and beg for permission to take them out of the factory, and if permission is not granted, they have to put the snow in their own bedclothes). The snow is carried in bags to specially designated areas where snow hills are formed. During the period under review, the approach to the possibility of engaging prisoners on the extremism register in this work changed: they were either prohibited from cleaning the industrial area or allowed to do it again.

"... To which officer Yanchenko said that snow is not falling now, why do you need bags. And did not allow us to get the rubbish bags. And

the next day it snowed. And we carried the snow in our own blankets that we sleep in, that we sleep under, that we cover ourselves with at night."

"In the morning, when I opened my eyes and saw it was snowing out the window, I just wanted to weep. It's really hard physical labour, literally really hard physical labour.

I mean, if it rains, we remove the puddles. If it snows, we shovel the snow. There shouldn't be a single snowflake. It's all cleared down to the asphalt. These are prisoners who have been serving their sentences for a long time, yes, for drugs, who were in prison for 6 years, 10 years, they said that it had never happened before, these rules only appeared now, when the political prisoners arrived."

Women who meet only a small percentage of their production quota at the factory are also assigned to perform inventory tasks. Each unit has 3 inventory days per month, during which the colony's housekeeper involves women assigned to inventory tasks to carry out their orders — moving furniture, logs, and other items. In addition, women are constantly assigned to perform loading and unloading tasks, during which they carry heavy bags of potatoes, vegetables, beds and furniture. Meanwhile, the administration of the correctional facility completely ignores the established maximum limits for lifting and moving heavy objects by hand, as outlined in the Resolution of the Ministry of Health of October 13, 2010, No. 133.

Work description	Maximum permissible weight of the cargo <*>
Lifting and moving weights when alternating with other work (up to 2 times per hour)	10 kg
Lifting and moving heavy loads constantly during the work shift	7 kg
The total weight of goods moved during each hour of the shift:	
from the work surface	Up to 350 kg
From the floor	Up to 175 kg

"If you have an inventory day, then at any moment the colony's housekeeper can come to the unit and say that they need 15 people there to carry tables or logs.

... Here they bring 120 sacks of potatoes. A whole vehicle. And everybody gets in a row and starts unloading them. Somebody climbs up, they throw these sacks down, they lower them, and everybody else pulls it all down.

Another type of work that prisoners are involved in, with the exception of those on the register, is cleaning and plowing the control and trace strip (CTS). CTS is the space between the three rows of fences that surround the facility. The CTS must always be plowed so that if someone passes through it, there will be visible footprints. The loosening of the ground on the strip was done with a tool that the staff called a "mashka". This tool resembles a small plow. Women were forced to "harness" into it like horses and loosen the soil.

"In general, prisoners are not supposed to get behind the fence there. Once a month each unit goes to the control strip, they are given a tool to plow the ground... No, not a rake. It's a thing that you pull, and it loosens the ground.

They harnessed ordinary people and forced them, like horses, to walk with this plow around their necks. In this way, they both mocked them and made them do the work that the staff themselves were supposed to be doing."

Medical care

"The medical unit is on par with city clinics: it has everything necessary for treatment – from modern ultrasound machines to a dental office, as well as wards for inpatient care."*

Despite the praise from the propaganda outlet about the medical unit, former inmates report several problems with accessing medical care. In the colony, there is a system for dispensing medication where you can receive pills prescribed by a doctor. Urgent medical assistance is provided by paramedics and on-duty doctors, but given the busy schedule of the prisoners, it's difficult to see them. Paramedics dispense emergency medications for colds and painkillers without explaining what the pills are or checking for potential allergic reactions, and often they refuse to issue painkillers without a doctor's prescription, for which the wait can be weeks.

"I was only able to see a doctor after a week and a half, and by that time, I had developed such a bad bronchial cough that I was afraid I had asthma."

* From an interview with the former head of IC No. 4 Sviatlana Pakhodava "Correctional colony No. 4 - from one dream to another", <https://kvb.by/rubric/obschestvo/ispravitel'naya-koloniya-n-4-ot-mechty-do-mechty>

"No, it hurts now, it hurts right now, I have my period, and I need to see a doctor." "I can't give you a pill without a prescription." ... So, you have to endure the pain while standing for half an hour at inspection, then go to inventory work, in pain, and later you're shoveling snow, and it still hurts."

Many women note indifferent attitude from paramedics toward their work. Appointments with specialists can take months. Prisoners are not allowed to store medications, so they have to go to the medical unit each time, accompanied by staff, to receive them. On weekends, there are no doctors in the colony, but medicines are issued. If a woman feels unwell at the factory, the decision on whether to take her to the medical unit is made by the brigadier and the supervisor. Often, these unqualified staff members deny women medical care, forcing them to continue working.

"They absolutely do not care about the life and health of the people they are supposed to help. I've seen their casual, careless walk so many times, and I kept asking myself, "Dude, you were called urgently, there's a person lying unconscious." But they couldn't care less, they don't give a damn."

"In mid-January, I had a very severe asthma attack, and it was a Saturday, so there were no doctors in the medical unit. I knew that no one would be able to help me."

"Other times, if you feel unwell at work, they refuse to take you out. They think a headache isn't serious, that you're pretending, and that you can keep working. In other words, to get taken to the doctor from work, you'd practically have to collapse — just fall down on the ground."

Women were pressured and coerced into receiving COVID vaccinations, with threats of being denied visits or packages. Inmates report that many felt unwell after receiving the Russian Sputnik vaccine, but no one was excused from work. Additionally, they were not compensated for missing a bath day due to the vaccination, meaning they couldn't wash for two weeks.

"And everyone was vaccinated with Sputnik. It's quite a heavy vaccine, and everyone felt really bad the next day... But they weren't even given bed rest."

"... On the same day, they were offering the COVID vaccine, and it came with the warning that if you refused, you wouldn't get any visits, and you'd have major issues with receiving packages as well."

Despite feeling unwell, sick leave is granted only in exceptional cases. Women continue to go to the factory and perform mandatory tasks — shoveling snow, carrying bags of vegetables, and doing the duties. Some inmates noted that political prisoners received special treatment and were particularly often denied sick leave.

"You go there with a yellow badge, and even if you have a temperature of 37.7°C (99.9°F), it's considered normal, and you're deemed fit to go to the factory, shovel snow, and do whatever else is required."

"The doctor has a note from the officers saying... does not admit guilt... do not give her sick leave. So, despite the fact that I'm dying, I have a fever, I'm sick, I have a cough, I'm exhausted, I physically can't go to the factory and work, they still won't give me sick leave. They prescribe antibiotics. I go to the medical unit to get the antibiotics, and they tell me they don't have those antibiotics."

For health reasons, the doctor can place labor restrictions on inmates' records. However, in practice, these restrictions are often ignored and become grounds for further mistreatment from the administration and scorn from other inmates.

"... I was given a waiver from lifting heavy objects. But this didn't help in all units. In some places, it helped, and I was harassed less. I'd say, 'I have an exemption.' But elsewhere, they'd say, 'It's no big deal, if you can't lift much, take a spoon... scoop things into a bag up to three kilograms and carry it around in three-kilogram bags.'"



Photo: Political prisoner journalist Ekaterina Borisovich after her release from IK-4.
Source: Human Rights Center "Vesna."

POLITICAL PRISONERS

*"A yellow tag means you're already a labelled person, who... is not permitted many things." **

"... this one was some kind of directive from above to finish us off. That is, there were always some waves of this kind. The most serious heavy wave was when Olya Harbunova announced a fundraiser. It was some kind of marathon and people collected half a million dollars, I believe.

According to former prisoners, almost all those detained under the "political article" are automatically put on the preventive register as "prone to extremism and other destructive actions". Some are given other profiles, such as "prone to violence against the administration and hostage-taking", "prone to suicide and self-harm", "prone to escape", etc. There are a total of 10 categories on preventive record. **

"'Extremist register' is the 10th category. Accordingly, there are some other 9, well at least, maybe more. Prone to suicide, prone to assault, prone to escape, prone... to everything in the world."

Preventive registers are not stipulated by the Criminal Correctional Code and is regulated solely by internal documents, which are not publicly available

* <https://baj.media/ru/verh-cinizma-ekskursiyu-po-ik-17-propagandistam-s-belarus-1-provodil-eks-zhurnalist/>
** <https://spring96.org/ru/news/107768>

and are not provided to prisoners for familiarisation. Therefore, there are no clear rules for it. In practice, all political prisoners are placed on the extremism register, especially those convicted for participation in group actions that grossly violate public order, participation in mass riots and for such articles as insulting a representative of the authorities, insulting the president, inciting discord, or malicious hooliganism.

"For those articles that were clearly political, they were put on the register not in the colony, but in the pre-trial detention centre."

All women on the preventive register must wear a yellow tag on their uniforms. In this way, every inmate and every staff member can see from afar who should be given special treatment. These yellow tags are also another way to find irregularities: occasionally, inspectors with rulers measured the tags and their placement on the clothing to find discrepancies with the requirements.

"The thing is that very often it was the political prisoners who were approached to check the badges, how they were stitched on. That is, there is some standard there, let's say, 10 centimetres from the shoulder. They came with a ruler, if anything, they simply tore it off and made us sew it back on."

