

After August 2020: Stories of LGBT+ People in Belarus

These interviews were recorded in 2020 after the elections in Belarus. These are very different stories – some talk about experiences of detention and violence, others about their relationship with parents, participation in protests (or their choice not to participate), support, hope, experiences of emigration, visibility and invisibility, and homophobia among protesters. These are all different facets of the same story of how the LGBT+ community is experiencing the socio-political crisis our shared country has plunged into.

Now, as the crackdown in Belarus continues and we learn of new detentions every day, for safety reasons we publish these stories without names. Each story is titled with a separate number. All but the last story are recorded interviews and the seventh is a written text about finding one's place and visibility, which unfortunately also has to be published anonymously. One day we will be able to sign our names to all these texts, but for now, we hope – as a hero of one of the interviews said – that this forced anonymity can also provide a sense of universality and the possibility of seeing ourselves in these stories.

The First Story

I

I was detained near Minsk Hero City Obelisk on August 11, we live there. I was just walking home from work, and I was detained. Some guy and a girl went ahead without problems. But I was detained. When I first got into the police van, I still had a small hope that they would let me go – as they say, «nobody wanted to die.» You don't know what will happen, but you think – most likely, yes, you will be imprisoned, beaten, and so on.

And so it happened. In total, I was sentenced to 13 days, and I did three of them. First, we were taken to one police department, then to another. In both

The author of this project is not disclosed for security reasons. The original text (in Belarusian and Russian), as well as the German translation, can be found here: <https://feminist.krytyka.com/ru/articles/posle-avgusta-2020-istorii-lgbt-lyudey-v-belarusi>

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police departments, we were treated roughly. I was ready for this mentally, but it turned out that not physically. I mean, I can, of course, do some ordinary things, but I can't stand on my knees for hours with my hands behind my head, face to the floor.

We spent one night in Okrestina. The camera is 4x4 meters in size, maybe a little more. Seventy-eight people in a 4x4 cell under the open sky – we could not lie down or sit down normally. And in the corner, there was a shit hole. We tried to sit so that everyone could sleep. It was impossible – someone had to stand while others were sleeping. At that moment, people were being beaten up in the yard. They were screaming all night, and you didn't know if they were the same people or not. And if so, how can one still stay alive? Then we heard that probably they were different people. More and more new people were brought in, and they stood on their knees in the yard at night with their heads on the floor, because there was no place for them. And if someone moved – everyone was beaten, it feels like they were beaten half to death.

II

If you are detained for the first time, the very beginning is the hardest part. It was very difficult in the police department. Most of all the humiliations in the police department happened before they wrote the detention report. If they didn't like something, they beat us. I was not beaten, but they treated me cruelly and threatened to beat me. There was a moment when I had to go up to the fifth floor, and either a riot policeman or someone else humiliated me while leading me up so I asked him to stop. Your shoelaces have already been taken away, you stumble, try to adjust your pace, but he starts walking faster, then slower, in the end, I could not walk at all, he pulled me, tilted me to the stairs so that I stepped on my hair. I realized that he was doing this on purpose to humiliate me. It was the toughest moment.

There was also a moment when they were writing the detention report. I was forced to lie down on the floor. The door in the room is open, you are lying flat on the floor, people are walking back and forth, and they are stepping over you. It was quite strange. They probably found something on my phone – a gay dating app or some messages, and one of them said: «Oh, so you're one of those!» – and hit me in the ear once or twice. It wasn't very painful, but it was unexpected. I mean, I was lying face down, and he just suddenly hit me. I didn't say anything. I was not afraid then that they would find out that I was LGBT. But they were probably trying to tease me to see my reaction. «Oh, are you one of those? Well, then you'd better not get into prison...» But whether because of a large crowd of people, or because it didn't bother me, I don't know for what reason, but I didn't get some special treatment towards me further.

III

The scariest moment was when I didn't know what was going on. I expected that we would be mistreated in the police department and in Okrestina, I heard all of it before and understood what was going to happen. I mean,

it was not too hard for me emotionally. The way they beat people in the yard in Okrestina – it, of course, clearly confirmed that we heard a real nightmare happening. But I had already heard even about this. But when we were taken to some gym class after the police department, it looked like a kidnapping, as if we would be taken to some forest and shot. That was scary. Mentally, I assumed that «everything is fine», it's just some stage that I hadn't heard about, but panic began to creep in inside. I still don't really know where it was.

