THE INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE FOR INVESTIGATION OF TORTURE IN BELARUS

LEGAL INITIATIVE

Torture and Ill-Treatment in Penal Colony No. 1, Navapolatsk

“He was personally beaten by the head of the colony, and the beating was so severe that the young man developed rectal bleeding.”

Public Investigation

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Abbreviations Used in This Document

PC-1	—	Penal Colony No. 1
DEP	—	Department for the Execution of Punishments of the Ministry of Internal Affairs
DAHC	—	Duty Assistant to the Head of the Colony
PDO	—	Parole / Early Conditional Release
CCRB	—	Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus
IR	—	Internal Regulations
SHIZO (DC)	—	Disciplinary Cell
PKT (CTP)	—	Cell-Type Premises
LSS	—	“Low Social Status”
SOBID	—	Recreation and Leisure Section
CHP	—	Combined Heat and Power Plant

Executive Summary

The purpose of this public investigation is to provide an overview of the situation of prisoners held in the correctional facility “Penal Colony No. 1” under the Department for the Execution of Punishments of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in the Vitebsk Region. The authors of this report analyzed 13 interviews (892 pages of transcript) with former inmates who served their sentences in PC-1 between February 2021 and January 2025. The average length of imprisonment among interviewees is 8.3 months, while the total cumulative duration of their sentences amounts to 149.5 months.

Former prisoners interviewed by experts of the International Committee for the Investigation of Torture in Belarus described in detail their detention in one of the harshest penal colonies in the country. PC-1 holds individuals convicted of both serious criminal offenses and political prisoners — people prosecuted on politically motivated charges. It is specifically for this category of detainees that the colony administration has created the most severe living conditions. The distinctive feature of the current Belarusian penitentiary system is total control, inhuman treatment, and complete information isolation of individuals considered “personal enemies” of the head of state who are held in PC-1, including Viktar Babaryka, Andrzej Poczobut, Ihar Losik[1], and others.

Within the colony, the administration continues to maintain and use for its own purposes an informal prison hierarchy — a caste-like system of separating inmates, whose most humiliating and degrading element is the category known as “low social status” (see sections Informal Prison Hierarchy and Low Social Status).

This report describes various stages of imprisonment in the colony, beginning with intake and quarantine procedures, further living conditions in the units, and the labor regime. Particular attention is paid to disciplinary practices applied to prisoners, as well as to physical and psychological violence by staff members.

The report describes the actions of both the former head of the colony, Andrei Palchik, and the current head, Ruslan Mashadziev.[2] The management system

[1] While this report was being prepared, political prisoner Ihar Losik was taken out of Belarus together with a group of other political prisoners whom Alyaksandr Lukashenka effectively exchanged with the U.S. government in return for the easing of sanctions imposed on Belarus. This type of “release” constitutes a form of forced deportation.

[2] Both heads of the colony have been included in the European Union sanctions lists for the ill-treatment of prisoners.

established under their leadership, along with the indifferent and abusive treatment of prisoners, leads to severe deterioration of health, psychological breakdowns, depression, and even deaths, including suicides. As former prisoners report, medical care in the colony is extremely poor: chronic illnesses are left untreated, and in cases of acute pain inmates are forced to rely on the bare minimum of medication, which medical staff often provide reluctantly.

Descriptions of colony staff contain numerous accounts of explicit abuse, mistreatment, and violations of norms and rules governing the treatment of detainees (see sections Provocations and the “Stukačestvo” System and Colony Staff). The authors of the report consider it necessary to note that in several interviews they also encountered a number of positive assessments of individual staff members who performed their duties impartially and professionally.

The authors conclude that Penal Colony No. 1 is in gross violation of international standards governing the treatment and isolation of prisoners.

The interviews with former inmates who served their sentences in Novopolotsk Penal Colony No. 1 were provided for this study by the International Committee for the Investigation of Torture in Belarus and the Human Rights Center “Viasna.” Additional materials supplied by the “Cyber Partisans” initiative were used for identifying colony staff. The authors recognize their responsibility for the information made public in this report. For this reason, all personal data of interviewees have been removed, and details concerning other inmates have also been anonymized. Experts of the International Committee for the Investigation of Torture in Belarus are prepared to provide competent authorities with this data for the purposes of independent investigations in the future.

General Information on Penal Colony No. 1

> “The Novopolotsk colony is located in an industrial zone. It should not be there — people cannot live in that area because the environmental situation is very bad. Even the water there is almost industrial-grade.” (From the testimony of a former political prisoner)

Photo 1. Novopolotsk Penal Colony No. 1. Photo: “Belarusian Prison” / VK. Source: https://news.zerkalo.io/life/101777.html

The correctional facility “Penal Colony No. 1” under the Department for the Execution of Punishments of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in the Vitebsk Region is located at: 211440, Vitebsk Region, Novopolotsk, Tekhnicheskaya Street 8. The colony has a capacity of 1,500 prisoners. In addition to individuals convicted on politically motivated charges, the facility also holds people sentenced for serious crimes, including robbery, intentional homicide, and aggravated bodily injury.

The former barracks built for workers of the Novopolotsk oil refinery were later converted into Correctional Labor Colony No. 10.

In 2014, the colony was transformed into a medical-labour rehabilitation centre (MLRC No. 8), where people suffering from alcohol dependence were forcibly treated and compelled to work in hazardous production environments. In 2017, the facility regained its status as a penal colony[3] and was assigned the number "1."[4]

Novopolotsk High-Security Penal Colony No. 1 is considered the most environmentally polluted facility in the country. The colony's territory is surrounded on all sides by oil-refining and chemical plants, which gives the air a distinct "chemical" smell.

> "...the refractive column of the Naftan refinery, where crude oil is distilled and fractions are evaporated, is located only one kilometer from the colony. It releases smoke and vapors that appear when the technical pipelines are purged. On certain days, the air quality was so bad that your eyes would burn as soon as you stepped out of the barracks."

Photo 2. View of the Naftan refinery; in the foreground — Penal Colony No. 1. Novopolotsk, Belarus. 11 September 2021. Photo: Agata Kwiatkowska, "Belsat." Source: https://news.zerkalo.io/life/101777.html

[3] https://etalonline.by/document/?regnum=P31700223
[4] https://www.svaboda.org/a/32826995.html

In PC-1, prisoners are used to manufacture case furniture, garden furniture, concrete products, as well as lumber and other wood-based goods. Production is carried out under the Republican Unitary Enterprise "Yedinitsa."[5]
For many years, this colony has been used to isolate prominent opponents of the Lukashenka regime. Currently, it holds well-known political prisoners, including the politician and philanthropist Viktar Babaryka, the journalist Andrei Alyaksandrau, Anatol Latushka (cousin of Pavel Latushka), the editor-in-chief of the newspaper 'Belarusi i Rynok' Kanstantsin Zolotykh, Andrzej Poczobut, a member of the Union of Poles in Belarus, and several other widely known political prisoners.

At various times, other prominent political prisoners have also been held in the Navapolatsk colony. In 2011, Andrei Sannikov, a presidential candidate in the 2010 election, was detained here for several months.

Political prisoner Svyatoslav Baranovich served his sentence in this colony under severe pressure until he was transferred to a prison facility in 2018.[6] Civic activists Nikita Likhovid and Ales Kirkievich[7] were also held here, and the anarchist political prisoner Ihar Alinevich spent part of his sentence in Novopolotsk.

Journalist Andrei Kuznechik[8] also served part of his sentence in this colony, and blogger Aliaksandr Kabanau, author of the YouTube channel 'Narodny Repartyor' and press secretary of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's initiative group, spent more than a year there. Until September 2022, the colony also held Dzianis Urad, a captain of the General Staff of the Armed Forces, who was sentenced to 18 years of imprisonment for "state treason."

[5] https://www.belarusinfo.by/rek/98843

[6] https://spring96.org/ru/news/91133

[7] A. Kirkievich wrote a book about his imprisonment titled "Seven Months in a Belarusian Prison" and received the Frantsishak Aliachnovich Literary Award in 2013.

[8] Andrei Kuznechyk, a journalist of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, was released from detention in Belarus as part of the political prisoners' release facilitated with the participation of the Trump administration in February 2025.

Colony Structure

There are five barracks in the residential area of the colony where prisoners are held.

The first barrack (referred to by prisoners as the “kozlyatnya” — “the goats’ shed”) houses inmates who work in the kitchen, as well as those performing construction and plumbing tasks within the colony. Living conditions there are somewhat better than in the other barracks.

The fifth barrack consists of two units and a quarantine section, each with separate exits in different directions. Inside the building, inmates from different units do not cross paths. Shared-use facilities include a club, a canteen, and a barbershop combined with shower rooms, as well as a small chapel. There is also a room where mattresses are stored and disinfected.

The colony has a medical unit and a separate vocational school building where prisoners receive training. Another standalone building is used for visitations.

The industrial zone consists of two large workshops and an area for coal production. There is also a sawmill, which is officially closed; however, it continues operating and is only shut down during inspections. Nearby are two wood-drying kilns and the building of the colony’s internal thermal power station.

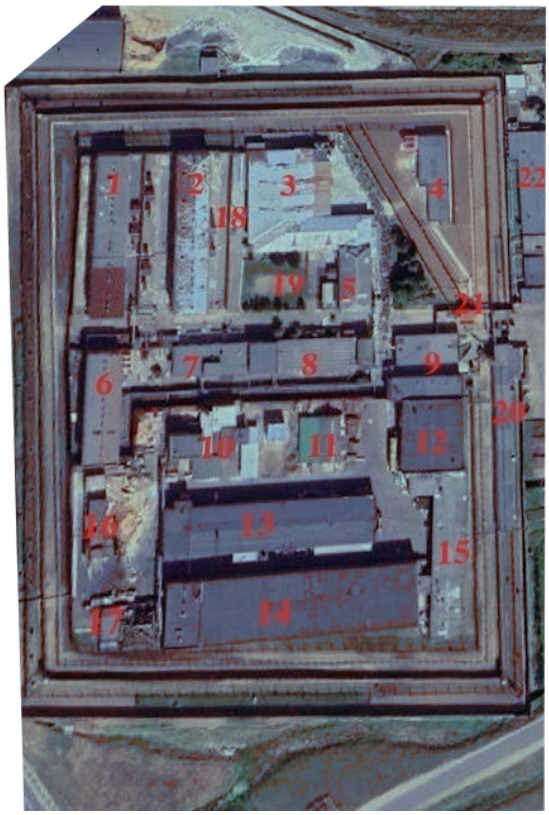

Photo 3. Correctional Facility PC-1. Google Maps (with annotations made by a former prisoner).

1 — Barrack No. 1, half of which is unoccupied; it has been declared unsafe for use.
2 — Barrack No. 2, fully occupied.
Next to the second barrack, as well as near the first one, there are smoking areas (the grey spots visible on the satellite image). You can also see the outline of the local yard area between the first and second barracks. This is a shared space accessible to several units.
To the right of the second barrack, a dividing line is visible — it separates the inner courtyard used by Units 5 and 6.
3 — The canteen. The section of the same building next to the number 3 is the club.
4 — The SHIZO (DC) and PKT (CTP) building.
The coldest cell is located in the so-called “boot” — the upper right corner of the structure, where it has walls on two sides. According to testimonies, this cell is significantly colder than the rest of the area.

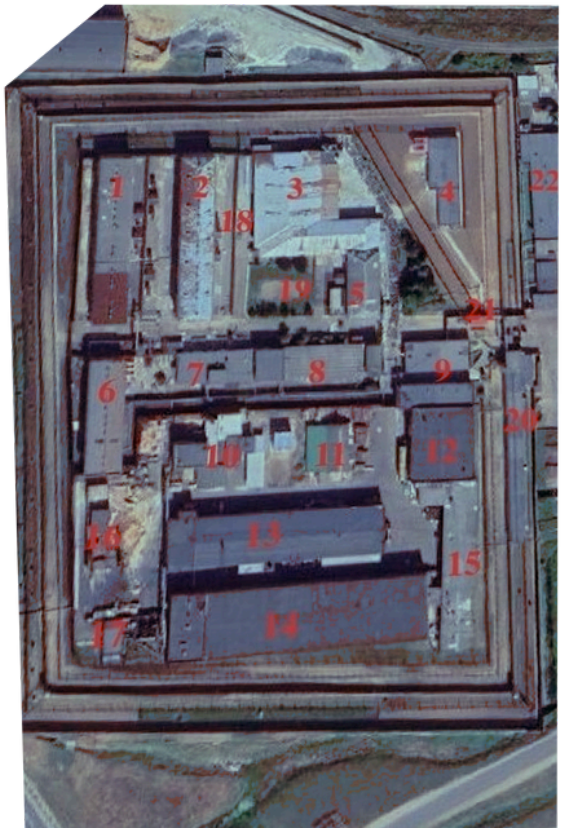

Photo 3. Correctional Facility PC-1. Google Maps (with annotations made by a former prisoner).

5 — The building with the residential unit (on the left) and the quarantine unit (on the right).
6 — The barrack for Units 1 and 2, commonly known as the “kozlyatnya”. The space between points 6 and 7 is their local yard area.
7 — The parcel distribution point. Along the line between points 7 and 8 are the barbershop, the showers, the mattress replacement room, and one of the rooms where phone calls are made.
8 — The medical complex. On the right is the outpatient clinic (the green rectangle). Under the new administration, all the trees in areas 19 and 8 were cut down.
9 — The vocational school.
The grey rectangle between points 9 and 12 is the administrative building (the HQ).
The boundary separating the residential zone from the industrial zone runs along the line connecting points 6, 7, 8, 9 and further up. Points 10, 11, 12 and below belong to the industrial zone; they are physically separated.

10 — The CHP (Combined Heat and Power Plant). In the middle: the wood-drying kiln and the lumber storage area. Between points 10 and 11 is the new wood-drying kiln.
11 — The lumber-cutting facility, where logs are sawn into boards. According to prisoners’ accounts, this is the place where one inmate once hanged himself. From what prisoners discussed, suicides in the colony occur regularly — one or two every year.
12 — The workshop where cars are repaired, mostly the colony’s own vehicles. The rightmost section is the military gear storage. Next to it is the woodworking shop with machines, where pallets are assembled.
13 — The industrial workshop. In the building marked as point 10, wire is used to make cords. Between points 13 and 14 (the long white rectangle) is another building of the vocational school.
14 — The processing facility. Along the edge of Barrack 14 on the right is the sewing section, followed by the waste-processing area: plastic bags are washed, peeled, processed, and shredded. There are machines that produce plastic bags. Further along, workers sort polymer waste (“boobki”), separating white and black materials for producing different types of bags and film.
15 — The industrial zone where prisoners’ work uniforms are washed. Under the building marked as point 12 is the soap-making workshop. At the very bottom of the map is the bakery, where Babaryka worked for a long time; the tile-production facility is also located there.
16 — The condemned sawmill, which continues to operate despite being officially listed as unsafe.
17 — The water intake facility. Between points 17 and 14, coal is burned.
18 — The outdoor sports area, an open-air gym. Political prisoners are not allowed there.
19 — The football field. Political prisoners are also not permitted to enter this area.
20 — The visitation building, a long corridor with visitation rooms.
21 — The entry checkpoint (“sluz”). Vehicles and all other items entering the colony are inspected there.
22 — The building where prisoners are not allowed to be. Censors work there, and the offices of colony officers are located in this building.

Extortion of Prisoners and Mandatory Deductions

In Belarus, the costs of maintaining prisoners in penal colonies are covered by the state budget. This means that the funding of the penitentiary system — including food, clothing, medical care, and other needs of prisoners — is provided by the government.