In addition to placing political prisoners on the preventive register, there is a gradation in terms of their importance and visibility. Thus, the most prominent political prisoners are under greater control and pressure. They, as well as those who refuse to cooperate, refuse to admit guilt and other actions required of them by the administration, are placed in the so-called pressure units. Units 9 and 18 are considered to be such in IK-4. Their specific features are that the prisoners there constantly monitor each other and report to the administration about any infringements, as well as constantly provoke or even frame breaches. The inmates also single out Unit 3, supervised by officer Chorny. It is challenging due to the network of informants and provocateurs built up by Chorny.

"She got into the pressure unit, Unit 9, where they poured water on the beds of political prisoners, or inserted blades there. And it wasn't done to everyone, but to those who were singled out by the administration... this girl also didn't admit her guilt and she was punished for that, too."

"... this is the most cruel unit, if there's a place that could be called hell, it was this place [about pressure unit 9]."

"As far as I know, well, originally unit 18 was considered to be a pressure unit, too.... Instructed by the staff, many convicts set our girls up."

Prisoners on the preventive register have a number of restrictions and special conditions for serving their sentences. For example, they are assigned a bed on the upper tier in the aisle opposite the door, so that they are always clearly visible. They stand in the front row at all lineups and inspections. They are allowed to store their belongings only on the top shelves in the wardroom, which creates a number of serious inconveniences.

"It was kind of like the first tier of shelving, meaning it's right under the ceiling, and it's very inconvenient. It's very inconvenient to climb up there because you have to use a stepladder. And usually on this 5th tier, nobody lives there, except for the political prisoners."

In addition to two checks per day, there are two additional checks for political prisoners, which means that they spend even more time outside for inspections in all weathers. At the same time, the administration prohibits prisoners with tags from communicating with each other. In addition, those on the extremism register are searched more often than other prisoners and in a rougher manner.

"The internal regulations stipulate that in inclement weather, in sub-zero temperatures, in very low temperatures, checks are carried out in the building. That rule was not in effect at all."

"And there was another political inmate in the unit with me, but we were forbidden to communicate with her, just forbidden on pain of punishment."

Prisoners on the register were banned from going to the club, gym, church, or to clean the control strap. Sometimes bans were also imposed on cleaning the industrial area. Also they were allowed to make a phone call only once a month and in the presence of the head of the unit, and sometimes in the presence of an operational officer. Long visits were provided for no more than 2 days without takeaway (the possibility to take the food left from the visit). They also limit the possibility of correspondence as much as possible, releasing letters only from the closest relatives.

"Moreover, you can't go to a club, and you can't attend college, and you couldn't go to the gym for a while either."

"... you get a number dialled in and the unit supervisor sits there and listens. But not only the head of the unit, in the beginning, they were constantly inviting operative officers to be present."

Political prisoners often receive penalties and incentive reports are impossible for them. Neither is it possible to recognise them as being on the path of correction, which is a prerequisite for transfer to a better regime or replacement of punishment or parole.

"... there has never been a precedent for someone to receive an incentive report, so I guess it's generally impossible for political prisoners.

Moreover, probably the most important point is that we can't take the path of correction in any way."

Interviewees note that the operative officers made a lot of efforts to create an atmosphere of suspicion and distrust among political prisoners. They persistently pushed for co-operation with the authorities and implied that everyone else had already agreed to that. At the same time, for ordinary prisoners, "snitching" on a political prisoner is particularly appreciated and they are well rewarded for this."

"He also told me: "You're so honest and so naive, when you're released, I'll show you the records and you'll find out how many of your girlfriends actually tell everything and share everything and feel great about themselves." Spoiler: I never saw any records."

"They had a really hard time getting us to co-operate. I mean, it got to the point where they threatened to extend my sentence. There is such an article — 411 — up to a year in prison."

INFRINGEMENTS AND PENALTIES

"The center of Europe, the 21st century, and they put people in a cage in the open air like animals."

According to Article 112 of the Criminal Correctional Code, the following penalties may be applied to inmates for violating the established procedure for serving their sentences:

1. reprimand;
2. Extraordinary duty to clean the premises or territory of the correctional facility;
3. deprivation of the right to receive a parcel or package;
4. deprivation of a long or short visit;
5. placement in a punishment isolation cell with or without assignment to work or study for a period of up to fifteen days;
6. transfer of inmates found to be persistently violating the established procedure for serving their sentences to cell-type premises for a period of up to six months.

Punishment Commission

According to Article 113.4 of the Criminal Correctional Code, penalties shall be imposed by resolutions of the officials of correctional institutions authorized to impose them.

The law does not introduce the concept of a "punishment commission", but in practice, penalties are imposed by such commissions. The commission consists of the head of the colony, operative officers, the head for the correctional process, a psychologist, and the head of the respective unit. Before the commission meets, a report of the breach is drawn up on an inmate and an explanatory statement is taken from her.

"Oh, the punishment commission — that's a topic in its own right. The head of the colony and all his close associates sit there, and the show begins: "Oh, you're this, you're that, you deserve to be rot in jail!"

Often, members of the commission use psychological pressure and threats against the women. Attempts to defend oneself are usually met with hostility. For the same breach, some women are given just a talking-to, while others are immediately sent to the punishment isolation cell.

Do you realize that you're taking a confident step towards becoming a persistent offender? Do you realise that your next punishment will be only a punitive cell? You won't get past the punitive cell. Alekhin sits there and says, "You have to understand that we know everything about you, every step you take. We have cameras, and we're watching all of you closely."

When considering the report, the commission positively assessed the fact that the prisoner admitted her guilt and wrote an application for pardon. Also, one of the women received an offer from the head of the colony to appear in a video on a political topic.

"And I remember that at that moment this head of the correctional process spoke out, who made me write this stupid petition for pardon. She says, "Yes, it's okay, she asked for pardon, it's okay. And the head of the colony goes: — Well, okay, then it's good. And, in short, their resolution on this report was... something like "a conversation is enough here".

"Also, at the commission session, the head of the colony made some strange suggestions: "Would you like to appear in a video? "

"Those out of favor, or targeted by the order from above, are labelled as "persistent offenders". This means being deprived of many privi-

leges. First, you're labeled as a persistent offender, and then... if they want to extend your sentence, there's a great article in our law, Article 411... It's a "stretchy" article, meaning the first part is up to a year, but most often they give a year, and the second part is up to two years. And so, they can charge you every six months again, again and again... extend the term of imprisonment to infinite".

Infringements

The list of infringements for which prisoners can be penalised is very broad. Moreover, the conditions are created where it is very difficult, if not impossible, to avoid such breaches. However, while the administration may turn a blind eye to such offences for ordinary inmates, for political prisoners every opportunity would be used to impose penalties. If there is no offence, it may be invented. It is impossible to prove one's innocence.

"Gate duty... The housekeeper, a real lackey who's in cahoots with the officers, says:"... you need to go take the calls right now, because they're already started the call session for you, political prisoners. In the meantime, Katya will stand in for you." I went to the calls without suspecting anything. And the next day they came to me,"... you left the duty"... and that's it, hello, I have a new report. I became a persistent offender..."

Reports are made on prisoners for talking during lineups, going off duty, keeping expired medicines or medicines on expired prescriptions, keeping prohibited things or things that are not in one's inventory list, breaking the schedule, or using foul language. Reports are also often made regarding violations of the dress code.

"Absolutely everyone talks in line-ups, but extremists are very often caught for this and given a reportable offence."

"... dress code can be violated not only in the form of wrong clothes, well, like you have a jacket and a skirt on, while you were supposed to wear a dress with a jacket, but it can include a loose button, failure to fasten all the buttons."

The real reason for the punishment and the reported offence do not always coincide. For example, if an inmate does something that is not to the liking of the administration, but it is impossible to officially punish her for that, then

offences would be created artificially by the staff or with the help of inmates who co-operate with the administration.

"... I was not afraid, I approached the inspectors to talk to them and tell them that our rights were being violated and so on, and what a horror was going on there. They were accompanied by the head of the colony, he heard everything I said. Literally 10 minutes later, the factory shift was taken to the unit, that is, the end of the working day and the working shift, and at the inspection they are pulling a coil heater out of my pocket. I did not have any coil heater on me, it wasn't mine at all... I actually asked them: "Guys, what are you doing? I don't need a coil heater, what are you saying? It's not mine'... Zi-uzin... says: "Ah so! You also slipped the word "guys"! That's it for you... that's another offence for insulting a member of staff by addressing them inappropriately. "And then they came up with some third thing, and the third thing was that they said that I was doing the reporting wrong, that is, that I had to report my data in a different way. That is, when they told me "Introduce yourself please! ", I always reported my data as "unlawfully convicted", and they said that this was also an offence and put me in the punitive isolation cell".

The administration does everything possible to combat the manifestation of mutual help and support among prisoners. There is even a term for this: "fraternization". Any actions aimed at caring for another person, or simply friendly relations can be summarised as a "fraternization" offence. Helping other inmates is also prohibited, as it is considered using other inmates for one's own selfish purposes.

"Asking for help, by the way, is also an offence. For there's a clause in the internal rules... "using the labor of other convicts for your own selfish purposes".

The fact that you eat together at the same time can also be interpreted by staff as fraternization, i. e. is a breach."

"The first report was filed against her for the fact that when I came from the factory, she started to soothe me. I came from the conversation with a staff member and she started to comfort me. They drew up a report that she was swearing at that moment."