In the gym class, they laid us flat on the floor, tied our hands, and so we had to lie like this. Obviously, you need to sleep, but whether you can sleep or not depends on the way your hands are tied. You might be lucky or you might not. One guy's hands were tied so tight that he could not feel his fingers afterward. I tried to make it look as if [the zip tie] had accidentally loosened... I could do it.

There was also a moment in the beginning when they put us on the floor and said: «If you need water or to go to the toilet, raise your hand. Any questions?» I raise my hand and ask: «For how long are we detained?» And before that, we were told the rules. If someone breaks them, we all get up and stand on our knees. And so he tells everyone to get up. Questions are not allowed. Did you want something? Here, take it, now everyone is punished. It feels like they are trying to tell you that you have no right to anything. That they have absolute authority.

We spent the night lying on this gym class floor, and the next day they woke us, lined us up against the wall, and made us sing the anthem. If people hesitated, they were beaten. At first, it was hard for me to stand, but at some point, I felt like I got a second wind. I don't even know how it happened, but at one moment I just couldn't stand it, and at another – nothing hurts anymore. Then I could stand, I could stand with my head on the floor, near the wall, and, if necessary, on my knees.

Then we were taken to Okrestina.

IV

There was a moment in Okrestina that I didn't share almost with anyone. We were kept in the yard for a long time, for two hours, maybe more, until they put us in a cell. There was no ceiling in it, there were bars at the top. The cell was about 5x5 or 4x4 meters in size, maybe a little more. In the corner, there was a shit hole, just a gutter with holes in the concrete floor. No one could think that that was the toilet. At first, you think – well, they will take us to the toilet. I thought so. But it turned out that that was the shit hole, and you needed to take care of your needs there. Later we counted that there were 78 of us in this cell. We couldn't fit there together at night. There were, of course, no beds; nothing, just a concrete floor and concrete walls. This gutter was not separated from us in any way; no one, of course, wanted to sit there. And we probably spent three hours trying to arrange ourselves so that everyone would fit. We tried in different ways: back to back, not to lean against a cold wall, but against each other. But there was not enough space. We tried to put

one slipper under the ass, and put our feet on the other, and sit this way. It didn't really work out either. Then we sat at each other's feet. That was probably the best way to fit, but still someone had to stand. And so we changed, someone was sleeping, someone was standing, well, we were dozing, it's impossible to sleep properly there. The whole night someone was being beaten in the yard, and we heard all those screams. And then a guy who was sitting behind me hugged me. And I also hugged the guy who was in front. And we were sitting there like that. It was so calm. In this world where everything attacks you, you still find yourself in this cell. It was sad. But at the same time, I felt such happiness. We are alive.

V

I think I will leave the country. I want to find a job and go abroad. Why did I, in particular, decide to leave? My parents support Lukashenko. They voted for Lukashenko. There was always a lot of pressure from my mother, all these conversations, «What don't you like here?», etc. The fact that my mother supports Lukashenko felt like a betrayal in a certain sense. This is your mother, she teaches you some basic things, like, what is good and what is bad. I'm probably still so naive to think that there are some obvious truths, for example, that beating people is clearly bad, and that the absence of development in the country is bad. But she... «It was so awful in the 90s, we survived such things...» And you don't know what to say to that.

I went to my hometown to vote. My parents voted early, and I voted on election day. There was an opportunity to vote in Minsk, but I decided that it would make it easier to steal my vote, so I went home. I hadn't been to my school in a very long time. It was a little awkward and scary to come there and vote, maybe to see my teachers and know that they were likely to fake votes. Before that, I found out on the Internet that my class teacher is the secretary of the commission. I was determined to express my resentment. I went there and intended to take a picture of the ballot, no matter what will happen. And so I move cautiously along the hall to the tables, expecting that now everyone will stop me, prevent me from taking pictures or something else, and it will be my teachers. But my class teacher saw me, came up, and we talked for quite a long time. It turned out that she didn't support Lukashenko, knew about the protests, about what had happened in 2010. I asked her directly if they were faking votes, and she said no. I felt an absolute connection with her, mutual support, we hugged at the end, and it was very pleasant as if we were «on the same side». Only later I saw that the votes between Tikhonovskaya and Lukashenko were distributed more or less equally in my voting district. I could believe in such results. Later, when I saw stickers saying «Teachers are traitors» around the city, it hurt me. Of course, I can agree that, probably, many people forged votes... But my teachers turned out to be normal. And this makes me cry. But on the other hand, this is normal. This should be normal.

