



THE INTERNATIONAL
COMMITTEE

FOR INVESTIGATION OF
TORTURE IN BELARUS

**TORTURE AND
ILL-TREATMENT
IN PENAL COLONY NO. 3,
VITSEBSK REGION**

PUBLIC INVESTIGATION

*"The colony is a place where they turn
you into an obedient slave...
They tormented me very badly.
There were days when they simply
carried me to work on their shoulders.
Like the wounded, you know?"*

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ABBREVIATIONS

PC-3 — Penal Colony No. 3;

DEP — Department for the Execution of Punishments of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Belarus;

DAHС — Duty Assistant to the Head of the Colony;

ECR — Early Conditional Release (parole);

CCRB — Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus;

IR — Internal Regulations;

SHIZO — Disciplinary Cell (punishment isolation cell);

PKT — Cell-Type Premises;

LSS — "Low Social Status";

SIZO — Pre-Trial Detention Center;

SOBID — Recreation and Leisure Section;

CHP — Combined Heat and Power Plant.



INTRODUCTION

"...there is a certain sense of solidarity. Along the lines of 'there is no such thing as a former officer.' The administration staff know that officers of the internal affairs bodies are held there, they know that both sides have long arms, and they try not to make conditions too harsh for 'their own.'"

From the testimony of a former prisoner

This study is the fourth document in a series of investigations into conditions of detention in the penal colonies of the Republic of Belarus.¹ The purpose of this document is to provide an overview of the situation of prisoners held in the correctional facility "Penal Colony No. 3" of the Vitsebsk Regional Directorate of the Department for the Execution of Punishments of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (PC-3 "Vitsba"). The authors examined 29 interviews (1,836 pages of transcript) with former convicted prisoners who served sentences in PC-3 between November 2020 and November 2023. Their terms in this colony ranged from 40 days to three years.

The principal difference between "Vitsba-3" and other colonies in the country's penitentiary system is the specific composition of its population: former officials and security-service personnel, as well as foreign nationals. This explains the relaxation of the regime for former officers. Yet it is precisely in this colony that ill-treatment and the creation of inhuman conditions of detention for prisoners convicted under political articles have been documented.

Harsh living conditions; an unbroken stream of disciplinary punishments imposed without cause; placement in SHIZO and PKT for long periods in cold cells unfit for human occupation; heavy physical labor for a pittance — this is how former political prisoners describe their time in this correctional facility. The predictable result of cruel conditions of detention and the failure to provide timely and effective medical care is the loss of health, and even the deaths of prisoners in the colony.

The document describes the various stages of imprisonment in the colony: quarantine, life in the units, prisoners' working conditions, and more.

The administration of this "model" colony maintains, and exploits for its own purposes, the informal prison hierarchy that exists in every correctional facility in the country (see the sections *Informal Prison Hierarchy and Low Social Status*).

Former prisoners name the PC-3 administration staff responsible for the abuse of prisoners. Particular emphasis is placed in the document on disciplinary penalties imposed on prisoners and on physical and psychological violence by staff.

Witnesses describe the former head of the colony, Aleksei Starovoitov,² and Filipp Sturchenko, who replaced him in that post. Former political prisoners are unanimous: both heads of the colony created pointedly harsh conditions for political prisoners; their actions require legal assessment and must not go unpunished.

The document contains facts of abuse of prisoners and of violations of the norms and rules governing their treatment (see the sections *Provocations and "Stukachestvo" and Colony Staff*). The authors conclude that international standards for the detention of prisoners are grossly violated in Penal Colony No. 3.

The interviews with former convicted prisoners who served sentences in PC-3 were provided for this study by the International Committee for the Investigation of Torture in Belarus and by the Viasna Human Rights Center. Materials provided by the Cyber Partisans initiative were used to identify colony staff.

[1] Torture and Ill-Treatment in Penal Colony No. 1. "He was personally beaten by the head of the colony, and beaten so badly that the young man developed rectal bleeding." Public investigation: <https://torturesbelarus2020.org/ru/katavanni-i-zhorstkae-abyhodzhanne-u-paprauchaj-kalonii-%e2%84%96-1/>.

Torture and Ill-Treatment in Homiel Women's Colony No. 4. "We really loved standing there looking out at freedom." Public investigation: <https://torturesbelarus2020.org/ru/pytki-i-zhestokoe-obra%20d1%8genie-v-gomelskoi-zhenskoi-kolonii-4/>.

Torture and Ill-Treatment in Penal Colony No. 17, Shklov. "You bitch! Face down on the floor!" — nine or ten men in masks burst in with batons and explain everything they need to you with rubber." Public investigation: <https://torturesbelarus2020.org/ru/pytki-i-zhestokoe-obra%20d1%8genie-v-ispravitelnoj-kolonii-%e2%84%96-17-g-shklova/>.

[2] Aleksei Starovoitov, the former head of Penal Colony No. 3 "Vitsba," died in February 2024 at the age of 47. The cause of death was not officially disclosed, but a number of independent sources mentioned suggestions of possible suicide.

The authors are conscious of their responsibility for the information they are making public in this investigation. For this reason, all personal data has been removed from the interviews and facts concerning other convicted prisoners have been anonymized. The experts of the International Committee for the Investigation of Torture in Belarus are prepared to provide all the data in their possession to the competent authorities for an independent investigation in the future.

[REDACTED]

GENERAL INFORMATION ON PC-3: A "POLITICAL PRISON"

"There's a corruption convict sitting there who is a police colonel. In that corner there's a policeman in for drugs — first he fought drugs, and then he came in himself on drug charges. I wrote in my letters: 'today I'm playing chess with a murderer, tomorrow with a drug baron, the day after with a corrupt official.'"

From the testimony of a former prisoner



Penal Colony No. 3 in the urban settlement of Vitsba, Vitsebsk Region. Photo: vk.com/@belaruskayaturma-vitba-ik-3.

Penal Colony No. 3 of the Vitsebsk Regional Directorate of the Department for the Execution of Punishments of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (PC-3 "Vitsba") is a men's general-regime penal colony, known as an "elite" and "model showcase" zone. It is located at 6 Tsentralnaya Street, urban settlement of Vitsba, Vitsebsk Region; postal code 211300.

It normally holds former senior officials, security-service personnel, judges, businessmen, and foreign nationals.

"Generally, PC-3 is a zone for former officers and foreigners. At first there was a guy from Colombia in my unit, and one from Nigeria. There was a guy from Cameroon. A Frenchman arrived during my time, sentenced to 12 years. A guy whose... mother was from Africa and father from France. He got 12 years for drugs. There was an Indian, there were Chinese..."

"Our colony was for the most part geared toward former officers of the internal affairs bodies, officials and foreigners. In other words, it is a kind of showcase institution. The rules are followed a bit more closely there, a bit more attention is paid to observing the chain of command... between the administration and the prisoners. Because delegations and ambassadors from other countries often come, and they have to keep up appearances, at the very least."

The colony is small. "Vitsba" holds only about a thousand prisoners. There are 100–150 guards for those thousand people. The whole site is divided into two large parts — the residential area and the industrial area.



Satellite image of PC-3. Source: Google Maps.

This is what the layout of Penal Colony No. 3 looks like according to former political prisoner Aliaksandr Knyrovich: <https://ru.belsat.eu/81034006/luchshaya-koloniya-belarusi-kak-zhivut-zaklyuchennye-v-ik-3-vitba-i-mozhno-li-iz-nee-sbezhat>.

- (1) Checkpoint No. 1 — the entrance to the colony and the office of the head of the colony;
- (2) The ground floor of this administrative building houses the hotel for visits; the first floor houses the colony's administrative services (accounting, human resources and others);
- (3) The ground floor of this building houses the canteen, the parcel collection point and the shop ("the stall"). The first floor houses the correctional department, the club, and the computer room for prisoners' distance learning. The telephones for calls and the quarantine facility are also located there;
- (4) The medical unit. The country's only psychiatric hospital for male convicted prisoners is located on its grounds;
- (5) The sports ground;
- (6) The church (Church of St. John the Russian);
- (7) SHIZO (the disciplinary cell block) and BUR (enhanced-regime barracks);
- (8) Residential barracks (three buildings);
- (9) The library and bathhouse complex;
- (10) The industrial area.

Before 2020, those serving sentences here on political charges included the former member of the House of Representatives Siarhei Skrabets and the 2006 presidential candidate Aliaksandr Kazulin. After the 2010 elections, "Vitsba-3" also held presidential candidate Andrei Sannikau, civic activist Aliaksandr Atroshchankau, and the anarchist Ihar Alinevich.

After 2020, ever greater numbers of political prisoners began to be brought to the colony. According to the Viasna Human Rights Center, more than a hundred political prisoners have served sentences in PC-3, among them the lawyer and member of the Coordination Council Maksim Znak, the politician Andrei Dzmitryieu, the bloggers Ihar Losik and Siarhei Piatrukhnin, the journalist Dzmitry Navazhylau, the former prosecutor Yauhen Babak, the former investigator Yauhen Yushkevich, the children's writer Dzmitry Yurtayeu, and the activist Maksim Viniarski.³

Among the former officials held in "Vitsba-3" were the former deputy prosecutor general Aleksandr Arkhipov, the former head of the Motovelo enterprise Aleksandr Muravyov, the academician Aleksandr Beletsky, and the former deputy state secretary of the Security Council Andrei Vtyurin.

Given such a population, some prisoners see the conditions of detention at Vitsba-3 as milder than in other Belarusian colonies. As witnesses note, no one in the colony tightens the conditions for former judges, prosecutors and police officers — as a rule, they take for themselves the cushiest posts of zavkhoz (barracks supervisor), orderly and other positions close to the administration.

However, the political prisoners on preventive registration⁴ — those marked with yellow and red tags — have the entire system of so-called "correctional" measures brought down on them in this "model" colony. Their daily life consists of unremitting pressure and restrictions: unfounded disciplinary penalties follow one after another, heavy physical labor becomes compulsory and exhausting, and access to parcels, medical deliveries and contact with loved ones is systematically curtailed.

"Half the colony are people with higher education. Intelligent, level-headed people you can talk to about business, about studying, brush up your languages with. It's not what it used to be — thieves, murderers..."

"This is a zone where the great majority of inmates are former officers. Investigators, prosecutors, the Main Directorate for Combating Organized Crime and Corruption, the State Security Committee, the former head of Lukashenka's security service, governors, city mayors, big businessmen."

"So the regime there is a bit softer, a bit slacker... It bears no comparison with PC-1 in Navapolatsk, for instance. Or Babruysk, or Mahiliou, or Shklou."

[3] <https://prisoners.spring96.org/be#list>

[4] Preventive registration in the colony is an internal system for classifying and monitoring prisoners whom the administration considers potentially "problematic" or in need of special control.

One of the key factors determining the colony administration's attitude toward a prisoner is his admission of guilt. According to former prisoners, it is precisely this criterion that serves as a kind of marker of "loyalty" to the system. For the administration, an admission of guilt is an indicator of the correctional facility's effectiveness, since it directly affects the statistics.

A special place in this system of punishment is occupied by the disciplinary cells (SHIZO) and the cell-type premises (PKT), where people spend long periods in conditions that the prisoners themselves describe as inhuman. Gradually this leads to a sharp deterioration in health, both physical and psychological. In some cases the consequences prove fatal: over the past several years a number of political prisoners have died in the colony for want of timely medical care.

A psychiatric hospital is located on the grounds of the "Vitsba-3" colony; prisoners are brought there from all over the country for psychiatric care, including those committed to compulsory treatment. Formally it is regarded as a medical institution of national significance, but among prisoners it is seen very differently. According to former inmates, "psychiatry" in PC-3 frequently becomes not treatment but an instrument of pressure and punishment.

"Those who did not admit guilt were more often subjected to unfounded searches, disciplinary reports and pressure in the form of loss of parcels, loss of calls and visits, than those who had already admitted guilt and were of no particular interest to the administration. That pressure there wasn't even concealed."

"If the SIZO is a place where they strip you of your health and your psychological equilibrium, then in the penal colony they turn you into an obedient slave. The regime is so harsh, and everyone watches everyone else so closely, that any deviation leads to punishment."

THE BEGINNING OF A PRISONER'S JOURNEY: SIZO – TRANSFER – "VITSBA"

"The colony is a unique experience. There was an interesting moment when we had only just arrived. That very same day a man was being released. And it was just like... A kind of positive spark in the unbroken, impenetrable darkness. You know, that sort of thing... a spark of hope. The realization that people do, after all, get out."

From the testimony of a former prisoner

Transfer from the SIZO to the colony, although it is expected by prisoners, as a rule happens suddenly. The procedure follows a long-established pattern: the cell door opens, a staff member calls out a surname, and the order follows: "grab your things and out." A few minutes are allowed for packing, during which the prisoner must gather all his belongings. On leaving the cell he is handcuffed — in the Vitsebsk SIZO the cuffs were usually fastened behind his back.

This position makes even ordinary movement substantially harder. First the man has to sling one heavy bag over his shoulder, then he is handcuffed with his hands fixed behind his back. After that he is forced to try to lift the second bag in an awkward position. With two bags and his hands fixed behind his back, the prisoner can barely straighten up and goes down the stairs half-bent.

Then, in the search room, the handcuffs are briefly removed, but this is only a formal pause before a thorough search of his belongings. The contents of the bags are pulled out entirely and picked through: packages may be torn open and their contents scattered. Gathering it all back up is left to the prisoner himself, after which the handcuffs are snapped shut again.

Before boarding the prison van a roll call by surname is conducted, after which the prisoners are led inside one by one. Help with belongings is out of the question, and this is one of the physically hardest moments: hands shackled, bags heavy, and you are required to move fast.

The prison van is a system of cramped metal compartments. Some of them, the so-called "glasses," are designed for one person and barely fit him together with his belongings. Others are small cells for several prisoners.

"...somehow you load yourself in there together with your bags. Every time it was astonishing how you fit in there at all."

The prison van brings the prisoners to the railway station. The transfer takes place at night. A so-called "Stolypin car"⁵ is brought onto a separate railway siding. When the train stops, everything around begins to resemble a film: service dogs barking, convoy guards shouting, men with automatic rifles. The prisoners are unloaded from the vans and driven forward almost at a run, half-bent, with bags and heavy holdalls in their hands.

"...a railway station, some separate siding. This 'Stolypin' carriage pulls up, drops people off, and it's all like in the films: dogs barking, blokes with automatic rifles yelling, and you run. And you're supposed to run 'bent over,' with your bags, with your holdalls."

The compartments in the Stolypin car resemble train compartments, but more people are packed in than the norm allows. Instead of four — six or seven. According to prisoners, it went as high as ten to a compartment. People travelled standing, "just like riding a trolleybus." Being in the smoke-filled carriage is extremely uncomfortable, lying down is impossible, legs go numb, and it is very hard to sleep in such a position.

[5] A specialized prison railcar with barred compartments, designed for transferring prisoners under convoy.

"At first there were four of us, it was fine, and then when we came up on Mahiliou in the middle of the night (Orsha), they topped us up. That's what a transfer is: it moves, some are dropped off, some are picked up. And in Orsha in particular they crammed in so many that people were standing in the compartment. They loaded in the ones being taken to the Vitsebsk SIZO."

"There were empty compartments. In one of them there was a man with a 'bad' article — sexual harassment. Naturally, if other inmates had been put in with him and found out about it, he would have had a rough time. There was also a former officer. Ordinary inmates couldn't be put in with him either — for inmates there is no such thing as a former officer, there'd be questions. There aren't enough places, so they cram the other compartments."

Sometimes prisoners had to travel in handcuffs for entire days on end. In such conditions it is virtually impossible to change clothes properly or to keep warm, so on the advice of "old hands" many put on extra layers before the transfer.

"There's a man travelling under Article 139, that's murder, part two. He travels without handcuffs, alone in a cage meant for three. And next to him is a little cage for one, and there are three of us in it, all three political, handcuffed behind our backs."

"You want to eat, you want to drink — you're in handcuffs the whole time. You need the toilet — you're in handcuffs the whole time. So you can't really do anything. Getting to the upper bunk with your hands cuffed was quite a quest. They didn't forbid you from doing anything — getting out food, if you have any, or a drink, or something else — it was just very awkward."

Food during transport is, as a rule, meagre. Mostly dry rations: tea, sugar, a little porridge or soup. During the journey water is given, and boiling water for brewing tea or soup. Prisoners are not taken to the toilet under any circumstances, regardless of requests.

"I had my own food. But in those conditions, with the handcuffs behind your back, when you're in that kind of stressful situation, your body has already coiled up like a spring and you're waiting for something at any moment. In a stressful situation like that, food is the last thing on your mind."

"I went to the toilet for the first time at six in the morning. I said to him — to the convoy guard — 'I'm about to piss on my own legs.' I couldn't hold it, urea was coming out through my forehead already. Really, urine comes out through your skin, that's how badly you need to go. And only then did he take me to the toilet."

The journey in the "Stolypin car" lasted several days for some prisoners, turning into a genuine test of endurance. For example, prisoners from the Brest SIZO travelled across the whole country for six days.

"And I met two lads from Brest there. They had already been travelling, I think, six or seven days. They were going from the Brest SIZO to the Vitsebsk Region. And all that time, because they were on preventive registration, they travelled on the train in handcuffs. Can you imagine — six days in handcuffs? They were genuinely barely alive. He practically couldn't even stand up on his own, he lay there... The convoy guard said to him: 'Come on, out!' He couldn't even get up. I helped him stand."

"They also arranged it so that the political prisoners had to squat down and go past the dogs. Dogs barking on both sides, just like in a Nazi camp. People had told me about it, I was already bracing myself for having to crawl in a squat with those bags, dragging them behind me. When your hands are cuffed behind you, you're squatting and dragging these bags along..."

After arrival at the final station everything repeats: unloading, the prison van, the cramped "glasses." On the colony grounds the handcuffs are finally removed, and this is the first moment in a long time that his hands are free.