One of the most common breaches is the so-called "alienation and appropriation". This concept is interpreted very broadly and any fact of transferring a thing even for temporary use falls under the offence.

"And my dad was particularly surprised when, on a video call, I said, "I shared my ice cream with a child. She was a former juvenile in-

mate, an eighteen-year-old girl. So I did what you taught me, dad — I shared. And for that, we won't see each other for nine months." To which my dad said he was proud of me."

"One penalty was because she gave a girl a rubber glove during potato peeling — a mandatory procedure — because the girl had cut her hand. That was considered alienation and appropriation offence. Both she and the girl received reports.

Punitive Isolation Cell



The photo is for illustrative purposes. Photo by "Nasha Niva" <https://nashaniva.com/ru/320952>

One of the harshest punishments is placing an inmate in a punitive isolation cell. Inmates sent to a punitive cell are prohibited from having long-term or short-term visits, phone calls (including video calls), purchasing food or essential items, receiving parcels, packages, or small packets, and sending or receiving letters. They are not allowed to play board games or smoke. Bed linens are not provided, and inmates are denied outdoor walks. Inmates are permitted to take their slippers, socks, seasonal underwear, a towel, toothpaste, soap, a toothbrush in a plastic case, and one roll of toilet paper to the

cell. Typically, placement in the punitive cell would be used as a punishment for the third breach, but sometimes inmates are sent there after their first offence.

"... In the punitive isolation cell... I didn't even have a comb. All I had was a toothbrush, toothpaste, a piece of soap, and toilet paper. That's it. And the thin uniform I was wearing, and shoes."

Women describe the conditions in a punitive cell as extremely harsh. It's cold, and it's impossible to stay warm due to the lack of warm clothing. The cell is about 3 square meters and made entirely of concrete. Propaganda materials are played continuously through a loudspeaker.

"The punitive isolation cell is a very small concrete chamber, and it is very, very cold, with leaky windows. Well, not windows, just a window. You sit inside a concrete box, and you sit on concrete. The concrete step is also edged with metal. The metal strip would get frosty from the cold."

"Then you just sit and wait. They play propaganda audio clips through the radio, and constantly try to brainwash you."

Despite the maximum time limit of 15 days in the punitive isolation cell, women are kept there longer. This is processed as a new offence.

"At the time when I was there, the record was [name] who had been there for about 30 days."

Placement in a punitive cell is closely linked to the status of a persistent offender, which is subsequently the basis for the use of Article 411 of the Criminal Code. And this is actively practiced by the regime.

Specific illegal punishments as the know-how of IK-4

"What a medieval practice! It's insane. Locking a person in a cage is unthinkable."



The photo is for illustrative purposes. <https://teso-decor.ru/furniture/undercroft/torture/kletka-dlya-dikih-zverej/>

In addition to the penalties stipulated by the Criminal Correctional Code, the colony applies a number of other punishments that are not prescribed by law. One of the most heinous is a cage located on the territory of the colony at the checkpoint between the residential and industrial areas. Women are placed in this cell for refusing to comply with the demands of staff or for violent conflicts with other inmates. Women spend between half an hour and 8 hours in the cage. The cage is located so that it is visible to as many convicts as possible on their way to and from work, which causes additional humiliation and suffering for the punished woman. Staff and inmates themselves call it a "cage of shame".

"This cage is specially set up for public view. When all the prisoners go out, the entire colony goes to the factory and comes from the factory, they put the convicts there on purpose at that time, so that everyone could watch them, like in a zoo.."

Other punishments used in the colony include bans on visiting the club and gym, and prohibiting other prisoners from communicating with the "guilty". They might not be given letters or have them torn up in front of their eyes, or the toilets of the whole unit would be closed. Transfer to another section or even another unit, or transfer to the pressure unit is also used as a punishment. In order to create tension within the unit against the offender, the administration introduced collective responsibility, when the whole unit is required to read the internal rules out aloud dozens of times.

"Or they can just deliberately fail to hand over letters from close relatives. For instance, they might give it to you in a week or a month after it came, or they might not give it to you at all."

"The housekeeper in Unit 13, this Homitskaya, would simply lock the toilets as punishment, and Pshenichnikova liked to tear up letters."

"We were forced to read the internal regulations. Almost all of us smoked, they wouldn't let us out to smoke, and there she was already under pressure from the girls. It happened that her own girls hit her with these house rules, hitting her in the face while we were all standing there."

As a form of punishment, women were also forced to do some humiliating and/or useless work. For example, there is a method of punishment called "Titanic" where a bucket or several buckets of water are poured on the floor and the prisoner has to collect it all. Sometimes women were made to just walk with boxes up and down stairs and around buildings, and sometimes the entire unit would have a fire drill.

"So, we took all the boxes out, we're all sitting outside waiting for him to come, I'm called to the unit. And the officer in charge says to me, "Right, well, you take the boxes now and walk round the "Bombay"."

"... "Titanic" is such a method of punishing convicts, when two buckets of water are poured onto the corridor. And the convict who is being punished must use a rag to wipe the entire floor dry as quickly as possible. This is done on their knees, as quickly as possible and is accompanied by some comments, most often of offensive nature."

Provocations

And about the attitude of the administration — it is somehow cultivated, sown in the circles of the convicts, that the political ones — they are not like others, they are some sort of arrogant ones."

"A colony is a scary place. Danger comes not even so much from the administration... I was already morally prepared for it, to perceive them that way. It's the inmate population."

Often the reason for imposing penalties on political prisoners are provocations organised by prisoners on their own initiative or on the instructions of the administration. The "activists" of the unit and the housekeeper play a direct role in the psychological pressure and intimidation of political prisoners. In addition, other convicts may exert physical pressure on political prisoners on the instructions of operative officers. Such convicts get the opportunity for some encouragement or indulgence if they follow the instructions of the administration.

"The officer gives the command "sic"... "And given that almost everyone in Unit 9 works for him, such a command can be given to anyone or everyone. This person plants a needle, then suddenly a search comes, finds the needle or a knife from the machine, and a report is made for possession of a prohibited object."

"... one girl was beaten very, very badly, and the operative officer gathered the whole unit in a separate room, in the educational activity room, and brought out some girls, 5-6 girls were brought out to beat up one girl."

The most common method of provocation is the slipping of any prohibited items (pills, needles, blades) to political prisoners in their personal belongings stored in the wardrooms, in their beds, in the pockets of their clothes.

"... needles were stuffed into her jacket, into the seams. Then suddenly she was called for some kind of inspection and there they found these needles. There's a punishment for that, too."

"Well, planting things, either planting things or stealing things. Because the political ones have things checked against the inventory all the time. Well, for the rest of inmates such checks take place a few times a year, but the political prisoners are often checked to make sure everything matches."

Snitching is widespread, especially in pressure units. And the situation that is the basis for a report is often manipulated or even staged. Sometimes the report is fictitious, which does not prevent it from being used for punishment.

"... they call in some ordinary prisoner who can't afford cigarettes and who has been asking for cigarettes from many people. And so they say to her — either you say that you were given cigarettes by such and such, or you'll have to turn everyone else in, and then everybody will know that you turned them in."

The administration makes every effort to create an atmosphere of distrust, even among political prisoners. For example, they create the appearance of a good relationship with one of the political prisoners, which fuels rumors that she is cooperating with the administration — something that is usually untrue.

*"Later, I laughed and said, "They've really elevated me." I said, "Out of everyone in the colony, only two people, myself and Maria Kale-
snikava, had water poured into our shoes."*

"They constantly tried to make us quarrel, to stir up discord specifically among the political prisoners. These were such pathetic attempts — like when someone would go for a visit and be allowed a "takeaway". A 'takeaway' is when you're allowed to bring a bag of food from a visit, up to a certain weight. According to their scenario, we were supposed to think, "Well, if she gets a takeaway, she must be cooperating, she must be an informant."

Let's focus on the actions of several inmates who engage in provocative behavior toward political prisoners.

Maria Khamitskaya, the housekeeper of the 13th unit. Besides using her position for personal gain and to benefit the inmates close to her, she could directly "punish" the entire unit for any violations of the prison rules.

"If someone misbehaved in the unit, it wasn't even the head of the unit, it was the housekeeper who gave punishment to the whole unit. Her favorite punishment was to close all the toilets except for one.... She would close all the stalls for several days, taping the doors shut."

"Such inhumane behavior was encouraged by the colony's administration. Moreover, the head of the unit essentially endowed Khamitskaya with his own authority, ensuring that the fear of punishment spread to the other inmates."

"And, of course, no one dared to disobey because the head of the unit always emphasized that the housekeeper was like a representative of the administration, and the housekeeper's word was practically equal to the word of the head of the unit. She had the right to do whatever she wanted, and you weren't allowed to disobey her."

Veranika Mikhviyenya. A prisoner from Unit 14, who directly threatened to use physical violence against a political prisoner, applying psychological pressure.

"... she probably wouldn't have killed me, but she could have caused some injuries. She's very aggressive, very uncontrolled — quite a dangerous person."

Stella Mamulyan. One of the inmates who actively participated in the provocations orchestrated by the operational staff of the colony. She created situations that led to disciplinary measures being applied against other inmates and acted on the instructions of the operational staff. She openly expressed her dislike for political prisoners, did not deny her connection with the staff, and her involvement in provocative actions while in Unit 9.