With my parents, I don't feel that «we are on the same side» at all. I even felt more tenderness for that teacher as a mother figure than for my actual

mother. I love my parents, but at the same time, they are my enemies. They think that being gay is not normal. They reacted to my activism saying «when will you stop doing this nonsense»? And to the fact that I always wanted to make games – «when will you finally find a normal job»? They were literally against everything that was interesting to me. We've always had this kind of relationship with them, like, «we don't accept you.» I thought that I would come out and something would change, but it didn't happen. They have always been hostile to my interests, and to my sexual identity. And my coming out didn't change that. Now, maybe, I feel a bit less hostility, but only because I try not to raise this subject at all.

Yes, they came to meet me after I was released. They started communicating with my boyfriend to «know how I am doing.» After my release, we all sat together in a cafe, and it was a «family reunion», but nevertheless they still continued to support Lukashenko, and made sure that I did not go out to protests. My mother called every night, asked me not to go out. I tried to argue and ignore it... After my release, I was invited for a «preventive talk». I know I didn't have to go there, I told her I didn't have to go. The climax was that my mother went there herself with my father to tell them that «he did not participate in anything, but he will come to you.» And she continued to put pressure on me – go, go. She called me, pressured me, and then, probably, against such a background, I fainted. At night I got up, went to the toilet, and lost consciousness. My boyfriend was not sleeping at that time, he saw that I was lying... I was lying on the floor convulsing. When I fell, I hit a wall, then it turned out that I had a cracked rib and a closed fracture. And this was the last straw for me. I thought that it was necessary to leave – this is a direct attack when there is damage to your health.

* * *

We met with the guy who hugged me that day in Okrestina and talked for a while. We stayed in touch. It turned out that he was pansexual. It's like a magic story. I've kind of decided to leave, and then it's like, «hi, there's still life here.» In fact, it's an incredible, magical story. Like, how did it happen, what is it? Sometimes it seems to me that you get a lot of things you want when you no longer need them in your life. And this injustice makes me sad. What for? Why? How to react to this?

The Second Story

I

When N. was detained, we still did not have all the information, we did not fully understand what was happening. Our friend passed us the news by text messages from Poland. And this feeling when you don't know what to do – feed the cat or something else – you are ready to tear yourself apart to help somehow, although at that time, let's put it this way, N. was not the closest person to me. And then each detention was like that. It reminded COVID:

at first, it was «someone out there». Someone out there got sick – someone out there got detained. My friend knows someone who got sick – my friend knows someone who got detained. Then the circle narrowed and narrowed, and you realized that there were practically no people left in your environment who had not been detained. And then... It's like you're getting used to it. The indignation doesn't last that long anymore. And you're happy if it's just a fine. Or just wait out these days in detention.

It's very scary that you get used to it. You notice these feelings: someone has been detained again, but you are calmer than before. It's like a child who gets used to violence in an abusive household – the same can happen here. When I realized this, I thought – okay, that's how defense mechanisms work now, but that doesn't mean I'm giving up.

II

The two things you care about when you are detained are the march reaching its destination and your loved ones worrying about you too much. You sleep for short periods, you doze, you think about your relatives, and it feels like you're reading your feed, you wonder if your friends at the protest were dispersed. You stand and sleep standing up, you remember your yoga instructor when you practiced something in one position. Or when it's cold, you remember camping and think: well, it's been even colder once. Clinging to something to bear it. And you just try to support each other.

It's hard when you don't know the rules. You don't know where they're taking you, what's going on, you can't call your loved ones. They are told that you are not in the Okrestina prison. They're going to Zhodino¹ when in fact I'm where they were told I wasn't. When you get to a police department, first they tell you «don't keep your hands under cold water for so long, you might catch a cold.» And then they put you on the goddamn concrete floor for four hours, when you can lie only with your sneakers under your kidneys.

If you think that when you are detained there is some certain procedure for registration in the police department, and then you are transferred to some particular place, and there is some kind of daily routine, then 15 days pass, and you get out the same person as you got there – you're wrong.

After the detention, at first, it seemed to me that now it would be less scary. But I remember going to the following march and realizing that I was damn wrong. It seems like I'm okay, but the slightest movement of the riot police or seeing someone run – and something twitches inside me immediately. I almost reached the end, and when the plain police clothes ran near the Opera House, I was standing near some bench and just sat down, lit a cigarette, and realized that I was wrong when I thought that it would be less scary now. Then I walked to the subway station. It seems like you're just walking down the street, no longer in a protest crowd, there are no ribbons, no flags, noth-

¹ Zhodino and Okrestina are pretrial detention centers, the first in the city of the same name around 50 kilometers outside of Minsk, and the second is in the capital.

ing – and you’re still not sure whether you’ll get to the subway or not. You get scared by every passing minibus, I mean, even a security guard inside a store triggers such a reaction. There will be such consequences, and we just have to decide how to deal with them.