Despite this, the practice of extracting payments from prisoners is widespread across all DEP correctional facilities, presented as voluntary contributions (the so-called “mecenatstvo” or “patronage”). Each facility has its own specifics, but generally, prisoners’ money is channelled into several common areas.

Funds are deducted from their personal accounts to cover accommodation, food, utilities, and other expenses.

> “...for pensioners, almost everything is deducted for maintenance: for electricity, heating.”
>
> “In the colony they give you a uniform, boots, underwear, socks. Then they bring you a payslip stating that you have to pay for all of this. It is often 400–500 rubles. If you don’t pay, you won’t qualify for PDO, for sentence reduction, for anything.”

In PC-1, the practice of buying “positions” and privileges is also widespread.

> “...of course, this is not for political prisoners. For example, you could pay 200 rubles a month to stay in the infirmary and do nothing. You essentially buy yourself a kind of exemption from work.”

The visually “well-maintained” appearance of the colony is also financed at the expense of prisoners. Their money is used for repairs of administrative buildings, installation of new windows, and the renewal of furniture and equipment.

> “If you want them to treat you more leniently, then you have to install plastic windows here and here. A person

writes home, makes a phone call. Their relatives pay for these windows and submit a statement saying they are providing material charitable assistance to the colony."

"The administration knows who has money and who has some business. They come to them openly and say: 'You owe us 500 dollars this month; you must transfer it to this account. Call your relatives and make the payment.'"

Prisoners who refuse to pay face problems.

"There was one inmate they kept extorting money from. Eventually he got tired of it and filed a complaint to the prosecutor's office. The complaint never left the colony. He was called in and told: 'What do you think you're doing?' He said: 'I will get a lawyer, and I will make sure this is exposed anyway.' That prisoner was thrown into SHIZO (DC), and both the quartermaster and the SOBID officer were also placed in SHIZO and removed from their positions. Even though they were acting under the direct orders of the head of the colony. They were outraged that the chief gives the orders and then sacrifices them."

Transfer, Arrival Procedures, and Quarantine

Transfer

Prisoners describe transfer between facilities as a physically and mentally exhausting process. For many political prisoners, it is made even more difficult by the fact that they are kept in handcuffs throughout the entire transfer. Carrying bags, sitting and sleeping in the train car for around 12 hours, going to the toilet — all of these actions had to be done with their hands restrained. At the same time, non-political prisoners are transported without handcuffs.

> "...when a murderer walks without handcuffs and laughs at us. And you, for a comment... you walk barely dragging your bag. Because your hands are shackled."

One former prisoner described how another inmate with mental health issues had to endure the transfer:

> "He was not well, that was obvious. He started having panic attacks and asked to have his handcuffs removed. Instead, they re-cuffed his hands behind his back. This is how they 'prevent self-harm': they simply cuff a person's hands behind their back, and he travels like that the whole way. He was transported alone, while we were packed tightly in our compartment."

Arrival at the colony

After the train, prisoners were loaded into prison vans and taken to PC-1. In the assembly hall they were given a "welcome" speech. Officers with batons stood around the perimeter of the room.

> "They talked to us like we were the lowest of the low. They had specific questions for political prisoners. The overall message was that what we went through before was just 'basic training,' and now we were going to 'taste the real thing.'"

During this very first meeting, prisoners were immediately divided according to their status.

> “At first they asked who among us had low status, just so they would know. Then they started calling people by their surnames: ‘Stand up and say what articles you’re convicted under.’”

The prisoners were given haircuts and issued clothing. After that, there was another search during which many people lost essential belongings, clothing, and food items.

> “They took everything. They didn’t allow the letters I had brought with me. In fact, they didn’t let through many things that were officially permitted.”

Quarantine.

After the initial intimidation procedure, the prisoners were sent to quarantine. All former inmates describe this period as one of the most brutal: endless abuse from staff and prisoners collaborating with the administration, and living conditions bordering on torture.

> “In quarantine, the administration had a special attitude toward us. It was a kind of moral and psychological pressure meant to quickly ‘adapt’ the prisoner to this reality — to intimidate, to break whatever remained of a free person’s psyche after the pre-trial detention centre.”
>
> “When we arrived in quarantine, it was minus 25 degrees. We had to walk across the entire colony wearing slippers on bare feet, in uniforms without any underwear. The cold was terrifying. That’s how, on the very first day, we experienced the torture of freezing.”

Quarantine is a local area separated from all other zones by a fence. It is essentially a barrack designed for 30-40 people, with two sleeping rooms, two-tier bunk beds, and tables. Nearby there is a toilet and a shower, but only the quarantine quartermaster and the “kozly” (prisoners cooperating with the administration) were allowed to use it. Separate wooden platforms are designated for prisoners with Low Social Status (LSS).

Quarantine serves two functions. The first is medical — to prevent the spread of infections and to identify other health conditions. However, the medical examination of newly arrived prisoners was extremely superficial, and chronic diagnoses were of no interest to the medical staff.

> “There was some kind of formal medical check. They are only interested in conditions that are highly contagious or something from which you might drop dead right here, so they don’t have to fill out paperwork.”

The second function of quarantine is to “adapt” the prisoner to the conditions and rules of the colony. This manifests primarily through constant, harsh pressure on prisoners on a daily basis. They are forced to carry out endless cleaning tasks, study the Internal Regulations (IR), including during outdoor line-ups regardless of weather or season, and watch propaganda television programs.

> “Daily cleanings, sometimes several times a day, cleanings used as punishment... They simply didn’t give us a single minute of free time.
> After I left, they introduced a new rule: people were lined up in two rows, and someone would read out the colony’s Internal Regulations while everyone else had to stand outside and listen, regardless of the weather.”
>
> “...the Lenin Room [a Soviet-style ideological room used for political instruction] is in the same building. There’s a big TV there. According to the Internal Regulations, watching it is allowed once a day during quarantine. Once a day they would take us there, sit us down, and we had to watch some kind of ridiculous propaganda program.”

Many former prisoners note that, as a form of psychological pressure, staff restricted sleep and food, and used the cold weather to create unbearable living conditions.

> “In quarantine, for some reason our footwear was

always kept outside, no matter how cold it was."

"Inside the building we walked in slippers, and in the morning you go outside, put on your boots — imagine that, minus 15 degrees."

"They gave us about four hours of sleep a day. They kept us in the cold, and there wasn't enough food. If you were a smoker, they allowed you to go out for a quick smoke only three times a day, for five minutes each."

Every violation in quarantine resulted in punishment through housekeeping or manual labour.

"In quarantine the administration pays increased attention to every tiny domestic detail and to the daily routine. They force you to clean constantly — to wash something, to scrub the floors, windows, tables. Even if everything is already clean, you still have to clean it again."

Some prisoners could be sent to the Disciplinary Cell (SHIZO) immediately upon arrival, straight from the transfer. Many former inmates say that such cases were frequent.

"During quarantine, political prisoners face what is essentially a mandatory violation. Mandatory — because I don't know a single political prisoner who left quarantine without receiving a violation. I spent a year in a pre-trial detention centre and never had a single disciplinary violation. Here they come to us and give out assignments: you did this, you — that — write an explanatory note."

Political prisoners report that almost all of them went through SHIZO (DC) directly from quarantine. Independent media have repeatedly written about this as well[9]. After his release, Aliaksandr Kabanau also described this practice.

[9] https://euroradio.fm/ru/mnogo-smertey-i-pytki-chto-proiskhodit-v-kolonii-gde-derzhat-viktora-babariko

Political prisoner Eduard Palchys faced particularly severe treatment in quarantine: he spent almost the entire time in SHIZO, then in PKT (CTP), and was later transferred to a closed prison.

> "...Quarantine had already been going on for about a week, and Palchys appeared roughly ten days after we arrived. He stayed for a few days, and then they took him away again. They released him and took him back three or four times. And I remember that every time he came out, he looked completely different. We had already begun to tan a bit from standing in the sun during roll calls, but Palchys, compared to us, was as white as a wall. In short, they released him three or four times like that and then placed him in the PKT (CTP) and later transferred him to a closed prison."

The reasons for punishment are usually trivial and insignificant. In quarantine, prisoners are forced to follow property inventories with excessive strictness. For example, in the unit they normally didn't count cigarettes one by one — and suddenly they were ordered to recount them piece by piece.

> "...I received a violation because I was allegedly standing in the smoking area at some specific time with an unbuttoned top button. The funniest part is that I don't smoke and I can't stand tobacco smoke, so I never even go into the smoking area, not even to talk."
>
> "The unit officer calls us in and says:
> — Well, we need to issue you all a violation...
> — For what? What violation?
> — We'll write that one of you had his top button undone — improper uniform, and the report wasn't in the correct format. Don't worry, nothing will happen to you, it's just a reprimand, you won't go to SHIZO."
>
> "Because we supposedly cleaned poorly, they dragged me and a few others — who the quarantine chief didn't like — into a room with cages. They put us in a 'stretch' position — legs far wider than

shoulder-width, arms twisted at the joints, palms against the wall. Standing like this for a long time causes extreme discomfort. I never imagined that after thirty minutes in a room where three or four people were being held in this position, the sounds would be like people pedaling bicycles. It was just people gasping and struggling to endure."

Living Conditions in the Colony

> “If, for example, it is –27°C outside or there is a blizzard, you will stand completely still at roll call for an entire hour. If it’s raining — you still stand for an hour. Then, in this completely soaked clothing, which you can’t wring out, you go straight to the industrial zone.”

Prisoners are divided into 10 units, each consisting of 80–90 people. Units are subdivided into sections — rooms where prisoners live on two-tier bunk beds. Standard rooms are designed for 8–16 people. Each person has less than two square meters of personal space. Due to severe overcrowding and an extremely tight schedule, prisoners have to wake up an hour to an hour and a half before the official wake-up time just to manage their basic physiological needs.

The cells differ significantly from each other in temperature, and colony staff move prisoners to colder cells as a form of punishment.

> “They put me on a bunk that was in the corner of the building. And it was much colder there. There was mold on the upper part of the wall — the whole wall, behind my head and behind my back. It was an outer wall. Even in winter, when the heating is on, the wall stays cold. You lie there and you can feel that cold through your body.”

During roll calls and line-ups, prisoners are forced to remain motionless outdoors for extended periods of time, regardless of weather conditions — including heavy rain and severe frost.

> “Again, a prisoner is expected to suffer. Morning and evening roll calls: an hour in the morning and an hour in the evening — everyone stands outside, the entire colony, no matter what the weather is.”

Prisoners are taken to the shower (the so-called “bathhouse”) once a week, and the duration of shower time is limited to 15–20 minutes. Within the one-hour period allocated for the “bathhouse”, prisoners must not only wash themselves but also hand-wash their main clothing.

Formally, after the workday in the industrial zone, prisoners are also supposed to have access to showers. However, this possibility is often blocked: prisoners are forced to perform urgent work tasks instead of hygiene procedures. Some try to wash using cold tap water in a sink, pouring it over themselves with a garbage bin, but such actions are considered violations and may result in disciplinary punishment.

> “The time allocated for showering is simply not provided. You are forced to work dirty and soaked until the end of the workday. And then return to the residential zone in that condition. Many wash with cold water, pouring it on themselves from the tap, but washing with cold water is also a punishable thing.”
>
> “You have a bar of soap, and you don’t go to the shower for an entire week. If the room is hot, you sweat constantly. We would fill this trash bin with water and then... In the toilet we would undress, soap ourselves, and wash like that, if someone wanted to.”

Inside the unit there is the so-called “Lenin Room” — a room where propaganda events are regularly held: lectures are given and news programs from state propaganda channels are shown. Due to poor ventilation, there is not enough air. Prisoners are required to attend despite exhaustion after work, often standing because there are not enough seats.

> “There was a mandatory news viewing before the evening roll call, from seven to eight. You come back from the industrial zone, have dinner, and then you go to watch propaganda. There’s barely any space, so you have to stand or look for a chair, bring one from your section, and sit there listening.”

All prisoners are issued a standard set of **prison clothing** — both winter and summer kits, which differ very little in terms of insulation. The quality of the issued clothing is extremely poor:

In summer, the clothing is hot, and in winter it does not protect from the cold at all. The shoes are extremely stiff and cause severe chafing; they may become unusable already within the first two weeks.

> “They gave us, I think, two sets already in quarantine, as required — a blue one and a black one — but the material was extremely unpleasant synthetic fabric. It doesn’t keep you warm when it’s cold, and in the heat it’s impossible to wear — it gets very hot, as if it’s melting. They also gave us the standard pair of boots, but they were awful quality, very hard, they rubbed your feet. I wore them literally for a week or two, and the sole cracked.”

The switch from summer to winter clothing is done strictly according to the calendar, which often leaves prisoners without warm clothing in cold weather. The head of the colony, Palchik, prohibited prisoners from wearing additional shirts, and staff monitored during roll calls to ensure that no one wore warm clothes without permission. Wearing such clothing was considered a violation and was punished.

> “In Navapolatsk they constantly threaten that you’re not allowed to wear two layers of underwear. Otherwise you’ll go to SHIZO. I still wore it at my own risk. They might check, or they might not. I’d rather take the risk than freeze.”

Food in the colony

is extremely scarce and nutritionally unbalanced: portions are reduced to a minimum, carbohydrates dominate, and there is an acute lack of proteins, vitamins, and minerals. Prisoners are constantly hungry, and their physical condition depends almost entirely on food parcels sent by relatives. The quality of the food is very low; spoiled vegetables and nearly inedible fish dishes are often served, leading to gastrointestinal illnesses. The lack of drinking water makes the situation even worse, and prisoners are forced to drink tap water.

> “They gave us food made from rotten produce: potatoes, vegetables that were stored right there in the colony. What was stored improperly would rot, but

they still threw it into the pot. Sometimes there were even peelings in the food."

In the living quarters, **searches are conducted regularly,** during which colony staff often act without providing any explanation or following proper procedures. They tear clothing, break personal items, or confiscate belongings that are officially permitted. Such actions create in prisoners a sense of complete vulnerability and powerlessness in the face of arbitrary treatment.

"They can take your things, tear them, break your pen. This is considered normal practice."

Correspondence, Parcels, Food Deliveries, Visits, Phone Calls, and Access to Lawyers

> “A member of the unit crew threw back my letter and said: ‘What are you, stupid? Don’t you understand that you’re not allowed to write to other people?’ This is extremely strong psychological pressure. A person behind bars is already in a constant state of stress. The connection with the outside world is a thin thread that supports you, supports your psyche.”

Under the general regime, prisoners are allowed[10] up to four parcels and two small packages per year; under the enhanced-security regime — up to three parcels and two small packages. The weight of one parcel or transfer may not exceed 50 kg, and a small package must not exceed 2 kg. In practice, this right can be revoked at any moment.

> “Political prisoners were almost always deprived of visits or parcels for some alleged violation. And you can’t prove anything to anyone there, because otherwise you’ll be sent to SHIZO.”

The right to purchase basic necessities is exercised through a prison “commissary” system (otovarivanie), using funds from the prisoner’s personal account. The monthly limit is up to five basic units, and for “persistent violators” the regime reduces it to two. High prices and the limited assortment make these funds insufficient. Since 2021, deposits to prisoners’ accounts can be made only by close relatives, which has significantly restricted prisoners’ access to essential goods.

> “From the moment of imprisonment, a prisoner’s close relatives could transfer money to his account in the prison. He could use this money to buy food or other items through the commissary. Until the summer of 2021, anyone could transfer money, but then everything started to be shut down, and only close relatives were allowed to make transfers.