"This Stella Mamulyan was transferred to our unit. She is... you know... Everyone knew she was working with the cops. She was really shameless."

Stella Mamulyan was also the reason for disciplinary measures being taken against Maria Kalesnikava.

"And a girl who participated in the sports event was able to convince Masha to lend her a watch. But I think what happened was that it seemed like she was lending it not just to a person, but supposedly for the needs of the colony. Shortly after, the officers came to the unit — it was clearly a setup. And a report was written against Kalesnikava. I understand this was her first infringement, after which she was sent to the punitive isolation cell."

After participating in these provocative actions, Mamulyan was given the privilege to communicate with an inmate from another unit (through the system of "extra duty" privileges).

Psychological pressure

"It's like they strip you of your identity, of who you are, by forcing you to admit guilt."

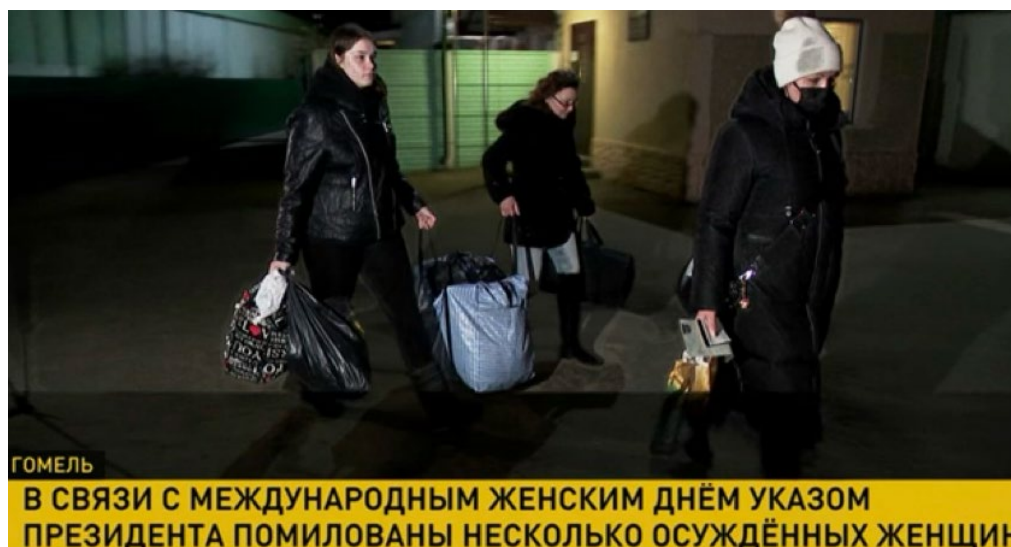


Photo: Women being released from the colony. ont. by

In addition to exhausting work, the lack of free time, cramped living conditions, and the feeling of helplessness against an unjust sentence, political prisoners are constantly exposed to psychological pressure. An atmosphere of constant suspicion is created, where you're always bracing for something to go wrong, even from the people around you. Some prisoners, often convicted of serious violent crimes, are used by the administration to intimidate and create discomfort for the political prisoners.

"They kept putting her near me, pairing us up, or putting her somewhere close to me so she could harass and torment me in every possible way. Psychologically, it was terrifying to be near someone like her. . If she's still proud of committing murder, I realized she could easily kill me too, knowing she wouldn't face much punishment for it."

There were Romani prisoners who deliberately shouted things like, "You are traitors to the country, worse than murderers, you should be imprisoned for life or executed." Some girls couldn't take it and just ran out. The thing is, if they responded and a conflict started, they would naturally be sent to the punitive isolation cell, and nothing good would come of that."

The administration uses a range of methods to force political prisoners to admit guilt — pressure, threats, transfers to other units, including to "pres-

sure units". The threats include creating unbearable living conditions, deprivation of visits, pressure from other inmates, placement in the punitive isolation cell, being labeled as a persistent offender, or additional time to be served under Article 411 of the Criminal Code.

"So here you go, here's a sheet of paper and a pen. And this stack — these are the statements against you I've collected. Shall we trade one for the other? " ...Of course, I had no choice but to agree and write that stupid confession of guilt under dictation.... It was like a civil execution."

"You know they slashed a girl over there, right? That's what's waiting for you too. You don't know how they beat people there," he said. "That's what's waiting for you. Just write it, think about where you'd rather be, here or there."

"One woman was simply not allowed out of the punitive isolation cell during the winter. It was so cold she said she had to wrap herself in toilet paper just to try to stay warm. These women ended up writing statements admitting guilt because they would keep pushing you until the very end. At first, almost no one admitted guilt."

At a certain point, political prisoners were also persistently encouraged to write requests for clemency. Admitting guilt is a mandatory condition for receiving clemency. In their attempts to persuade, staff would even mention the specific number of inmates who would be granted clemency. However, for most, these promises turned out to be empty.

"She refused to write a clemency request. They transfer her to Unit 9. They find blades sewn into her jacket, and she is sent to punishment, to the commission. She got off with a warning. But the officer told her, "If you don't want this to continue, write a clemency request." And so, she wrote it. Then they transferred her back."

In coercing political prisoners into cooperation, cruel threats and humiliation were used. Women were told that their relatives had been detained, and their fate was made dependent on the woman's willingness to cooperate. They were also threatened that by the time they were released, their health would have deteriorated to such an extent that they wouldn't even be able to take care of themselves.

"He says: "During the search, your mother-in-law was detained..." And that was it, I went pale, then flushed, everything inside me just collapsed. I lost the ability to speak and to think straight — it's just hor-

rible when you receive news like this while you're in prison and can't find out anything or help in any way. And then they say, "Well... let's do this. You write one paper for us, and we'll help resolve the problem with your mother-in-law".

And again, with renewed force: "You idiot, you go straight to the punishment cell. Good luck to you.".... "You've got a long time left here.. When you get out, no one will recognize you." "You'll leave here a shell of yourself", he said, "unable to think clearly or even control your own body."



Photo: Natalia Kochanova, Chairwoman of the Council of the Republic of the National Assembly, visits Penal Colony No.4 of the Department of Corrections of the Ministry of Internal Affairs for the Homel Region in August 2021. <https://belta.by/society/view/sozdannye-v-ik-4-uslovija-pozvoljajut-zhenschinam-ispravitsja-i-prodolzit-zhizn-dostojno-kochanova-453993-2021/>

EMERGENCY SITUATIONS IN THE COLONY

Women report that when an inspection arrives at the colony, the facility is essentially “placed under martial law”. All inmates are forced to remain either in their unit in a specific section or at their workplace, not even allowed to use the toilet. The situation worsened after one inmate attempted to report violations to the inspection team, after which she was placed in punitive isolation.

“So, it happens periodically that some inspection comes to the colony. And when an inspection arrives, the colony is placed under martial law. That means everyone must be sitting in their units. And generally, not just in the units, but in one room.”

Serious injuries, illnesses, and even deaths occur frequently in the colony. The administration does everything it can to keep such information in secret.

“Once, there was a situation where a girl lost her finger in the sewing machine. She had explained that her vision was poor, yet they still forced her to sit at the machine. Her finger was cut off, but the medical staff didn't take her to any doctors. There was no investigation. They simply documented it as a scratch, bandaged what was left of her fingers, and that was it.”

* <https://belta.by/society/view/sozdannye-v-ik-4-uslovija-pozvoljajut-zhenschinam-ispravitsja-i-prodolzit-zhizn-dostojno-kochanova-453993-2021/>

"... if a death occurs, they try very hard to hide it. For example, if it happens in the hospital, it's almost impossible to find out unless the relatives make a lot of noise. If it happens in the hospital, other inmates don't know about it and don't see it. But if it happens in the unit, there are always other people around who see it and talk about it. This way, I know of four deaths for sure..."

Maria Kalesnikava

Maria Kalesnikava, a leader of the peaceful protests in 2020, was detained on September 7, 2020, and later sentenced to 11 years in prison. She is serving her sentence in Penal Colony No.4. After two years in the colony, she was urgently hospitalized. The sharp deterioration of Maria Kalesnikava's health, which led to an emergency surgery (perforated gastric ulcer), was caused by the harsh conditions of her confinement in the prison punishment cell and the delayed provision of medical care.*