III

When people joined the first Sunday march – it was an incredible, mind-boggling sight. There are so many of us! But the sense of community did not come immediately. I’ll be honest, my life had been showing me that it was every man for himself. Probably, it was only with the beginning of COVID that it began to feel that if some accident happens, you can count on someone. But when you haven’t experienced it for a long time, it’s very difficult to believe it.

At first, I had a feeling that there are these people and there is me, and they are kind of together, and I am «kind of» as well. But I didn’t have this feeling of solidarity and community. It began to appear when people started smiling at each other on the street. It was very unusual.

I probably believed it after Okrestina, when I was released – and someone brought me coffee, a blanket, offered to sit down². And I didn’t seem to need it then, I was okay, but still... It was the first time in that period that I burst into tears. All that brutality that was going on before horrified me, but I hadn’t had this emotion – I hadn’t cried. It turns out that in the end I was more impressed by the second side – kindness, mutual assistance... As if violence is something you prepare for and expect. These days in detention, the arrest, all such moments are not very pleasant, but it was easier to «put up with» them than with this cup of coffee given to you on the street when you’re ready to burst into tears just from the fact that it’s happening.

People are probably the most striking thing to me. It seemed to me that with such people you would be definitely taken care of. There is such an exercise when you fall backward from some elevated place, and people catch you. It’s still very hard for me, but I think I could «fall» with such people. It’s as if you already see it with your own eyes but still can’t believe that it can be so. But in the end, you start to trust... Trust people, and in general trust life.

The Third Story

I

When it all started back in April [COVID-19 – editor’s note], I was in quarantine for a long time, apathy and impotence accumulated, and at some point, I felt that I had to do a lot to somehow compensate for all the time when I was in «suspended animation». So began my return to life. At first, I sewed medi-

² Outside Okrestina, volunteers established a camp where they offered medical, legal, and psychological aid to released detainees. Read more: <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2020/08/19/the-mutual-aid-corridor>

cal masks³, then I joined Food Not Bombs⁴, I began to get more and more used to risks (as practice has shown, you can get detained for giving away meals), and I understood that I was mostly ready to participate in something.

On August 10, I was where the action was. When I got too scared, I left, then came back, brought water, and left again – I ran around like that. And when, a month later, I read about the violence experienced by the detainees that day, I realized how miraculously I managed to avoid something horrendous. Going there wasn't some rational decision, it was made mostly out of guilt. On August 9, we were walking with a friend, and she wanted to go to the protests, but I was too scared. I walked her to an intersection, and I kind of go and understand that, on the one hand, I want to drop everything and go, and on the other hand, there's a voice inside: no, they'll kill you, stay the fuck away from there. And I turned around and went home. I was ashamed, I blamed myself very much for not going with her. The next day I decided – here goes nothing – I'm going out.

It was hard to stay away. I couldn't sleep, I think many couldn't. I was rushing around my apartment, but I could hear everything from the balcony, and even if I closed the door, I still could hear everything. I understood that I was going to go crazy there, there was no Internet connection, and you couldn't get distracted anyhow. And I didn't want to be distracted, I couldn't. And I decided to go, among other things, to find some semblance of inner peace. I'm outside – and that's it, I'm here, where I should be, everything is over, I can breathe out. Without hesitation.

II

All this time I had thoughts of bringing queerness to the protest. Even before the queer block, my friend and I went out with a small banner «Pussyboys and sheep support the miners»⁵ with a reference to the movement «Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners». It did not draw attention; except for us

³ During the beginning of COVID pandemic in Belarus, Lukashenko declined to institute measures to restrict movement and mass gatherings, there was not enough PPE in hospitals, and many regular people and organizations joined a nationwide effort to help hospitals and doctors: <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarusians-colunteer-coronavirus-lukashenko-plays-down-covid-19-threat/30594557.html>

⁴ Food, not Bombs is a worldwide movement that gives away food for those in need free of charge (e.g., in the form of vegan meals). The movement is closely related to anarchist and anti-capitalist ideas. As in many other countries in the world, it is also criminalized in Belarus: <https://freedomnews.org.uk/2021/01/28/belarus-food-not-bombs-activists-receive-prison-sentences-for-giving-away-food/?fbclid=IwAR0ZGGzoJ8lmYHw88rRVgn-P0o1Feyp-4mwoyITllyOsc67ZXq2qgkalf-II>

⁵ «Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners» was a protest movement in Great Britain in the 1980s in which gay and lesbian activists publicly supported the miners' strikes. During the protests in Belarus, this banner was used to express the support of the striking workers. "Pussyboy" (originally "rooster" from Russian "петух") is a derogatory term for gay men mainly associated with prison hierarchy, it has been used by prison personnel and police to humiliate detainees. "Sheep" is a derogatory term that governmental media used to depreciate women taking part in the protests.

and our friends, no one understood this reference, but we were proud of ourselves that we came out with such a queer banner.