The procedures do not end there, however; new searches follow — on leaving the prison van and on entering the colony. Belongings are taken apart completely again, and some are confiscated: what was permitted in the pre-trial detention center may turn out to be prohibited in the colony. Clothing, footwear and certain items are sent to the store; food is often destroyed.

So ends the transfer — a long, exhausting journey after which the prisoner finds himself in the "Vitsba-3" penal colony.

"But then again, new stress. Everything is new. And most importantly — the uncertainty. You don't know what awaits you five minutes from now, what will happen to you. Who will come in, where they will take you. Because you don't belong to yourself. You are entirely under the control of the administration."

Quarantine

"...they're like fish thrown up on the shore, looking around. You can't yet tell which of them are political and which aren't, people of different ages, all so different... But once they've been changed into uniform and had the tag sewn on, then it's clear — yellow means political, that's a hundred percent."

Quarantine — the compulsory initial stage for all new arrivals — takes place in a separate block at the edge of the site, adjoining the administrative building. Formally quarantine is intended for adaptation and medical screening, but in practice prisoners experience it as one of the harshest periods of their time in the colony.

The length of time prisoners spend in quarantine in PC-3 may vary, but as a rule it is from one to several weeks. One prisoner, for example, recalls that he spent more than two weeks there. During the pandemic (in 2021–2022) quarantine periods were extended: some prisoners spent up to three weeks in quarantine.

Prisoners are issued a uniform — a smock made of coarse synthetic material, which the prisoners themselves call *steklyashka* ("glass cloth") because of the constant skin irritation it causes. The clothing is often the wrong size, its quality is poor, and in winter it offers almost no protection from the cold. Identifying tags are sewn onto the smock, including one indicating preventive registration status.

"If it's too big... well, there isn't another one, you'll have to wear that one. And if, on the contrary, they don't have your size, they may give you one size smaller. Well, put up with it. That's how it was for me. They didn't have my size, and at first I had to walk around in boots that were probably about a size 46½. And because of that my feet were constantly chafed, blisters..."

Under the rules, initial medical procedures are supposed to be carried out in quarantine: examination by doctors, basic tests (an ECG, for instance); prisoners are asked about chronic illnesses and health complaints. According to prisoners, however, if such examinations took place in quarantine at all, they were extremely perfunctory and cursory. Even medication required for daily use was confiscated in quarantine, and could only be recovered on arrival in the unit, three or four weeks later.

"And they confiscated them straight away — my tablets. I had no access to them. In quarantine there is no access to medication at all; I spent two weeks without my tablets. It was only later, when I moved up to the unit, that I built a route to the senior nurse in order to get those tablets. Only then did I start receiving them."

The second function of quarantine is to break the prisoner into the colony's conditions and rules.

"Quarantine is a minimum of two weeks of special confinement where, before you are assigned to a unit, they tell you and show you how everything works here. They carry out operational measures, finding out in detail who you are, what you are, your positions, your character. They run several sessions with staff, interrogations. They find out your profession, they find out your capabilities..."

According to prisoners, almost immediately upon arrival an operative officer spoke with them. He asked what at first glance were simple questions: what your plans are, how you intend to "do your time," what you did before. But behind this conversation you could sense an attempt to work out how convenient a person would be for the system. The questions could also sound provocative. For example, an operative officer might ask a prisoner whether he wanted to "leave his mark on the history of the colony."

One of the first mechanisms of pressure encountered by newly arrived prisoners was the so-called "questionnaire procedure." Formally it looked like an ordinary procedure: people were handed forms with questions calling for simple "yes" or "no" answers. But by agreeing to them and signing the document, a person was in effect confirming his readiness to cooperate with the colony administration.

"That is, that you will report any incidents, any breaches of the IR⁶ regime and so on. In other words, full cooperation with the administration. I don't know what these bits of paper are for. Some signed them, some didn't. But the lads who refused to sign went straight to SHIZO."

The regime in quarantine is strict. Reveille is around 5:30 a.m. Only a few minutes are allowed for all the morning routines (wash, dress, make the bed), after which comes lineup and compulsory morning exercises outdoors, regardless of the weather. Even in winter, in frost or rain, everyone must go out into the yard — a small concrete area enclosed by a high fence with barbed wire. Prisoners in quarantine have virtually no free time.

"If you have free time on the schedule, you read the internal regulations, you memorize the colony's officials and everything else. That is, there is some time to have a cup of tea or coffee, but not much..."

[6] Internal Regulations.

Prisoners in "quarantine" spend most of the day in a common room. They also eat there. Access to personal belongings is severely restricted: the kisharka⁷ is opened only twice a day for a few minutes, and by no means everyone manages to get in.

The day is spent in constant occupation. Prisoners are assigned to work: in winter this means clearing snow, breaking ice, clearing roofs; indoors — endless cleaning, often repeated with no visible necessity. Even if a room had already been clean, a short while later the prisoners would be made to wash and clean it again. For political prisoners the ordinary quarantine regime is made harder — they had to be constantly in plain view, outdoors.

There is no proper rest at night either. After lights out (around 10 p.m.) prisoners are checked several times during the night: staff come in with torches, count them, sometimes deliberately shine the light in their eyes. Exhaustion from lack of sleep builds up very quickly.

Work assignments are handled by the zavkhoz — a prisoner who cooperates with the administration. A great deal depends on his attitude: who gets the heavier tasks, who is put on duty more often, and so on.

"...if you need to fetch toilet paper, tea, coffee or a razor, you can only do it twice a day, ten minutes for 30 people... And you could only go in two at a time."

"In quarantine the daily routine is very strict. Apparently in order to instil more dread and fear in those who have only just arrived. So the political lads, from the moment of exercises, of reveille, after breakfast, were obliged to be outdoors."

"They put the political prisoners on general duty scrubbing constantly in that quarantine. So that you'd just scrub, scrub endlessly. It worked out that at half past five you go and clear snow. And only the political prisoners went. And then, from 8 a.m., you do a general clean twice for two or three hours, and at 5 p.m. you go and clear snow again."

"If there was one thing you didn't get, it was sleep. You lie down, and then just — bang — a blackout and: 'Units, reveille!' And you have to get up quickly, because exercises start literally five minutes later. Exercises are downstairs, you have to come down from the first floor, and that's in any weather, any season: minus 30 or plus 30... At 6 a.m., nonetheless, everyone goes out for exercises. If you're late, the warders come to check. Which means there'll be a disciplinary report. And a report is a violation."

"The quarantine 'zavkhoz' is a prisoner serving a long sentence. At present the quarantine zavkhoz is X., a rare piece of filth who has helped make many people's lives worse. He answers personally to the head of the operational department, Sergei Aleksandrovich Golubev, and carries out all sorts of dirty tricks at his request."

[7] Kisharka — prison (camp) slang for the place where prisoners' personal belongings are stored. It is a small store or storeroom inside the unit or quarantine block where bags of belongings are kept.

At the same time, there are also people among the prisoners who act as informants. They report everything that happens to the zavkhoz and to the colony administration.

In quarantine, punishments follow the slightest violation or even purely formal pretexts. For instance, if cleaning is deemed inadequate, everyone may be taken outside for several hours, sometimes for the whole day. In cold weather this meant many hours in the freezing cold. Common grounds for punishment also included discrepancies in the inventory of personal belongings (for example, discrepancies in the number of cigarettes or envelopes) and an unfastened top button. Such violations could result in placement in SHIZO immediately upon completion of quarantine.⁸

Former prisoners say that decisions on punishing certain prisoners in quarantine bore no relation to their actual conduct. Despite being formally assigned to a unit, they never got there: immediately after quarantine several violations were attributed to them, followed by transfer to SHIZO or PKT, and then to a stricter regime — to prison.

"There were, so to speak, embedded operatives who collected [information]... They sat there apparently along with everyone else in quarantine, but never took part in duty shifts; they were constantly hanging around and passing on to the administration whatever they heard in the common room."

"That orderly 'worked' well. He was constantly turning me in if I did something out of line. For example, after that inspection I took off my smock and sat down to eat cold food. He had a complaint that I'd taken it off. At first I said I didn't want to get it dirty, I made up excuses, I didn't create a conflict. But he kept insisting and asking what the reason was. To calm him down I said: 'From now on I'll eat without my smock every time.' He said, 'Fine!' And after that he went off to report to whoever needed to know. The next day he was already provoking me to take my smock off at lunch."

"As punishment for bad cleaning (bad cleaning means somebody ran a finger somewhere and found dust) they could keep us outside for eight hours. March wasn't very warm yet, there were frosts, it was cold and wet. Practically every day we spent six or seven hours outside, and sometimes as much as ten."

"He helped me draw up that inventory, which turned out to be wrong, and because of that I went to SHIZO for ten days. It was obvious that if it hadn't been that violation, they would have pinned others on me, because the complaints against me began from the very first days — they checked how I cleaned my room, whether I did this or that correctly."

"I remember there were people about whom there was an order from above; they didn't even move up to the unit, they went from quarantine to the disciplinary cell block... He had been assigned to my unit, but he never even came up to the unit; they wound up a new case on him and sent him to the closed prison."

[8] Under the internal regulations a prisoner goes to SHIZO after four violations, but political prisoners could be sent there after the first violation.

The assignment of prisoners to units after quarantine is formally carried out by a commission composed of senior officers — the head of the colony, the deputy head for regime and operational work, the head of the medical unit, and psychologists. On the one hand, professional skills were taken into account. For example, prisoners with experience in particular fields, such as furniture manufacturing or woodworking, might be assigned to the corresponding units. At the same time, because of a shortage of specialists, assignment to units could be arbitrary.

"The head of the colony at the time, Aleksei Mikhailovich Starovoitov, now deceased, asked what I had done. I told him. He said: 'Well, perhaps that's enough leaping about like Lenin onto the barricades. You need to serve out your sentence quietly and go home to your family.' I said: 'Yes, I fully agree.' And I was told: 'In that case Unit No. 5, the woodworking shop, is free.'"

"In quarantine there was one lad with me. He had previously worked at a furniture factory. And he evidently stated that. They came for him and took him to the experimental workshop."

On the other hand, witnesses point to the role of the administration's personal attitude toward a particular prisoner, when the formal consideration of his unit assignment turned into demonstrative pressure and humiliation.

"...[at the assignment hearing] the head of the colony was there. I came in and introduced myself. He started shouting at me. That I was a fascist in a brown shirt, that he would have had me shot, but that I would go to Unit 7 on woodworking and drop dead at work under him."

DAILY LIFE IN THE COLONY

"Reveille is at six, inspection at eight, and then you load up for the industrial area. At six there's inspection again, and it seems like free time, but you're a political prisoner, you're on preventive registration, and at eight you have yet another inspection. And at ten it's lights out. So there was no free time to speak of."

From the testimony of a former prisoner

A prisoner's daily routine depends on his work schedule. When a person works the first shift, reveille is set for 6:00 a.m. and lights out for 10:00 p.m. On moving to the second shift the routine shifts by an hour: reveille at 7:00 a.m., bed at 11:00 p.m. The working day on the first shift runs from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. The second shift begins between 5:00 and 6:00 p.m. and ends at lights out. The timing of all other regime activities is adjusted in line with these cycles.

Political prisoners on preventive registration are required, in addition to the general morning and evening inspections, to report three more times a day to the local area — the yard of the barracks. This happens at 10:00 a.m., 4:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m.: an assembly is announced over the public address system, all the "preventive registration men" line up outside and wait while the duty officer goes through them on his list.

When working the first shift (8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.) there was virtually no free time left: taking into account meals, inspections and waiting for the additional preventive-registration inspection, actual personal time was reduced to 30–40 minutes before lights out. Colony staff additionally filled these gaps with compulsory "educational activities" — film screenings in the club, lectures, meetings.

"The schedule is deliberately designed not to leave large blocks of time... Free stretches cut up into 20–30 minutes — they can always think up some activity."

According to former prisoners, PC-3 held prisoners from various countries — citizens of Russia, China, Nigeria, Syria, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Lithuania, many of whom did not understand Russian. Despite this, all regime requirements, including the compulsory oral report at lineup, must be delivered exclusively in Russian, regardless of whether the person understands a single word.

"People would just sit down, dictate to him, and he wrote it in his Chinese and learned [the text of the report]. That is, he doesn't understand at all what he is learning. He simply learns a set of sounds that he absolutely must say to the head of the colony."

Watching state television is compulsory. After dinner, in the so-called "Lenin Room," colony staff switched on the Belarusian state channels, and prisoners must sit and watch the news. At weekends, attendance at the club to watch "patriotic" films — Soviet war pictures and propaganda material — was also compulsory. In addition to television, individual conversations were held regularly with political prisoners by the political officer and operative officers, always on one theme: whether they had recognized their "mistake" and were ready to admit it.

"At weekends, from 9 to 11 you had to be in the Lenin Room watching what was called IR-TV. They showed films about the war and about what fine fellows the Soviet soldiers were... In my view it just made people angry all the time."

Inspections by various supervisory bodies (the Department for the Execution of Punishments, the prosecutor's office, the regional executive committee, public monitoring commissions) were carried out regularly. Their effectiveness as a control mechanism, however, was nil: on the eve of each inspection the unit officer would gather the prisoners and deliberately instruct them to keep quiet during the inspection. Raising a complaint with the inspectors meant condemning yourself to SHIZO for certain and losing any prospect of a reduction in punishment. Likewise, any letters to state bodies, including complaints, were sent through a special department which decided whether or not your letter would leave the colony.



An Orthodox church is located on the grounds of PC-3, but access to religious practice is in effect closed to prisoners of other faiths. Catholics are not allowed to attend services; their written applications requesting that services be organized went unanswered, and requests to invite a Catholic priest were refused on various pretexts. At the same time, according to the available testimony, the colony administration deliberately used the Orthodox priest to pressure believers of other faiths into converting to Orthodoxy. Catholics were forced to organize prayers on their own, arranging matters with individual staff members on feast days.

In June 2023 Sturchenko was appointed head of PC-3. With his arrival, conditions for political prisoners noticeably deteriorated and unscheduled inspections became more frequent. A video surveillance system was installed throughout the facility, including in the residential barracks, which deprived prisoners of their last opportunities for unmonitored rest or simple privacy.

"The day before he would gather us and say: 'Tomorrow not one of you bastards walks around the grounds. If they want to talk to you — none of you have any questions, everything is fine with you. If any bastard asks a question — you won't be out of SHIZO until Easter.'"

Ceremonial opening of the new sports complex at PC-3. Source: vitbichi.by

"We faced outright discrimination — we were discriminated against on the grounds of our faith. An Orthodox priest would come and try to set us on the true path, to make us Orthodox. There were two cases there where Catholics converted to Orthodoxy."

"The regime started being tightened, political prisoners were checked more often. Then funding was secured to install video cameras everywhere possible, including in the barracks. Life became much harder."

Sanitary Conditions and Hygiene

For every 90–120 people there are 5–12 washbasins and 5–7 toilet places, either with no partitions or with partitions about a metre high. In the morning and evening queues form at the toilets — access to a toilet was a particularly acute problem for elderly prisoners and people with illnesses. Those who could not wait urinated right there in the queue; cases of incontinence were commonplace. The only way to avoid the queue was to get up at 5:00–5:30 a.m. instead of the official 6:00 a.m. reveille.

"I saw a lot of people who simply, in the queue, had incontinence, and took a rag and wiped up their own urine. Well, that's human physiology."

A proper wash is permitted once a week — a person is given 15–20 minutes to wash himself and launder his clothes. On the other days only cold water from the tap was available. Washing from a basin or sluicing yourself down to the waist is formally a breach of the regime and is punishable by placement in SHIZO. Even so, people committed this violation — especially in summer, when air temperatures exceeded 30 degrees, after physical work or sport.

"Washing was completely forbidden... If you got 'caught' — you went straight to SHIZO, no questions. Especially after the sports ground; if you didn't wash, sometimes it was hard to even walk into the dormitory."

The work shops were fitted with showers, and the chance to wash after a shift was considered one of the few privileges of working in the industrial area. Those who did not go to production — pensioners and those excused from work on health grounds — could wash only once a week. However, the showers in the shops were available in name only: there were two or three cubicles for dozens of men, the queue was enormous, and no more than two or three minutes were allowed for washing. Some prisoners developed skin problems after showering because of the quality of the water in the industrial area's pipes.

"The shower is designed for two people. Although there were about 50 men in the shop at the same time. For everyone to wash, you have to go through a quest."

"After showering, I remember, they were on my chest, on my back — enormous blisters, which shrank over time. And at night, when I slept, they formed again. They itched terribly and hurt."

Food in the colony is provided three times a day, but its quality and calorific value, according to prisoners, were unsatisfactory.

For breakfast they gave a thin water-based porridge, most often oats, pearl barley or the so-called sechka (a low-grade sticky mass of crushed grain), together with excessively sweet tea. Lunch consisted of a watery soup with no meat, plus porridge or mashed potato. Root vegetables were frequently served rotten or frost-damaged. Dinner often repeated breakfast.

Meat officially appeared on the menu, but in practice it was encountered in the form of individual fibres or gristle. Fish patties were made from badly ground fish including the bones, and dumplings were stuffed with bone meal. Fresh vegetables and fruit were entirely absent on ordinary days, and dairy products were not provided for in the diet.

Because of the quality of the food prisoners lost a great deal of weight, and problems began with their teeth and digestive system.

"The taste defies description, because it is simply feed. It is not a dish, it is feed."

"Monotonous, uniform food, badly cooked and with few nutrients. In terms of quality — yes, a bit better than in the SIZO, but even so, still awful. I'm recalling it now... You really cannot feed people like that."

"Borscht made from rotten beetroot — that's a dish too. Black beetroot floating in your bowl along with black potato... The cleanest and best food is rice porridge, oat and pearl barley, because they didn't add anything to them."

"And we particularly loved the prickly patties, we called them 'hedgehogs.' It's a fish patty simply made from ground fish, badly ground fish. And the bones just dig into the roof of your mouth, into your tongue."

