

Some people in Belarus still cling to Lukashenka's regime ideology as they cannot imagine anything else. Others have a different view of the country's future but prefer to remain silent and suffer in solitude. There are also those who have declared an outright "holy war" against the regime, no matter the cost, and who are ready to sacrifice their lives on the altar of freedom.

Zmicier Dashkevich, 30, is of this latter stock, a political prisoner, a protestant and the leader of the officially banned Young Front, a Belarusian opposition youth movement. He is serving a two-year prison term, having served another prison term for his political activities not long time ago. Despite continuous pressure, he refuses to sign a pardon petition to Lukashenka and may remain in prison after all other political prisoners are released.

Arrests and Imprisonments

He was preemptively arrested just a day before the 19 December 2010 largely fake presidential elections in Belarus and the brutal dispersal of a 30,000 - 50,000 strong peaceful demonstration in their wake, which ended with mass arrests. He was attacked by unidentified police agents and then literally kidnapped, along with several of his other colleagues, in broad daylight. Dashkevich and his colleagues were subsequently accused of "attacking" this group of unidentified persons.

The Belarusian authorities could not let Zmicier join the protesters in the aftermath of the 19 December 2010 presidential elections as they feared him more than any other opposition leader or presidential candidate. Zmicier is quite popular with the Belarusian youth. He attracts the most persistent and determined among them.

And it is the Belarusian youth that is most eager to bring about democratic change in Belarus, fearing no one as they have nothing to lose. Dashkevich has always been an uncompromising opponent of the regime, rejecting any form of dialogue with it on the part of the oppositional political forces. He organized a wide public campaign "Down with Lukashenka!" calling on all presidential candidates to boycott the fake elections and to unite in order to oppose the dictator. But this initiative was left largely unheeded by the politicians.

Mistreatment in Detention Centers

Dashkevich was subject to beatings and torture, his fiancée, Nasta Palazhanka, says. This is not at all groundless in view of the evidence of abuse and torture of the former presidential

candidates and political activists alike that surfaced in spring this year. Palazhanka, too, spent several months in a KGB prison in Minsk, the most notorious in Belarus for its harsh conditions for inmates, and was released in February 2011.

Zmicier was denied meeting his lawyer by the administration of the Horky colony where he was transferred this summer from Zhodzina prison. Deputy Prosecutor of the Mahilou region reluctantly acknowledged that the detention center administration broke the law by forbidding Dashkevich from meet his lawyer.

While in Horky, Zmicier was not allowed to meet his parents, nor could he send letters home or possess a copy of the Bible. Several times he was put to a one-man cell for alleged “violations” of the Horky prison’s internal regulations. One of the inmates was punished by several days in solitary confinement for informing Paval Seviaryniets, another political prisoner, by phone about Zmicier’s suffering.

Pressure to Seek Pardon From Lukashenka

There were many attempts to crush Zmicier’s determination to endure the suffering and harsh conditions of the Horky detention center by its administration. Some prisoners, urged by the latter for just a wretched plate of prison skilly, tried to force him to write an official letter addressing Lukashenko and begging him for a pardon. But he refused to and his determination grew even stronger as he quoted the words of the scripture in his letter home: “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you...” (Mathew 5:11). Now he is in Hlybokaje detention center and was finally allowed to meet his lawyer and father.

His mother’s death has become yet another blow for the imprisoned leader. Zmicier has been jailed for the second time for his democratic activism. His imprisonment has been torment both for himself and for his parents. It is hard for Zmicier’s aging parents to live through it a second time. They live in a torturous state of anxiety, afraid because anything can happen to their son in prison. “This is a very tough time for my son but he is determined to stand his own’, his father says.

Will Dashkevich Remain the Last Political Prisoner?

Now, clearly, Lukashenka faces a dilemma. With severe economic crisis looming large, he is still seeking a Western financial bailout. He also feels enormous pressure from Russia, which wants to be in control of Belarusian property.

With the last two presidential candidates still in jail, it is very likely that the Belarusian

dictator will sooner or later release them, leaving the unyielding Dashkevich, a leader very popular with young Belarusians and an uncompromising freedom fighter, behind bars.

Yet, after the death sentence handed down to Kanavalau and Kavalou, it is all the more obvious that only Lukashenka decides the matters of death and life in Belarus, with judges and the judicial system nothing more than a dead letter. Therefore, after this point, Lukashenka can do whatever he pleases to Zmicier and other political prisoners too.

Dashkevich represents the new generation of Belarusians who are weary of endless promises, ready to struggle for change and a better future for their country. The hopes of a younger generation in Belarus hinge on him. Already during his first prison term he became a symbol for young Belarusians. Moreover, today he has become a symbol of struggle for freedom and the independence of his country.

Let us help release Zmicier Dashkevich and the rest of the political prisoners and, thus, let us help Belarus become a free and democratic country.

Ales Kirkevich authored and submitted this opinion.

Ales Kirkevich is a Young Front activist from Hrodna, Belarus. He was arrested soon after the 19 December 2010 demonstration and then again, in January 2011, and put to into a detention center just days after his marriage. He was released on 31 August 2011.

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