[10] https://ik1mag.by/dopolnitelnaya-informaciya

> If the money was transferred not by a relative — for example, through the post office or via ERIP [Belarus' national electronic payment system] — then the money was either returned or, in some cases, as I understand it, simply disappeared."

Extended visits are granted selectively and rarely last more than 24 hours. Over an entire sentence, prisoners typically receive only two or three such visits. In practice, the right to visits has been turned into a tool of pressure: the duration depends on the administration's attitude toward the prisoner and may vary from one to three days. Obtaining permission is difficult, and short-term visits in PC-1 were suspended for months under the pretext of repairs. Short-term visits are often disrupted on fabricated grounds — for example, a prisoner would be placed in SHIZO (DC) precisely on the days when relatives were expected to arrive.

> "In PC-1, there were no short-term visits at all for six months. Staff claimed that the visitation area was under repair."

Prisoners may receive letters only from a limited circle of relatives, and the administration often refuses to deliver correspondence even from immediate family members, arbitrarily restricting the right to communication.

> "Political prisoners were allowed to correspond only with close relatives — and not just close relatives, but verified ones. The relative had to be verified and approved in the Ministry of Internal Affairs database."

During the 2022 constitutional referendum in Belarus, letters from non-close relatives and acquaintances almost entirely stopped arriving. Later, prisoners witnessed bags of such letters being destroyed.

> "I saw bags of letters being carried to the CHP. Or rather, I saw the bags, and afterward I talked to the guys and asked what they had been burning. They said — letters."

The colony administration actively obstructs the filing of complaints about convictions or staff actions, creating administrative barriers, while prisoners themselves often refrain from submitting complaints out of fear of increased pressure.

> “The administration reacts very negatively to appeals of convictions; they obstruct the writing of complaints in every possible way. Filing a complaint with the prosecutor is impossible. Everything goes straight to the head of the colony, and then the physical and psychological pressure increases several times over.”

The right of political prisoners to make phone calls is strictly regulated by the administration and is granted extremely rarely — usually once or twice a month, for up to five minutes. A failed connection attempt cancels the prisoner’s right to a call for a long period, and calling alternative numbers is not permitted. Complaints about restrictions are treated as violations, and the use of video calls is also limited.

> “It all depended on the operative officer. If he wanted to grant calls out of generosity — he would. If he didn’t — then he wouldn’t. And short calls were at most five minutes. And if, for example, you didn’t get through, you didn’t exercise your right to a call — and that’s it, goodbye.”

Access of lawyers to political prisoners is severely restricted by formal obstacles. Confidentiality of meetings is not ensured; colony staff remain nearby, monitoring the conversation and preventing the prisoner from transmitting complaints or information about violations.

> “My lawyer came to see me once, when I was in the isolation cell. It was strange that they let him in at all, because I hadn’t submitted the required request. They brought me out, but didn’t allow me to stay with him one-on-one. I was surrounded by, I think, seven staff members. They just stood there and listened to what I said. They made sure I didn’t say anything extra — and that nothing extra was said to me.”

Labor in Penal Colony No. 1

> “People constantly get hit by flying splinters from logs or something else. I know a guy who said he split his leg open with an axe. Someone else injured a finger — chopped it right through.”

Work in PC-1 is mandatory. The workweek consists of five working days[11], and the total duration of work is around 8.5 hours per day. Shifts are divided into a morning and an afternoon shift — from 9:00 to 12:00 and from 13:00 to 17:30. Such a schedule does not take into account the physiological needs of prisoners and does not allow sufficient time for rest or recovery. Political prisoners are often assigned to work on weekends and public holidays.

> “There was an enormous amount of work. Sometimes after a full day in the industrial zone you return to the unit, and because you are a political prisoner you still have to carry snow at night, or take out the garbage, or haul debris from the construction site. So after work you have more work.”
>
> “Very heavy work six days a week. And that’s for all political prisoners — whether it’s stripping cables or sorting garbage. They put us on the hardest, dirtiest jobs so that we had no free time — no chance to study, write letters, or read.”

In PC-1, prisoners are assigned to woodworking and metalworking, plastic recycling, production of film, soap, bread, and charcoal, as well as sewing uniforms for state agencies. Many workshops have extremely harsh conditions: plastic recycling involves toxic fumes, and charcoal production exposes prisoners to constant coal dust and combustion products. Political prisoners are typically assigned to the most physically demanding and hazardous work areas, regardless of their qualifications or medical limitations.

One of the types of work assigned to political prisoners is sorting polyethylene waste — constant contact with fine plastic dust damages the skin and

[11] According to the order of the colony head, A. Palchik, political prisoners had a six-day workweek.

respiratory tract. During rare inspections, the administration hides the traces of this work, concealing materials and tools under the pretext of “classified” activities.

> “...so much polyethylene dust would rise into the air that the upper part of the room looked hazy, as if filled with smoke. And when you are in there, all of it gets into your lungs. I had this experience: I spent a day working there and then blew my nose — it looked like coal dust, as if I had been in a mine. The next day I took a medical mask so I wouldn’t breathe all of this. I wore the mask for literally an hour or two, and a black spot formed in the area around the nose. You could see how dirty the air was.”

Another type of work is woodworking. Prisoners manually carry heavy boards and logs outdoors. Work continues both in freezing cold and under the scorching sun. Political prisoners are assigned tasks with clearly hazardous characteristics, such as treating rotten wood with chemical substances.

> “Our unit was transferred to woodworking as auxiliary laborers. We had to stay outside all the time. It was extremely cold back then. We were told that we couldn’t go anywhere to warm up. If they caught us — there would be a report. It was very hard because the shoes were essentially summer shoes. People wore two or three pairs of socks just to somehow stay warm.”

Prisoners also manufacture pallets and wooden crates, including those used for storing mines, shells, air bombs, and rockets. Orders come from enterprises in the defense industry, effectively making the industrial zone part of military logistics. Everyone is assigned to this work, including political prisoners.

> “There were various samples lying around in the warehouse. I served in the army, so I can recognize that these were crates for mines and shells... and crates, as I understand, for tank ammunition. For air

bombs — because the cylinder was made of sections, and the diameters inside changed to fit something in. Only air bombs fit that design. And we also made something similar to crates for rockets... for MLRS, because the tubes were very long and could hold several pieces."

The third type of work assigned to political prisoners is the disposal of cables and waste materials. The practice of burning insulation, rubber, and decommissioned military equipment leads to the release of lead and other toxic compounds, and the smoke reaches the residential buildings. The lack of protective equipment makes such work a direct threat to health and life.

"They brought in cables in polyethylene and plastic sheathing. They sawed them, chopped them, burned them. A column of pitch-black smoke rose across the entire zone, blowing into the windows and everywhere. On top of the fact that there were two chemical plants on each side of us, they were also burning this plastic sheathing that produced caustic fumes. They also burned all the trash — they even brought in army gas masks. Above the industrial zone there was a thick black cloud of burning rubber."

The colony also uses various forms of forced unpaid labor, carried out under the guise of "maintenance work." One regular format is the so-called park-maintenance days (PHD), which are essentially large-scale cleaning operations. PHDs were held at least once a week, often after lights-out.

In addition to PHDs, there is a system of mandatory daily "controlled" cleanings, required both during the day and in the evening. In the mornings and throughout the day, prisoners clean the outdoor areas; in the evening after lights-out — the indoor premises.

"Since the entire day is filled with work and countless checks, the cleanings were mostly at night. And we, political prisoners, were driven to these cleanings. There were a lot of cleanings — really a lot. Lights-out

would be announced, and then you go to clean the staircase, the corridor, the washrooms."

Violations of internal rules, delays, or ignoring the schedule may result in an additional "punishment" in the form of broom duty — forced cleaning, formally presented as regular maintenance shifts. These "duties" take place after the main workday and significantly reduce prisoners' personal time, especially for those who have already served disciplinary punishments.

"You go to dinner, and then you still have about 30-40 minutes of broom duty left. They monitor you: there are cameras everywhere, and a person is assigned to you who records in his notebook when you started this 'broom duty' and when you finished. If you violate this — you go back to SHIZO."

Seasonal work is also included in the general routine. In winter, early in the morning before wake-up and throughout the day, prisoners clear snow from the local areas, packing it into bags and carrying it to designated sites. During rainy periods, at the same times, they remove puddles or collect fallen leaves. Such work — especially on weekends — often falls disproportionately on political prisoners.

"When it snowed, all prisoners cleared the snow. Everyone who wasn't bedridden went out and carried snow in bags. When I saw that mountain of snow, I would never have believed that people could carry that much. The pile was about 6 meters high, 10 meters wide, and 100 meters long."

Another element of the labor regime is the practice of "double punishments" — after release from SHIZO, prisoners may be assigned an additional month of daily broom duty or other cleaning tasks, on top of the standard schedule.

"There is what they call the practice of double punishments. This is when everyone who has been in SHIZO, upon release, receives, for example, a month of broom duty."

In PC-1, compliance with workplace safety regulations is purely formal and effectively nonexistent. Prisoners do not receive proper safety briefings, personal protective equipment is almost never issued, and the machinery is often in disrepair. Transportation tools consist of makeshift carts assembled from scrap metal. There have been documented cases where prisoners were given work clothing and footwear that did not match their size and were unusable.

> “They told me that they would give me a work uniform in two or three weeks. I said: ‘What am I supposed to do?’ They replied: ‘Well, that’s up to you. If you don’t work, you’ll get incident reports, and you’ll end up back in SHIZO.’ They found me a dirty, torn uniform that they were about to throw away. And I had to work in it.”
>
> “They issued me a uniform that was five sizes too small. It simply wouldn’t fit on me. And they said there were no others — wear this one if you want, or don’t wear it at all. Same with the boots: they gave me ones that wouldn’t go on my feet. ‘Refuse to accept them? We’ll document it, and there will be a report that you refused to take your work clothing.’”

Safety violations are systematic and often lead to injuries. Serious injuries occur when working with machines and tools: fingers are cut, people are struck by axes, splinters get into their eyes, heavy objects hit their heads. Many prisoners avoid reporting incidents out of fear of being accused of intentional self-harm.

> “A log rolled down quickly, the man didn’t have time to move his foot, and a heavy cart with a metal disk ran over his leg and broke his foot. Another guy, a political prisoner, was chopping wood — from Unit 10. He swung the axe, missed, and hit his own leg. Yet another man climbed up to fix something electrical in a machine, and he got shocked — the current hit his fingers. He walked around with his hands bandaged for about two months.”

The temperature conditions in the workshops are extremely unfavorable: the soap-making and bakery workshops are unbearably hot, while the workshops with constantly open gates — as well as outdoor work areas — are freezing, especially during the transitional seasons. Prisoners are sent to SHIZO for attempting to warm up or rest outside the designated time.

> “It is extremely hot in the soap workshop, extremely hot in the bakery. When Babaryka worked there, you could see him stepping outside just to get some air because it was so hot. And it is very cold in the workshops where the gates are constantly open.”

According to former prisoners, wages range from 3 to 7 rubles per month. Many prisoners, however, stated that their actual wages were around 60–80 kopecks a month after all administrative deductions. Prisoners are paid significantly less than the legally established minimum wage, with officials citing deductions for everyday expenses.

> “In essence, it was slave labor. In three months I didn’t earn enough even for a lighter. Sixty kopecks a month. I looked at my payslip for three months — I got 2 rubles in total.”
>
> “In the industrial zone the average salary is about 1 ruble, 1.20 rubles per month.”

Informal Prison Hierarchy

> “The prison is organized according to the structure of a military unit. In terms of hierarchy, it is very convenient. The head of the unit is essentially a company commander — comparable to a captain or lieutenant — and the prisoners who hold positions under him are, in effect, the NCO corps. If you look at it this way, the hierarchy is basically a carbon copy.”

Until 2010, Penal Colony No. 1 was considered a so-called “black zone”, where prisoners lived “according to the criminal code of conduct”: it housed “watchmen” and “thieves-in-law.”[12] However, after political opponents of the Lukashenka regime — Andrei Sannikov, Ihar Alinevich, Nikita Likhovid, Ales Kirkevich — were brought there following the 2010 presidential election, the colony was brought fully under administrative control and became a “red zone” with a very harsh regime.

> “Penal Colony No. 1 is considered the most ‘red,’ the most rigid and controlled. Any violation is recorded immediately. Everyone is under total police control. The only ones who feel comfortable there are the ‘activists’ who work for the administration; everyone else slaves away. Basically, if you’re not an informant, you suffer.”

The colony is dominated by its administration, which on the one hand relies on penitentiary and procedural legislation, and on the other hand maintains and uses the informal prison hierarchy. As in other Belarusian colonies, the prison population is divided into those who cooperate with the administration (the so-called “kozly” — orderlies, unit seniors, brigade leaders) and those who do not (“muzhiki” — the general population and those with LSS status).[1] Starting from the quarantine period and continuing throughout their stay in the units, a significant part of the staff’s functions is carried out by “kozly.”[13]

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[12] https://www.svaboda.org/a/32826995.html

[13] See: “Informal prison hierarchy” in the investigation “Torture and Ill-Treatment in Penal Colony No. 17 in Shklov,” pp. 26–29: https://torturesbelarus2020.org/shklow_ik17/

> “At the quarantine stage, these ‘activists’ — the inmates who cooperate with the administration — are often even worse than the staff themselves. When I arrived, there were heavy snowfalls. They would wake us up at four in the morning to clear the snow.”

In quarantine, round-the-clock supervision of inmates is carried out primarily by the senior prisoners of the unit. This category also includes the unit secretary and the orderlies. According to testimonies, many of them have never actually lived in the main zone for various reasons, and transferring to the zone is undesirable for them. Two types of people are typically kept in quarantine: those willing to do anything to obtain parole (PDO) or a regime change, and prisoners convicted of sexualized offenses who fear becoming “low status” (LSS) within the colony.

> “I know that the secretary... he had some kind of sexual involvement with a minor, judging by the article number. He spent a very long time as one of the people stationed in quarantine, and they say he used to write notes and reports for the officers.”

The colony also has certain “prestigious” positions that grant their holders small privileges and relaxations of the regime: librarian, medical assistants, food distributors in the canteen, wardens of the medical unit, the technical school, plumbers, and orderlies at the visitation rooms.

> “The 1st and 2nd units, which are located separately, consist entirely of inmates who don’t work in the industrial zone but perform various maintenance and service tasks around the colony. For example, the librarian — that’s considered a very good position. In the medical unit, there are medical assistants or the medical unit’s senior orderly. Then there are the orderlies at the visitation rooms. These are the more ‘advanced’ positions that give a lot of leeway.”

In addition to their formal duties, the wardens also act as intermediaries in “transactions” between inmates and activists and are responsible for collecting contributions to the informal fund (“obshchak”).

> “Once a month every inmate pays a certain number of cigarettes for ‘services’ — three packs. These three packs are then distributed among the inmates who serve as wardens (zavkhozy), orderlies, or orderlies of the personal-belongings storage rooms — essentially as payment for their work.”

Those with Low Social Status (LSS) also receive several packs from these contributions for cleaning the toilets. There are additional informal arrangements within this system as well — for example, sewing clothes in the industrial zone, repairing shoes, and similar favors. In practice, cigarettes function as a form of currency inside the colony.

> “For example, they re-stitched my shoes in exchange for three packs of cigarettes.”

Most inmates try to serve their sentence neutrally, as so-called “muzhiki”: they go to work and try not to attract attention.