"And this is something incomprehensible, stuffed with who knows what. The shape of a patty... well, by the look of it, it's a patty, but when you eat it, there's no telling what it's made of. So sometimes I couldn't force myself to eat those patties either."

"When I went in I weighed 100 kilograms, and I came out at 78 or 70-something... There could be stones in it too. There were many cases where someone was eating and a piece of tooth broke off."

"Essentially it is physiological destruction. It turns out this is needed so that a person cannot escape. And indeed, after two or three weeks of that food you walk around and the boots you were issued feel like weights, that heavy. I remember at one point even catching myself thinking that I could barely move my legs."

"The ration per person is supposed to be such as to keep him functioning. They won't let you die. But that you'll lose the last of your health with those working conditions and that feed, if you have no support from outside, from relatives — that's certain."

Prisoners could make purchases at the colony shop no more than twice a month, within a limit of between 2 and 6 base units (approximately 60–205 Belarusian rubles), even if far more money was held in their account. Political prisoners on preventive registration were restricted to the lower figure. If a prisoner received three disciplinary penalties and was declared a "malicious violator," the limit was likewise reduced to 2 base units, for which one could buy little more than an onion, boiled sweets or a packet of tea.

"There's money in your account, but you can't spend it... Two base units is nothing at all. You couldn't buy yourself anything for that money."

For many, the only source of adequate nutrition was food parcels from relatives and mutual support with food between prisoners — the so-called *semeynichanie*. Those who had no family outside or no support from other prisoners found themselves in a particularly vulnerable position.

"I didn't understand how people with no support from outside survive. Physically it simply destroys your health. The food is completely empty... Really, just so you don't drop dead."

"If you have no relatives and no solidarity — it is very hard to survive there."

Correspondence, Parcels, Commissary Purchases, Visits, Phone Calls, Lawyers

According to former political prisoners, their correspondence was severely restricted. Officially they were allowed to communicate only with close relatives entered in their personal file, and to have a person added to that list required submitting copies of documents proving the family relationship. Aunts, uncles and cousins as a rule did not make the list. Letters from friends, colleagues and strangers writing words of support did not reach their addressees but simply disappeared. After February 2022 the flow of letters to most political prisoners dropped sharply. They were also forbidden to take out subscriptions to newspapers and magazines.

All letters passed through a censor. The censor could recount the contents of a letter without any embarrassment when handing it over. Some letters were simply not handed over without any explanation, and many outgoing letters were confiscated as well — some prisoners learned after their release that their letters containing important news had never reached their families. Political prisoners faced even more serious restrictions; for many of them the right to correspondence was cut back almost entirely.

"I was in the camp with no right to correspondence. I put it to him that there is no stamp in my sentence saying 'without the right to correspondence,' so why am I not receiving letters. To which he replied — you get letters from your wife, that's enough for you, and if you keep asking questions you'll go to SHIZO."

"The letters you write, they absolutely [certainly] read them. Some things they may simply not hand over. The censor could ask, without any embarrassment: so what's in there, your wife wrote you this and that."

Letters in foreign languages were not allowed through, and contact with consulates for foreign nationals was effectively blocked.

"A Chinese man tried to get in touch, but they didn't let him. He sent letters from the SIZO, from the colony, to the consulate, but they weren't allowed through because they were in Chinese. Write in Russian, they said. A Chinese man writing to the Chinese consulate in Russian!"

"...some Russians tried to contact the consul but received no replies. They were very shocked that Russia doesn't care about its own citizens; their world shifted a little, their outlook, in that respect."

Phone calls for political prisoners were not scheduled — an operative officer granted them at his own discretion. Neither the prisoner nor his relatives knew in advance when a call would take place, and they had no way of preparing for it. Conversations lasted from 5 to 15 minutes, including the time spent getting through. All calls were monitored: the operative officer could tap into the line at any moment, and after the call he could summon the prisoner for a conversation with questions about what had been said. If he did not like what he heard, the call could be cut off and the prisoner sent to SHIZO. The possibility of video calls for political prisoners was regularly restricted.

"They gave them if they felt like it, they didn't if they didn't. Absolutely every one of your calls is listened to. After a call they could summon you and ask: so you said this there, and they said that to you, we were watching."

Visits with relatives were another instrument of pressure on political prisoners. Long-term visits of one to three days were initially not granted to political prisoners at all. To obtain permission one had to go in person for an interview with the deputy head for regime and operational work. According to testimony, in a number of cases long-term visits were in effect granted only in exchange for loyalty to the administration or through informal arrangements with the *zavkhos*. Long-term visits took place in a separate building containing 11 rooms for accommodation with guests. The rooms were probably bugged.

Short-term visits were sometimes granted once every four months. It was not possible to go to the toilet during such a visit: leaving meant its automatic termination. Also, when Sturchenko took over the leadership, colony staff stopped signing applications for short-term visits with persons who were not direct relatives, including cases where a minor child came accompanied by a mother who was not formally married to the prisoner.

Political prisoners in PC-3 faced systematic obstruction of meetings with lawyers. Even when a prisoner submitted an application about a forthcoming visit well in advance and the administration signed it, for unknown reasons the lawyer could still be arbitrarily refused a meeting with his client.

"And it was exactly the same with long-term visits: we had no long-term visits, they didn't give us Skype. The first political prisoner received his first long-term visit almost a year after arriving at the colony."

"By that point I hadn't seen my family for a year and a half. The operative officer said: because of your complaints my workload has increased. You'll get a video call and a visit last of all the political prisoners, and even then only if you get one at all."

"There was one case where, after a political prisoner's visit with his wife, an operative officer called him in and said: 'Everything your wife told you about — please don't repeat it in the colony, otherwise you'll have problems.' In other words, there is a hundred percent surveillance there."

"The convoy guard says: if you go to the toilet, you won't come back. That means the visit is over. And that is how people were led away and not brought back. Instead of talking to my family I fought the urge to go to the toilet."

"A lawyer came to see a colleague of mine on preventive registration about four times, I think. Only on the fourth occasion did he get in to see him. Three times the lawyer was told that the man was in the production area and could not be called for a meeting. Even though this yellow-tagged prisoner had submitted an application in advance stating that a lawyer was coming to see him. The application was signed. As in, no objection."

PRISONER LABOR

*"In three years in the colony, working every month, I earned 49 kopecks.
This is legalized slavery."*

From the testimony of a former prisoner

Approximately 600–650 prisoners are required to go out to work in the industrial area, but barely a hundred of them had any real work — the rest are forced to create the appearance of working so as not to be punished.

Three main workshops operate in the PC-3 industrial area: woodworking, metal dismantling and sewing. Assignment to workshops was not random for political prisoners: they are deliberately sent to the heaviest and most harmful production. The metal dismantling shop is considered the worst place and serves as an instrument of punishment — the "undesirables" or those who dare to complain are transferred there. One witness was transferred from the sewing works to metal dismantling the day after his wife sent him greetings via a radio programme.

The metal dismantling shop is housed in an old boiler house with no windows and no heating — in winter the temperature inside is no different from that outdoors. Prisoners dismantle old cables by hand, extracting copper, aluminium and lead.

To speed up the work, the administration practiced burning cables in metal baths right on the grounds of the industrial area. Grease and plastic sheathing burned; black smoke drifted into the residential area and into the production buildings where prisoners continued working. When inspectors arrived, the pits with the baths were hastily filled in; after the commission left, they were dug out again.

"Out of the three hundred men who came into that shop, 15 or 20 work, and the rest just drift back and forth for 12 hours. In winter it's cold there, very cold. You can't sit down, you can't eat or sleep. It is terribly demoralizing. People develop illnesses."

"They sent the most undesirable people to metalworking, because it is the most harmful production. The bulk of the yellow-tagged political prisoners worked there."

"Political prisoners are mostly sent to metal dismantling. Political prisoners were always sent to the physically hardest and most harmful work. Those with white tags simply didn't go there."

"Everything is filthy. Dust mixed with grease. Fumes from the plastic sheathing — it heats up and starts to stink. Metal dust, plastic dust in the air. My back hurt constantly from having to pull the wires out, unbraid them, untangle them. I associated myself with cattle: I have to do this, otherwise it will go badly."

"And on metal dismantling the most frightening thing was that metallic polypropylene suspension flying through the air. And at a certain point I realized that I simply could not get well. That is, I am constantly ill, constantly coughing, constantly hacking up some kind of dirt and blackness, something incomprehensible in my nose. Plus there is copper dust hanging in the air as well, and it all scrapes your throat afterwards. And my bronchial tubes have been rather weak since childhood, so they were inflamed there just constantly."

Output quotas are set arbitrarily and are often physically impossible to meet. They are also constantly increased. People were punished for failing to meet quotas by various methods, including being sent to SHIZO.

The woodworking shop is an enormous unheated hangar, draughty throughout, with the loading gates constantly open. The only heating was a single pot-bellied stove, which was later dismantled on the instructions of inspectors as failing to meet standards, making the shop even colder. Political prisoners were generally not allowed near the machines and worked as general labourers: carrying logs, moving boards, clearing sawdust.

The sewing shop is warmer and is considered the best place, especially in winter. Here they sew mop rags and work clothing, and since the start of the war in Ukraine, military uniforms and backpacks for the Russian army. One prisoner refused to sew military uniforms and got ten days in SHIZO for it. The air in the shop is saturated with microfibre dust, causing prisoners breathing problems.

"There's genuinely smoke everywhere. In winter the snow lies on the colony in black flakes, ash falls from the sky instead of snow. No protective equipment whatsoever. X. couldn't take it, took a fire extinguisher and put those fires out. Because it was impossible to be inside the building. After that he spent almost three months in SHIZO."

"There were days when they give you 5 kg of cable and say: 'You have to extract 10 kilograms of non-ferrous metal from it.' When you strip off the insulation, there will be only two kilograms of metal in the five kilograms. And you will never make the quota."

"You simply had to load an unbelievable amount, 17 tonnes of these cables; you had to load them before lunch. That is, from 8 a.m. until 2 p.m., when our lunch starts, all of that had to be done. And if it wasn't done, the lads would not be allowed to wash in the industrial area."

"It was very cold. There can be snow in the shop, frost, the temperature in the shop can be below zero. There's nowhere much to sit down. Also, by the way, there's no food in the industrial area, you can't take anything in there. You can try to smuggle something in, but you can get written up for it. In terms of conditions, the conditions there are the worst; you have to keep walking to stay warm, it's very cold. You need to eat something, there's no food. Awful, dusty, noisy."

"An unbelievable amount of dust. When the sun was shining, it was as if the room were full of smoke — with all that dust in the air. For people with respiratory problems it is simply impossible to be there. Ninety percent of everyone who was in that sewing works used them [masks], simply because your nose gets so blocked that you can't breathe. Naturally, you blow your nose afterwards, and whatever colour of thread is being sewn, that is the colour of your snot."

The colony administration forced even people who obviously had serious health contraindications to work in the shops.

Prisoners were assigned to workshops regardless of their qualifications.

The tools used in production are homemade: hammers welded from offcuts of pipe; knives made from metal plates bolted to wooden blocks. The bolts dig into your palms, the handles are uncomfortable, the blades are blunt.

Industrial injuries occur regularly: logs fall on people, fingers are cut off on the saws. Those injured are forced, under threat of SHIZO, to write statements saying that the injury was caused by their own negligence and not at work. Reports on industrial injuries are never drawn up.

Gloves were issued once a month; there were never any protective goggles or respirators. Everyone's hands were permanently cut.

"They tormented me very badly. There were days when X. simply carried me on his shoulders. Like the wounded, you know? In the shop in the industrial area they laid me on sacks. And I lay on those sacks. When the duty officers came for lineup, they hit that sack to check whether I was alive or not. If I showed signs of life — alive, good, they ticked the box."

*"The zavkhoz asked what I could do. I said I had worked half my life as a masseur, that I know how to manage staff, because I had certain abilities and skills. He said: 'Right, so you can't do f***ing anything, you're going to woodworking.'"*

"The conditions were nonexistent, disgusting. If some inspection came to the colony, then all the machines inside that shop had a sign hung on them saying 'out of order' or 'under repair.' In other words, the equipment was so old that in fact it should have been thrown out. But they went on using it."

"The tools, meanwhile, are the most primitive; often they are very blunt, and most of the lads would get hold of some kind of blade by any means available. Some tried to make their work easier with hammers or nails and dismantle those cables. Some tried to tear them apart with their bare hands."

"Very often people were injured when they were tearing those wires apart. Some injured their hands, some caught another man in the eye, because of the overcrowding."

"People were made to write a statement saying that they had cut off their own fingers through their own negligence, and not because the saw had no guard. The operative officer would say: 'You write it like this. Or you go to the disciplinary cell right now.'"

"I know of a case where a man crushed his foot with a log. And he was made to write a statement saying that it was his own criminal negligence, and not because the blocks he was laying the log on had no stops fitted. And it simply slipped off."

"Once a log fell on me while I was carrying it. It hit me pretty hard. I slipped, it struck my thigh, and there was an extensive haematoma. It was hard to walk, to squat, to sit down, to do anything at all. And they gave me sick leave then for almost a week. On condition that I would say, if anything came of it, that no log had fallen on me, that I had slipped on the stairs and fallen, but not on the territory of the industrial area."

Before entering the industrial area all prisoners were searched — even in cold weather people were forbidden to carry in personal items that might help them keep warm.

Besides their main work in the shops, prisoners were regularly drafted into additional forced labor not provided for in their formal duties. The most common form of such work was clearing snow on the colony grounds. Refusal risked a violation, followed by SHIZO. Prisoners were also made to haul heavy loads on carts, drag construction rubble by hand and perform other work at sites entirely unconnected with their shop. All of this took place both during working hours and after they ended, without any additional pay.

In addition, prisoners on preventive registration were taken out to the industrial area on days when their unit was working the second shift. From 1:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. they were required to sweep and perform ancillary work. This was presented as an "educational measure," but in essence it was out-of-hours forced labor without any compensation.

"It is very dusty work; there's often glass wool flying in the air there. In the evening, when I was clearing out my nasal passages, I realized that they are, in effect, the respirator that obviously should have been provided in those harmful conditions. Obviously they should have provided eye protection. Hands simply rotted, punctured. Especially as it is such dirty work. They should have provided disposable gloves, knives, grease and everything else. None of that was provided."

"So again the unit lines up, goes off to the industrial zone, reaches Checkpoint 2 in our case, and there a blocking detachment of these warders forms up for the search, and they search you to make sure you don't take anything into the industrial zone: no immersion heater, no mug, no tea."

"There, say, major road repairs are under way, they're breaking it up — brick or cement structures, asphalt. There was a cart of the kind you harness a horse to. And prisoners were effectively harnessed to that cart and hauled loads on it, even though there are construction brigades, maintenance brigades, that do this work."

"The first two winters were just a nightmare. One day it was minus 27 and we didn't go out to work. Otherwise we went out in minus 21 and minus 23 as well. In winter there's also endless snow clearing. They made special separate brigades out of the political prisoners. The political prisoners clear the snow."

"He could assign you to work entirely unconnected with the shop, or to work requiring some kind of special permit or protective equipment. For example, clearing snow in winter in an area unconnected with the woodworking shop — that happened several times. We refused to do work that wasn't provided for. He came with threats. The threats there are usually standard — the disciplinary cell."

"Persons on preventive registration had to go to the industrial zone. To sweep somewhere there, to do something else. It's like an additional educational element, additional work for people on preventive registration. Yellow or red tag."

Prisoners were additionally required to perform duty shifts on the unit's territory. They washed the floors in corridors, on staircases, in washrooms and showers, and served duty in the canteen and at the serving hatch. About six people were on duty at any one time; each shift took around two hours. For new arrivals duty shifts were assigned almost daily.

Also, once a week a general clean took place in the zone — usually on Sundays, during time that is formally designated as free.

Wages for a full working day or month were counted in kopecks. According to the payslips that several witnesses managed to keep, this could be: 11 kopecks for a month, 25 kopecks, 1 ruble 2 kopecks, 78 kopecks for the whole period in the colony. One witness earned 49 kopecks in total over three years of work. On paper, however, the colony credited prisoners with 150–200 rubles a month, but it was stated that the whole sum went toward "maintenance" — food and utilities. Nothing at all reached the personal account, or only those same kopecks.

Under Belarusian law, prisoners are entitled to a two-week break from work in the industrial area — a chance to spend time in the barracks. This was particularly valued in winter. Political prisoners, however, were refused this right without any explanation.

"You arrive, and straight away they put you on duty somewhere every day. Whoever has got into trouble will be on duty every day — he failed to answer what the head of the colony is called to that unit officer."

"They introduced a general clean, or whatever you'd call it, where everyone is fully assigned: who cleans which rooms, who sweeps outside, and I think it was a Sunday. You had to clean from the morning. Wherever they put you."

"The administration states on the invoices that all the money goes toward maintaining the prisoners. The warders even joked that the food allowance for their guard dog is eight times higher than a prisoner's."

"In all the time, the year and a half I worked in the industrial area, they never gave me leave. I submitted an application for leave; I was told leave was refused without explanation. On my application it is written in ordinary pencil: 'leave refused.' That application was later confiscated from me."

Extortion of Prisoners and Informal Payments

Besides the official deduction of earnings for "maintenance," a system of informal extortion exists in PC-3. Pensioners are particularly vulnerable to it: unlike most prisoners, they have real money in their personal accounts, since their pension continues to be paid even in detention.

The administration exploits this, using various pretexts to force elderly prisoners to write statements consenting to "voluntary" deductions. The pretexts vary widely: repairing a refrigerator, buying paint, new wallpaper. Sums are collected from the entire unit, which might contain several dozen pensioners. Refusal risks negative consequences at the parole commissions.

"The refrigerator broke; 50 dollars from every pensioner to repair the refrigerator. There are 34 pensioners in the unit. Pensioners are people who have real money, since their pension is transferred to their personal accounts."