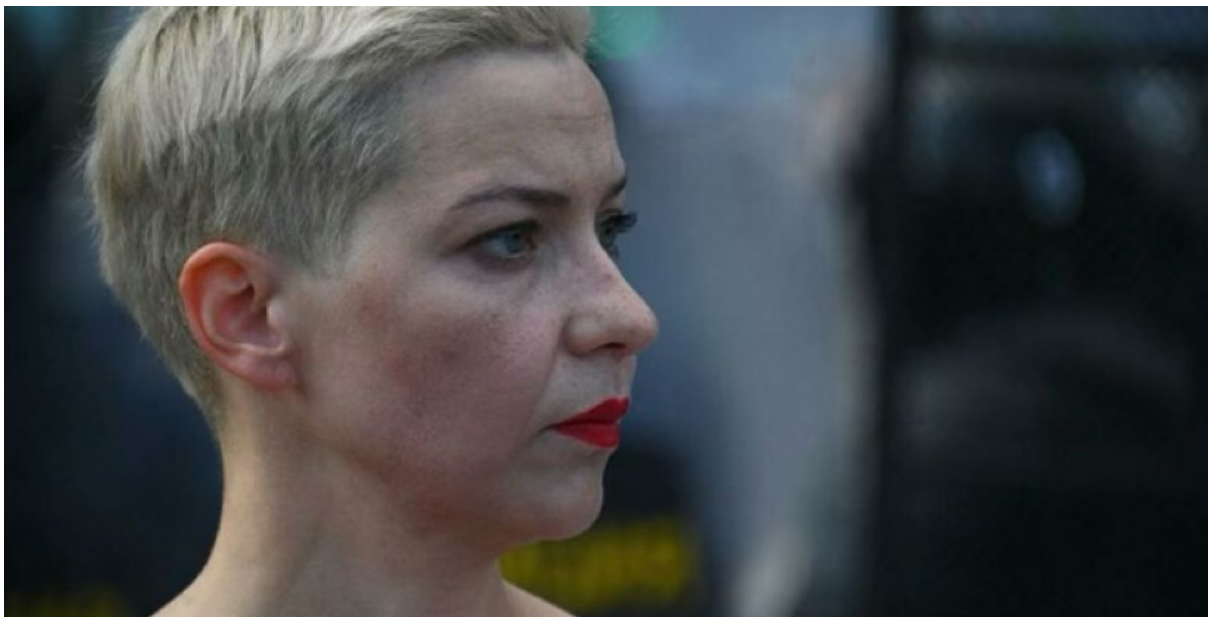


Photo: Maria Kalesnikava. RIA Novosti / Evgeny Odínokov

On September 2, 2024, Maria Kalesnikava's sister, Tatsiana Khomich, posted an update on Facebook about her current situation:

1. My sister, Maria Kalesnikava, is serving her sentence in Homel Penal Colony No.4. In November 2022, Maria was hospitalized with peritonitis due

* <https://www.golosameriki.com/a/kolesnikova-prison-surgery-conditions/6866316.html>

to a perforated ulcer and underwent surgery. For more than 560 days, I have been gathering information about Maria bit by bit — from women inside and those who have been released from the colony. The last letter we received from her was on February 15, 2023. Her lawyer is not allowed to visit her, and she is forbidden from receiving parcels.

2. From what I know, Maria is essentially starving in the colony. She weighs 45 kg at a height of 175 cm. Her condition requires a special diet, which means she cannot eat much of the prison food. Her allowance for purchases from the prison store is either 40 or 80 rubles. I can't confirm the exact amount, but I understand that it's barely enough for tea, oatmeal, a pack of sanitary pads, soap, and minimal hygiene products.
3. Feeding someone with an ulcer prison gruel is like torturing them and slowly killing them. Denying them the right to correspond with their family only accelerates that death...*

"... On that day, Maria Kalesnikava was unwell, and they took her to the city hospital for surgery. All the guards were occupied with her transportation, security, and transfer, so they didn't open the parcel window at the checkpoint at all that day. It was the first Saturday of December 2022."

According to women who have been released, Maria was initially held in Unit 18, which is considered a pressure unit. The administration pays close attention to her, creating unbearable living conditions. Their goal is to break her spirit and strength, but they have not succeeded so far.

"Maryia Kalesnikava was sent to the punitive isolation cell for the first time because she lent her watch to another girl during a shift."

"Again, Maria Kalesnikava is the only political prisoner in the unit; she's not allowed to talk to anyone at all."

* <https://www.facebook.com/tatsiana.khomich.kalesnikava/posts/pfbid057VougRV5CgyYxf2CibUJpwJjQsXeh-saTD4SoYxPzXqSMZYKvno9TzCZHbpNqc4Ql>

COLONY STAFF

"The horrors that happen in the colony, most of them, are deliberate, meaning they are done intentionally under orders from staff. Most often, these orders come from the operative officers or the head of the colony."

The staff of Penal Colony No.4 are officers of the Department of Corrections of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, who serve in this penal institution. There is a hierarchy within the colony's staff, with administrative subordination from lower-ranking officers to higher-ups. As a result, lower-level employees cannot take certain actions without the orders or knowledge of their superiors.

Most of the staff in Penal Colony No.4 hold official ranks and specific job responsibilities. Those who are classified as "civilian" workers do not have ranks, years of service, or associated social benefits.

In their activities, the staff are required to strictly follow the laws of the Republic of Belarus, adhere to professional ethics, and maintain high moral and ethical standards. However, the authors of the inquiry have recorded numerous cases of criminal actions and gross unethical behavior by staff members of Penal Colony No.4 toward both political and other prisoners.

"... but you understand, anything that's prohibited can be allowed with the administration's permission..."

In Penal Colony No.4, an atmosphere has been created where not only are Belarusian laws violated — laws that guarantee certain rights and conditions to those serving sentences — but basic human rights are also routinely ignored. The colony staff implement a systematic repressive policy toward political prisoners.

Head of the colony and his deputies

“The individual factor of the boss. One boss wants it this way, another wants it another way. Some of them are lazy, and some are meticulous.”

The head of the colony holds the broadest powers as the highest-ranking official in the facility.

Until August 16, 2024, Dzianis Talstsiankou was in charge of Penal Colony No.4. As of that date, Lieutenant Colonel of Internal Affairs Stanislau Kavalou became the head of the colony, having previously served as the deputy head for security and operational work*. According to media reports, since July 2024, all of the leadership at Penal Colony No.4 has changed: Major of Internal Affairs Alena Leanidauna Drazdova was appointed as the acting deputy head for correctional processes, and Major of Internal Affairs Mikita Piatrovich Alokhin was appointed as the acting deputy head for security and operational work.**

* <https://mspring.media/ru/new-boss-in-prison/>

** <https://t.me/MAYDAYMog/4424>



Full Name

**Talstsiankou,
Dzanis Anatolyevich***

position, rank

born on August 17, 1977, was the head of Penal Colony No.4 until August 16, 2024.

.....

On August 9, 2024, the United Kingdom expanded its sanctions list against Belarus. Among those targeted by the new restrictions was the former head of Penal Colony No.4, Dzanis Talstsiankou.**

At the initial stage, he was responsible for assigning newly arrived prisoners to their units. When it came to political prisoners, he chose units with the worst conditions, where the inmate could be subjected to pressure both from operational and security officers, as well as from other inmates.

"I realized that my placement in this particular unit was a form of punishment because I spoke to him a bit defiantly during the post-quarantine assignment."

As the head of the colony, Talstsiankou was also responsible for imposing numerous ungrounded and illegal sanctions on political prisoners. He chaired the commission that decided what kind of punishment would be imposed, and the rulings were issued under his signature. He verbally abused the prisoners, insulted them, and threatened to impose additional punishments or criminal charges under Article 411 of the Criminal Code.

"He genuinely hated all of us, and it was obvious. Naturally, under his leadership, the screws were constantly tightened in the colony, both for us and for ordinary prisoners. And whenever he spoke to inmates during commission sessions, he always tried to humiliate or insult them."

He yelled at me and insulted me...

Toward [name], he would say things like, "You're a monkey, go back to your Ethiopia!"

Like other staff members at Penal Colony No.4, Dzanis Talstsiankou was involved in putting political prisoners on preventive register, which effectively served to stigmatize a specific group of inmates.

Talstsiankou did not hide his disdain for the Belarusian language, making remarks to prisoners who used it in conversation.

"Well, I said "Вітаю вас" ("Greetings"), and he said, "Well, you can say that to your girlfriends", and I said, "With my girlfriends, I say "прывітанне" (a form of "Hi"), it's a different concept, that's it." And he said, "Well, you could have said "good afternoon" or "good morning." Just these weird nitpicky comments."

* <https://luka.zone/person/focod3a9-b522-4bfd-af39-dc4e1d8f9ca0>
** <https://t.me/MAYDAYMog/4412>

N°002



Full Name

**Kavalyou,
Stanislau Syarheevich***

position, rank

Deputy Head of Penal Colony No.4 for Security and Operational Work. Since August 16, 2024, he has been the head of the colony. Born on December 12, 1984.

.....
While serving as the deputy head of the colony for security and operational work (presumably until August 16, 2024), he was in charge of all operational and security personnel at the colony. It was under his direction that the alleged crimes, torture, and cruel treatment of political prisoners were carried out.

"They were friends with this Ziuzin, as I understand. And when they came into the unit, they would... everyone would hide or run away... because you would immediately get a report, as they would definitely find something to pick on. They would conduct searches, turn everything upside down. They acted like lords of life. They came to have some fun...."

on his orders, all icons were removed from the units.

N°003



Full Name

**Lukomskaya,
Alena Piatrouna***

position, rank

former Deputy Head of Penal Colony No.4 for
Correctional Processes. Born on July 27, 1976**

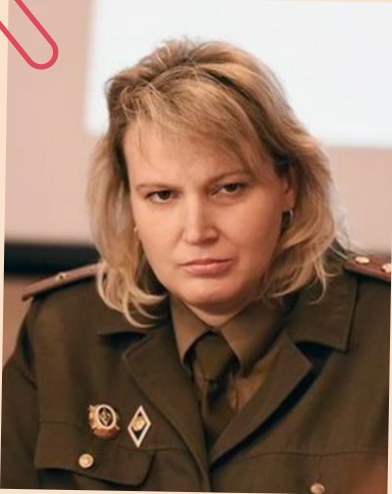
.....
She no longer works at Penal Colony No.4. In July 2024, she turned 48,
which marks retirement age for security officers.