Another group understands that cooperation with the administration significantly increases their chances of obtaining Parole/Early Conditional Release (PDO) or a regime change. Those inmates, therefore, try to get into the category of activists (i.e., collaborators with the administration).

> “All the people who get into this activist group, in one way or another, cooperate with the administration.”

According to inmates, before 2020, people convicted under drug-related articles lived in conditions similar to those now experienced by political prisoners — equally discriminated against and facing many of the same hardships. In 2020 the situation inside the colony began to change. With a sudden influx of political prisoners, those convicted of drug offenses started to be treated far more leniently and were increasingly allowed to take certain positions. And given that drug-related sentences are long, the only realistic way for them to secure earlier release is to gain access to PDO or a regime downgrade.

> “This depends not so much on the formal criteria as on the informal ones. During the regular assessments,

you need positive references — the police officers must be convinced that you have firmly embarked on the path of rehabilitation. And given how easily infractions are issued, manipulating this process is extremely simple. They give you one infraction, then another, and suddenly you're labeled a 'persistent violator.'"

Usually, an inmate's "career" begins with becoming an orderly. If the administration likes the inmate, he can be promoted further. This significantly helps in obtaining positive evaluations and moving up within the activist hierarchy. Many inmates convicted under drug-related articles are released much earlier than their original sentence because of this.

"From the point of view of personal benefit, everything is obvious. But to others it's also clear: because of the conditions they help create — which negatively affect people's health and everything else — they essentially become conduits for the lawlessness carried out by the prison staff."

Additional privileges for activists include various forms of encouragement, such as an extra long-term visit of up to three days or an out-of-turn parcel. Thanks to such benefits, activists live far more comfortably than other inmates.

“Low Social Status” as an Additional Tool of Pressure on Prisoners

The establishment and maintenance of social hierarchies among inmates begins with the prison staff immediately upon arrival, and throughout further imprisonment this system becomes a powerful tool for the administration in managing prisoners. The administration pursues several goals: creating internal tension within the colony; preventing unwanted communication between inmates — especially with political prisoners; exerting psychological pressure; and maintaining the ability to manipulate inmates through the fear of being assigned “Low Social Status” (LSS).[14]

> “If a person is convicted of rape, they are usually placed into a ‘lower social status.’ But not everyone. If someone has money, they can buy their way out. If they don’t — that’s it, go clean the toilets.”

Upon arrival at the colony, it is the staff who decide which status a particular inmate will have.

> “It’s the administration that determines who falls under which status. Even though this hierarchy comes from inmate subculture, the administration still decides. They generally rely on the conviction — violent crimes against minors, serial rape, homosexual relations.”

However, even this unwritten rule has exceptions. One may “negotiate” a different status for money or by fully cooperating with the administration.

> “There are people with the same charges who are not placed in this status. And, as a rule, these are the people who work for the administration.”

[14] More information about “Low Social Status” (LSS) in colonies and prisons can be found in the section “Informal Prison Hierarchy” in the investigation “Torture and Ill-Treatment in Penal Colony No. 17 in Shklov”, pp. 26–29: https://torturesbelarus2020.org/shklow_ik17/

> “He’s considered one of the ‘regular guys’ (“muzhiki”) because his mother regularly sends money to the colony’s accounts. That’s why no one touches him.”

A second category of inmates assigned to LSS consists of people who, before imprisonment, abused alcohol or scavenged for food at dumps (the so-called “cherty”). They end up there because they violate the informal “zone” social etiquette. They usually start as “otsazhennye” — those who are simply not allowed to sit at the common table during meals. There are also inmates with mental health conditions in LSS. The third group includes LGBTQ+ individuals.

To avoid falling into this degrading category, inmates must not greet LSS individuals, take anything from them, wash in the same facilities, or interact physically. Any form of violence against them is also forbidden — even a verbal insult — because the LSS person may simply walk up and hug the offender, and the inmate will automatically acquire the same status. Even flushing the toilet after oneself can lead to being labeled as LSS, because “real men (“muzhiki”) don’t flush”.[15]

> “There are internal criminal rules there. Whether you like it or not, you have to follow some of them, otherwise you discredit yourself. And this can end very badly. There is a rule that all the toilets are cleaned by people called ‘petukhi’; in official documents they are referred to as ‘persons of low social responsibility.’”

The prison administration actively exploits these elements of inmate subculture. When, for whatever reason, they decide that an inmate should be assigned LSS, they force him to perform tasks that “regular men” (“muzhiki”) do not do — namely, cleaning the toilets.

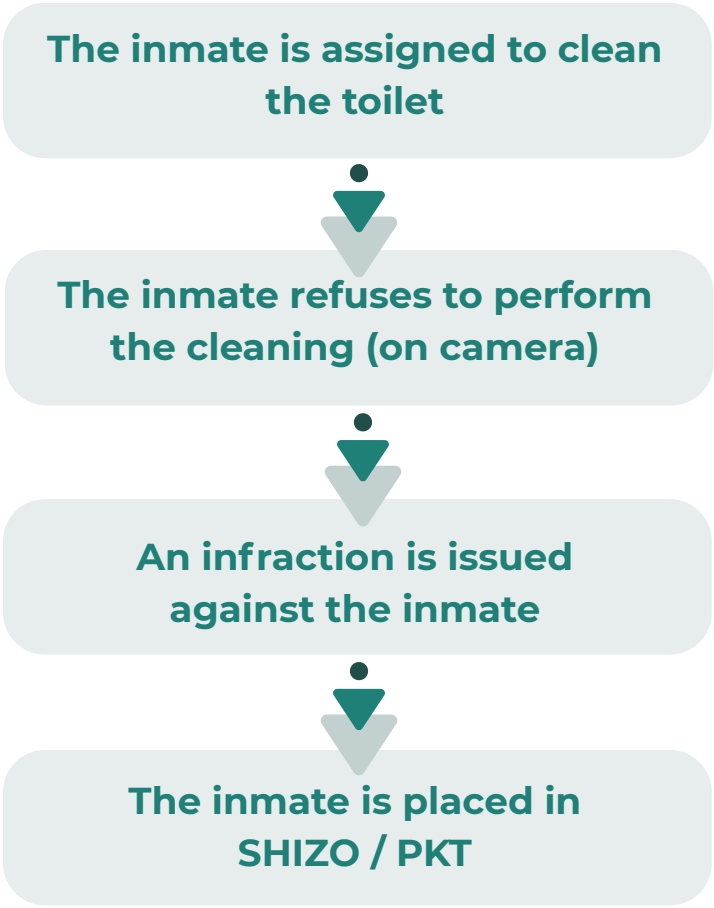
> “Low Status” inmates in every unit are responsible for cleaning the toilets. And all of these individuals are made to sign a paper with the operative officer stating that they voluntarily agree to perform cleaning work in the unit.

[15] https://news.zerkalo.io/life/54097.html

In this way, the State assumes full responsibility for this discrimination. Because not everyone who has committed a sexualized offense is assigned ‘Low Status,’ but every person with Low Status is required to sign such a paper. Therefore, it is the State itself that designates them as ‘Low Status.’”

“If an ordinary inmate were to perform this work, he would automatically have to be reclassified into ‘Low Social Status.’ No one is willing to cross that line — it is a boundary you simply cannot cross.”

This well-established scheme is used by the colony staff when the administration decides to send an inmate — including a political prisoner — to the Disciplinary Cell (SHIZO) or the Cell-Type Premises (CTP/PKT) without any real grounds.



This procedure can be repeated multiple times, especially in relation to political prisoners.

> “When I came out of SHIZO, they didn’t even let me return to the unit. The operative officer would come, take me to the toilet area, and change the cleaning schedule so that I would be assigned to clean on that specific day. Since this could alter your social status within the prison hierarchy, you refuse. They record it on camera — and you are immediately thrown back into SHIZO. They did this four times. In total, I spent about 57 or 58 days in isolation.”

Psychological and Physical Violence Against LSS Inmates in PC-1

According to the zone’s rule ‘A fist does not roam the zone’, physical violence inside the colony is prohibited, and this rule is supposed to apply equally to everyone. Staff members, as enforcers of this rule, are expected to uphold it first and foremost.

> “If someone pushes a ‘petukh’, everyone looks the other way. But if he is actually hit, there will be consequences — just like with anyone else. Besides, many ‘petukhi’ are informants. People are wary of them because they can report things.”

Despite these rules, former inmates report that individuals with Low Social Status (LSS) in PC-1 were often beaten by the staff themselves.

> “The ‘Low Status’ inmates were beaten by the administration staff themselves. Maybe it was some sort of ‘preventive measure,’ or maybe they just enjoyed it… Every day they would take one young guy, 26 years old, out to the holding area and stretch him so badly that he would return to quarantine with almost black legs. They beat him with batons and kicked him.”

From the inmates’ perspective, staff members in PC-1 treat those with Low Social Status somewhat more leniently than others, allowing them to perform their usual tasks, follow the basic rules of the subculture, and generally not harassing them without specific reasons.

> “Penal Colony No. 1 is called ‘the roosters’ paradise’ among the inmates — in everyday slang — because for people with ‘Low Status’ life there is, in many ways, easier than for ordinary prisoners, due to the level of restraint shown by the guards.”

Inmates report that because of the unfair system established in PC-1 and the cruel treatment of prisoners — especially political prisoners serving long sentences — they witnessed cases of inmates voluntarily moving into Low Social Status.

> “...And then he won’t face problems afterward... I mean, most people don’t really talk to the regular ‘low-status’ guys, but, for example, with our political ones we tried to chat a bit.”

Political Prisoners: Yellow Tags, Six-Day Work Week, and Special Custodial Regime

> “This is a concentration camp — the concentration of political prisoners there is extremely high. When I arrived, around 25 to 35 percent of all inmates were political prisoners.”

In the Navapolotsk colony, the administration treats political prisoners harshly and disproportionately — just as in other correctional institutions across the country. It is clear that the staff act in accordance with orders and directives from the Department for the Execution of Punishments of the Republic of Belarus and other security agencies.

> “These officers, trained under Palchik, are extremely cruel. They took it out on the prisoners as much as they could, each in their own way. The first guys who ended up there suffered terribly — because there were so few of them.”

The first visible distinction between political prisoners and others serving sentences in the colony is the presence of yellow — and sometimes red — tags on their clothing. Political prisoners receive this marking already in the pre-trial detention center.

> “First and foremost, being placed under special supervision means constant attention from the staff. You always sit in the front rows, you have to report to a specific place at a specific time three times a day. If you are late — that’s an infraction. And, for example, under the tenth level of supervision, we even made phone calls separately, and we had them less often.”

The primary task of the staff in the colony is to make prisoners’ lives harder. For political prisoners, everything is twice as difficult.

> “Persistent violators” (‘zlostniki’) are mostly political prisoners. These are the ones who are constantly cycled through SHIZO; their prison shop limit is reduced to no more than two base units. Sometimes visits are taken away as well. Everyone is treated individually — some face harsher treatment, others slightly less so.”

The most common supervision categories assigned to political prisoners are Category 3[16] and Category 10[17]. Prisoners with yellow tags — those under supervision — must line up three times a day, in any weather, for an additional roll-call by name. The only day without this extra roll-call is Sunday.

> “The situation was even worse for those with red tags. These were people labeled as ‘prone to escape’ — there were only two or three of them in the entire colony. They had never attempted to escape, of course. And yet they had to report for checks every single hour.”

Another common supervision category is “suicide risk.”

> “People who tried to cut their veins carry that supervision category. Those who attempted to hang themselves, or who repeatedly voiced suicidal thoughts, are also assigned to it.”

Former political prisoner Alyaksandr Kabanau also attempted suicide in the SHIZO of this colony. He recounted that he had been sent to SHIZO three times. The last time, the conditions were so unbearable that he couldn’t take it and cut his wrists with a disposable razor. Doctors applied 68 stitches.[18]

> “Even before arriving there, I knew what kind of place it was. During transfers I spoke with people who had already been in colonies. The darkest rumors circulated about ‘Unit One’ [Penal Calony №1.]

[16] 3rd supervision category — deemed prone to taking hostages, showing aggression, or attacking prison staff.
[17] 10th supervision category — deemed prone to extremism or other “destructive activities.”
[18] https://news.zerkalo.io/life/34986.html

> People said it was absolute hell. When I first arrived, they immediately wrote me up for having unbuttoned cuffs. Later that same day, they issued a second infraction: supposedly the number of photographs I had didn't match the inventory list. Then they ordered me to clean the toilets. I refused — and they put me in solitary confinement in SHIZO for a month."

As for other restrictions and prohibitions, attending the vocational school is not allowed for political prisoners.

> "Because, let's say you have 15% political prisoners — that means your selection pool is very small... There was a man nearly 60 years old, and they forced him to go study just to meet the quota."

Access for political prisoners to the chapel was periodically opened and then closed again. Their main "recreational activities" remain physical exercise, reading books, and watching propaganda programs in the Lenin Room.

> "There are contests like 'We're Looking for Talent.' Political prisoners aren't allowed to participate. The main entertainment is the pull-up bars, the dip bars in the local area, books, the 'Lenin Room' where the TV is on. And just sitting around drinking tea."

Typically, political prisoners leave quarantine with one or two infractions already on their record. Sometimes they receive three violations at once, which automatically classifies them as "persistent violators" (zlostniki) and sends them to SHIZO.

> "This is done to turn you into a 'persistent violator': you need either three violations of any kind, or two if one of them resulted in SHIZO."

The treatment of political prisoners in SHIZO differs little from the treatment of other inmates — the very fact of being held there amounts to cruel, inhuman,

and degrading treatment.[19] Political prisoners are sent there far more often and for much longer periods. Many of them, after numerous placements in SHIZO or CTP, are subjected to a change of regime and transferred to a closed-type prison.

> “In practice, it often depended on personal attitudes. Some political prisoners defended their boundaries more firmly, others less so — and because of this someone might get more bleach poured into their cell. The main bias was that we were sent to SHIZO much more frequently than others.”

Inmates report that individuals involved in high-profile political cases face far greater problems and hardships in PC-1. Many journalists are held there, including BelaPAN editor-in-chief Andrei Alyaksandrau and Union of Poles activist Andrzej Poczobut; the “railway partisans”; trade union leaders; Sergei Tsikhanouski’s assistant Yury Vlasau; former police officers and some local-level civil servants; and the head of Belgazprombank, Viktar Babaryka. Blogger Eduard Palchys and anarchist Aleksei Lyoukovich were transferred from the Novopolotsk colony to a prison after numerous placements in SHIZO and CTP.

> “They are abused there in a very deliberate way. If minor political prisoners — those jailed for comments, like me — can blend in a bit until someone remembers about you, then public figures like Losik or Babaryka cannot.”

[19] See the section of this document on conditions in SHIZO and CTP.

Viktar Babaryka: Total Isolation and the “Coal Hell”

> “When he shouted, ‘You are our president!’ (this was when Babaryka had just arrived at the colony), he ended up spending about 90 days in SHIZO. Then they assigned him the 10th supervision category. And afterward he was sent to the closed-type prison in Mahiliou.”

Photo 4. Viktar Babaryka. Source: https://euroradio.fm/ru/mnogo-smertey-i-pytki-chto-proiskhodit-v-kolonii-gde-derzhat-viktora-babariko

When a political prisoner arrives at the colony, the entire administration knows about it in advance. But when Viktar Babaryka[20] was brought to PC-1, real panic began. According to a former political prisoner, no one in the colony knew where to “place” him — which unit to assign him to, what work to give him, or how to organize his conditions of detention in a way that would minimize any contact with other inmates.