"They milk you and milk you from one commission to the next, and that commission is every six months: give, give, and give for this, and for that, and for repairs, and for paint, and for wallpaper, and for everything under the sun."

Many rights guaranteed to prisoners by law also become objects of bargaining. For example, in order to get onto the queue for a visit, a prisoner had to hand money or goods to the responsible person.

"Accordingly, if you want to get a long-term visit, you have to chip in some money for the unit's needs. And chipping in means calling your relatives and saying: 'Transfer money to so-and-so, for this and that.' Or: 'Please send some things, food, this and that, into the colony by parcel.' Then he will put you in the queue for a long-term visit. There were no other options."

There was also the possibility of obtaining lighter and less dangerous work by bribing the zavkhozy.

"In short, I paid 700 Belarusian rubles. I call my wife, I say: 'Wife, we need to transfer money to so-and-so.' The money was transferred to his relative. That is how it's all set up. Yes, I won't hide it: I became a barber through a bribe."

INFORMAL PRISON HIERARCHY

"An unpleasant conclusion — these inmates do more work than the administration itself. Precisely in the ideological sense, and naturally in the physical sense. One can conclude that these colonies are held together by such lackeys, and not by the work of the administration."

From the testimony of a former prisoner

"Vitsba-3," like the other penal colonies of the Belarusian penitentiary system, functions as a "red" zone, in which all power belongs to the administration. Some prisoners define it as a strictly "regime-driven" colony in which the usual prison "code" is absent and precise compliance with the Internal Regulations prevails.⁹

"Vitsba is precisely a regime-driven colony. In terms of the IR and everything else it is very strict. That's why it is very hard there. Maximum restrictions, minimum freedom of action."

Nevertheless, alongside the formal system of governance, a stable informal hierarchy among prisoners operates in the "Vitsba-3" colony, typical of all penitentiary institutions in Belarus.¹⁰

As prisoners maintain, the highest caste of blatnye¹¹ as such is absent in this colony, but their roles and functions have in effect passed to other prisoners acting under the administration's control.

"If we're talking about any blatnye, there is none of that there. There are people who play at it, but it amounts to nothing. Some people just have that criminal romanticism in their heads. But these people amount to nothing in terms of being any kind of threat to others."

The key role in this system is played by the so-called "activists" — prisoners in close cooperation with the administration. They include orderlies, zavkhozy and other "responsible" persons who formally perform housekeeping or organizational functions, but in practice also exercise control over the conduct of other prisoners. Through such prisoners the administration obtains the possibility of indirect management within the prison environment. A significant part of disciplinary practice is realized through their hands: they monitor, they report, they initiate inspections. This allows constant pressure to be maintained on prisoners without the direct involvement of staff.

Prisoners performing the functions of the "activist" group often remain in quarantine or in separate areas for the whole of their sentence. Many former prisoners, for example, described the role in the informal hierarchy of the quarantine zavkhoz X., who is serving a long sentence in this colony.

"[name surname]. He is one of the people who signed a formal agreement to cooperate with the colony administration. That, in fact, is why he became the quarantine zavkhoz. The zavkhozy have far more preferential treatment and far better conditions."

[9] Prisoners are held under a strictly regulated regime determined by the court.

[10] For more on the informal hierarchy in Belarusian places of deprivation of liberty, see Torture and Ill-Treatment in Penal Colony No. 17, Shklou. Public Investigation, pp. 26–29: <https://torturesbelarus2020.org/ru/pytki-i-zhestokoe-obra%20d%20enie-v-ispravitelnoj-kolonii-%e2%84%96-17-g-shklova/>.

[11] Blatnye — prisoners holding a high status in the informal prison hierarchy.

Position in this hierarchy directly affects living conditions. Prisoners included in the "activist" group as a rule receive certain privileges — lighter work, a smaller workload, access to additional resources or a more lenient attitude from the administration.

At the same time, those who refused to cooperate or were perceived as "problematic" were systematically subjected to pressure: they are assigned duty shifts more often, monitored more strictly, and the slightest violations are recorded.

"This post [orderly] is a staff position in the colony. They receive a wage for it. Twenty rubles, I think, is what an orderly was getting at the time. They monitor the daily routine, took people to the canteen, to the bathhouse, and elsewhere. There was one responsible for the belongings storage room. And the zavkhoz, who monitored general order in the barracks, allocated sleeping places and laundry slots. They kept the unit running."

"Those were the conditions of detention for the turncoats, if we're speaking in Gulag, Solzhenitsyn terms — they had everything. They could go to the shower and take one every day, and they did. They could go to the sports ground, because they didn't go to work, since they were considered to be in charge. If they are in charge in the unit, they also received, unlike the others, wages..."

"For them it is standard practice to drink tea with the administration, to treat them to sweets and vice versa. Besides that, all sorts of perks are available — improved and long-term visits, constant calls, and so on and so forth. Not to mention that thanks to their position they can obtain practically anything in the colony, even from the list of prohibited items. Not that it's drugs or..."

"On the very lowest rung are the so-called 'vodogrebni,' or as they're called there, 'petukhi.' These are either paedophiles or rapists and so on. They were on the lowest rung of the hierarchy. Then came the political prisoners. Then everyone else in the form of murderers, drug addicts and so on. And then the activists. The activists are the orderlies, the zavkhozy. After the activists come the staff of the colony itself..."

"...we understood that if you start getting into conflict with the zavkhoz, the administration will automatically punish you somehow. There was a case while I was there: the zavkhoz in the canteen... basically he was stealing, pilfering. He short-weighted the ordinary blokes, gave them less butter than they were due. And one of the prisoners who worked there got into an argument with him, and he went and told everyone that the zavkhoz was short-changing everybody."

Low Social Status

"It's no secret that in the personal file, even if a person is transferred or whatever... they drew the letters 'LS' so the cops would understand that this is low status."

Within the structure of the informal hierarchy in the colony, a separate group of prisoners is singled out with so-called "low social status" (LSS). As a rule, it comprises persons convicted under articles connected with sexual offences, or belonging to the LGBTQ+ community.

According to prisoners, however, many managed to buy their way out of "low status" despite having the corresponding article. According to former prisoners, there were five or six prisoners with low social status in their units.

Formally, prisoners with LSS are part of the unit, but their position is a segregated one.

Although it is possible to communicate with them, spending time together with such prisoners and their participation in shared daily life are restricted. Moreover, a mechanism of "status contamination" is in operation.

Belonging to low status is not necessarily accompanied by open violence. As regards attitudes toward people with LSS, opinions in the colony vary, but the majority of witnesses maintain that such prisoners are largely without rights.

"The only thing left of that code is low status. Everything else is simply universal human principles of a social group living in a closed space."

"Low status is what they call 'petukhi.' People who come in for crimes on a sexualized basis."

"No one talks to them. They sit separately in the canteen, [they have] separate beds. They clean [the toilets]. I know at least that in other colonies there were cases where political prisoners were driven to clean toilets. If you go [to clean the toilet], it means you move into that low status. At 'Vitsba' this was low-status work — the eternal toilet duty."

"Their duties include all the dirty work. That is, they always clear the snow in winter, they clean the toilets, they empty the bins, they clean whatever they're told to. If someone spilled something on the floor, if someone was walking with a mug of tea and spilled tea in the corridor in the barracks, then this man will clean it up."

"This person has no right to sit at the common table, cannot eat at the common table. You must not touch his mug or his plate."

"At night they can beat him, for snoring, for example. That is, if some people are allowed to snore, they are not allowed to snore. At night they can give them a thumping, and then look for concealer so they can cover up the bruises, so the administration won't have questions. Absolutely without rights."

"If he gives you a cigarette and you take it from his hands, then you automatically become a 'petukh' as well."

Paradoxically, despite their marginalization, such prisoners may simultaneously be used by the administration as a source of information.

"But the funniest thing about it — I found out by chance — is that all the 'petukhi' in the colonies are informers for the administration. A low-status man told me so himself. There was a Sasha there, he was a 'petukh' in quarantine. And quarantine is a place everyone passes through, and there are only two people permanently there: X., who is the zavkhoz, and alongside him this 'petukh' Sasha who cleans all the bogs..."

The mechanism by which this status is formed deserves separate attention. Inside the colony it is, as a rule, not assigned arbitrarily. This is connected with the existence of stable internal rules which, according to prisoners, are necessary for the functioning of a closed environment where "there are many prisoners and few staff."

"You can't just transfer someone to low status. There have to be grounds for it. Perhaps that happens in colonies where people are held for a second time, but in our colony, where people are inside for the first time, there is nothing like that."

"This foul business is carried out by the SIZO administration: Valadarka, Zhodzina and in other cities. That is, as soon as a person slips up, the local administration lets the so-called blatkomitet know."

In most cases this status is formed at the pre-trial detention stage and is then carried over to the colony.¹²

"...in quarantine they explained how to behave toward people with low social status... so as 'not to create problems for anyone, so that no questions arise about you.' How to behave in the toilet, in the washroom, in the dormitory. There is a definite subculture there, rules of conduct. If you stick to all that, you'll do your time smoothly, no one will raise questions about you..."

As former prisoners note, the key role in determining this status is played by the position of the operational department staff: if the head of the operational department says that this man is to become such, then he is declared as such.

Moreover, the mechanism for assigning low status may be used as an instrument of indirect punishment, including in respect of political prisoners. The administration can assign them work which, in the prison environment, is considered degrading and entails a lowering of informal status — for example, cleaning toilets. Refusal to carry out such an order is treated as a breach of the regime and may entail disciplinary punishment, including placement in a disciplinary cell.

According to the testimony of former prisoners, threats of transfer to "low status" were constantly used by the administration as an instrument of pressure on political prisoners.

"He said: 'Go into "low status," into the "petukhi," go and clean the toilets, then you'll get long-term visits.' This was the operative officer Vladislav Vladimirovich Spiridonov. A young man with a wild hatred of political prisoners, by his own words."

[12] Mikalai Dziadok. Colours of a Parallel World. The Untouchables in the Prison Hierarchy: <https://ru.anarchistlibraries.net/library/nikolaj-dedok-cveta-parallelnogo-mira>.

An additional role in this system is played by prisoners cooperating with the administration. In particular, one of the quarantine zavkhozy regularly threatened political prisoners with transfer to "low status."

"X. worked for the head of the operational department, Golubev. He threatened political prisoners that he would send them to the 'harem,' to 'low status,' to the 'petukhi.' He made all these threats and set-ups with the permission and encouragement of the head of the operational department, Golubev."

POLITICAL PRISONERS

"...they showed us the film 'The Pianist,' Polanski the director. The Jews there had yellow patches on their sleeves. I said: 'The administration... are they all right in the head, or have they lost their minds showing me a film about myself? Showing that we are living under fascism right now!'"

From the testimony of a former prisoner

Among the best-known political prisoners who have passed through PC-3 are Pavel Seviarynets, Mikalai Dziadok, Ihar Losik, Dzmitry Afnahel, Dzmitry Dashkevich, as well as Andrei Dzmitryieu, Maksim Viniarski, Siarhei Piatrukhin and a number of other activists.

According to former prisoners, the proportion of political prisoners in the colony fluctuated in different periods: in the winter of 2022 there were around 7 political prisoners per 100, but by the spring of 2023 their number had grown to roughly 28–30%. On average each unit holds around 25–30% political prisoners, and they are distributed among the units more or less evenly. This dynamic is explained by constant rotation: some prisoners are released and new prisoners convicted under "extremism" articles arrive to take their place.

The most conspicuous marker of political prisoners in the colony is the special distinguishing labels — yellow, and sometimes red, tags on their clothing. Practically every political prisoner has his own preventive registration category depending on the article under which he was convicted.¹³

"A yellow tag meant that the man is on preventive registration. It's not that it applies specifically to political prisoners, but they are simply all on preventive registration. Ordinary prisoners have a white tag. On it is the surname, first name, article, year of birth, start and end of sentence. And for preventive registration the tag is yellow."

"People with terrorism articles came into our camp too. But he is as much a terrorist as I am an extremist: that is, a man protests against military equipment being moved through the territory of Belarus into Ukraine, lays this wire on the railway to stop the traffic. The authorities called him a terrorist."

Political prisoners arrived at the colony in transports, and each such "wave" had its own characteristics.

"They put me on the second registration category as 'inclined toward extremist and other destructive activity.' They read the preamble of the sentence and decided on that basis that I was inclined toward it. In practice I had to add to my report, which I gave at least twice a day, that I am on preventive registration as inclined toward attacking the administration, hostage-taking, extremism and other destructive activity. I also had to state the start of my sentence, the end, the article and who the officer in charge of my registration category is."

"Initially it was people who went out onto the streets: under Article 342, Article 339 'hooliganism,' my Article 368... Article 364, Article 363 'resisting traffic police,' Article 368 is 'insulting the president.' Article 293 is 'participation in, organization of, financing of mass disorder.' And these are open, vivid people, interesting to talk to; you understand that there was an idea. People went out onto the street, they weren't afraid of their own opinion."

[13] For example, preventive registration category 10 was assigned to a person considered, by the colony's standards, to be inclined toward extremism and other destructive activity.

"Then people started coming in under Article 140 — that's 'incitement of hatred on various grounds.' These are the so-called prisoners in the Zeltser case. When the shoot-out happened in a residential flat, they couldn't restrain themselves, their conscience wouldn't take it, and they commented on the case. And they started getting from two to eight years. In some cases they detected a threat to national security in a 'like,' in others in a comment. According to their accounts, there were special experts who gave conclusions, carried out assessments of their psycho-emotional state and said they were guilty. Very many people are involved in this system, the system of punishing and exterminating people."

Yellow tags bring their wearers additional work, deprivations and control. Prisoners with such labels have to work on Saturdays, when everyone else has a day off, or to stay on working longer if they had previously been on the second shift. There are additional checks for them — the so-called roll call — and they are also granted fewer calls, visits and deliveries. On top of this there are additional everyday inconveniences that are unwritten rules in the colony: a sleeping place on the upper bunk, bags in the kisharka only on the top shelf.

Political prisoners were systematically restricted in rights enjoyed by prisoners convicted under ordinary criminal articles.¹⁴ They were forbidden to attend the weightlifting gym, the literary club, the vocational training college attached to the colony and many other facilities and events. Quotas also existed for political prisoners' participation in certain competitions. In the library, whose main users were political prisoners, books in Belarusian and foreign languages were confiscated.

Political prisoners in PC-3 were systematically denied access to the incentives that formally existed for all prisoners. The gap was particularly obvious in situations where a political prisoner's work or participation brought his unit a result in sporting events, but the reward went to prisoners more loyal to the administration. At best, the political prisoner was promised unofficial protection at his next violation.

"Political prisoners weren't given a pass to the proper gym. The other prisoners got them and went and trained. No logical answer: 'What, haven't you seen what tag you've got? Yellow!'"

"To get into the sports ground you need a pass. And no one was given passes, only those working and cooperating with the regime."

"There was also an analogue of the game 'What? Where? When?' Amusingly, at some point only BChB people started taking part in that game, and an internal order was issued saying that the team captain must not be a BChB person, but someone with a white tag. Then they said it had to be half and half — half with white tags, half BChB people."

[14] Persons convicted under ordinary criminal articles, that is, for offences unconnected with politically motivated prosecution (theft, fraud, robbery, causing bodily harm, drug offences and the like).

"So we go and play basketball. I wreck my knees there. We win. And then the PE instructor writes in the zavrkhov and some orderly or other, claiming they were on the team. And the unit officer gives them extra visits with their wives. You sit there waiting for them to give you a seven-minute call twice a month, and they go off every month for three days into the arms of their wives and children."

The heightened attention to political prisoners is expressed in constant checks: staff come with searches for no apparent reason, inspect bedside lockers and personal belongings, and try to find any formal violations. Even trivial pretexts become grounds for drawing up disciplinary reports. This practice has a specific purpose — to give the political prisoner the status of "malicious violator." Three disciplinary penalties are enough for a person to fall into this category.

"I came into the zone and was one of the first political prisoners. Apart from me there were maybe four or five people. Very intense attention on all of us. If you have three violations, you are considered a malicious violator. They can buy in the shop for two base units. That's 60-odd rubles, that's no money at all..."

"They always lined up the preventive registration men at the front of the unit. All movements to the canteen, from the canteen, around the colony grounds, are done by unit, five to a row. And there was always heightened attention on us. If you fell behind in the canteen, for instance, you stand out, because you have a yellow tag while everyone behind you has only white tags. That too can become a reason for them to write you up for a violation."

These violations have particular significance in the context of early conditional release. An unwritten instruction is in force with regard to political prisoners not to allow them parole. To this end, PC-3 uses the practice of deliberately accumulating penalties. "Sometimes they come and say outright: give us a violation," notes a former prisoner. As a result prisoners face a choice: either to "supply" a minor violation themselves and reduce the pressure for a time, or to face harsher consequences — several penalties recorded in succession followed by placement in a disciplinary cell (SHIZO) or transfer to cell-type premises (PKT).

According to prisoners, the administration deliberately obstructs any contact between political prisoners. Ordinary prisoners also kept their distance from political prisoners — talking to them could become grounds for punishment.

"In quarantine these interviews took place. It was stated there that there were to be no political slogans, that we were not to gather, not to talk to one another. If you don't want problems, try to talk less to those lads. That was when more well-known figures like Maksim Znak started coming in. I'll say honestly, many people disappointed me, because they were afraid of those threats."

"So, even having a cup of tea together, talking about something... People were immediately moved to different barracks, some were thrown into the punishment cell. All of that was under the strictest prohibition. Ordinary prisoners shunned us, we were not to be talked to."

PROVOCATIONS AND "STUKACHESTVO" (INFORMING)

"You are constantly in plain view. And that presses on you too. It presses because you understand that you cannot share your story, your information, with anyone, because in 99% of cases that information will be used against you. It will be used so that they can save themselves: inform on someone, and then you'll get less attention."