While serving as the deputy head for correctional processes at Penal Colony No.4, starting from the quarantine phase, Alena Lukomskaya held conversations with political prisoners to convince them to admit guilt for the crimes they were accused of and write a request for clemency. She talked harshly, using manipulation and making threats. Following orders from the colony's leadership, she took part in the repression of political prisoners.

"She simply said: — You don't want it? You say: — No, I don't. And she replies: — Well, think about your parents, they are suffering..."

"Lukomskaya, the deputy head of the colony for correctional processes, held these talks... she was quite harsh and would say things like, "Here, we'll clip your wings..."

* https://luka_zone/person/7a7c4deg-eece-4f02-bee2-79865121fa45
** <https://mspring.media/ru/new-boss-in-prison/>



Full Name

**Drazdova,
Alena Leanidauna***

position, rank

Deputy Head of Penal Colony No.4 for Correctional Processes. Born on April 3, 1978

.....

While serving as deputy head of the colony, she participated in pressuring and intimidating political prisoners.

"... and an amusing fact about her is that this head of the correctional process, who is supposedly supposed to "correct" you, constantly uses foul language and swears in front of people, including inmates."

"... He starts telling me that I need to write a confession, with threats of the punitive isolation cell... We entered the neighboring office, where a woman was sitting — Alena Drazdova. She also started talking to me... then began asking questions about the criminal case, saying, "Maybe you are guilty of what you're here for, maybe you should write that confession." I had hoped, since she was a woman, that she would understand me, see that I was being threatened, and say this was wrong, that she would help me... But no... they both pressured me, and eventually, she joined in saying, "You know, it's hard to follow all the internal rules, nobody's perfect", suggesting that I could be sent to the punitive cell for any little thing."



Full Name

**Aliokhin,
Mikita Piatrovich***

position, rank

Head of the Operational Department at Penal Colony No.4. Born on August 24, 1988

.....

He directly participated in provoking political prisoners, intimidating them, and threatening them with unjust punishments. He would use fabricated reasons to force them to write "confessions" and requests for clemency.

".. It turns out he's the head of the operational department of the colony, the terror of the place.

... So he comes up to me and says, "Well, what now? "I'm standing there, not understanding what he wants from me." "Are you going to admit your guilt? " I said, "I haven't done anything illegal." And he turns to the guard and says, "Keep a close watch on this one."

".. Of all the people in the colony, if pressure needs to be applied to any of our girls, Aliokhin is the one who handles it directly. Sometimes it's the lower-ranking officers, but it's always under his orders."

Aliokhin personally prohibited prisoners from speaking to the "political" ones, threatening them with punishment or the loss of certain privileges if they tried to communicate. He also punished those who helped political prisoners.

".. She's been there a long time and had a child... When her child turned one, she was supposed to move to the "Mother and Child Home", which she really wanted. Aliokhin came to her and said that if she talked to [name], she could forget about moving there."

"That girl later told me that he had accused her of telling me about an upcoming [provocation]... until she started having problems herself. She was removed from all her positions and so on."

In addition, Aliokhin would intimidate political prisoners right before their release, threatening them with re-arrest, either of them or their relatives who would come to pick them up.

".. When we were being released, they filmed us... the whole process of what you're doing. Aliokhin stood there with his phone, filming."

".. He tried to threaten us, saying, "If you organize some sort of mass action, God forbid, outside the colony gates, OMON will come and take you right away."

Operational Officers

“This happens often — there are a couple of officers who give the same punishment almost every time: making everyone in the unit carry all their belongings from the storage room and walk around the entire colony with them. You could have just received a package, and maybe you have 20 kilograms of your own things, plus another 50 from the package. Then you have to carry it all yourself, in your hands, whether it’s winter or summer, +30°C, and you’re walking with some other people from your unit, or the entire unit, and they hate you for that and are figuring out how to get back at you, all while shouting at you.”

In Penal Colony No.4, the operational officers are the group directly responsible for using repressive practices against political prisoners. They act both independently (insulting, threatening, intimidating, fabricating reports about prisoners’ violations) and through other staff or inmates.

“Each unit has different operational officers, and inmates’ lives depend mostly on them because some are more brutal, and others are slightly less brutal... Some like to punish more, and some less.”

Operational officers frequently exert pressure on political prisoners through other inmates. One of the most common methods is “collective punishment”, where the entire unit or section is punished for an imagined violation by a political prisoner (carrying belongings, cleaning duties), which increases pressure on the political prisoner from the rest of the inmates.

“There’s an officer like ours, who resolves issues differently. He just psychologically manipulates different people, turning them against each other. They start making things up, acting crazy, and he just watches from the sidelines, like a shadow ruler, observing from afar...”

Operational officers use individual psychological manipulation tactics such as provocations and threats of punishment to stir up conflict among political prisoners.

“This led to some political prisoners accusing others... One political prisoner accused another of reporting her to the security officers about having someone else’s raincoat in her storage. The officers came and searched that exact spot, meaning they knew where everything was. That was the officer’s doing-- he manipulated peo-

ple during conversations. He might not have given any punishments at the time, but it was a psychological game."

Snitching in the colony happens largely due to the fact that the officers control all aspects of the prisoners' rights and privileges. For example, a prisoner can be punished by being deprived of a visit or a package. So, each prisoner must decide whether to cooperate with the operational officer or lose access to food, hygiene products, clothing, and contact with loved ones.

"... The officers liked to roll up the mattress like a snail, wrap it with the sheet and tie knots on it, then hang it on the bed... You come back with 10 minutes left until the inspection, trying to assemble everything and put it back in order. If your bed isn't properly made, you could get punished."

"Other inmates bullied her — morally and sometimes even physically. This behavior towards her was because the leadership and officers had ordered it, deliberately."

The main repressive practices against political prisoners are aimed at breaking them morally and obtaining a written confession of "guilt" and a request for clemency. The methods for achieving this goal differ depending on the specific officer, the colony leadership's requests, and external factors.

"... Political prisoners are overseen by the GUBOPiK. They determine how to deal with a person and give instructions to the operational officers at the colony on how to probe the person, understand their mood, and figure out what they are like. . There's talk that the pressure is exerted through GUBOPiK."

N°001



Full Name

**Chorny,
Ihar Viktaravich***

position, rank

Operational Officer at Penal Colony No.4, born on April 9, 1989

.....

"I also got threats from Chorny. The last few times we talked about my infringements, he threatened to move me to Unit 9, saying ironically, "Come on, it's a great unit, why are you complaining? "

"... His job was to push people to confess to new crimes and things like that. The girls who returned after talking to him told me he had harsh conversations with them, like, 'You're here on Article 205, now tell me about your friends. I'm 100% sure they're stealing, doing drugs, whatever. And hey, maybe we'll charge you under Article 328 and send you off again."

"... People were snitching so much; it was hard to believe. Once, I walked by someone who was writing a minute-by-minute report about what I was doing, and I saw a surname, [surname], and it said, '09:35 – [surname] sat next to this person and started talking. '

N°002



Full Name

**Kuzniatsou,
Aliaksandr Mikalaevich ***

position, rank

Operational Officer at Penal Colony No.4, born on March 21, 1991

.....

"All the worst stories, which I think everyone tells you, including me, are usually about Kuzniatsou. One of the main units where these awful things happen is Unit 9. Among the inmates, especially the political ones, it's often called a 'pressure hut,' it's not a room or anything, rather the entire unit is like that."

"Kuzniatsou was the worst operational officer there. He organized Unit 9, the pressure unit — that was his job, his doing. Later, he was the operational officer in Unit 18, where Maria Kalesnikava was kept. He was the most zealous one..."

"Pronin was a security officer, and Kuzniatsou was an operational officer. Out of nowhere, they locked themselves in the storage room with me... and just started doing something insane. 'Who do you think you are? You like being here? You're going to end up in the punitive isolation cell, and lose all your hair.' I said, 'Okay, sorry, but what's the matter?' "The matter is that you're a traitor to the motherland."

"... He got angry at the unit inmates, mainly at the political prisoners... He told everyone to take laundry soap bars and whip them into foam... and then scrub the floor in figure eights. If you didn't do it right, he'd start shouting and pressuring you... You spent all your free time scrubbing the floor with a brush until he said you could stop..."

"The concept of collective punishment and the types of these collective punishments were introduced to the colony with the arrival of Kuzniatsou. He came up with this "carry the boxes" punishment. The phrase "let's have a walk with the boxes" is feared by everyone in the colony because the reason for it could be anything... He started asking political prisoners what his name was, and when he asked me, I didn't know. So, he said the whole unit would go get the boxes from storage and bring them down to the first floor, and we lived on the fourth."