[20] A banker, public and political figure, and philanthropist. In 2020, he ran as a candidate for the presidency of the Republic of Belarus. He was sentenced to 14 years of imprisonment.

Already in quarantine, inmates began facing problems simply because they interacted with Viktar Babaryka.

> “When we all arrived in quarantine, they told us right away that talking to Babaryka would immediately cause problems. ‘Even if you’re standing next to him while receiving registered letters, don’t greet him, don’t talk to him.’ On Sunday, I deliberately arranged with him that he would tell us how the art collection had been assembled. We were just sitting there — I was drinking coffee, and Babaryka was telling stories. We even took a book about Belarusian art from the library and had a pleasant, civilized conversation. And the next day everything began… I ‘enjoyed my coffee properly’ — and ‘departed’ to SHIZO for 20 days. I know people who simply weren’t afraid to talk to him occasionally — and they also ‘departed’.”

A bakery originally located in Unit Two was moved specifically because of Babaryka — to Unit Six, the smallest and most secluded local area. The mesh fence was replaced with solid gates so that no one could see him. Viktar Babaryka first worked as a stoker, then as a bakery packer. The temperature inside was over 30°C, there was no ventilation, dust everywhere, and two blazing ovens. He baked bread, shaped rolls, and made pasta. Several other inmates worked with him, but speaking to him was forbidden. Anyone who spoke to him was sent to SHIZO.

> “When Babaryka arrived, for example, two people were sent not to quarantine but straight to SHIZO. They helped him carry his bags. Formally, finding a reason isn’t hard: an unbuttoned cuff, failing to greet someone…”

By the time the politician arrived, the number of surveillance cameras in the bakery was increased from five to twelve — so that not a single blind spot remained. Every step he took, every movement, was recorded. He was monitored not only by cameras, but also by so-called ‘stool pigeons’ — inmates controlled by the administration who wrote reports and informed on his every action.

“Until they started putting pressure on him, Babaryka lived in a world of his own. He was always assigned work in isolated areas — baking bread or burning coal. Meaning, places where he was kept separate from everyone else. One or two people worked with him, and they were vetted, trusted individuals. Then, when they started pressuring him, there was this guy working with him — he made Babaryka climb into barrels even though he had a medical certificate saying he wasn’t allowed to. Basically, a mini-guard. And I remember very well that later, when Babaryka was taken to the CTP, this guy wore Babaryka’s jacket saying, ‘I earned it.’ In the places where Babaryka worked, they added extra surveillance cameras, and there was this loud alarm every time the door opened… Everyone knew when Babaryka was going to the toilet, because to escort him out of that area, they had to open the door.”

In November 2022, Babaryka was transferred to another job — to the charcoal-production brigade — even though he had medical contraindications for such work. This is considered one of the harshest and dirtiest jobs in the colony. Prisoners work outdoors all day long, with no access to a break room, surrounded by furnaces, carbon monoxide, heavy loads, and soot that seeps into the skin. Constant surveillance of Babaryka continued there as well, and all his movements were monitored.

“There were always two or three informants next to him. Two on the sides and one behind. They walked with him and looked around. He moved around the colony like he was under escort from inmates. Wherever he went, these three followed him.”

“You’re standing there, chopping wood or doing something else, and you see — the guards and the kozly (inmate collaborators) are already running after Babaryka. They run to his workplace to give him infractions. The area where he worked, with the coal, was under an alarm system. And when he comes out of there, if the alarm hasn’t been switched off and no one has come to open the door for him — that’s it, it immediately goes ‘wee-wee-wee’. The siren goes off, and they already rush over to issue him an infraction.”

A political prisoner who was in Unit 4 with Babaryka and worked with him at the charcoal site recounts:

> “He’s very thin, hunched over, he lost a lot of weight. He’s forbidden from receiving any parcels. Then they put him in the CTP. Recently, a good friend of mine was released. He said he saw Babaryka in the CTP. If he’s alive, that’s already something... And we haven’t seen him since late spring 2023. They let him out for a few days at some point, and then shut him in again.”
>
> “God forbid being in the same unit as Babaryka — searches every other day. And they search thoroughly. I think it’s one of the methods of pressure on him through other inmates, to provoke aggression and resentment toward him. But as far as I understood, everyone there was sane, they understood what was happening, and understood that he had no control over any of it.”

Since February 2023, Babaryka’s conditions of detention have sharply deteriorated. He was assigned the 10th supervision category as “prone to taking hostages” — the pretext was scratch marks on a windowsill from a knife he used to cut pork fat. Access to his lawyer was restricted, he was banned from purchasing goods in the prison shop, and parcels from relatives were prohibited. Every alleged violation resulted in SHIZO. Speaking to him once again became a reason for new reprisals.

> “When he refused to clean the toilets, they first put him in the CTP, and then — again in SHIZO. They took away everything they could. They even started restricting books. Belarusian authors were banned, foreign languages were banned, letters didn’t get through.”
>
> “At some point, their attitude toward him suddenly changed. They took him somewhere for some kind of conversations. We didn’t know anything, didn’t understand anything — we just saw that they were taking him somewhere. And after one of those visits,

suddenly everything changed. They refused to accept a parcel from his relatives, he was denied visits. And then came SHIZO, SHIZO, SHIZO...”

In April 2023, Viktar Babaryka was taken to a hospital surgical ward in serious condition.[21]

“In the medical unit, when he was brought there, they installed a surveillance camera in one of the rooms. Clearly, it was meant for Babaryka. Many inmates saw him through the window with his head bandaged. Meanwhile, the police began spreading rumors that Babaryka had ‘fallen.’ A friend of mine, another inmate, walked into the medical unit at the time when Babaryka was there — when he was being transported from the prison hospital in Kolodishchi. He asked, ‘What happened to you, Dmitrievich?’ And he replied, ‘I fell.’ Apparently, that’s what he had been told to say.”

The former inmate adds that, according to information circulating inside the colony, Viktar Babaryka had a punctured lung, kidney problems, and lost consciousness several times. Later, he was transferred to Pre-Trial Detention Center No. 1 in Minsk, and then returned to the colony. He spent the entire summer in the CTP.

Since November 2023, Viktar Babaryka has been held in complete isolation. Since then, neither his family nor the public has received any confirmation of his whereabouts.[22]

According to witnesses in the colony, in early 2024 he was taken away by unidentified masked men, who forbade other inmates even to look out. It was assumed that he might be prepared for possible participation in the trial of his son Eduard, but in the end he was not brought to any of the hearings.

Periodically, prisoners released from PC-1 share whatever information they know about Viktar Babaryka.

[21] https://news.zerkalo.io/economics/37775.html
[22] https://news.zerkalo.io/economics/37786.html

One of the former political prisoners whose testimony was documented by the International Committee for the Investigation of Torture in Belarus provided the following account:

> "...I got to know one inmate. Around 50 years old, serving time for a brutal murder, and he clearly had mental health issues. From him I learned that for about six months he had been in the same cell as Viktar Babaryka. He said that Babaryka, despite everything, always took about six months he had been in the same cell as Viktar Babaryka. He said that Babaryka, despite everything, always took care of himself, exercised, behaved with maximum dignity — but for some reason did not communicate with him, a bodybuilder. And I can guess why. Viktar Babaryka is a smart man, and, apparently, immediately understood that the person next to him had an unstable psyche, so he chose a tactic of not communicating, so as not to provoke a conflict with consequences. Based on the fact that they try not to show Viktar to anyone, I can conclude that this inmate was deliberately placed with him so he would break him psychologically, beat him, or pass information about him in exchange for a lighter regime for himself. A fairly common tactic in PC-1."

Prisoners report that Viktar Babaryka tried not to speak with anyone in order not to cause them trouble.

> "Because if you talk to him, you will be sent to SHIZO over and over. If you approached him to say something, he usually went: 'Stop! Better not!' He understood perfectly well — because you talk to him and then you end up in SHIZO destroying your health."

Prisoners also reported a case of a young inmate being brutally beaten for communicating with Viktar Babaryka.

> “He was beaten in SHIZO so badly that his legs stopped working for several weeks. If you get severely beaten in SHIZO, they keep you there until everything heals before releasing you back into the residential unit. After that, Babaryka generally spoke with very few people, because he knew exactly what happened to those who tried to talk to him.”

On 8 January 2025, Raman Pratasevich[23] published photos and a video of his meeting at PC-1 with political prisoner Viktar Babaryka, about whom there had been no news for more than a year and a half.[24]

According to Pratasevich, he brought Babaryka letters from close relatives and recorded a video message from the opposition figure to his family. During the meeting, Viktar Babaryka also wrote several letters to his relatives and handed them over to the blogger. “I will say it right away: the main purpose of my visit was to deliver messages from his family to him and, accordingly, to pass on his letter in the opposite direction,” Pratasevich said. The real reasons for this visit remain unknown.

Photo 5. Former head of Belgazprombank Viktar Babaryka together with Raman Protasevich in PC-1. Source: https://info214.by/event/226

[23] Blogger Raman Pratasevich collaborated with the Belarusian services of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Euroradio, and served as editor-in-chief of the Telegram channel NEXTA. After his arrest in 2021, he cooperated with the investigation and made public “confessions.” In practice, he remains a hostage of the system and is used by the regime for its own purposes.

[24] https://news.zerkalo.io/economics/87902.html

No official information about Viktar Babaryka's condition has been released since then. The politician continued to be held in Navapolotsk Colony under the harsh conditions of a cell-type facility (PKT), without any contact with the outside world. On 16 August 2025, media reports emerged stating that Viktar Babaryka was in his unit and working in the bakery again.[25]

[25] https://pozirk.online/be/news/151449

Andrzej Poczobut: “They broke him in every possible way, but he remained steadfast”

“Poczobut was brought in and immediately thrown into the punishment cell (SHIZO). Then from SHIZO he was transferred to the cell-type facility (PKT), meaning he only spent two days outside of it. When we were heading to the industrial zone, I saw him being led out of the PKT into the medical unit under escort — something had happened.”

Photo 6. A banner featuring political prisoner, journalist, and activist of the Union of Poles in Belarus, Andrzej Poczobut. Białystok, Poland. 20 January 2023. Photo: Beata Zawrzel / Reporter / EAst News. Source: https://ru.belsat.eu/83911548/losik-ishudal-pochobut-derzhit-marku-aleksandrov-vyezzhaet-na-pozitive-chto-s-politzaklyuchennymi-zhurnalistami-iz-ik-1

According to one former political prisoner, the colony repeatedly tried to break Poczobut.[26]

> “While I was there, he was constantly in the punishment cell (SHIZO). They released him once, but at that time he was not allowed to approach other people at all.”

Pressure was exerted on Andrzej through regime manipulations. His cleaning schedule suddenly included a task he was physically unable to perform — this became a pretext for placing him in the cell-type facility (PKT).

> “Poczobut spent all his time in SHIZO and PKT. Later, I heard that after I left they let him out and he lived in the unit. But while I was there, it was only SHIZO and PKT.”

His imprisonment severely affected his health. Poczobut has heart problems, his blood pressure fluctuates, and his eyesight has deteriorated. He was repeatedly denied the right to receive necessary medication. Letters and parcels are delayed for months, and visits or phone calls with relatives are almost never granted.

> “They were putting him in SHIZO again, and he complained about high blood pressure. They took him to a doctor, the doctor measured it — it was indeed high. The young doctor had a good reputation and refused to authorize placing him in SHIZO. The next day they took him to the head of the medical unit, and she approved it. I know that this young doctor resigned shortly afterward.”

According to eyewitnesses, officials repeatedly came to Poczobut and tried to persuade him to write a petition for pardon. They even handed him pre-filled

[26] Journalist from Hrodna and activist of the Union of Poles in Belarus Andrzej Poczobut was detained on 25 March 2021. On 8 February 2023, a court found him guilty of “calling for actions aimed at harming national security” and “inciting hatred” and sentenced him to eight years in a high-security correctional colony. The Ministry of Internal Affairs added him to the registry of so-called “extremists,” and the KGB included him on the list of “persons involved in terrorist activities.”

forms where he only needed to put his signature. But the journalist remained steadfast and refused to sign.[27]

> “From the way they were trying to break him, we understood: this was a matter of principle for Lukashenka. He wants Poczobut to repent personally. But he did not break.”

Lukashenka has openly admitted this himself: he stated that he was ready to exchange the journalist for members of the opposition’s National Anti-Crisis Management (NAU) headed by Pavel Latushka. In effect, Andrzej Poczobut is being held hostage by the regime, and his fate depends on the decision of a single person.

[27] The conviction and subsequent imprisonment of Andrzej Poczobut caused a significant international outcry. In response to the verdict, Poland closed the Bobrowniki border crossing on the Belarus–Poland border, while the authorities in Minsk imposed reciprocal restrictions on Polish carriers, banning them from crossing the border via Lithuania and Latvia.

Ihar Losik: The Voice of Freedom They Are Trying to Destroy

Photo 7. Ihar Losik. Photo: svaboda.org. Source: https://news.zerkalo.io/life/34976.html

According to accounts from former political prisoners, Ihar Losik[28] was first seen in Colony No. 1 at the industrial work site. He was dismantling old cables and stripping them of insulation — a physically demanding, hazardous, and deeply humiliating task, especially for prisoners with a “high status”.

> “He looked pale, severely emaciated, but very focused. It was clear he was holding on with his last strength.”

The special pressure exerted on Losik was explained by his public profile and his principled stance. He refused all offers of cooperation and declined to write a petition for pardon. His wife continued speaking about him in interviews — and every time his name appeared in the media, the pressure on Ihar intensified.

[28] Blogger, media analyst, consultant for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and author of the Telegram channel “Belarus golovnogo mozga”, Ihar Losik was sentenced to 15 years in a high-security penal colony and spent more than five years behind bars.

Later, he was assigned to a unit where prisoners sort polyethylene for recycling, and for some time his stay in the colony was relatively calm. After Ihar Losik's wife was sentenced to two years in prison, his psychological state deteriorated sharply. In addition, the colony administration began to pay increased attention to him.

> "His problems started when his wife was imprisoned. He crashed morally. I know that he was taken to the administration offices several times. You could tell from his face that some kind of bargaining was likely taking place, and he understood it. He hoped he would be exchanged. Considering that Kuznechik was later exchanged, I wouldn't be surprised if this had been discussed in one way or another for a long time. Later, when they started putting him in the punishment cell (SHIZO), it became clear that the guy was in trouble and that PKT was coming soon."

One day, staff members entered his cell with a video camera and ordered him to clean the toilet. In the colony, such an order is equivalent to an attempt to push a prisoner into the "low-status". Ihar refused. For this, he was immediately sent to SHIZO.

> "They ran him through the toilet-cleaning procedure. He cut himself badly. But the guys who managed to see it said it was demonstrative — the goal was lots of blood, not a life-threatening wound. They bandaged him. He spent several days in the infirmary."

What followed was an even harsher punishment — transfer to PKT, a form of long-term isolation equivalent to a solitary confinement block. Losik was kept there almost constantly. He was released only once — for one or two days. Those who saw him at that moment were shocked.

> "It wasn't a person anymore, but a shadow. Skin and bones. Completely pale. It looked like he was dying."

Prisoners began to help: some secretly shared food, others tried to offer words of support. But the administration reacted harshly — everyone who assisted Losik was sent to the punishment cell (SHIZO), and some were given several consecutive terms. Ihar himself was returned to PKT once again. His condition deteriorated critically, and reports emerged of a suicide attempt. He cut his arms and neck.[29]

In the spring of 2025, Ihar Losik disappeared from PC-1. According to eyewitnesses, movement throughout the colony was completely halted that day in order to minimize the number of potential witnesses.