From the testimony of a former prisoner

The colony administration deliberately uses some prisoners as informants (stukachi). As a rule, such people act on the instructions of operative officers: they provoke political prisoners into breaches of the regime, which then serve as grounds for disciplinary penalties. Beyond the direct pressure on a specific individual, this creates a general atmosphere of mutual distrust in the facility, in which every prisoner suspects his neighbour of informing.

The informers help representatives of the administration find out exactly what relationships exist between prisoners, what their weaknesses are, and what violations they are committing.

PC-3 staff deliberately create conditions for particular prisoners (including those convicted under political articles) in which they are forced to agree to cooperate with the administration. By putting pressure on a specific individual, staff obtain his agreement to inform on other prisoners. Threats, blackmail and the arbitrary imposition of disciplinary penalties are used for this purpose.

A separate line of activity is the recruitment of prisoners to spy specifically on political prisoners. Cooperation did not always mean the prisoner's transfer into the "activist" group and could consist only in occasional provision of information. Political prisoners were also recruited as informers.

"There are loads of different foreigners there. And that's why the zone is such a showcase... They usually bring all the informers there. And if you said something somewhere, it will definitely reach the person you would least want it to reach."

"Denunciations flourish in PC-3. Prisoners cooperate with the administration in exchange for certain perks; they turn people in, they inform, they denounce their own. Well, not their own, of course — it's every man for himself there. But even so, we all suffered from the regime. And there are people whom everyone knows are cooperating with the administration and reporting to the operative officers. In exchange they simply don't go to the industrial area, or they have a ceramic or glass cup instead of a plastic one. An electric kettle instead of an immersion heater..."

"I understood why this was being done. Because they really can lock a man up in SHIZO and keep him there as long as they like. And if it's cold, they can give you a cell that will freeze your kidneys off, and then what? I was afraid of that, I don't hide that I was specifically afraid of SHIZO."

"Look, here's the thing. The picking-off of BChB people isn't going to stop. You don't want to keep going to SHIZO, do you? What the f do you need those problems for?" — he threatened me. He said I wouldn't get out from under the closed prison: 'You need to sign a cooperation agreement with the administration. If you don't do that, mate, you know yourself, the picking-off won't stop, you'll be f*ed.'"*

*"Operative officer Vladislav Vladimirovich Spiridonov pulled me aside at the checkpoint. It was a one-to-one conversation. I signed the papers. He said I'd be f***ed if I told anyone, that it's a state secret.' These were papers about informing on the cops. Afterwards I told the lads: listen, here's the thing, they told me to sign this thing, so that you don't worry... He said: 'I can call you in once every couple of months.' Only on BChB matters, as I understood it, meaning all the political prisoners in the zone. He also said he was interested in information about those planning to join the Kastus Kalinoŭski Regiment on their release."*

Operative officers and other staff form their own networks of informers.

Prisoners with long sentences, as a rule for murder or drug trafficking, and with no support from relatives and friends outside, are often used as informers. Informers receive "bonuses" for their services: for example, being excused duty shifts, extra deliveries and visits.

"Informing" was practiced not only by prisoners but also by colony staff not connected with operational or regime work — medical personnel were often drawn into denunciation as well.

The administration creates conditions for provocations of physical violence among prisoners, with the subsequent prosecution of the prisoner involved.

Former law enforcement officers, former judges and officials frequently became informers.

"Because every even slightly significant cop in the zone has his own informant. A person who informs and carries out his orders. Even the most insignificant one."

"Mostly it's drug articles, murder. I think that's because their sentences are very long, from ten years, and the administration treats these people more favourably, since they have a long time to serve anyway. Some improvements for them. I treat everyone decently and I understand them as human beings, that they've been sitting there for God knows how long. Probably they had no choice, if they behaved that way."

"The psychologist would come and tell people news about Ukraine's successes in the war. People listened, they liked it, and he observed the reaction, who reacted how. He made notes for himself."

"And that's why they support this position of the administration, to squeeze somewhere, to make life hard for political prisoners; they called everyone charged under political articles, everyone with an extremism registration category, either 'BChB people' or 'zmagary.' And in principle you could even say that the administration made life harder for people like me through their hands as well."

"There are special people among the prisoners whom the administration instructs to provoke conflicts. And so they go around provoking conflicts. So you accordingly have a choice — either just to run off so as not to talk to him, or to get into it with him, so to speak, and throw a few punches. Well, with the consequences that follow."

"Our unit was probably half former cops or KGB officers, a couple of military men, prosecution people, judges. That was the sort of population. That's why our unit's nickname was 'the District Department of Internal Affairs.'"

PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL VIOLENCE AGAINST PRISONERS

"Is it prison everywhere? Whatever it may be — Akrestsina, Zhodzina, Vitsebsk SIZO No. 2, PC-3, it doesn't matter. And they are constantly doing you some kind of underhand dirty trick so that you feel bad there. And from the point of view of the law you can prove nothing, and you cannot record anything — you have no cameras — and no one will be able to take it down from your words and confirm what you say."

From the testimony of a former prisoner

The testimony of former prisoners indicates that physical and psychological violence in PC-3 was used as part of a system of pressure and control. This concerns not only individual instances of beatings, but also the constant threat of the use of force. Such treatment could be used for punishment, for suppressing complaints, for coercing compliance with the administration's demands, or as a demonstration of power over prisoners.

In addition to fabricated violations, surveillance and denunciations against prisoners, staff systematically threaten them with transfer to "low status," with the opening of new criminal cases and the extension of their sentence, and with violence against their relatives or their arrest.

"And we gathered everyone, we came out against it. That lad X. in particular came out against that orderly. And we asked everyone to vote, who is for him and who is against. Five people raised their hands for him, and against him, accordingly, they didn't even bother raising them, there were over a hundred... The administration takes him from the industrial area and beats him half to death. They beat him there, he wet himself, soiled himself. They simply beat him half to death with batons in the duty room."

"And the second lad involved they simply pulped, and then held him for 60 days in SHIZO. The head of the colony was there, all the deputy heads of the colony and all the operational staff [this refers to events that took place in October 2023]. That is, you got the feeling that they had a kind of collective complicity there. It was insane — each of them came up and struck at least a few blows. Some tried particularly hard. Then they started hitting with batons. They beat you on the buttocks with batons with all their strength until those muscles relax, all your sphincters, your bladder..."

"A prisoner said that he had signed papers as an unlawfully convicted person. Fedchenko was there, he ordered special means to be used. After that [the name is withheld for reasons of confidentiality and safety] was severely beaten and thrown into SHIZO for 27 days. He sat there alone and was taken to the shower alone so that others would not see the bruises. Later his bruises faded and they let him out. He came out with his hands shaking. The man became completely withdrawn when he came out."

"And then I write from dictation that, on the material, on the substance of the questions put to me, I explain that yes, I really was asleep at such-and-such a time, lying on the floor, because I had a headache and was feeling unwell. I admit my guilt, I repent of the violation. And I write these words and I understand that I am doing it out of animal fear, because thoughts come over me that I might not get out of here."

"They threatened me severely. I think I said something they didn't like, and it reached them. An operative officer summoned me to his office. This was in August 2022. He locked the door from the inside, began shouting and threatening: 'If you keep talking that s, I'll beat you with a baton personally. In a proper zone you'd have been fed long ago, and I'd f** you myself.' He started coming out with that kind of thing. It was very unpleasant for me, it stuck in my memory. Some time after that conversation he promised me: 'I'll lock you up in SHIZO, you'll sit there and you won't get out.' I thought, well, great. I didn't have long left to serve and I thought, go ahead, lock me up. In the end I did 17 days and came out. Then they seemed to calm down and that was that. Honestly, remembering it now, my hands are shaking."*

"VIOLATIONS" AND PUNISHMENTS

"Every day is stress. Every day there are conflict situations over everyday matters. People... boorish communication. Such unhealthy egoism, an indifferent attitude toward one's neighbours. It all leaves its mark, it all leaves negative memories. But over time you get used to it. A person gets used to everything. But you don't get used to stress. Stress is constant. And fear that another violation will land on you, that they'll come and search your bag. And every bag is supposed to have an inventory. If the inventory doesn't match the contents of the bag, that is a violation. And a violation may mean loss of a short visit, of a long visit. A violation may mean loss of a delivery, or even the punishment cell."

From the testimony of a former prisoner

Article 112 of the Penal Enforcement Code of the Republic of Belarus establishes the list of punishments applied for breaching the established order of serving a sentence.¹⁵ The concept of "breach of the order of serving a sentence" is not itself defined in legislation, so the administration of the correctional facility interprets this provision at its own discretion.

One of the frequent violations for which prisoners were punished is failing to greet a representative of the administration. This practice was often taken to the point of absurdity: prisoners were obliged to greet the same staff member 30 to 50 times a day, stating their name, status and other information prescribed by the rules.

"If a man needed to be put in the disciplinary cell very quickly, additional cleaning was assigned and the man was sent to clean the toilets. Mostly everyone refused. And then another cleaning job, emptying the bins. They refused that too. That's it, the man goes to the disciplinary cell. What other punishments are there? Well, the lightest is a reprimand, then additional cleaning. Then the harsher ones — loss of an extra parcel or delivery, loss of a short visit, loss of a long visit, and then the disciplinary cell, the punishment cell."

Disciplinary reports on violations are considered by a commission composed of members of the colony administration headed by its chief. Prisoners call the commission session the "christening." It is conducted as a formality; no one tries to establish whether the violation actually took place or to assess its consequences — the prisoner is simply given whatever penalty suits the administration at that moment.

"For that violation he is summoned to the head of the zone. And the head of the zone with the political officer, over this violation... Imagine, two colonels sitting there, saying in all seriousness that eggs were found in your bedside locker. And, imagine, you took that food out of the canteen. It's like in old Soviet... in the old days, a tale about some terrible business, when in fact the whole thing isn't worth a damn."

It can be said with confidence that all political prisoners were subjected to disciplinary penalties, and that the administration assigned the majority of them the status of "malicious violator of the established order of serving a sentence."

"I got SHIZO for the second, third and fourth violations. For slippers, then twice for sleeping. And there was SHIZO one more time for swearing, as they put it. For saying: 'You bastards, you've taken my family from me.' Then I got off with what they call the 101 — that's overtime work sweeping the parade ground outside, an allocated section."

[15] For more on the system of disciplinary penalties, see the investigation *Torture and Ill-Treatment in Penal Colony No. 17, Shklou*, pp. 38–40: <https://torturesbelarus2020.org/ru/pytki-i-zhestokoe-obra%dt1%89enie-v-ispravitelnoj-kolonii-%e2%84%96-17-g-shklova/>

"Malicious violators. Three violations. Then you go to the commission and receive the status of malicious violator. While on general regime, you automatically receive enhanced-regime conditions of detention. That means fewer parcels, packets, visits, calls, video calls. It's simply that if someone doesn't like you, you can be given malicious violator status. Or if you don't admit guilt for a long time, that too can be a reason for receiving malicious violator status."

Penalties frequently applied to political prisoners include the loss of visits (including visits already approved, of which relatives had been notified in advance), the loss of the right to a delivery, and the assignment of extra duty shifts. Since it is not prescribed in the regulations which punishment may be applied for which violation, the decision on punishment in practice depends largely and exclusively on the discretion of the administration staff member. For the slightest infraction — an unfastened button, invented stubble and other contrived pretexts — a person can lose a visit with his family that both the prisoner and his relatives may have been awaiting for a whole year.

Political prisoners are also regularly subjected to checks of the inventories of their personal belongings and food, in which "violations" are almost always found. This is because food is naturally consumed and its quantity is constantly changing, while prisoners have no real possibility of weighing it precisely and maintaining compliance with the formal accounting requirements.

"And I emphasize that all the political prisoners are sitting there with violations. I said this to the press and I say it again. The unit officer calls you in and says: 'Choose: either you were late for exercises, or you smoked in an unauthorized place.' He says that in any case you have to have a violation, so choose, so I don't have to make one up for you."

"I had seven violations in all. There were also violations for not saying hello, for the inventory in my bag not matching. Pillow... sleeping... sleeping... pillow... slippers... sleeping... sleeping... not saying hello... swearing... not meeting the quota in the industrial area..."

Punishment by extra duty shifts does not look too onerous, but such shifts are often used by the administration as a means of subsequently placing a prisoner in SHIZO. A prisoner may be ordered to clean the toilet or take out the rubbish, faced with a choice between doing work that lowers his "status" and disciplinary punishment in the form of SHIZO.

"And if you commit violations, it means you have not embarked on the path of correction. If you have not embarked on the path of correction, then you get no parole, no change of regime, and again, if you apply for clemency, the same 'clemency.' Even if you admit guilt, the reference is still written by the administration. The administration will write: 'Is a violator, has not embarked on the path of correction.'"

"SHIZO is a measure of last resort. You understand that, don't you? And there, initially, they may simply issue a warning. But then off it went — loss of calls, loss of some short visit, loss of a long visit. That is, violations constantly, constantly, constantly, and you arrive at SHIZO. And after that, once they have deprived you of everything — SHIZO again."



SHIZO AND PKT

"SHIZO was the hardest stage of imprisonment. If you divide up that year and a half, it was easier at the very beginning. With every day and month the conditions grew harsher, and the final point was a month and a half in SHIZO in solitude, alone with my thoughts. Cold, hunger — that was the hardest thing and it shaped how I assess what happened."

From the testimony of a former prisoner

In our investigations we have repeatedly described the conditions of detention in SHIZO in various colonies across the country.¹⁶ The SHIZO cells there constitute inhuman conditions. PC-3 is no exception.

The maximum term in SHIZO is 15 days; however, when a person is placed there a "carousel" of violations is often set in motion, in which new violations are recorded as soon as one term ends. At a certain point a person even stops being taken to the commission, being merely notified of a new term of detention. As a result of this practice, time in SHIZO can in effect stretch into months.

When placing prisoners in SHIZO, PC-3 staff deliberately aggravated their situation by creating conditions that were openly of a torturous character — restricted food, confinement in a cold room, lack of fresh air, and the impossibility of exercise or of any communication with the outside world and with other prisoners.

"If it's PKT, you can read, you can even spend money at the shop, but here there's no reading, no writing, nothing. And they didn't give me my glasses, even though I had glasses with me, I always have glasses. Although even if you had glasses here, what would you read, when they don't give you books, they don't give you anything. For smokers it is a terrible hell, because smoking isn't allowed either. And people who smoke have nicotine withdrawal for the first three or four days, maybe five."

"In SHIZO there is no bedding, you have to sleep on bare boards. The bunk is edged with metal angle, you have to put something under your knee; your legs and shoulders go numb. Instead of a pillow I had toilet paper, which I rationed over a month and a half, because the smaller it got, the harder it was to sleep. Your head ended up in an uncomfortable position. During the day I used the towel as a scarf, and at night as a sheet. The rag that lay at the entrance to the cell I used as a mattress — I put it under my side, because the boards were cold enough, even if they weren't metal."

"To get warm you had to get up at night and do physical exercises. It was quite hard in terms of physical stability. I lost quite a lot of weight then, and the scales now show a definite loss of weight because of the exercises, because the food they give there is empty, and there are no deliveries or parcels. You are constantly cold and hungry, it is very hard."

"And those who are halfway through their term, many of them had time added. Or they come up: 'It's not been cleaned. And a prisoner is supposed to clean his cell. It's not been cleaned, or the report was wrong.' And they add another disciplinary report, another 10 days. After 10 days another report, another 10 days."

"If you're in the barracks, you can go at any time, make yourself tea in your free time, make a sandwich, cut off a bit of lard here and there, eat a piece with onion. In the end, you'll never go hungry in the barracks. But there — only on the standard ration. And the people who did 30, 40, 60 days when I was in the unit, they simply came out and I didn't recognize them. Thirty days on the standard ration — you can see it straight away, they lose weight instantly when they can't eat their own food."

[16] For more on the system of disciplinary penalties, see the investigation *Torture and Ill-Treatment in Penal Colony No. 17, Shklou*, pp. 41–43: <https://torturesbelarus2020.org/ru/pytki-i-zhestokoe-obra%20d1%8genie-v-ispravitelnoj-kolonii-%e2%84%96-17-g-shklou/>.

Confinement of a prisoner in SHIZO creates ideal conditions for physical and psychological violence: access for witnesses and the possibility of receiving timely assistance in such premises are extremely limited. A widespread practice is placing a person in SHIZO after a beating by colony staff, and holding him there until the external traces of the possible injuries disappear.

The main differences between PKT and SHIZO are

the presence of bedding;
the possibility of making purchases in the shop from a limited range up to the value of one base unit per month; daily exercise; and the possibility of keeping personal belongings. The maximum term of detention in PKT is 6 months.

"When I came out beyond that red house faced in red brick, they called it 'the Kremlin,' my head spun from the open space, from the green of the grass and the trees, from the blue of the sky. My head genuinely spun."

"Total solitude presses on you. Because of the large number of days, at a certain point you start turning the same thoughts over and over in your head. And in the end you have to occupy yourself with something silly. I started feeding a spider with midges, writing on the wall the menu they brought each day: porridges, soups. I really did have to occupy myself with nonsense. If you're not walking from corner to corner or doing physical exercises, you're just doing something pointless."

"You need to recover your strength after that year and a half, especially the last month and a half in SHIZO, when both your physical and your psychological condition were broken. That's because you are constantly alone there, with nothing to do. You could go out of your mind at some point..."

"The conditions of detention there are the same as in the SIZO. A cell for several people. You are there with your belongings, exercise once a day for half an hour. They take you out for calls, the library is allowed, you write an application and they bring you... The conditions of detention are essentially like the SIZO."

"They leave you only your underwear, pants, a vest, they give you pyjamas and trousers like that. On the back of the pyjamas is written 'Punishment Cell.' The letters are large, like the way the police have 'Police' written, and in SHIZO it says 'Punishment Cell.' And that's it, you are there with those things. They don't take you out. I emphasize: they don't take you out for exercise."