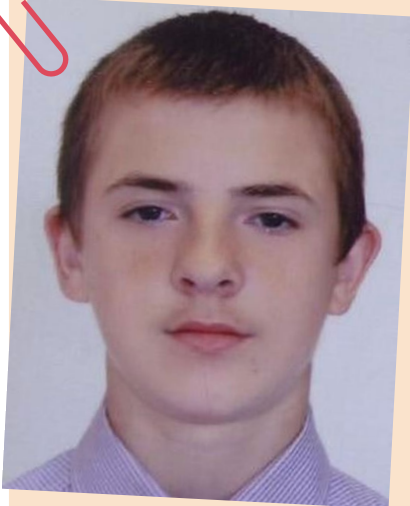
"Another form of punishment is walking around 'Bombay,' a local area named that way because it has the most units — there are three units located there."We'd get off work, approach the unit, and they'd tell us we weren't going inside, but had to walk around 'Bombay' for an hour until inspection. For an hour, you just march in formation. This is collective punishment; they usually say who's at fault, and everyone walks for them — for example, someone didn't make their bed properly, so everyone has to walk because of that."

"..... who, following orders from the colony administration, completely crush people mentally. This happens to anyone who goes against the administration. In that unit, my pillowcase and sheets were slashed. I constantly found caterpillars in my tea, and my bed was often soaked with water that had been dumped on it. All of this happened with Kuzniatsou's permission, as he was the operational officer supervising the unit."

"Then he came up with another punishment: they carried the bed frame from the living section outside, and the whole unit had to take turns making and unmaking the bed. This was in the summer, I remember, it was unbearably hot, and some people fainted... Just imagine, there were 97 people in the unit, and each of us had to fully make and unmake the bed."

"He loved collective punishments, making the whole unit stand outside for hours, even in the winter... It was late November, early December."

N°003



Full Name

**Ziuzin,
Aliaksei Alehavich ***

position, rank

Operational Officer at Penal Colony No.4, born on February 19, 1998

.....

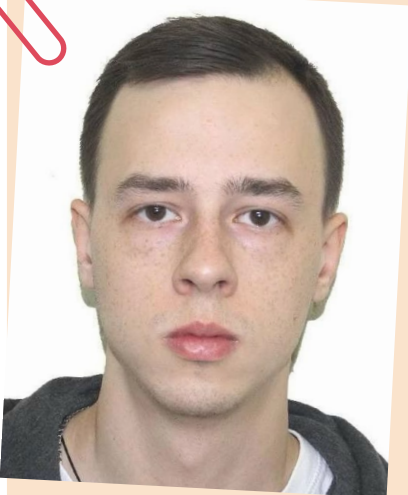
"You know, suicidal thoughts came up quite often. It was unbearable to be there... In Unit 14, there were people like that. And these people didn't even hide the fact that they were ordered by operational officer Ziuzin to insult me in every possible way."

"He once deliberately destroyed my letters right in front of me... When I asked him not to tear up the envelope, he said, 'No, it's the rule,' and tore it up. How would I describe him? It's pure human meanness. It's odd how such a young guy... how could someone his age act like that? Where does all that inner filth come from? "

"When she was arrested, GUBOPiK beat her severely. She has a serious psychological trauma because of GUBOPiK. And our officer, along with another one... Ours was Ziuzin, and the other was Kavalou... they would put on balaclavas, come to her, and start asking her questions, whatever they wanted, during the inspection."You don't like balaclavas, huh? Why not? You don't like GUBOPiK either" It was outright mockery. Just seeing the balaclavas triggered a hysterical reaction in her."

"Ziuzin, my new operational officer, really loved to come into the unit."S. ," he said, and I replied "Yes." "I saw some photos of you from your younger days. Well, now... you're a total wreck."I shot back, 'Well, given your institution, it's of no surprise." Or, in front of the whole unit, he would say, 'S. , tell us how you became such a traitor. People, did you know she betrayed her country? " It was constant humiliation, constant insults, always focused on how awful I looked."

N°004



Full Name

**Hancharou, Y
araslau Aliakseyevich***

position, rank

Operational Officer at Penal Colony No.4, born on
September 4, 1998

.....

"He's a really mean person. A real fan of bullying... if someone messed up... there would be a call from the checkpoint to the unit, and we'd be ordered to line up outside, in the winter... instead of having our free time to drink tea and warm up, we'd all have to stand outside in the cold. We'd stand for five minutes, ten minutes, fifteen, half an hour."

"It was Ziuzin and Hancharou who once called her in for a talk. They were trying to coerce her into cooperating. They deceitfully tried to convince her that her mother-in-law had already been arrested and was facing chargers because of her, and that only she could help. And she had to agree to cooperate with them. They tried to force her to sign a paper. They pushed her to the point of a breakdown, leaving her in tears."

"Hancharou and some other officers started visiting me more frequently, having unpleasant conversations with me. Of course, they always called me trash, a traitor. They hinted that the best thing I could do was to write a request for clemency."

"Almost every week, Ziuzin and Hancharou would call me in for a talk. These talks were always along the lines of, 'You're an idiot. You think you're kind, huh?'," "You won't make it out of the punitive isolation cell, we'll send you to Rechytsa after this colony." "It was psychologically very hard to endure."

N°005



Full Name

**Baranau,
Danila Valintsinavich***

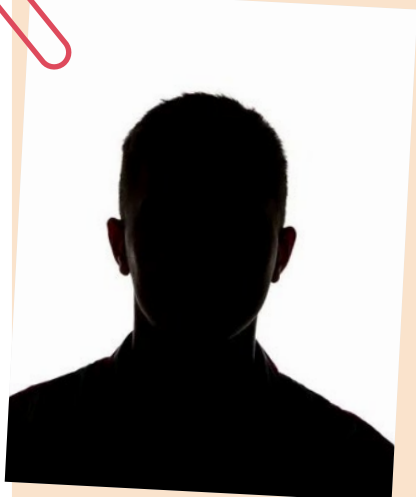
position, rank

perational Officer at Penal Colony No.4, born on
September 10, 1998

.....

"Baranau, though he could write false reports, I don't think he ever filed one against me. He wasn't involved in outright pressure. He was just told to come up with infringement reports on this one, this one, and that one, and he'd say, "Okay, sure, I'll do it." But he wasn't as horrible as Ziuzin and Hancharou."

N°006



Full Name

**Klauko,
Yahor Andreevich**

position, rank

Operational Officer at Penal Colony No.4

.....

"That's when I met my officer, Klauko. He brought me into the office, and Ziuzin was there as well. They started off, as usual, with their lame jokes: "You're having it way too easy. You should get a report, almost everyone else has one, and you don't. So, pick what it's gonna be for"... a couple of days later, Klauko came to me again and told me that on the day of the search, I was loudly swearing at the staff members in the storage room."

"I was on duty cleaning the toilets, scrubbing everything with gloves on. He walked in, pretending he needed to talk to me, and while I was cleaning, he was holding his phone. He always had his phone in hand. Later, it turned out he was recording a video. Somehow, the most disgusting screenshot from that video, where I looked like crap, ended up with GU-BOPIK, and they posted it on their media channels."

Heads of units

The head of a unit in IK-4 is an official with a police rank who performs intra-unit organisational functions, monitors compliance with discipline, approves duty schedules, helps solve issues related to prisoners' everyday life, participates in educational work within the unit, etc.

"At first I thought she was insane, because she would gather the unit almost every day... and she would just yell at everyone very loudly and could even use some very harsh words, that is, not directly foul language, but insulting statements of different kind".

"And there was immediately a very heavy atmosphere in this unit. Somewhere the prisoners made a mistake and this Viktoria seemed to be very displeased. She went around and shouted at everyone. She screamed so much that I thought I would need a nappy... She just started shouting threateningly: 'If, God forbid, you give someone a cigarette, a sausage, drink tea with someone, or bring it to someone, or take something with you... I will show you who I am, you will not get out of the punishment cell.'" There were a lot of such threats."

Let us only describe the facts of collaboration between the heads of units and operational officers, when they actually participate in repression of political prisoners. This can manifest itself in special attention to political prisoners, when heads of units fulfil their official duties, but display an obviously biased, discriminatory attitude towards a group of the "yellow-tagged".

"... also by threats she tried to force me to go to work on Sunday. She would periodically arrange inspections of my boxes, for no particular reason, when I had to take out all my boxes and she inspected them."

"... once she gathered us all, the entire unit, and yelled that we are animals that belong behind a fence. Those are her literal words. That is, we are animals that can't go free."

The complicity in repression on the part of the heads of units was also manifested in their direct participation in 'operational' activities together with other colony staff. Unit heads could both simply threaten with punishment without any real infringements and directly participate in provocations: planting unauthorised objects in prisoners' property, moral abuse and insult, persuading them to make a written "confession of guilt" or to write a petition for clemency.

N°001



Full Name

**Maksimchykava,
Anhelina Siarheyeyuna***

position, rank

Head of Unit No. 9 at Penal Colony No.4, born on
October 6, 1993

.....

"Maksimchykava loved assigning individual tasks specifically to political prisoners... people would just come up to them and throw their dirty laundry right in their faces — sometimes stained with menstrual blood, sometimes with feces or urine, just disgusting, sweaty clothes."

"The horrors that happen in the colony, most of them, are deliberate, meaning they are done intentionally under orders from staff. Most often, these orders come from the operational officers or the head of the colony. But there are also staff members like Anhelina Maksimchykava, the head of Unit No. 9, which is the "pressure unit", who was equally involved in various beatings, bullying, extortion, and other forms of abuse."

Other Staff Members

In the colony, there are many different staff members who, while performing various functions, participated in the repression of political prisoners by using their official powers to persecute them.