[29] https://news.zerkalo.io/life/34976.html

Provocations and the System of Informants (“Stukačestvo”)

> “They would sic the police on political prisoners more than on anyone else. The officers enjoyed it when someone reported something about the political ones.”

The practice of “informing” (“stukačestvo”) among prisoners is extremely widespread in PC-1. It begins already during the initial period in quarantine.

> “There are informants who ‘report’ from time to time. They get called to the operative officer; they are not formally part of the ‘aktiv’ [a group of inmates who cooperate with the administration], but their disciplinary penalties get lifted and they move faster toward PDO or a regime change.”

Informing, especially about political prisoners, is actively encouraged by the administration. Members of the ‘aktiv’ report to the administration everything that happens to political prisoners.

> “A group of political prisoners decided to have tea with Viktar Dmitrievich [Babaryka] and talked for a few hours. The head inmate of the sixth unit reported them. They were sent to SHIZO. These ‘informers’ try to earn favors in order to qualify for a regime change or PDO.”
>
> “They summoned me four times, and the operative told me: ‘See how often you come to my office? You must understand: those who come to the operatives often are the ones who inform. People will start suspecting you. Maybe you should actually… you know…’”

Physical and Psychological Violence Against Prisoners

> “I felt utterly helpless; I didn’t know what to do. I was sure I wouldn’t be able to cope with it, I completely lost heart…”

In PC-1, inmates are systematically subjected to both physical and psychological violence by DEP staff. Within this investigation, the experts examined in greater detail the cases of violence specifically targeting political prisoners.

> “When I was in the PKT (CTP), the screams from beatings were audible even out in the corridor. They also practice beatings in the shower room. These beatings are intended to draw blood, because everything can then be washed away with a hose. This is done directly by the controllers — members of the internal troops assigned to the colony.”
>
> “I heard it… There is nothing comparable to that sound. Dull blows to the body — you can hear them very clearly, as well as the person’s moans. You just hear this ‘mm, mm, mm…’ A muffled thudding sound… It’s obvious what is happening.”
>
> “They tormented him; he spent more than 100 days in winter in a cell at the end of the corridor. They drove him into such a state that his lips cracked from the cold and drafts, his hands cracked and bled. He tried to warm himself near the radiator and ended up burning his back. Palchik came to him and looked:
> — ‘Why are your lips bleeding? Are you hitting yourself?’
> — ‘No, I have vitamin deficiency, my lips are cracked.’
> — ‘Oh, vitamin deficiency. Well, you have an aluminium bowl, don’t you? Maybe you’re lacking aluminium — go ahead, lick your aluminium bowl.’”

“It was obvious that the Head of the Colony had a deeply biased attitude toward him. He constantly insulted him, provoked him, kicked him in the legs, forced him into the ‘stretching’ stress-position…”

Witnesses point to specific PC-1 staff members who systematically used physical violence against inmates. First and foremost is the former Head of PC-1, Andrei Palchik, who not only knew about the unlawful violence carried out by his subordinates, but also personally beat prisoners.

“Three people carry out the beatings there. They’re all large, physically strong men. Palchik, the Head of the Colony; Filipp Vladimirovich, a captain from the DPNU; and another one — a deputy, or rather the head of the regime department, a major. They’re all around 1.90 meters tall. They simply have this inclination — to beat people. They are the initiators of these punishments.”

“They staged it as if he were attacking them. After that, they began beating him. It happened like this: he was shaking the officer’s hand, then a controller pretended that the inmate was twisting his arm — bending it backwards. And all of this was filmed on camera… After that they beat him brutally. They opened a criminal case against him, allegedly for assaulting staff, and gave him an ultimatum: either he ‘forgets’ what happened, never tells anyone, never files complaints, or they will pursue the criminal case. They threatened him with Article 411 of the CCRB and an additional sentence. That’s how they blackmailed him.”

“That’s what Lisouski was like — constantly trying to provoke me, poke at me, bait me. He can also hit.”

“Under Palchik, I know for sure they beat people inside. I know of an elderly man whose ligaments in one leg were torn in a car accident — Palchik tried to force him into the stretching position, and the old man simply collapsed because his leg couldn’t hold him. I know that Palchik personally beat him.”

“[About the ‘stretching’ stress position] They push you against the wall, make you place your hands on it, then force you to step a couple of paces back, and they spread your legs wider and wider — to the point where it feels like you’re being forced into a split. They keep stretching you until your flexibility gives out or until you collapse from pain or loss of balance, or you can easily get injured. They hold you like that for a long time, or they keep pushing your legs further apart while beating you in the ribs.”

“There was a man who had been taken to a hospital before — they beat him so badly that his spleen had to be removed. After that he was held in the closed-type prison in Mahiliou. They had beaten him for two months straight. Every day, for two months.”

“They beat him three times, very brutally. They dragged him into the shower room and beat him at night. I heard those screams. One night I woke up because the screams were insane. There were five or six of them. They beat him with batons so severely that he screamed like a slaughtered animal.”

“They pressed my hands against the wall, two officers stood on both sides, and they started hitting my legs, forcing them apart. And they started yelling at me: ‘Do you not understand where you are?! You hear me?!’ I fell to the floor. They beat the inner thighs, the feet. One pulled my leg in one direction, the other in the opposite. They hit the soles so they would slide apart on the floor. They held me by the arms and forced me into a full longitudinal split.”

“Violations” and Punishments

> “There, you can get a violation for practically anything. Didn’t say hello, a button isn’t fastened, or something else. And even if you did say hello — it doesn’t matter. If they came to give you a violation, you already have it.”

Under the Criminal Executive Code, disciplinary sanctions may be imposed on prisoners for violations of the rules of serving a sentence, including a reprimand, extraordinary cleaning duty, deprivation of the right to receive parcels or visits, placement in a Disciplinary Cell (SHIZO/DC) for up to 15 days[30], and transfer of “persistent violators” to Cell-Type Premises (PKT/CTP) for up to six months. In addition, prisoners who systematically and intentionally violate the established order of serving a sentence may be transferred to a closed prison for a period of up to three years.[31]

> “The worst punishment is when your relatives are already on their way to see you — they’ve left from somewhere, from Brest for example — and they throw you into SHIZO on purpose.”
>
> “A parcel arrives for him, and they suddenly decide to punish him. The parcel is at the post office. The post office calls the colony and says the parcel has arrived. Within five minutes they punish him and deprive him of the parcel. They don’t pick it up from the post office; they immediately send it back home.”

With political prisoners, disciplinary sanctions are applied arbitrarily in order to create inhumane conditions of detention and to enable their transfer to PKT or to a prison regime, and subsequently to bring additional criminal charges under Article 411 of the CCRB.

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[30] Until July 2024, the maximum period of placement in a Disciplinary Cell (SHIZO/DC) was 10 days.

[31] See Part 5 of Article 69 of the Criminal Executive Code.

“Usually, an inmate is informed that they have violated this or that rule and that a report will be filed against them. A few days later they are summoned and told to write an explanatory note. The person has a choice: either write it or refuse. And in most cases, it all ends with SHIZO (DC).”

“Legally, the punishment is up to 10 days. It can be one day, five days, six, seven, or ten. But in PC-1 this simply does not exist — SHIZO is always 10 days, for any infraction. Everyone knows perfectly well that no other term is ever applied.”

Disciplinary Cells (SHIZO) and Cell-Type Premises Regime

> “One thing that can be unequivocally classified as torture is detention in SHIZO (DC).”

Placement in SHIZO and transfer to PKT (CTP) are the most severe disciplinary sanctions provided for under the Criminal Executive Code. They are formally intended to be applied only in exceptional cases, when other sanctions fail to influence an inmate. In PC-1, however, placement in SHIZO is used for the slightest formal infraction — or even without one, simply because the inmate is categorized as “political.”

> “In SHIZO they could put anyone. If they wanted to punish a person — they would always find a ‘violation.’ It was done very easily: they would conduct a targeted search of a specific inmate and their belongings. Cigarettes were used as currency, and it is almost impossible for smokers to count them precisely. If even one cigarette was missing — that’s it, you’re going to SHIZO.”

It is common practice to impose new sanctions on someone who is already in SHIZO, or who has only just been released from it.

> “The next day in SHIZO they wrote a report stating that the cell ‘had not been cleaned.’ Literally that same morning they came and said: ‘another report for you,’ meaning, ‘not 10 but 20 days now.’ And about 2–3 days later they came again. I had a small piece of bread left from breakfast. But they said: ‘Oh, forbidden food products.’‘How is it forbidden? I was given it this morning. It cannot be forbidden by definition.’ They immediately gave me a month.”
>
> “I know people who spent 70 or 80 days there. Formally they ‘release’ you from SHIZO, walk you to

the unit, immediately write a report for an allegedly unbuttoned top button — and take you straight back, starting the term again from zero to 40 days. I met people who spent 100 days or more this way."

Legislation — including the Criminal Executive Code and the Internal Regulations (IR) of correctional facilities — formally defines the conditions of detention in SHIZO (DC). In practice, these standards are not observed in PC-1. [32] Inmates are held there in inhumane conditions.

"The items allowed are limited to the following list: a roll of toilet paper, toothpaste, a toothbrush, and a bar of soap in half of a soap dish."

"[The lighting] switches to nighttime mode, but it is still quite bright. LED lamps are on around the clock, both in SHIZO and in PKT."

"The bunk is attached to the wall with electric locks: during the day it is locked upright and only lowered at night. During the day you cannot sit or lie on it. You may sit only at the small table — on a bench about eight centimeters wide."

Staff members of PC-1 deliberately create unbearable conditions, especially with regard to temperature. In practice, this amounts to torture by cold.

"If you end up there in the off-season, the clothing is useless — very thin, the standard issue. The radiators are off, the windows are open, and there is a constant draft in the cell. Nowhere to hide, nowhere to get warm."

"In winter the radiator is at least turned on, so people try to warm themselves near it, but it is metal. I saw burns on people coming out of SHIZO — they tried to warm up next to the radiator, fell asleep accidentally,

[32] More detailed information on the conditions in SHIZO (DC) can be found in the investigation into the conditions of detention in PC-17 (Shklov) (pp. 41–44): https://torturesbelarus2020.org/shklow_ik17/

and ended up with burns across half of their back. Real cooked flesh."

"There are solitary cells in SHIZO that are extremely cold. Cell 13 is called the 'invigorating cell.' It is located on a corner, and all the wind blows directly into it. They would lock two or three people in that cell. It is very small — there is nowhere to walk and nothing you can do. They put people there simply to freeze them."

"I learned there that if you wrap your head in a towel, it becomes somewhat warmer to sleep — but it doesn't help much. You can sleep for maybe two hours at most. When it was –10°C and they put us there, one hour was the limit. After an hour you just wake up from the cold, even with your head wrapped in a towel, and you start walking, doing push-ups and squats, or sitting next to the radiator. But if you sit next to the radiator — you can get another 10 days on top of your term."

"A night in SHIZO is the worst thing for any person. During the day you don't really want to sleep, but eventually you want to sleep during the day too. At least during the day it's warm. But at night you simply cannot sleep: you lie there shaking, shivering from the cold."

"The new head of the colony [Mashadayev] banned prisoners in SHIZO and PKT (CTP) from wearing their own thermal underwear. This is a very serious blow."

Witnesses reported that the amount of food provided in SHIZO is noticeably reduced.

"They cut the amount of food. You are supposed to get two eggs — they give one egg per week."

"Every crumb is precious. There is never enough food because a person under stress needs more energy. You constantly need to warm yourself, keep moving, and the cold drains calories out of the body."

Despite the renovation of the SHIZO premises, prisoners say that the conditions did not improve. Colony staff deliberately create inhumane conditions there and intentionally mistreat prisoners.

> “One month I spent there. The head of the colony [Palchik] used to come to me and say: ‘I’ll make sure your mind snaps. You’ll walk out of here a complete idiot. You came here alone, and you will leave in a group of three: you, hemorrhoids, and schizophrenia.’”
>
> “Beatings take place there. I can confirm this — I heard it myself, although I did not see it with my own eyes. The doors are closed, but you can hear everything. While I was in PKT (CTP), people were being beaten. Not only political prisoners — ordinary prisoners as well. For misconduct, for lack of respect toward the administration.”
>
> “In both SHIZO and PKT, every weekday they would pour about 5–10 liters of bleach onto the floor — essentially torturing people.”

Confinement in SHIZO under such conditions inevitably leads to severe physical and psychological consequences.

> “People came out of there completely emaciated. Your kidneys work faster when it’s cold, the fluid leaves your body more quickly. A person without fluids simply dries up.”
>
> “You constantly run to the toilet. Something starts happening to your body, and at night you may run to the toilet five, seven, ten times. The fluid leaves your body. After my first SHIZO term, I lost 24 kilograms.”

“New Year Express.”

On the eve of New Year’s, the administration of PC-1 deliberately applies arbitrary and mass placement of prisoners into SHIZO. It does not matter whether a prisoner committed any violation.

> “They pack all PKT inmates into one or two cells, fill the remaining ones completely with people, and then there are around 90 prisoners in total. Normally there are about 30.”
>
> “Under Palchik, this happened every year. We thought maybe things would change under the new head of the colony, but nothing changed — all SHIZO (DC) cells were fully occupied for New Year anyway.”

Transfer to PKT (CTP)
is the harshest disciplinary measure and is applied to political prisoners quite frequently. In practice, it is long-term confinement under conditions nearly identical to SHIZO, with only minimal allowances.

> “PKT is the same as SHIZO, but there is an electrical socket, which is switched on three times a day for an hour and a half or two hours. At night you can sleep not on bare metal bunk boards — you get a mattress and bedding — and twice a week, usually once, you may access your belongings. You are allowed to take one item — a book, a notebook, or some food.”
>
> “Everything you managed to bring with you in your bags runs out very quickly, and then you’re left with nothing, because no parcels or packages are allowed. Only one small postal packet is permitted once every six months, up to two kilograms. Usually people receive cigarettes. Formally, outdoor exercise can be up to two hours, but in reality it lasts 20–30 minutes, except on rare occasions. When it’s cold or raining, they may take you out for 40 minutes — just to freeze.”

The administration of PC-1 often uses PKT for political prisoners during their final six months before release.

> “I had six months left until my release, and he [Palchik] sent me to PKT. I had no violations at all. First he kept

me in solitary, and then in PKT he continued tormenting me."

"There is such a practice — about six months before release, they send a political prisoner to PKT. They start rolling them through 10, 20, 30 days in SHIZO, and after that the commission issues a decision: the person is transferred to PKT."

Medical Care: “As Long as You Can Move Your Legs, You Will Not Receive Any Help”

Former inmates of PC-1 report that receiving qualified medical care in the colony is almost impossible. Upon arrival, prisoners are met by a single medical worker — a paramedic. There are no medical specialists, no examinations, and no proper treatment.

Prisoners were not granted **sick leave** even when they had a high fever, a severe cold, or an exacerbation of a chronic illness. In the medical unit, such individuals were labeled as “malingerers.”

> “After work in the industrial zone, there is only one paramedic left, and he doesn’t care about anything: he gives everyone ibuprofen for all illnesses — and that’s it.
> Sick leave with a fever? You don’t even need to ask — you won’t get it. For example, I didn’t get it even once.”