**MEDICAL CARE: "HOWEVER MUCH
HEALTH YOU HAVE, THAT'S HOW
MUCH YOU CAN TAKE"**

"The only people they took out to doctors on the outside were people who had cancer, who had some kind of operations. Basically, those in a pre-death state."

From the testimony of a former prisoner

The medical unit at "Vitsba-3" gives the impression of an ordinary polyclinic. There is a laboratory capable of carrying out tests, as well as an X-ray room fitted with modern equipment, and the wards have been decently refurbished. Consultations are given by general practitioners and a psychotherapist, several nurses are on staff, and there is a separate dental surgery. Formally it is assumed that any prisoner whose health deteriorates or who has chronic conditions may seek medical assistance.

Provision of Medical Care in PC-3

Access to medical care in the colony is not a guaranteed right. The possibility of obtaining an examination, treatment or even minimal relief of one's condition depends not only on medical indications but on administrative decisions. In the case of political prisoners this is often aggravated by additional restrictions and a higher risk of being denied timely or adequate medical care.

"I emphasize, with the political prisoners it is a general instruction — no sick leave for any political prisoner, no exemption from work."

"Ask anyone at all from PC-3, they will all confirm that the medical unit there is simply awful. They genuinely don't help at all, don't treat you when a person is genuinely in a bad way. Medical care is not provided, or is provided incompetently. Here's an analgin tablet, off you go."

"It depends a lot on which doctor you get. In my case it was like this: I developed haemorrhoids. And the doctor who saw me said: 'Well, nothing terrible. Go to work, you'll sit on a stool, you'll pull your wires there.' I said: 'I can't stand or sit, do you understand?' He says: 'No, off you go.' There were also cases where people were sent to the industrial area with a temperature of 39."

You had to fight for your health. Access to treatment depended not so much on medical necessity as on the prisoner's own persistence. For example, one prisoner was refused even vitamins, drops and eye solutions, and only after endless pleas for help did he manage to secure a transfer for examination.

Obtaining even already-approved medication is organized in the most inconvenient way possible. If a prisoner was sent vitamins or medicines, he could not simply receive them and take them as prescribed. He had to go through a multi-stage approval procedure involving several medical staff before gaining access to the prescribed drugs. Then prisoners were forced to queue daily to receive strictly measured portions, one tablet or one vitamin at a time. This system turned treatment into a daily bureaucratic procedure and in effect discouraged people from seeking help.

"That's why I tried to go there as little as possible. Even when you've had your own vitamins prescribed and you have everything: the permit, they've been sent to you... To get them, you first have to go to the senior nurse, then to another nurse, and then they issue them through the kiosk in the canteen. And only one tablet, one vitamin a day, after queueing, you collect it."

Access to specialists and medical care outside the colony. A neurologist, cardiologist, ophthalmologist, otolaryngologist and other specialists, according to witnesses, came to the colony once every few months. To get in to see them, a prisoner had to submit an application and wait to be included on the corresponding list. He did not know when the doctor he needed would come, whether the doctor would come at all during his imprisonment, or whether there would be any possibility of getting an appointment.

"If you needed specialists of the kind of neurologists, cardiologists, ophthalmologists and ENT doctors, they came once every few months. That is, you write an application, they put you on a list, and you have no idea when he might come or whether he might not come at all while you're inside."

Individual testimonies point to complete disregard for prisoners' serious conditions. For instance, the experts learned of a case in which an elderly prisoner with a disintegrating hip joint received no medical care for many years despite the obvious deterioration of his condition.

"Over a year his leg shortened by several centimetres, because his hip joint is disintegrating, and he is given no treatment. He fought to get an examination. He got a referral for examination, waited for that examination, and then he was told: 'Your examination has taken place, everything is fine with you.' Even though he had not been taken anywhere, examined anywhere, and nothing whatsoever had happened."

Another former prisoner described a stroke he suffered in PC-3 and how the colony's medics responded to this condition. Instead of an emergency response to a life-threatening condition, he was sent back to the barracks. Only when the patient developed acute neurological consequences — in particular, when his face became deformed — did the doctors begin to take action.

Even despite the obvious presence of a problem, the head of the medical unit instructed the neurologist who had come from Vitsebsk not to record his actual diagnosis in his medical record.

"When I had my stroke, they only put me in the medical unit on the fourth or fifth day. I was carried there. From the medical unit they sent me away with a stroke, they said there was nothing serious. Then they got worried, because part of my face was completely paralysed again. There were already consequences, and no one called an ambulance or anything."

"A doctor came to look at me, a neurologist. They took me to the ground floor and stood me sideways against the wall, because I couldn't stand properly, and the door happened to be on that side. They stood me sideways against the wall so I could wait until the head of the medical unit called me in; the neurologist was with him at that moment. He [the head of the medical unit] did not know that I was standing behind that door, and I heard his words: 'So you understand, don't write anything.'"

Access to medical care outside the colony is possible, but is accompanied by a cruel and humiliating transfer procedure. Prisoners were taken to the city hospital only in extreme cases, where care already required urgent intervention outside the facility: for appendicitis, for instance, or kidney stones.

Telling in this respect is the description of an ophthalmological examination carried out on a prisoner in a city medical facility in handcuffs. At his appointment in the city polyclinic he felt humiliated.

Dental care in this colony effectively amounts to extracting the diseased tooth. Waiting for treatment stretches into months. One prisoner said that in two years the dentist could not find the opportunity even to give him a basic examination.

"We had a lad who was taken out to have his appendix removed. There was also a case with kidney stones. When political prisoners were taken out to the city hospital, convoy guards come — you are taken under special convoy. Political prisoners were put in shackles on their hands and feet, like in American films, and you are taken to the hospital in the city on a chain attached to a convoy guard."

"They didn't take off the handcuffs... they sat me down at the apparatus still on the chain. The doctor who saw me behaved rudely, insolently. For some reason the examination went very quickly. They practically jabbed that device they use to look at the fundus into my eyes. The examination went very quickly, she said: 'I can't see anything.' And she gave an opinion that everything was fine with my eyes."

"I tried to save that tooth, and on leaving quarantine the first thing I did was go and put my name down for the dentist, and then I waited about a month. She [the doctor] says: 'People sit here and wait ten months. You can wait some more.' And so I tried several more times to get an appointment with her, and I wasn't called. That tooth of mine broke off in pieces."

"X., also a political prisoner, had a problem where half his face swelled up. I don't know what from, whether something with a tooth, but it looked very bad. The dentist there is awful; she can't do anything at all, she can't even pull a tooth properly, let alone treat one. She couldn't help him. I had constant problems with my teeth there, my teeth hurt very badly, I went to the doctor very often. I received no proper care there. In some respects they may even have made my teeth worse."

Many endure toothache for years, preferring to preserve what remains of their teeth in whatever form, hoping to have them treated after release. However, the absence of professional dental care and prosthetics in the colony means that prisoners end up with no teeth at all.

"I understood that teeth could still be treated. There, if you have a long sentence, someone who is already left with nothing but gums, who has had everything pulled out... And what then? Ask your relatives for a blender? And how are you supposed to chew afterwards?"

"We had a case. She [the dentist] pulled out two healthy teeth before pulling out the diseased one. She made a mistake once. It was a woman doctor. The second time, while extracting, she broke a healthy tooth. She had to pull out the healthy one, and only then got to the diseased one. That's the kind of care it was. And on top of that, quite apart from her simply being rude, you couldn't get any adequate care from her. In other words, it is better not to go to the doctor."

Many former prisoners were in the colony during the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of the shortage of places in the infirmary, the psychiatric ward's premises had to be used for the sick, and the patients held there were in turn moved to cell-type premises.

"They sent them off to the PKT altogether, to the cell-type premises. Whoever was lucky got a bed, whoever wasn't got the floor. And the psychiatric ward was given over to COVID patients."

The testimony of former prisoners indicates that during the pandemic medical care in the colony was often reduced to minimal and formal measures. Even with a high temperature and a serious condition, treatment might be limited to a few drugs, a drip, and a requirement to monitor one's own temperature.

"In 2021 they kept saying: 'There's no COVID, there's no COVID.' And then people started... fainting right there at lineup. A bloke is just standing there — bang, down he goes. They started taking them to the medical unit first. The medical unit ran out of places. There aren't many places there. The administration started taking them to SHIZO."

At the same time the condition of the sick was not properly monitored: oxygen saturation was not measured, no full examination was carried out, and the risks of respiratory failure and possible deterioration were not assessed. According to witnesses, medical staff often did not respond to complaints, and their visits were perceived more as a formal check than as an attempt to provide the necessary help.

"She didn't listen to my breathing, didn't take my blood pressure... If I had chills, then she'd say to cover myself with a blanket. It seemed to me that for her this was more of a routine exercise than a desire to help and provide real assistance. Because afterwards that same Violetta said to me: 'I would have believed you, but...' And hearing that 'I would have believed you' from a doctor is not great."

Many were not even admitted to the infirmary when ill; people treated themselves with tablets brought to them in the barracks by the orderlies.

According to former prisoners, vaccination in the colony was in effect compulsory.

The administration linked access to long-term visits to having been vaccinated: prisoners who did not get vaccinated risked losing the possibility of meeting their loved ones. Repeat vaccination was also offered later, including at the end of 2022.

Chronic illnesses — diabetes, HIV. According to witnesses, prisoners underwent fluorography regularly and compulsorily in order to prevent the spread of tuberculosis. Against that background, individual chronic illnesses such as diabetes turned out to be secondary. Illnesses dangerous primarily to the prisoner himself did not attract the same attention from the administration and the doctors.

Former prisoners recall that there were **many people with HIV** in the colony. According to them, however, they went to the industrial area along with everyone else, even though work involving sharp and cutting objects may carry additional risks, both for the prisoners themselves and for those around them.

"They gave me one antibiotic and told me to take my temperature every day. When I came round (consciousness came and went), I had a temperature of as much as 39.8. When I recorded such a temperature and lay with it for 18 days, I understood: if a ventilator had been needed there — and there simply wasn't one — I would have burned up from lack of oxygen. No one measured my saturation, no one carried out those procedures on me. The only salvation was that on the first day they put me on a drip."

"They gave a voluntary-compulsory COVID vaccination. When I was ill, they issued... again, at first they issued them to me, and then the orderlies went round and were issued the tablets for me. And a couple of times they gave me nose drops."

"Oh, it was bad... temperature, runny nose, the snot streaming constantly. They gave two or three ibuprofen tablets for a day. It wasn't enough, so I took half a tablet at a time. When it was really bad — a whole one. And on top of that you're outdoors all the time. So for me, say, in the morning it's more or less all right, I took a tablet at night. You wake up in the morning, seem better, an hour outside — the snot is streaming again, the temperature is rising again."

"The administration there sets conditions: if you have no vaccination, you get no long-term visits. Everything is compulsory. When my term was coming to an end, they also offered repeat vaccinations. That was at the end of 2022."

"In all my time in the camp I couldn't even get my sugar level measured. Not once did they take a reading, even though I have diabetes and I need to regulate it daily to know whether to increase the dose of medication or not. There I was deprived of all that — there was no possibility of monitoring my blood glucose level."

"They are more afraid of tuberculosis, so every six months there without fail, the unit officer would practically line us up: who hasn't had their fluorography? Right, if you don't have your fluorography today, you'll go to SHIZO. They were mainly concerned about mass illnesses. Ones that are transmitted. But my personal diabetes is my personal diabetes, that didn't interest them."

Holding Persons with Disabilities, Mental Disorders and Serious Health Conditions in the Colony

According to former prisoners in PC-3, the colony is in effect a place where convicted persons with disabilities and mental impairments are held who, by virtue of their condition, require protection, care and specialized treatment. These people are in an environment where they are especially vulnerable and defenceless.

"There were people with disabilities in practically every unit. Some even got around on those walking frames, you know. One was blind. He was led about, he couldn't see anything at all. The man must have been getting on for 70. There were mentally abnormal people, you understand, with clearly expressed mental disorders."

The most striking example is the story of Dzmitry Hopta, a political prisoner with a chromosomal condition and developmental delay. He could not fully control his physiological processes, experienced serious everyday difficulties and needed constant help. Yet according to witnesses there was no official system of care for him. Another prisoner took on caring for him on his own initiative, because the situation had become intolerable and Dzmitry himself risked becoming an object of violence, humiliation and exploitation by other prisoners.

"It was hard just to watch the attitude toward him from the inmates. Not even from the administration. The administration, on the contrary, didn't touch him and was glad that he had a guardian. Because I looked after him. And I made sure they didn't eat his food or steal from him there. Although there were still people who did that."

The Psychiatric Hospital

A psychiatric hospital is located on the grounds of "Vitsba-3," to which prisoner-patients are brought from all over Belarus.

"We learned a lot of information from other zones and from the world in general thanks to the fact that there was a psychiatric hospital on the grounds of the zone. It is the only psychiatric hospital to which inmates were brought from other colonies."

"There was a case where someone arrived who had 'lost the plot.' They took him away immediately. Two hours later they came for him from the hospital. He was brought from 'Navinki'¹⁷ or somewhere. He was sent straight here into some special block or other."

Former prisoners' accounts also contain assertions of beatings and the use of psychotropic drugs on prisoners with mental health problems.

"...they beat them, they jab them. I mean they jab them with injections, with psychotropic drugs. It is frightening when you see it. Because they hold people with disabilities there, they don't release them, they keep them on with further terms. You cannot hold such people there. If a person has mental disorders, like that Hopta, how can you keep him there at all?"

The testimony indicates that not only people with genuine mental illness but also those who were mentally healthy could be placed there. Information about this medical facility on the territory of the colony has already appeared in the media. One prisoner describes it as a place where people are deliberately broken. According to him, he saw strong, physically powerful men break down and start to cry. "They turn them into mentally ill people," he says, emphasizing that he observed this personally and heard it from others.¹⁸

Medical Consequences of Imprisonment in PC-3

"A person doesn't fully know his own body. I was lucky in the sense that I only served two years. But now I think, for example, of L., who was handed 16 years — he has probably lost his health irreversibly."

From the accounts of former inmates it can be concluded that the health consequences of imprisonment in PC-3 are not reducible to any single injury or diagnosis. As a rule this concerns accumulated physical and psychosomatic damage that manifested during their time in the colony, where prisoners did not receive proper treatment, and continued after release. Prisoners with long sentences prove particularly vulnerable, for whom the absence of medical care leads to irreversible health consequences.

Thus, one former prisoner describes a series of changes in his body: a sharp weight loss of 30 kilograms, signs of dehydration, problems with his knees, and impairment of the vestibular apparatus.

[17] Navinki" is the everyday name for the Republican Scientific and Practical Centre for Mental Health near Minsk.

[18] The story of former political prisoner Siarhei Sabaleuski, who suffered a stroke in the colony and was released with cancer: <https://ru.belsat.eu/81111912/istoriya-byvshego-zaklyuchennogo-vitby-sergeya-sobolevskogo-kotoryj-perezhil-na-zone-insult-i-vyshel-s-onkologiej>.

"...standard illnesses. The vestibular apparatus is impaired, because for three years you go everywhere on foot, and then you get into public transport and you feel travel-sick. But for those who have been inside a long time, that's a standard thing. My body was dehydrated. You constantly drink tea, coffee there... And my knees hurt."

He also describes more serious medical consequences. He developed psoriasis on a nervous basis. Sores became inflamed across his body, accompanied by severe itching and scratching until it bled. He developed stomach pain, periodic heartburn, *Helicobacter pylori* infection and a gastrointestinal disorder. The same former political prisoner also developed varicose veins in the colony, as a result of which he required urgent surgery to remove veins from his legs after release.

For another witness the consequences of imprisonment manifested primarily through the development of sarcoidosis,¹⁹ as well as a sharp deterioration in the condition of his teeth. He himself connects these changes with stress.

"Because of stress, apparently, problems with my teeth appeared. That is, before that all my teeth were my own, completely healthy; I had never in my life been to a dentist. And in three years it all went to nothing very quickly. Some teeth had to be removed."

Overall the testimony of former prisoners shows that after imprisonment they came out with a deteriorated general condition: chronic or aggravated illnesses (diabetes), consequences of time in SHIZO, of prolonged standing and of a harmful environment (diseases of the kidneys, blood vessels and joints), as well as anxiety, panic attacks, insomnia and intrusive memories. They had to deal with their medical problems after release, including through urgent operations and consultations with specialist doctors.

Deaths in the Colony

"It is a crime. I remember several prisoners who died precisely because medical care was not provided to them in time."

Information about deaths in places of detention is concealed by every means. Since 2020 PC-3 has featured in several reports of prisoner deaths, including at least two political prisoners.

[19] Sarcoidosis is an inflammatory disease in which small clusters of inflammatory cells form in various organs; these are called granulomas. It is generally thought to be a malfunction of the immune response: the body reacts too aggressively to some trigger — for example an infection, dust, chemicals, or another environmental factor.

"— And how many deaths were there during your time? — At 'the Three,' [PC-3] I think, four people."

These are only the fatal cases in PC-3 known to us as of the time this investigation was prepared:

1. **Mikalai Klimovich**, 61. Died in PC-3 in May 2023. He was a political prisoner sentenced to a year in a colony in a case of "insulting Lukashenka" over a caricature. He had a Group II disability due to a heart condition. After the trial he was sent to serve his sentence in PC-3, and on 7 May news of his death in the colony emerged.
2. **Vadzim Khrasko**, 50. Died in PC-3 on the night of 8–9 January 2024. He had been convicted over donations and had a serious illness. He was gravely ill in detention, but the official cause of death was pneumonia. He was taken to hospital when it was already impossible to save his life.
3. Another prisoner, aged 54 (his exact name has not been established; he is known of from witness testimony), died on 25 August 2024. According to witnesses, the man had been in PC-3 for about ten years. He had less than a year left before release. He was taken to a Vitsebsk hospital in critical condition, but could not be saved.
4. There is also testimony about the death of a 50-year-old Russian citizen (his name is likewise not reliably known). There is information that he took his own life in PC-3 at the end of December 2024. According to our witnesses, the man had been sentenced to 16 years under a "drugs" article and had asked to be transferred to Russia to serve his sentence, but was refused. He was found dead after a night inspection.