N°001



Full Name

**Siutsou,
Andrei Valintsinavich***

position, rank

Head of the Security Department at Penal Colony No.4,
born on February 12, 1988

.....

"... When he took over as head of the security department, a lot of conditions in the colony worsened. For example, it was after his arrival that they banned colored socks — everything had to be black. Only underwear, undershirts, and bras could remain in other colors. He also banned sandals..."

N°002



Full Name

**Dasheuskaya,
Ala Uladzimirauna***

position, rank

Officer in the Security Department, born on July 7, 1973

.....

"At the beginning, Dasheuskaya really disliked me, and it was obvious. Once, when she came to Unit 14, I didn't notice her. I was on desk duty at the time. And she started criticizing me. Then, she asked to call the housekeeper and started scolding her as well. She said, "Why is M. not fulfilling her duties properly? Give her a task she can definitely handle, something more suitable for her, like cleaning the toilets."

"On top of the unbearable conditions, with intolerable food — rotten vegetables, stones in the porridge, worms. Once, as we were leaving the canteen, Dasheuskaya said, "Why are you smiling? " I asked, "Are we not allowed to smile? " She replied, "No, you're not." I asked, "Why? " She responded, 'Because it's not allowed by the internal regulations."

N°003



Full Name

**Drazdou,
Yauhen Siarheyevich***

position, rank

officer of the security department, born on June 29, 1999

.....

"We had this guy, Drazdou, the son of some high-ranking female officer... He stood out because during inspections — line-up ones, where they check your uniform and how your tags are sewn on — he would walk around with a ruler, measuring all the tags. If they were even half a centimeter off, he would tear them off with pleasure. He would rip them off with a satisfying tear... Why are you ruining them? You have to remake them, laminate them again so we can sew them back on. But he just got physical pleasure from tearing them right off you. Even the female guards who were with him looked at him in surprise: 'Seriously, why are you doing this? What's the point of this?'"

N°004



Full Name

**Pyrkh,
Alena Dmitryeuna ***

position, rank

officer of the security department, born on January 4, 1978

.....

"Alena Pyrkh... she's quite fond of unscheduled shakedowns. She's a security officer. She loves making us carry boxes from the storage room."

".. I ended up in the press unit multiple times... My stay in that unit ended with the punitive isolation cell; they planted a needle on me. The needle was planted by officer Alena Dmitryeuna Pyrkh. She planted it; she came to the unit and said, "I need to inspect your locker," and immediately she knew exactly where my locker was, which side, where and how. She purposefully went straight there, opened the locker — I didn't even have time to get there — and then she tells me, "I found a needle in your locker, this means a report on you, and you're going to the punitive isolation cell..."

Among the staff, "**controllers**" stand out as a specific group. These are people who provide external and internal security of the colony, escort within the colony, accompany prisoners to various places within the colony, conduct checks of prisoners, and can perform searches (both personal and of premises).

"There was this controller, Yuryeuna, who was later made head of the unit. She was always very strict. During our evening check, she approached the local area, and we hadn't lined up yet. "Oh, you're not ready? You should have been standing here at 8 o'clock, all lined up. Fine, you'll stand here until I finish inspecting the entire colony." And she would walk around and come back only in half an hour."

CONCLUSIONS

The penitentiary system is a critical element within the broader security sector, designed primarily to ensure adherence to the law and to maintain oversight on its enforcement. The system is also responsible for protecting society by isolating individuals who pose a serious threat to others, deterring potential offenders, and rehabilitating them.

“The sole punishment for the convicted is deprivation of freedom” is a foundational principle of penal systems in many European countries.

In its current form, Belarus's penitentiary system has retained and actively employs many remnants of the Soviet penal system. In practice, it functions as part of the regime's apparatus for suppressing dissent, disregarding the varying needs, rights, and circumstances of women, men, and young adults. Its methods fail to align with human rights standards and do not contribute to the rehabilitation of prisoners.

*The Body of Principles for the Protection of All Persons under Any Form of Detention or Imprisonment** establishes in its very first principle that all persons under any form of detention or imprisonment shall be treated in a humane manner and with respect for the inherent dignity of the human person. The Bangkok Rules, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2010, address the treatment of women prisoners and non-custodial measures for female offenders. These rules require states to implement measures to address the

* Adopted by the UN in 1988.

underlying causes that lead women to imprisonment and the consequences of their incarceration.

In 1980, Belarus ratified the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (hereinafter referred to as the Convention), making its provisions binding on the state. Article 8 of the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus affirms the priority of universally recognized principles of international law and ensures that national legislation complies with them. Paragraph (a) of article 5 of the Convention declares the commitment of States parties to take all appropriate measures to modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women.

*The Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners** (hereinafter referred to as the Rules) contain minimum standards that penitentiary institutions must adhere to in ensuring the rights of prisoners. This also applies to Belarusian penitentiary institutions in accordance with the country's international obligations.

In examining the conditions for women imprisoned on political charges in Homel Women's Penal Colony No.4 since 2020, the authors uncovered alarming facts that reveal serious issues with the procedures and punitive methods used in this facility. These findings point to practices that blatantly violate international standards and regulations for the humane treatment of women in custody.

Based on the data gathered and its analysis, as well as the current policies of the regime, the authors of this work find it neither practical nor feasible to offer specific recommendations for remedying the identified issues. The only conclusion in this case is clear: the penitentiary system, where serving a sentence turns into a struggle for survival, must be completely restructured.

The working conditions for women in Penal Colony No.4 resemble a form of slavery, where inmates are forced to perform grueling labor seven days a week in exchange for food. When mandatory housekeeping tasks are included, their workload far exceeds 40 hours per week. The Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences, Tomoya Obokata, in his report "Contemporary forms of slavery as affecting currently and formerly incarcerated people", dated 19.07.2024, points out that while the use of labour during incarceration is not forced labour per se under international human rights and labour standards, incarcerated individuals should be recognized as workers who can enjoy conditions with regard

* Adopted by the United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders in 1955.

to wages, social security and occupational safety and health that are comparable to the conditions of workers outside correctional settings. He also indicates that State-imposed forced labour has been reported in Belarus.*

OHCHR found that prisoners held on politically motivated charges in penal colonies across Belarus were subjected to compulsory and exploitative labour in unsafe working conditions. Some interviewees reported accidents, injuries and negative health effects due to lack of training, work clothing or protective equipment.**

Penal Colony No.4 disregards both international standards and national law: political prisoners face restrictions on correspondence, orchestrated provocations, and the use of unauthorized penalties.

A particularly disturbing aspect is that prisoners are effectively held hostage by the system, left with no means to defend their rights within the colony, while the administration and their superiors have free rein for any form of abuse. Given the presence of Article 411 in the Criminal Code, there is effectively no time limit on the duration of such abuses, allowing mistreatment to continue indefinitely.

Here, women imprisoned on political charges are subject to a system of arbitrary and disproportionate punishment. They are assigned the status of a "persistent offender", which brings severe consequences, including potential charges and subsequent confinement in a punitive isolation cell for "persistent disobedience." The penalties for these "violations" are disproportionate and unjustified. Prisoners can be held in a punitive isolation cell for up to 30 days in total isolation under inhumane conditions.

The denial of timely, quality medical care and refusal to provide necessary medications transforms the detention conditions in the Homel women's colony into a serious health hazard, at times reaching life-threatening levels. One of the most striking examples is the case of Maria Kalesnikava, who has developed a serious health issue, including a perforated ulcer and weight loss to 45 kg (99 lbs) at a height of 175 cm (5'9"), as a result of poor quality food and harsh confinement conditions. This condition threatens to have long-term consequences for her health.

On March 17, 2022, in Geneva, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet presented a report on human rights abuses in Belarus, with Natalia Hersche as a witness. Hersche testified that her deteriorated health due to harsh conditions in the Homel prison punishment cell was disregarded and even exploited to increase pressure on her as a political prison-

* A/HRC/57/46, п.1, 30

** A/HRC/55/61, § 33

er. She also recounted witnessing torture and severe treatment of other inmates, including the isolation of women with epilepsy in punitive cells and the lack of leniency for cancer patients.

During her speech in Geneva, Natalia Hersche identified individuals directly responsible for the mistreatment of prisoners in the Homel penal colony. She named **Dzianis Anatolyevich Tarasenkau**, the head of the colony, and **Sviatlana Aliaksandrauna Silkina**, the head of the therapeutic department, as those accountable for the abuses.

In his report dated March 15, 2024, the UN High Commissioner indicated that OHCHR has reasonable grounds to believe that a crime against humanity of persecution may have been committed, along with other underlying acts which may be established as a result of the human rights violations described.*

The authors of the study claim that many prison staff are complicit in the persecution of citizens on political grounds and other crimes against humanity** that continue in Belarus. According to article 85 of the Criminal Code, the statute of limitations rules do not apply to the prosecution of persons who have committed a criminal offence under article 128 of the Criminal Code.

* A/HRC/55/61, p.52

** Article 128 of the Criminal Code criminalises acts falling under the category of crimes against the security of mankind. These include unlawful detention, mass or systematic extra-judicial killings, abductions followed by disappearances, torture or acts of cruelty committed because of the race, nationality, ethnicity, political convictions and religion of the civilian population.