One of the interviewed political prisoners with chronic illnesses developed a severe pneumonia in PC-1, caused by hypothermia in SHIZO (DC). Medical staff ignored his complaints and the worsening of his condition, allowing the illness to progress.

> “Constant kidney pain, cramps. No treatment at all — only painkillers, if you manage to beg for them. I had pneumonia from the cold.”

According to inmates, the paramedic may refuse to refer a sick prisoner to a doctor for weeks, limiting medical aid to painkillers and antipyretics. As long as a prisoner is physically able to stand, they are forced to work. Complaints about pain, cramps, or other symptoms are ignored. As a result, prisoners do not receive treatment, and illnesses frequently worsen to the point of requiring hospitalization in an external medical facility.

Physical injuries

and trauma in PC-1 are routinely concealed. If a prisoner sustains a fracture or a serious injury — even as a result of torture — the chances of receiving qualified medical assistance are minimal. The wound is bandaged, and the prisoner is sent back to the barracks or to SHIZO (DC) so that no one can see his condition. In some cases, because injuries are hidden and bones heal incorrectly, infections develop. Yet even then prisoners are not sent to a medical facility.

> “His collarbone healed incorrectly — the bone presses into his throat, parts of it have already begun to rot, and his right arm is partially non-functional. They still forced him to carry logs.”

At the end of April 2023, political prisoner Viktar Babaryka suffered severe injuries. At night, he was secretly transported out of the colony to the city hospital in Navapolotsk. It turned out that he had visible signs of beating and was diagnosed with a spontaneous pneumothorax (a punctured lung). In other words, he had been beaten to the point of a lung rupture — essentially a life-threatening condition — and only then was he taken to the hospital.

Nevertheless, the administration claimed that Babaryka’s health was “not in danger.” A few days later, Viktar was discharged from the hospital and placed in a closed quarantine block — PKT (CTP) — inside the colony to hide his condition from other inmates.

One documented case involved a prisoner with serious spinal problems who needed a stabilizing brace to prevent further deterioration. However, he never received the required assistance in the colony.

> “During my first visit to the neurologist, she said that the only thing ahead of me was a vertebra replacement — a very serious, traumatic surgery. But then the chief medical officer falsified the documents just to deprive me of the brace. I’m half-disabled, and he made sure I didn’t get it.”

According to a former prisoner, even when relatives managed to send the necessary painkillers, injections or treatment procedures prescribed by outside doctors were often withheld.

The administration deliberately used the denial of medical care as a form of psychological pressure.

As a result, treatment for prisoners depended not on medical indications, but on the will of the colony's administration and its staff.

Eyeglasses

were de facto prohibited in PC-1. When the colony's leadership changed, the administration confiscated all medical certificates that allowed prisoners to wear glasses or use a cane. Without such a certificate, glasses and canes were treated as "forbidden items."

> "Everyone who had a cane — it was taken away. Everyone who had glasses — taken away as well. Getting the certificate reissued was only possible through the medical unit, and that took months. People were sent to work on the industrial site without glasses, which could easily lead to new injuries."

This practical ban on eyeglasses created a direct threat to prisoners' health and life: a person could not safely work or even move around the facility. But the administration, through the medical staff, deliberately delayed issuing new permits.

One prisoner who served a long sentence in PC-1 nearly lost his vision completely. His complaints about worsening eyesight were ignored — there was no ophthalmologist in the colony, and no glasses were provided.

> "He started having serious vision problems, but the medical staff provided no help. By the time he was released, he was almost blind. If an ophthalmologist had seen him in time, something might have been done. But the main principle there is: as long as you're still walking, you'll most likely receive no help."

Dental care

in PC-1 is also reduced to a minimum. Formally, the colony has a dental office, and a dentist from the city clinic visits. She can treat teeth and place fillings. However, the administration strictly limits access to dental treatment.

> “The head of the colony, Andrei Sergeevich Palchik, allowed only one type of dental service — extraction. If your tooth hurts — you either have it pulled out or you endure the pain. If you ask for treatment — no.”

Former political prisoners say that in rare cases the dentist did place a filling, but such cases were an exception and directly contradicted the orders of the colony’s chief. If the administration found out, the consequences for the prisoner were severe: he could be punished, sent to SHIZO (DC), or deprived of parcels.

Any attempt to treat a tooth rather than remove it was treated as a violation. As a result, many prisoners leave PC-1 having lost several teeth.

> “Once a guy had severe gum inflammation. They took him to the dentist; the anesthetic didn’t work, and they pulled the tooth for half an hour. He lost consciousness from the pain several times. It was horrific.”

As for **medication**, prisoners primarily received only ibuprofen. Overcrowded barracks, unsanitary conditions, and cold temperatures led to outbreaks of diseases, which also received no proper medical attention.

> “In a barrack of 50 square meters, 30–32 people lived — which is unacceptable from an epidemiological perspective.”

In addition, the colony is located next to a chemical plant, and prisoners breathe industrial emissions 24 hours a day. Within the colony itself, there is constant chemical smog. These factors seriously affect prisoners’ health. No filters or masks are provided. Regular medical checkups are not conducted, even when people start coughing en masse.

In such conditions, infections and contagious diseases spread easily. In spring 2024, PC-1 experienced a mass scabies outbreak.

Within several weeks, dozens — if not hundreds — of prisoners became infected. It remains unknown whether this outbreak received any treatment at

all. Prisoners told their families only that many were covered in rashes, but no quarantine was introduced in the colony.

Similar incidents had occurred before.

> “In winter, a flu epidemic broke out in the colony; hundreds of people fell ill at once. But the prison medical service did not respond properly — they lowered the fever with the same ibuprofen and sent the sick to the general formation. No isolation of infected prisoners, no disinfection of the barracks was carried out, and as a result almost everyone got sick.”

Any attempts to ask relatives to send vitamins or bandages were blocked. Many political prisoners were prohibited even from receiving parcels with basic medicine from their families.

Political prisoner Konstantin Prusov, who served his sentence in PC-1, had Type I diabetes. He required daily insulin injections. Despite his officially recognized disability status, he was held in an ordinary unit and assigned to regular work. He was not provided with the specific diet or sugar substitutes required for diabetics. Only thanks to parcels from outside and the support of other prisoners was Konstantin able to manage his condition. However, over the course of three and a half years, his health deteriorated significantly, and he developed serious complications. In particular, he suffered from heart problems and severe vision loss. He received neither specialist medical consultations nor the medication necessary for treatment inside the colony.

Deaths in the Colony

According to former prisoners, tragic incidents occur in PC-1 every year: some prisoners die by suicide, others die from untreated illnesses. Such deaths are often officially presented by the administration as “natural,” although behind these official formulations lie very specific causes — and very specific responsible individuals.

> “Every year one or two people die in the colony. Before I arrived, someone hanged himself. Every year someone either kills themselves or dies in the medical unit.”

Systematic pressure from the administration, combined with the absence of any psychological support, creates conditions in which suicides become frequent and predictable.

> “While I was there, one person hanged himself. He received no support from outside, felt mentally exhausted. There is a psychologist, but she is an employee of the Ministry of Internal Affairs — the wife of one of the regime officers, just as aggressive as the others.”

In January 2021, the deaths of two prisoners serving their sentences in PC-1 became known[33]: 25-year-old Andrei Dubik and 27-year-old Alexei Zhuk. Dubik’s relatives reported[34] that he had been subjected to psychological pressure in the colony. He was summoned by the administration, urged to “admit guilt,” and told to stop correspondence with human rights defenders. His last letter was received on 8 January. Soon after, it was reported that he had died by suicide in a disciplinary cell (SHIZO).

Denial of medical care in PC-1 has also repeatedly resulted in deaths. Prisoners recall cases in which lives could have been saved had the prison medical staff responded in time and treated the prisoners’ conditions responsibly.

[33] https://www.svaboda.org/a/32826995.html
[34] https://masheka.by/belnews/7224-v-karcere-ik-1-novopolocka-pokonchil-s-soboj-25-letnij-andrej-dubik.html

> “At night, one man (around 45 years old, not a political prisoner) felt severe chest pain. In the medical unit, they did not even measure his blood pressure — they simply gave him some pills and told him to stop “faking.” At 6 a.m., when the wake-up bell rang, he walked to the smoking area, lit a cigarette, and collapsed dead. No one in the administration seemed particularly concerned: it is much easier to “write off” a prisoner than a service dog”.

One former prisoner also described a young man[35] who lost his mental health while in PC-1. Instead of providing care, staff repeatedly placed him in SHIZO, where he slept on a concrete floor and eventually developed pneumonia. He was taken to the district hospital, but it was too late to save him.

There have been multiple cases in which beatings and abuse by staff ended in the prisoner’s death, but officially such deaths were presented as the result of illness or suicide.

> “They beat a guy. As everyone said, they beat him to death. Then they hanged him. They said he committed suicide. He was around 19 or 20.”

Only on very rare occasions does the colony acknowledge its own abuses. In 2023, Captain Igor Petrov of PC-1 was sentenced to six years in prison for abuse of power after he was found guilty of brutally beating a prisoner, nearly causing his death. However, this case was an exception — more likely motivated by the administration’s fear of being held responsible than by any genuine concern for prisoners’ lives.

> “There was a case when the head of units 1–3, Petrov, struck a prisoner so hard that the man suffered internal bleeding. That prisoner was later released and filed a complaint. A criminal case was opened against Petrov. After that, things calmed down a little in the colony.”

[35] https://www.svaboda.org/a/32826995.html

Colony Staff

> “In PC-1 there were more inadequate staff members than adequate ones. You could count the adequate ones on the fingers of one hand.”

All personnel of PC-1 are officers and employees serving in the penal institution and subordinate to the DEP (Department for the Execution of Punishments). Staff members of PC-1 are either employees of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (if they serve in uniformed positions) or civilian personnel who support the functioning and technical maintenance of the institution (these employees are state civil servants). All colony staff are obliged to strictly follow the legislation of the Republic of Belarus, adhere to professional ethics, and observe moral and ethical standards appropriate to their positions.

As in all other institutions under the DEP, PC-1 maintains a strict hierarchical structure based on official positions and special ranks. All lower-ranking officers must strictly obey the orders and directives issued by the colony administration.

During this investigation, experts documented numerous incidents of criminal conduct, inhumane treatment, disciplinary violations, and unprofessional or immoral actions committed both by members of the administration and by ordinary staff.

Head of the Colony and His Deputies

It is evident that any actions taken by PC-1 staff members are carried out either under direct orders from the administration or with its tacit approval. The administration sets the overall directive: to create inhuman, effectively torturous conditions of imprisonment for all detainees, and especially for political prisoners.

The head of the colony, both the former and current one, as the highest official in the institutional hierarchy, bears full responsibility for the use of torture and ill-treatment inside the colony. He is likewise responsible for the creation and maintenance of inadequate conditions of detention within the facility.

> “No guard ever does anything illegal of his own initiative, because they are afraid of each other. All of this happens only when they are told to do a specific thing. The same guard in the SHIZO or PKT may beat someone today and secretly bring fever pills to other prisoners tomorrow, simply because he sees they are in really bad shape. In one instance he acts like a human being, and in the other – he acts because he was ordered to. It doesn’t absolve him of responsibility, but that’s their moral code: today I beat, tomorrow I help.”

Ruslan Khikmetovich Mashadziev

Full name: Ruslan Khikmetovich Mashadziev
Position: Head of Penal Colony No. 1
Date of Birth: 26 September 1981

Since May 2023, Ruslan Mashadziev has served as the Head of Penal Colony No. 1. Prior to this appointment, he worked as the Deputy Head of the same colony. [36]

> “Compared to Palchik, he is of course softer. He seems somewhat more adequate. Palchyk was completely unhinged — he genuinely enjoyed it. He personally loved beating people.”
>
> “If you compare him with Palchik, he is more reasonable. At least he prohibited beating prisoners without necessity. Only when there is a ‘need’ to use force will they do it. I haven’t heard of cases under Mashadziev when prisoners in PC-1 were beaten for nothing, the way it happened under Palchik.”
>
> “Morally, it became a little easier under him. But in fact, nothing has really changed. They can send you

[36] https://t.me/MAYDAYMog/3262

to SHIZO — or they can send you to SHIZO in a way that makes you shake, be terrified, and feel like shit all the time. And here, the second approach disappeared."

Despite the fact that many interviewees describe Ruslan Mashadziev as a somewhat "softer" head of the colony compared to Andrei Palchik, it is important to emphasize that he is likewise complicit in the regime's crimes against political prisoners. As the highest-ranking official of the colony administration, he is obligated to stop any violations of the law or misconduct by his subordinates. In practice, however, he leads this entire repressive machinery. Several countries have imposed individual sanctions against Mashadziev.[37]

"If Mashadziev is pressuring someone, it's simply an order from the DEP. He is also guilty of everything — an accomplice. I'm not excusing him."

"Mashadziev replaced [Palchik]. At first, things became slightly better. He allowed wearing shirts in the industrial zone. But on the other hand, he banned wearing personal underwear in SHIZO. I'd say he's the same kind of tyrant. But he doesn't have that personal sadism. For him it's more formal. Still, he's an even greater bureaucrat — everything must be 'according to the law,' except that this law is twisted."

[37] https://www.opensanctions.org/entities/NK-kfypSheRLHezmy8bLkoGV6

Andrei Sergeevich Palchik

Full Name: Andrei Sergeyevich Palchik
Position: Former Head of Penal Colony No. 1
Date of Birth: 3 March 1981

Palchik is considered one of the most notorious officials of the colony. His name is directly associated with the construction of a torture-based punishment system and the cruel conditions of detention in the colony. Palchik bears the same level of responsibility as the current head of the institution. Several countries have also imposed individual sanctions against him.[38]

> “In three words — he’s a sociopath, a sadist, and insane. He genuinely needs psychological treatment.”
>
> “A huge bald brute, a bodybuilder. Almost two meters tall. A stereotypical image: imagine a prison guard–OMON officer who has risen to the rank of colonel. A robot, an emotionless machine, absolutely cold-blooded and cruel.”
>
> “I heard he even liked to hit his own staff from time to time.”

[38] https://www.opensanctions.org/entities/NK-Z97nt3LXuuFApSfXXDuG7x

“Palchik created conditions designed to make people suffer as much as possible — not only physically. He himself beat prisoners in SHIZO; he liked to use his fists. In cold weather, he could simply say that we ‘had not yet switched to winter clothing,’ and order us: ‘Go outside in your summer uniform, stand in the rain, stand in the frost.’”

A distinctive feature of Palchik’s tenure is that he personally used violence, issued threats, and humiliated prisoners.

“When Palchik was the head of the colony, people were constantly being beaten in SHIZO. One of the reasons he was removed from his position was that someone in SHIZO was beaten so badly that his ligaments were torn. When he got out, he filed a complaint against the head of the colony for the beating. He wasn’t a political prisoner, so apparently his complaint was accepted.”

“He told the head of the colony [Palchik] to his face that he wouldn’t break him. Palchik replied: ‘I won’t break you? We’ll see about that.’ They took him, put him on the table, held down his arms. The head of the colony personally beat him — so severely that the man started bleeding from the rectum. He was beaten very badly, and beaten prisoners are never allowed out anywhere.”

“He could curse you out, humiliate you, say: ‘You’re nobody, you’re not a human being.’ He’d ask: ‘Who are you?’ You would give your name, say that you are such-and-such a convicted person. He’d say: ‘You don’t need to continue. You are a convict — you are an adjective, not a human.’”

“He was known for telling elderly prisoners: ‘You came here to die; I don’t give a damn about you.’”