Many prisoners believe that deaths in the colonies cannot be explained by natural causes alone. They lay responsibility for them on the facility's management. In their words, the cruel conditions of detention in the colony and the inhuman system of "correction" are constructed so as to suppress a person completely, taking no account of his individual characteristics, physical condition or mental health.

"Maybe Starovoitov is not the most terrible man among them. But I saw the consequences of his decisions. Locking people up in SHIZO for 30 days, or in cell-type premises where people sit for six months — that is torture. Not only torture, it is the destruction of health. Failure to provide medical care, when people were dying of some illness or other. Is that not a crime?"

"...A fair number of people died in [the colony]. I witnessed a dying cancer patient lying in the medical unit. His family were at the checkpoint, these were his final minutes, and even in the final minutes of his life his mother and family were not let in to say goodbye. Can you imagine, it was... [the interviewee could not contain his emotions and wept]."

"Several political prisoners have died now. One died of pneumonia, and I know why he died. Because the doctors didn't give a damn. They simply didn't want to admit him [to the medical unit]. I could have died of pneumonia too, if I hadn't fought to get an X-ray. If I hadn't achieved it myself, hadn't gone with a temperature of 40 and started banging on those doors, so to speak, so that they'd give me that X-ray. My body held out, and that man's body didn't..."

"He was supposed to separate wires from rubber. He developed some terrible rash on his hands... People lose their health, they develop illnesses. They are not treated for these illnesses. At best they are given painkillers, the symptoms are removed, and that's it, then back to the industrial area. That is why death in the colony is quite an ordinary thing."

"Well, for example, that same Frenchman. To his misfortune he got toothache. The crown simply needed to be taken off and the tooth cleaned. A three-minute job. They turned it into a circus, so that the man developed an abscess like this. He had to be hospitalized as an emergency, taken into the city. And if he hadn't been taken into the city, the pus could have spread to his brain. And that's it, curtains..."

"A person needs special tablets that his relatives can send in from outside. The administration does not give permission for those tablets, because they are not on the list of permitted medicines. So it's 'no, sorry, we won't accept them.' The person dies."

Particularly telling is the case of Vadzim Khrasko, who died of pneumonia because he was brought to hospital too late.

Prisoners describe deaths in the colony as the result not so much of serious illness as of systemic delay, refusals of treatment, and the substitution of simple symptom relief for medical care. From their accounts it follows that even a comparatively simple problem could become life-threatening because it was not responded to in time.

One example is inflammation of a tooth under a crown. According to the witness, the situation could have been resolved quickly by a dentist, but instead it was allowed to develop into a severe abscess and emergency hospitalization.

Another example concerns prisoners who need special medication. Relatives can buy and send the medicines, but the administration refuses to issue them because they are not on the list of permitted preparations.

Medical Personnel of PC-3

On the basis of the testimony of former PC-3 prisoners, the following medical staff and characteristics of their work can be noted.

1. The chief physician, surname Romanov (first name could not be established) holds key powers: he takes decisions on the admission of medicines, on medical indications and on changes to conditions of detention. He is described as a person on whom access to treatment directly depends. According to prisoners, his decisions are as a rule subjective and selective. Refusals to provide necessary medicines even where there are indications are noted.

"They called that chief physician Doctor Mengele there, because he is absolutely unhinged, incompetent and in no way suited to his post or indeed to the profession."

"How many times it happened: for lads with a temperature, or with heart conditions for whom such conditions are contraindicated, this doctor Romanov, the head of the medical unit, would write: 'Everything is fine, alive and well, may be placed in the disciplinary cell.'"
2. The dentist (her first name and surname could not be established) in practice does not provide treatment or carry out full examinations. Medical care is limited to extracting teeth at late stages, with poor quality of care and the occurrence of complications.

"She doesn't treat people when they come to her in acute pain, but sits them in the chair and went off somewhere. Fifteen minutes later she would come back and say: 'Come and see me in a month.' Without an examination, without any questions. When inflammation begins, she simply pulls the tooth. And very unprofessionally, with complications. In short, these are two people whose surgeries it is better not to end up in."
3. The general practitioner Dmitry (surname could not be established). Mentioned as one of two general practitioners performing basic consultation duties. Former prisoners note his complete incompetence in treating patients.

"The second one is so incompetent... He said to me in so many words: 'And what would you prescribe yourself in this case?' I was shocked by such questions from him. And it was like that for everyone. And my good fortune was that I had no problems other than some simple ailments, nothing serious overall."

4. The general practitioner Violetta (surname could not be established) performs general consultation duties. She is characterized as a rude, incompetent doctor.

"She simply hates prisoners, she communicates very rudely, she takes no account of patients' health complaints."

"That is, first you had to go to the doctor, obtain a prescription, wrest a prescription, beg for that prescription. With Violetta this was practically impossible; if you got Dmitry, there was a chance. Then you could ask him, persuade him that you needed those preparations."

5. The nurses — the mid-level medical personnel. According to former prisoners, they performed their functions in accordance with their powers. However, some prisoners recall that treatment became inaccessible to them precisely because of certain bureaucratic procedures and subjective decisions by the mid-level medical staff.

"The nurses treated us not so much with understanding, just... they did their job and that was that."

"But in fact it depended on whether the senior nurse was in the mood to open up and work on issuing these personal preparations or not. And they were very hard to obtain."



**COLONY STAFF: "WHEN YOU KNOW
THE VILENESS THEY COMMIT,
OR ORDER OTHERS TO COMMIT,
YOU CANNOT STAY SILENT"**

"There is one more instance of a prisoner being beaten. He is not a political prisoner, but an ordinary inmate. He objected to the lawlessness of the administration and of the zavkhozy in his unit. And they beat him right there in the office where the commissions are held. Sturchenko and Fedchenko beat him, and someone else as well. And they beat him pretty hard. In the disciplinary cell you have no communication at all, and the only moment when you cross paths with other prisoners is once a week during the shower. The lads said he was black and blue all over."

From the testimony of a former prisoner

The staff of PC-3 consists of officials serving within the structure of the Department for the Execution of Punishments of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Belarus (hereinafter — DEP). The facility is staffed by attested officers of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and by civilian personnel responsible for the technical support and functioning of the colony (state civil servants). Under the legislation of the Republic of Belarus and the codes of corporate conduct, every employee bears an obligation to comply strictly with the norms of professional ethics and with the legal and moral standards corresponding to their official status.

A rigid chain of command typical of the DEP system, based on subordination of ranks and posts, is in place in PC-3. This vertical of power presupposes the unquestioning execution by rank-and-file staff of any instructions and orders of the facility's administration.

In the course of this investigation, systematic instances of the commission of crimes, acts of inhuman treatment, and immoral and unprofessional conduct were documented. These acts were permitted both by representatives of the PC-3 management and by rank-and-file staff.

The Head of the Colony and His Deputies

"The most terrible man who was there was, of course, Colonel Starovoitov, the head of the colony. They are all supposedly officers there, defending the Motherland, aren't they? But when you know the vileness they commit, or order others to commit, you cannot stay silent. That is why I will not condemn these people; I will condemn their acts. And their acts were of various kinds."

Given the specific hierarchical structure of the facility, the entire personnel of PC-3 is directly subordinate to the head of the colony and his deputies. Any human rights violations within the walls of the colony occur either on the direct instruction of the administration or with its tacit approval. It is precisely the facility's management that sets the course toward creating conditions of detention of a torturous character, aimed at suppressing the dignity of prisoners — above all those persecuted on political grounds.

The colony administration acts as the direct executor of the authoritarian regime's instructions on pressuring political prisoners. These tasks are implemented through a system of formal and informal orders, and through the maintenance of rigid discipline among subordinate staff.

The head of the colony (both the current one and the one who previously held this post), being the highest official in the facility's hierarchy, bears personal responsibility for the use of torture and for cruel and degrading treatment, as well as for the creation of improper conditions of detention in PC-3.



Aleksei Mikhailovich Starovoitov

Position: former head of the colony.²⁰

Date of birth: 29 July 1977

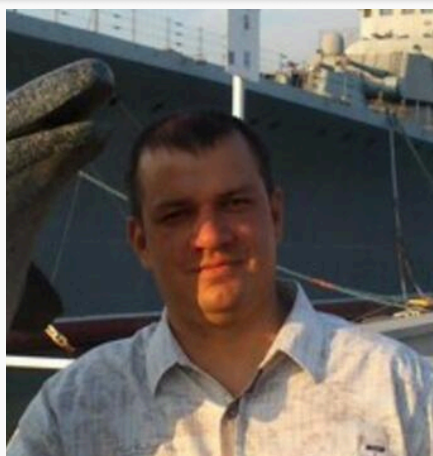
"I met him at the assignment to units; he screamed at me with foul language in front of everyone, how dared I commit [the offence in the sentence]. And he said that if he heard about me even once, that was it, I would have no peaceful life here, I would end up in prison under a roof."

"As a person he was awful. Constant shouting, constant threats of some kind."

"A figurehead general whose duty was to meet various commissions and excursions, to escort them, to show them his fiefdom; he had been in this colony a long time. I don't even know how long — he came up through it, originally arrived there as a warder and rose to colonel. I know of a case where a political prisoner was beaten on his orders."

"Starovoitov, in my view, was one of those representatives of the security structures who was gradually drinking himself to death."

"On 23 February the news came out that the former head of the colony had died. It says on the website that the cause of death is unknown. They all drink like horses, in fact, they drink, they smoke, and clearly not many people love them."



Filipp Vladimirovich Sturchenko

Position: head of the colony.

Date of birth: 1 January 1977

[20] Aleksei Starovoitov worked at PC-3 from 1998, rising from warder to head of the facility. He headed the colony for about five years and remained its head until the summer of 2023, after which he was replaced by Filipp Sturchenko.

"They appointed Sturchenko from March 2023. He came from the Vitsebsk SIZO, where he was deputy head for regime and operational work. Everyone who had been in that Vitsebsk SIZO spoke very badly of him. And on the whole that is how it turned out. He is a very harsh man. Cruel, rather, and vindictive."

"When Sturchenko took up the post of head of the colony, he tightened conditions for all prisoners in the colony. All sorts of madness goes on there constantly. They invent occupations for themselves. Under Sturchenko they stopped signing applications for short visits with non-relatives. Political prisoners started being checked more often. And then funding was secured to install video cameras everywhere possible, including in the barracks. And life became much harder. It became problematic to rest anywhere, to lie down, to do sport..."

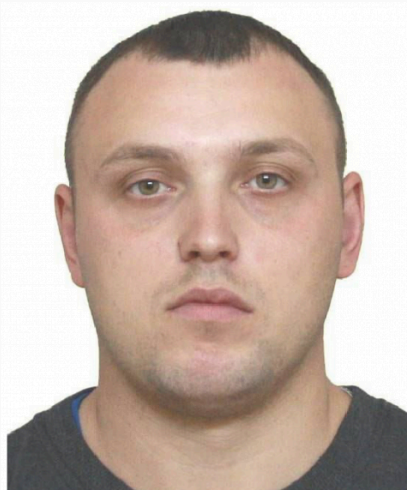
"Sturchenko looked pretty disgusting. You could see the man was hitting the bottle properly. Checks on political prisoners became more frequent."

"A vile, vindictive, harsh man; everyone was just waiting for him to retire on his colonel's pension — the staff and all the prisoners."

"There were a great many people whose fate he decided. Practically no one did he decide in favour of. Whenever there was a commission on some parole case, or a commission on transfer somewhere else to a milder regime, he treated everyone very harshly. He accommodated very few people."

"If political prisoners came before Sturchenko at a punishment commission, that meant SHIZO for certain. Nine times out of ten it would be SHIZO."

"He sits there all... Red-faced, puffing. Fedchenko sits next to him and just turns away and laughs, shaking with laughter. He didn't like this Sturchenko. And he genuinely found it funny that someone had told him the plain truth to his face."



Denis Nikolaevich Fedchenko

Position: deputy head of the colony for regime and operational work.

Date of birth: 24 September 1988

"...he could perfectly well, without any explanation, refuse visits and calls, and in certain cases he even decided whom to lock up in the disciplinary cell, whom to visit and write up a pile of violations for. Practically everything was done through him."

"Fedchenko was the de facto head of the colony. Everything depended on him. Even to obtain what you are entitled to by law, without any questions, you had to make an appointment with him and explain, ask his permission. For example, for a long-term visit, which is due to everyone without exception, regardless of whether they are on preventive registration or not. For video calls, which are likewise due to everyone without any restrictions. So he is the tsar and god of the colony."

"Fedchenko is a very cunning man. He will never carry out a punishment with his own hands. He will redirect it to one of his staff a rank below, so that he looks good in the eyes of the prisoners, so that no one could suspect him. He is a very cunning man, very clever in that respect; he understands psychology and manipulates it."

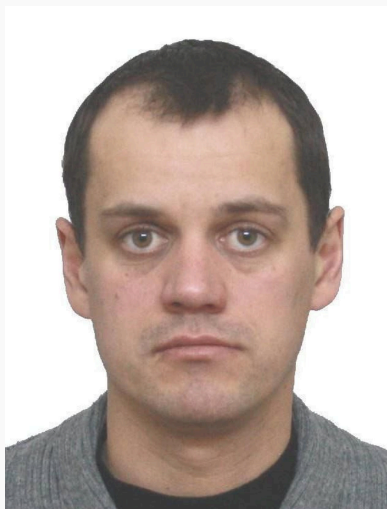


Konstantin Vladimirovich Ignatovsky

Position: deputy head of the colony for educational and ideological work.

Date of birth: 13 March 1981

"The thing is, there is a hierarchy, but each department there pulls the blanket its own way. There is the head of the colony, to whom everyone is subordinate. There is the deputy head for regime and operational work, to whom, again, everyone is subordinate. Plus there is also the head of the correctional process, or as he is commonly called, the political officer. He is separate, as it were, and everyone is subordinate to him too. Specifically in the colony, they had constant friction with that same deputy for regime and operational work, with that same Fedchenko. Ignatovsky and Fedchenko. They constantly had disagreements of some kind. One would permit, the other would forbid. One would forbid, the other would permit."



Dmitry Anatolyevich Krasovsky

Position: deputy head for the correctional process.

Date of birth: 6 May 1980

"Also a rather peculiar and rather cruel man. He may not have beaten anyone, certainly not in my time. But for him, locking a man up in SHIZO was the simplest thing in the world. A matter of mood, a matter of chance."

"Krasovsky did everything to do with educational work. That means ideological productions of some kind. In our colony there were television programmes on Saturdays and Sundays, patriotic films. He chose those films, staged productions of some kind, simply brought people out for talks. Conducting ideological work with someone."

"Krasovsky is hot-tempered and also cruel. Considering what he put people in the disciplinary cell for — sometimes there is simply supposed to be a hearing before you are put away, and a punishment is assigned. But he could simply take you into the disciplinary cell in the evening, on his own initiative."

"A man was simply walking in the column, not in the place where he was supposed to stand. He saw this from a distance, came over deliberately. Pulled him out of the column, called him by his surname and said: 'You're coming with me!' And took him straight to the checkpoint, and from the checkpoint he was transferred to the disciplinary cell."

"The only time I clashed with Krasovsky... He didn't like the way I stood up when he came in. When a member of the administration comes in, everyone must stand up. He said I had not stood up quickly enough, that I sleep too much. And so he sent me to sweep the street."

Operative Officers

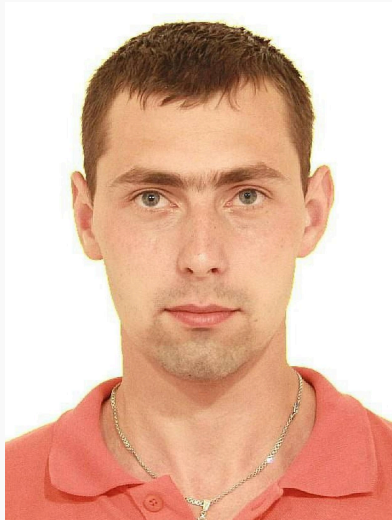
Under the regulations, the operational staff of PC-3 are required to carry out operational-search activity aimed at the prevention, detection and investigation of crimes, both new and from previous years, as well as at ensuring internal order and preventing violations among prisoners.

In the course of this investigation, the experts established that instead of performing their lawful functions, operative officers are involved in the systematic repression of political prisoners. Their activity amounts to the falsification of disciplinary offences, psychological pressure, intimidation and other acts of inhuman treatment aimed at breaking prisoners' will and holding them to account without grounds. Furthermore, cases of the use of physical violence against prisoners were identified in the course of the investigation.

"I remember the surnames of all the operative officers. Vladislav Vladimirovich Spiridonov. The second is Anton Mikhailovich Solovyov. The third is Roman Leonidovich Tereshko. The fourth — I only remember the surname, Andreev. They used to write me up for various violations. When the political prisoners went to make Skype calls, that Skype often fell through and was postponed, because the operative officer Spiridonov, who was supposed to do it, didn't do it."

"The prisoners do each other dirty through the operative officers. Very often it is not the operative officers who encourage you to inform or to come and ask them to do someone a bad turn. And for the operative officers it's — well, yes, go ahead, why not? You're my man, you're of use to me, well, if that's what you want, all right."

"The head of the operational department mostly does not take part in prisoners' ordinary lives. And next comes the operative officer assigned to the unit. And it is he who really decides your fate. That is, you meet him, he finds out who you are, what you are, what your views are, what your intentions are for the next few years or for the part of your sentence that you have to serve there. And your subsequent time there depends on that."



Sergei Aleksandrovich Golubev

Position: head of the operational department.

Date of birth: 20 March 1989

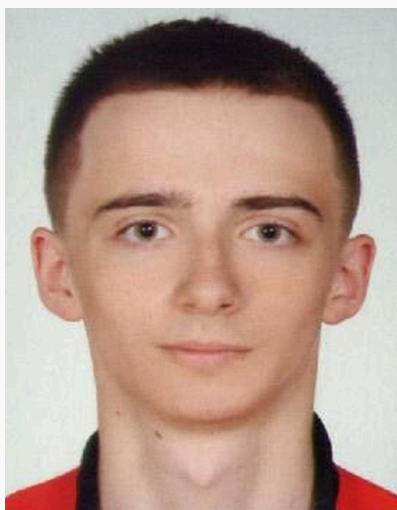
"Normal people are not made heads of operational departments in Belarus. His entire repertoire is meanness and cunning. He will say one thing to your face and do another. That's a classic for operative officers."

"A rare piece of filth. He made himself out to be a man of principle; possibly he really was an ideological 'yabatska.' For him, sending a man to the disciplinary cell or winding up an Article 411 case is as easy as anything. Small, short, very thin. He is probably one of the few staff members with whom it was never really possible to build any dialogue."

"Those who were brigade leaders in the industrial area, who were under him, whom I know, the lads used to say: 'Oh, those are Golubev's people.' They did whatever they liked in the zone. And obviously, if you cross them, they go and tell Golubev, and boom, two days later you're off to SHIZO, then transfer to another unit, then they change your industrial area assignment to the worst one, then something else, they put you next to the entrance or next to the toilet."

"Golubev is very aggressive, small, puny and full of complexes. From him came aggression, insults, blows. The mildest of his humiliations were things like 'zmagar,' 'protester.'"

"Sometimes it seemed to me that he simply hated us. He is head of the operational department, he is supposed to be looking for further crimes, he is supposed to be signing people up to cooperate, he is supposed to be weaving intrigues in order to find out something new. At the 'christenings,' if a prisoner had done something wrong, he always argued for the disciplinary cell if the matter concerned a political prisoner."



Vladislav Vladimirovich Spiridonov

Position: operative officer of PC-3.

Date of birth: 25 March 1997

"And the head of the operational unit Golubev came to check on me, together with his subordinate, that Spiridonov, who beat me in the cell when they were hitting me with a stun gun."

"And at some point I was called in to the operative officer [Spiridonov], who said that I was orchestrating my own movements, that people listened to me, and that he did not like this. And therefore, if I did not stop, I would go to the punishment cell. To which I replied that my movements, on the contrary, promote order. But let's have you start giving us video calls and visits and everything else. Then he said: 'Go into "low status," into the "petukhi," go and clean the toilets, then you'll get long-term visits.' A young man with a wild hatred of political prisoners, by his own words."

"Spiridonov. The lads all feel very strongly negative about him. In fact he is from quite a well-off family, and why he works like that I don't even know. He mixed a great deal with the inmates. They got up to a lot there, and the whole colony knew it, and Fedchenko knew it. I said to Fedchenko: 'Are you aware that you have zavkhozy who sell visits, who sell parcels, good sleeping places, and that your operative officer is involved in this, and you are not putting a stop to it?' He tried to break these people up, but it never extended to Spiridonov; no one ever punished him in any way, they might change the activists who were doing it, create problems for them..."

"Spiridonov is a wounded child. Perhaps he was bullied somewhere in his youth, and he decided to rehabilitate himself in this way, through his service. He is one of those people who, given a drop of power, thinks he can turn the whole world upside down. Very young, feels himself in that uniform like a superman in armour. He was one of those who most of all applied some kind of physical force. In himself he is, well, not big, small, thin, puny. Possibly he has some kind of complex. That's why toward me he behaved, let's say, more aggressively than all the rest."



Roman Leonidovich Tereshko

Position: operative officer of PC-3

Date of birth: 12 October 1994

"He looks calm and kind, but in fact he ground down the political prisoners. He monitored things so that all his political prisoners passed through SHIZO; in short, he kept us on our toes. He treated us fairly harshly."

"Initially our relations did not work out. It was he who threatened me that I would have no visits and no video calls. Later, if you can put it that way, relations evened out."



Anton Mikhailovich Solovyov

Position: operative officer of PC-3.

Date of birth: 12 November 1993

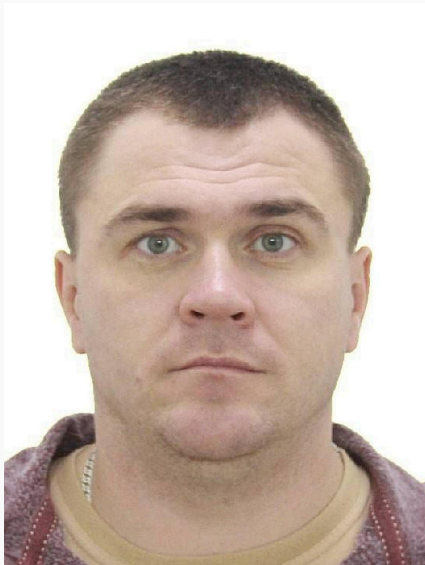
"The vilest of them is Solovey. By his will a great many good lads were put in cell-type premises and then transferred to prison."



"Solovyov is a strange man. He apparently felt no direct hatred or aggression toward political prisoners. That is, he tried to do everything by the IR, by the rules — and in a Belarusian zone that came out harsh. That is why many people there hated Solovyov. And I can say nothing good about him."

"Emotionally unstable, touchy, full of complexes. His surname, I think, is either Solovejchik or Solovyov, I don't remember exactly. And he took great offence when people called him Solovey [Nightingale]."

The Regime Department



Sergei Mechislavovich Kibik

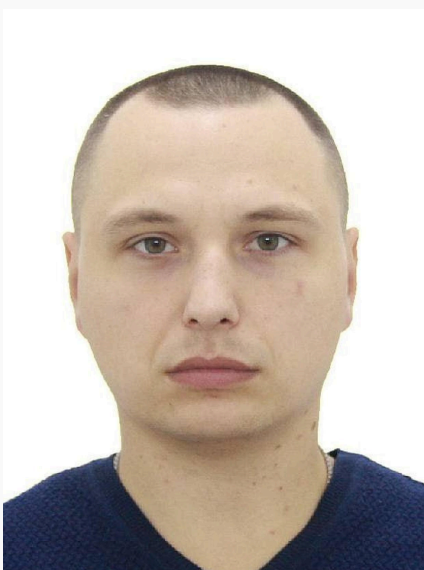
Position: head of the regime department.

Date of birth: 6 November 1986

"The regime men are people who suck the blood out of ordinary prisoners, just like the operative officers. In our case the head of the regime department was Kibik. One of the most unhinged people I met in the colony at all. This showed in his rude and harsh manner of communication, an over-familiarity without any needless formalities."

"And he found fault with everything. If you walk wrong, a button isn't fastened, or something is sticking out somewhere. A notebook poking out of your pocket — you were allowed to carry a notebook, but if it poked out of your pocket, he might count that as a violation. If he didn't like something about you, he writes you up for a violation for being unshaven, and so on."

"A boor, a foul-mouthed, unbalanced man. There were cases when he drew up disciplinary reports. He drew up reports and people went to the disciplinary cell, including political prisoners. In short, an unpleasant individual vested with power."



Dmitry Vladimirovich Khinevich

Position: officer of the regime department.

Date of birth: 2 April 1993

"And Tarasenko and Khinevich are ghouls. There is no other word for them. At the slightest thing — paperwork. Toward political prisoners, the harshest possible attitude. Say two men got into some trouble, they're doing press-ups in the drying room. Right, you're political, you're ordinary. The ordinary one — off you go; for the political one — paperwork."

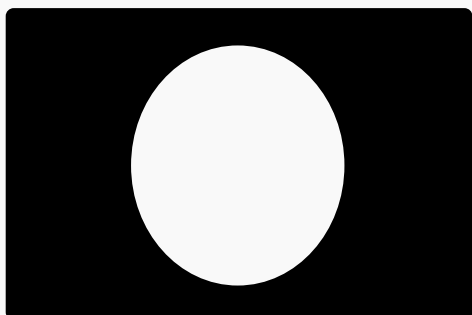
"Khinevich once found on an old man simply a drawing of Lukashenka in a notebook, in some caricature form — he was taken away to the closed prison."

"Khinevich is a ghoul, simply a ghoul, who put pressure on people and found fault. Tarasenko is the same. If some search had to be carried out, some low trick, some nastiness, they did it with pleasure, both Khinevich and Tarasenko. When I came into the colony, Tarasenko took all my things, even the black ones, or whatever they were. I went to quarantine naked — he left me only underpants, socks, one sleeveless vest and one pair of black tracksuit bottoms, and that was it. I was so cold there."

"A rare piece of scum. Over there we used to saw ourselves boards out of wood so we could cut up food on them or whatever. Everyone knew about it, but nobody really paid it any mind. He got carried away, something didn't sit right with him. He just gathered up all those boards wherever he found them, put them on the threshold and broke them with his feet. Those plastic mugs — he could set one down and stomp it flat with his boot."

Other Staff Members

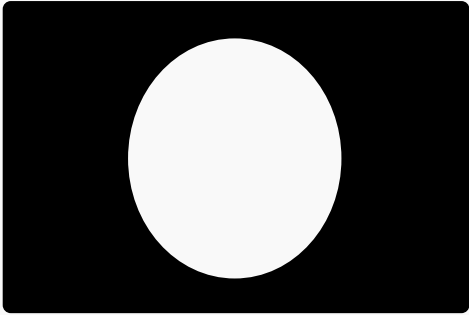
Duty Assistant to the Head of the Colony (DAHC). In the system of internal control of a correctional facility, the DAHC is assigned a key role: they are responsible for overseeing compliance with general order and for monitoring prisoners' conduct within the established regime. In practice, in the conditions of PC-3, this category of officials is an instrument of constant pressure on political prisoners. The DAHC's participation in repression is comprehensive in character: from initiating contrived disciplinary proceedings (drawing up fictitious reports) to the direct commission of acts of violence.



Denis Nikolaevich Tsirkunov (a photograph and exact date of birth could not be established)

Position: duty assistant to the head of the colony.

"Tsirkunov, he was also one of the DAHCs, well, not a good one. He too could carry out any vile order. They said that he could quite happily beat someone in SHIZO if necessary, that is, use physical force. Several other DAHC chiefs were polite lads and very reasonable, genuinely so. When it was their shifts, people would look and say — oh, today we can arrange something about sport, today's DAHC is a good one, a normal one. But those ones, Tsirkunov and Laberko, were, well, not good people."

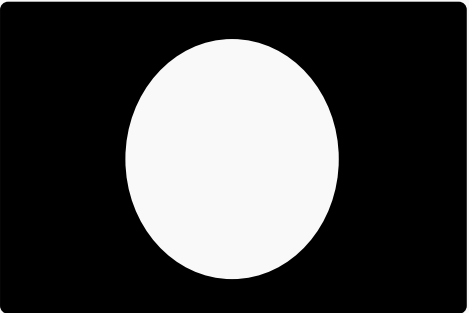


Laberko (full name, photograph and exact date of birth could not be established)

Position: duty assistant to the head of the colony.

"There was a Laberko. He was not a good one. He had a fairly negative attitude toward political prisoners as well, and he found fault with people. In SHIZO he wrote up paperwork with pleasure. In SHIZO he carried out orders such as coming in and pretending that he had found dirt, and then writing the man up. He did that with pleasure."

"Otryadniki" (unit officers). Unit officers are DEP officers whose direct duties include implementing the correctional process and monitoring prisoners directly in their living quarters (units). In practice, however, the otryadniki act as the lowest link of the repressive apparatus. In relation to persons serving sentences on political grounds, they effectively perform the role of overseers, responsible for creating an atmosphere of unremitting pressure and for implementing punitive measures at the everyday level.



Anton Mikhailovich Barsukov (a photograph could not be established)

Position: unit officer.

Date of birth: 14 October 1998

"There is a staff member like that, Anton Mikhailovich Barsukov, unit officer of Unit No. 7. He was in the industrial area, and he also worked in the sewing shop. We went outside, it was just him and me, there was no one else. He said: 'Look, here's the thing. The picking-off of BChB people isn't going to stop. You don't want to keep going to SHIZO, what the f do you need those problems for?' He threatened me that I wouldn't get out from under the closed prison. 'You need to sign a cooperation agreement with the administration. If you don't do that, mate, you know yourself, the picking-off won't stop, you'll be f*ed.'"*

CONCLUSIONS

"He wrote that he had been unlawfully convicted and that he did not accept these conditions. And at the assignment [to a unit] the now deceased Starovoitov started shouting at him. To which M. calmly replied: 'Don't get too full of yourselves here! We still have to put you on trial afterwards.'"

From the testimony of a former prisoner

The testimony of former prisoners allows us to state that Penal Colony No. 3 in Vitsebsk, which might previously have been perceived as a "model" or relatively benign colony, in fact became after 2020 a place of deliberate pressure on political prisoners.

According to witnesses, this was the result of the management policy of the colony's leadership — both the former head Aleksei Starovoitov and Filipp Sturchenko, who replaced him. Under them the regime of detention came to be used not only for the execution of punishment, but also as an instrument of suppression, isolation and humiliation of people convicted in politically motivated cases.

At the same time, despite the special status of the facility, where former representatives of the authorities are held, particularly severe restrictions are applied to political prisoners.

Inadequate food, dependence on parcels, harsh living conditions and constant pressure on the prisoner combine into a coherent and consistent system aimed at exhausting and suppressing the individual. People without support from relatives, prisoners with psychological or mental health problems, persons with disabilities and foreign nationals find themselves in a particularly vulnerable position in the colony.

Former prisoners testify to extremely harsh conditions of forced labor in the colony. Labor is used here above all as an instrument of pressure, punishment and subordination, and not as a means of vocational adaptation or resocialization. The heaviest and most harmful work is systematically assigned to those whom the administration considers disloyal, that is, to political prisoners.

Working conditions, meanwhile, are characterized by the absence of elementary occupational safety, protective equipment, serviceable machinery and adequate medical care in the event of injury.

Industrial injuries and illnesses are perceived as an inevitable part of everyday life, and attempts to refuse dangerous or out-of-hours work are met with threats of SHIZO and disciplinary punishment.

Prolonged confinement in SHIZO affects prisoners' physical and mental condition. Many prisoners lost weight after SHIZO and experienced emotional exhaustion.

As in the Belarusian penitentiary system generally, strict restrictions apply here to money transfers and to receiving deliveries from persons who are not close relatives. The system of prisoners' communication with the outside world in PC-3 in effect functions as a mechanism of isolation and additional psychological pressure. Despite the formal existence of the right to correspondence, calls, visits and legal assistance, access to them depends not so much on the established rules as on the discretion of the administration and the operative officers. Censorship of letters, the disappearance of correspondence, restrictions on contact with people outside the circle of close relatives, the monitoring of conversations and the obstruction of meetings with lawyers create an atmosphere in which all communication is entirely controlled. It is especially telling that contact with family and the possibility of seeing loved ones are turned into an instrument of disciplinary influence.

Regular strip searches, pointless lineups and control over the slightest actions, and the inhuman conditions of detention in SHIZO and PKT, drive prisoners to psychological breakdowns and to thoughts of suicide and self-harm.

The medical service in Correctional Facility No. 3, as in other correctional facilities of the country's penitentiary system, is embedded in the system for the execution of punishments and subordinated to its logic — the priorities of security, control and administrative manageability. As a result, the colony's medical unit functions not as an autonomous healthcare structure but as part of the penitentiary infrastructure.

According to witnesses, medical unit staff treat prisoners rudely and dismissively. They emphasize, moreover, that this concerns not only political prisoners but is the general practice in the colony's treatment of prisoners, with the exception of those close to the administration.

Overall the testimony shows that medical care in the colony is hard to access, unprofessional and humiliating. Instead of proper treatment, a person encounters refusals of assistance, queues, the threat of punishment and bureaucracy even in simple matters.

Deaths in the colony appear in prisoners' accounts not as isolated tragic exceptions but as a consequence of the entire system: disregard for prisoners' health, the priority of the regime over treatment, the dependence of assistance on the prisoner's own persistence, and unpunished medical inaction.

The staff of PC-3, from the senior officials of the colony administration, through the mid-level operational and regime officers, down to the warders, are responsible for the systematic persecution of and reprisals against prisoners. It is precisely this hierarchical and clearly defined system of subordination of the rank-and-file staff to the colony administration that ensures the execution of criminal orders in relation to political and ordinary prisoners in PC-3.

Staff both directly apply physical and psychological violence, falsify disciplinary penalties and create inhuman conditions for serving sentences, and also persecute political prisoners through their network of informers and provocateurs among ordinary prisoners. The criminal acts under consideration not only entail criminal liability under the criminal law of Belarus, but also form part of the widespread and systematic persecution within the meaning of international criminal law.

The testimony of former PC-3 prisoners analysed by the experts of the International Committee for the Investigation of Torture in Belarus indicates systemic violations of international standards for the treatment of persons deprived of their liberty. This concerns, in particular, the prohibition of torture and of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment; the right to respect for private and family life; the principle of non-discrimination; and the state's obligation to ensure the protection of persons under its full control in places of deprivation of liberty.

The authors of the investigation assert that a number of colony staff are complicit in the persecution of citizens on political grounds and in other crimes against humanity being committed in Belarus to this day. Under Article 85 of the CCRB, the rules on the expiry of limitation periods for holding to account persons who have committed a criminal offence under Article 128 of the CCRB do not apply.²¹

[21] Article 128 of the CCRB establishes criminal liability for acts falling within the classification of crimes against the security of humanity. These include unlawful confinement, the mass or systematic carrying out of executions without trial, the abduction of persons followed by their disappearance, and torture or acts of cruelty committed in connection with the racial, national or ethnic affiliation, political convictions and religious beliefs of the civilian population.