For Palchik, dismissal did not amount to any punishment: he easily obtained another senior position within the penitentiary system.

Deputy Heads of the Colony

Vyacheslav Sergeyevich Zhurko

Full Name: Vyacheslav Sergeyevich Zhurko
Position: Deputy Head for Security and Operational Work
Date of Birth: 2 October 1986

Zhurko served as acting head of the colony during the transition period between Mashadziev and Palchik. He is responsible for enforcing regime requirements in the colony and oversees the operational officers. He bears direct responsibility for the discriminatory restrictions imposed on political prisoners compared to other inmates, and his subordinates are responsible for systematically issuing unjustified infractions against political prisoners.

> “He brainwashed us so that our relatives wouldn’t call the colony, because they supposedly ‘can’t answer any questions’ about what is happening to us.”
>
> “Every prisoner on preventive monitoring has an assigned supervisor. My supervisor was Lieutenant Colonel Zhurko. He was more or less reasonable — a very cunning man, a bit more farsighted than many others in the administration. I told him: “You’re forbidding me to speak with Babaryka — on what

grounds?" He said: "There are no grounds, and I'm not forbidding you — I'm advising you.""

"He's skinny, red-haired, tall — about 1.85 m. He was the one who sent me to SHIZO at that time, because the head of the colony was away. And he also said: 'Maybe we should put you in PKT, and then transfer you to the closed prison?' I told him: 'If there's a reason, then you can put me there and transfer me.' He replied: 'Well, we'll work on you.'"

Vladimir Valeryanovich Kryvko

Full Name: Vladimir Valeryanovich Kryvko
Position: Deputy Head for Educational and Ideological Work
Date of Birth: 15 August 1978

The official duties of this deputy head include developing and overseeing the system of inmates' "resocialization," as well as organizing all mass events in the colony. In practice, however, he was also involved in persecuting political prisoners, issuing threats, and forcing them to participate in propaganda activities.

"He's like a two-faced joker — you can't figure him out. He's very cunning, like a fox. If you show even the slightest weakness when talking to him, that's it — you're caught."

"He also harmed a lot of people. He pressured me to give an interview to the state TV channel, even forced me to write a statement addressed to the head of the colony saying that I wouldn't give the interview due to family reasons — because I didn't want my family to see me on television. He kept forcing me — they brought me in about five times so that I would give

an interview. I told them I wouldn't do it. At that time, Palchik was being removed from his position, so they wanted to cover themselves, to show on television that everything in the colony was fine."

"He is a very, very dangerous person for an inmate. He tried to draw people into conversations. And then, of course, those people were sent to SHIZO for 30 or 40 days."

Operative Officers

Operational officers of PC-1 are formally required to carry out investigative and intelligence activities inside the colony aimed at identifying and solving crimes, maintaining order within the institution, and preventing future offenses by inmates. However, instead of performing these duties, they participated in the systematic persecution of political prisoners, fabricated infractions against them, intimidated them, and engaged in other forms of inhumane treatment.

Name: Denis Viktorovich Smolyakov
Position: Operational Officer
Date of Birth: 28 October 1995

Name: Aleksandr Vladimirovich Kiselev
Position: Operational Officer
Date of Birth: 24 August 1994

“Smolyakov — the small one — and Kiselev, the second one. They’re about 28–30 years old now. An operative is an operative; everything is clear. You don’t see direct harm from them, but everyone understands that everything happens because of them. They influence everything, they know everything, but usually someone else just comes to you and tells you that you’re getting a report from the unit officer.”

“The unit head decides nothing. Everything is decided by the operational officers. The operational and regime officers are the ones who set the climate in the colony.”

“Yefim. Skinny, short — about 1.70–1.80 m, looked very young. But he had absolutely no brakes. He punished people with a month of cleaning duty just for wearing gloves. It got cold outside, and he ran in shouting: ‘Who told you you could put on gloves?’ He punished about ten people who didn’t manage to take them off fast enough. Then he started putting people in SHIZO. On a constant basis. He would run in and hand out infractions non-stop.”

DAHC (Duty Assistant to the Head of the Colony)

Under Belarusian law, Duty Assistants to the Head of the Colony (DAHC) play an important role in the system of internal oversight within a penal institution: they supervise general order, monitor inmate behavior, and ensure compliance with the regime of the correctional facility. In practice, however, in PC-1 the DAHC officers are the staff members who systematically persecute political prisoners, from drafting fabricated disciplinary reports to directly applying physical violence.

Philipp Vladimirovich Kholmachev

Full name: Philipp Vladimirovich Kholmachev
Position: Duty Assistant to the Head of the Colony
Date of Birth: 31 December 1993

According to testimonies of interviewed political prisoners, this officer systematically subjected inmates to torture — and was promoted ahead of schedule as a result.

> “Philipp — a big guy — was mostly responsible, as I understood, for SHIZO: if someone needed to be pressured, that’s where they did it. That’s why, being

so young, he made it to the rank of major; he was already a major when I was released."

"He [Kholmachev] beat people in SHIZO."

"We could hear the screams. And I knew it was him because the person was shouting: 'Stop, Philipp Vladimirovich, stop! Can't you see you're hurting me?' Apparently he wasn't alone — someone was holding the inmate down. This is how they do it: they bend the person over, stomach against the metal table, arms hanging down. Someone holds the arms, and then the beating begins — rubber batons to the kidneys, to the buttocks, because that is extremely painful. They beat him, and afterward he fell silent for about a day. We even started to worry about him. Then he began calling for a doctor, and it was obvious he was in very bad physical condition."

Viktor Vasilievich Ozimuk

Full name: Viktor Vasilievich Ozimuk
Position: Duty Assistant to the Head of the Colony
Date of Birth: 11 March 1982

Viktor Ozimuk systematically subjects political prisoners to disciplinary sanctions by drafting fabricated reports about alleged violations. There is also testimony indicating that he personally creates unbearable conditions of detention in the colony.

"He [Ozimuk] forced us to clean during rain and to carry out the trash."

"During Ozimuk's shift, there were always long inspections. We were constantly freezing and getting soaked. He issued a huge number of violations to the guys, 'sniping' them through the cameras and giving punishments. Someone didn't button a collar, or someone wore something extra..."

"He comes in with the keys, opens the window, and says: 'It's too warm in here.'
He opens the window and says: 'Well, good luck.' And leaves. I didn't sleep at all that night. It's impossible to sit there — everything is freezing cold. They give you that 'glass' robe — when you sit on anything, you immediately start shivering even more."

Unit officers (“Otryadniki”)

Unit officers (“otryadniki”) are officers of the DEP who are formally responsible for the correction of convicted persons and for maintaining control over them within the unit. In practice, they serve as one of the key instruments of repression against political prisoners.

“When I arrived in the unit, a conversation with the unit officer began. Prisoners were pressured to ‘admit guilt’: for them, an admission is equivalent to ‘correction’ — that’s their whole paradigm. These conversations always come down to the same thing: you must repay your civil claims, repay your clothing debt, and financially support the colony. They force you to make your relatives provide financial assistance so that it can later be counted in your favor.”

“Usually it’s a lieutenant, sometimes a captain at most. You can say that he is involved in absolutely every violation report — he is the one who drafts them. In fact, all unit officers are complicit in these fabricated violations; they sign and approve them. Everything that happens outside the PC industrial zone is under their control.”

Sergey Gennadyevich Zinevich

Full name: Sergey Gennadyevich Zinevich
Position: Head of the Rehabilitation (Correctional) Unit
Date of birth: 1984-02-08

This officer is known for deliberately humiliating and provoking prisoners.

> “Zinevich — we had this major — deliberately pressured me. He was the head of our unit. He would come to the promka (industrial zone). I walk past him, knowing I have to greet him. Of course, I say: ‘Good afternoon, officer!’ And he turns around and says: ‘You didn’t greet me.’ — ‘How did I not greet you? I did. People heard it.’ ‘You’re not supposed to greet me like that. You must bow at the waist.’
> This is humiliation of a person — and they enjoy it. He wanted to provoke me, and I didn’t want to say anything.”

Igor Alexandrovich Petrov

Full name: Igor Alexandrovich Petrov
Position: Unit Head
Date of birth: 1990-04-27

According to accounts from interviewed former prisoners, this officer did not display particular zeal in repressing political prisoners, yet nevertheless took part in such practices. Notably, Igor Petrov was himself criminally prosecuted for abuse of power under Article 426 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus[39]. Witnesses indicate that the reason was a typical case of beating in PC-1.

> “He stopped coming to work, and later we learned that he had been arrested. An investigative team came to the colony several times, sealed his office, and removed the contents of his safe. A non-political prisoner did something, he was punished, and Petrov hit him several times. There were marks left. Petrov forgot to check the tag and didn’t realize the man was being released in a couple of days. He was released, documented the injuries, and filed a complaint with the DEP’s Internal Security Department.”

[39] https://spring96.org/ru/news/113130

Other Colony Staff Members

This section brings together all remaining personnel of PC-1 who are broadly implicated in carrying out repression against both political and ordinary prisoners.

> “[Regarding staff involved in beatings] Young guys, around 22–23 years old. Big, strong. One of them, named Andrei, very tall — about 1.96–1.97 m, around 100 kg.”
>
> “The colony itself is very specific. The staff — one worse than the other. I remember maybe three or four who were somewhat adequate, but they’re still cops. Each with their own harsh quirks, and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

Nikolai Aleksandrovich Zelenkovsky

Full name: Nikolai Aleksandrovich Zelenkovsky
Position: Officer of the Security (Regime) Department
Date of birth: 19 September 1988

"Do you know why he got the nickname 'Parasha'? Because to get you punished and sent to solitary, he would dig through excrement if needed."

"Always smiling, as if searching for a victim. A madman's smile, a fox's smile. During his shift, people would consistently receive around 20 infractions. If he didn't issue at least 10–20, his shift was basically wasted. Out of those 20, about 16 people would be sent to the SHIZO. And this happened every single shift."

"He had a particular hatred toward political prisoners. Abusing inmates was routine for him, but especially toward politicals. He constantly issued punishments and encouraged ordinary prisoners to set up others."

"Because of this man, guys in the PKT were not receiving their meals in full — simply because he wanted it that way."

“If he came to the industrial zone, it meant he was already on his way to punish someone: whoever he caught, he punished. Just a local sadist.”

“Zelenkovsky Nikolai hated political prisoners. He behaved like a madman. He seriously damaged the health of many people. He was either trying to impress his superiors or was genuinely unwell mentally.”

Separately, we note the staff of the colony’s medical unit, who not only failed to provide adequate medical care but also executed clearly unlawful orders from the administration. In addition, some of the staff directly participated in drafting fabricated disciplinary reports against prisoners.

“When Palchik was the head of the colony, it was clear that the decision of whether to treat someone or not was not made by the doctor. The doctor would look at the head of the colony — if he nodded or not.”

“The head of the medical unit was Natalia Nikolaevna. All the abuse stemmed from her. Therapists didn’t want to admit patients, didn’t want to work. She refused to issue medical permits. If a person said something she didn’t like, she would write a report — and then the person was sent straight to the punishment cell.”

“Because of her, there was no possibility to receive any proper treatment. If she couldn’t make a diagnosis, she would shout ‘malingerer’ — and the sick person would be sent for punishment.”

“If they don’t know what’s wrong with you, if they can’t diagnose you, they send you to the SHIZO.”

Yuri Anatolyevich Chumakov

Full name: Yuri Anatolyevich Chumakov
Position: Psychologist
Date of birth: 1979-12-29

The psychologist of PC-1, Yuri Chumakov, does not fulfil his professional duties; instead, he provokes political prisoners and threatens them with arbitrary placement in the disciplinary cell (SHIZO).

> “He [Chumakov] was as if lost. He didn’t understand what was happening around him. He could nitpick over trivial things. He even confiscated my glasses.”
>
> “He also tried to draw people into conversations — and afterwards they ended up in SHIZO. Sometimes during a lecture he would take someone outside: ‘Come on, talk, I’m a psychologist. This is a normal topic, we can discuss it.’ A person would express their opinion, and he would say: ‘Oh, that’s what you think? Well, take a trip to the SHIZO for twenty days.’”

Conclusion

Following the events of 2020, PC-1 in Navapolatsk received a new wave of political prisoners, which led to a further deterioration in detention conditions.

According to testimonies of former inmates, PC-1 — a high-security correctional facility — differs from other colonies in Belarus by its particularly brutal treatment of prisoners by the administration (including the selection and training of personnel and the leadership style), the creation of inhumane conditions in SHIZO (disciplinary cell) and PKT (cell-type premises), and the use of psychological and physical violence. All these factors are directly linked to the political situation in the country and the directives of the Department for the Execution of Punishments (DEP) and the country's top leadership.

УPC-1 is characterised by a strict regime with severe limitations on personal space. Overcrowded accommodation, frequent inspections, and restricted access to hygiene and basic services create extremely harsh living conditions. Food rations are insufficient, nutritionally unbalanced, and often fail to meet even minimal quality standards, which negatively affects prisoners' health.

In PC-1, prisoners' rights to parcels, visits, correspondence, phone calls, and access to legal assistance are systematically restricted and arbitrarily violated. The administration uses the deprivation of these rights as a tool of pressure, often on fabricated grounds, especially against political prisoners.

Labour in the colony is compulsory and discriminatory, particularly for political prisoners, who are systematically assigned to the heaviest, most hazardous, and harmful types of work, without adequate occupational safety measures, personal protective equipment, or proper work clothing. Work norms and schedules are combined with additional unplanned tasks, including work on weekends and at night, depriving prisoners of necessary rest and free time. Remuneration for labour is disproportionately low and often nominal, making such work essentially forced labour. Refusal to work or failure to meet production norms is treated as a regime violation and results in disciplinary punishment, including placement in SHIZO. The combination of these factors indicates gross violations of occupational safety standards and the use of the labour process as a tool of repression and coercion.

In PC-1, systemic problems persist regarding the protection of prisoners' health and the provision of adequate medical care. According to testimonies of former inmates, proper medical services are not provided in the colony. Moreover, denial of medical assistance is used as an instrument of pressure and ill-treatment. As a result, the right to health is effectively denied to prisoners, in

gross violation of both national legislation and fundamental human rights standards.

Cases of suicide have been recorded, including in the punishment cell (DC) and in the industrial zone, as well as deaths caused by violence and neglect of prisoners' health.

Former inmates confirm that PC-1 has developed and implemented a strict system of pressure and abuse against political prisoners. Various methods are used, including inhumane conditions of detention, hard physical labour, repeated placement in the DC or the Cell-Type Premises (CTP), followed by transfer to a closed-type prison. One documented case shows a prisoner spending 100 days in the DC during just one and a half years in the colony.

Particular concern is raised by the treatment of Viktar Babaryka, Andrzej Poczobut and other political prisoners, who are forced to spend most of their time in the DC or CTP under strict supervision, in harsh conditions and in complete isolation from society.

Colony staff, on the one hand, rely on a broad system of denunciations and provocations carried out by inmates; on the other hand, it is the staff themselves who draft fabricated disciplinary reports, give false testimony, and apply physical and psychological violence against prisoners. Such behaviour is largely driven by a rigid hierarchical system of subordination to senior officials of the colony, who not only directly order torture and other ill-treatment, but also create conditions of complete impunity for any criminal acts committed against political prisoners. The existence of such a system does not relieve lower-level staff members of responsibility. It appears that the criminal acts committed by employees of the colony are subject to qualification not only under Belarusian criminal law but also under international law.