A couple of weeks later, we were already walking with the queer block⁶. The first time was the scariest – we were a very bright, attention-grabbing group, and if before that I could somehow blend in with the crowd, then there was no such opportunity. In any case, you are the center of attention, as if you have a target on your back, and you are simply at the mercy of the crowd. Fortunately, everything was fine. And now I remember it not as «God, what a fool I was, it was so scary,» but rather with joy and pride.

I am proud and glad that, despite all the hate, we have introduced this agenda. And I don't doubt for a second that it was the right decision. I noticed that there were different approaches to introducing this agenda. Someone was promoting the idea that the oppression that all Belarusians are experiencing now is how we have always felt. This approach is not quite close to mine. Yes, it is important, but for me, it was not the most important aspect.

For me, it was important to convey that we exist, we are also part of the protest, we are not some group of people who are always «on the outside» and suddenly appear when they need something, but who are always close, who have their social stance, even if «you don't know about it.» It was important for me to identify myself. As it was important for students to identify themselves, or pensioners, or miners, by analogy, as in any case when there is a social group with strong social ties within it which makes it possible to unite and represent a greater force than everyone by themselves. And that's great.

I'm sure only a few understood the banner «How are we going to explain OMON to our children?» Probably more than «Pussyboys and sheep support miners», but still not as much as we would like. Some said, «Why are you comparing?» (it is simple to explain queerness to children, but not OMON, the riot police). And we explained that that was a kind of mirroring. I understand that the meaning was understood only by those who heard this phrase a thousand times in their address. But I'm okay with this joke being only for the inner circle.

III

I felt part of the protest even when I didn't identify myself as a queer person or wasn't part of the queer block. Queer is part of my identity, but not all of it, so it was okay for me not to label myself. It was interesting for me to be there in both aspects.

I didn't shout the slogan about «sucker pussyboys», addressed to the police, but I didn't feel any intense aggression or sadness because everyone used it. I understood that people can repeat hate speech without analyzing it, without processing all its meanings, and I was ready to turn a blind eye to the correctness of their vocabulary, realizing that we have one common goal.

⁶ Read more: <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2020/11/10/the-rainbow-colours-flying-together-with-the-white-red-white-flags-the-belarusian-lgbt-community-at-protests/>

I had different emotions about the slogan «Long live Belarus!», as it is, essentially, a nationalist slogan. I've been shouting it all my life, but now I've started to rethink it, and at some moments I didn't shout it, but at some I still did – as if it rose above the nationalist idea and became just a protest slogan. Like the white-red-white flag. My favorite slogan is «Put prison trucks to prison trucks». I sometimes shouted «Put Lukashenko to a prison truck», but then I thought – I'm against prisons. And on the other hand, it's just an expression of aggression. And it is normal to feel aggression, it is normal and important to express it. But I'm against prisons. And it was also a fluid sensation. And then when I heard «Put prison trucks to prison trucks», later I used only it. It perfectly expressed both anger and some kind of ideological rationale.

IV

I started to process these fears [of detention – editor's note] back in June 2020, at one point I was discussing it with my girlfriend and just sobbed at the thought that I could go to prison, that I (with the gender marker changed to male in my ID) would be totally fucked up there. Probably because I went through all this horror and grief at the beginning of summer – in September, when I was deciding whether to go or not to go, I didn't think whether I would pass or not and how it would affect me. I relied more on irrational feelings: whether I was scared or not, anxious or calm. It was more of an emotional decision. It seems to me that one decides to participate in protests largely relying on emotions. Today I'm not very scared – I'll go, today I'm very scared – I won't go.

When my trans friend was detained, I felt guilty that we were not detained together. This is the survivor's guilt. I worried about him. Of course, it was very scary – you can imagine what kind of special treatment one might get. And he did. It was important for me to know every little detail about what had happened to him in order to imagine what could have happened to me. And, probably, due to the fact that I thought a lot about it in June, imagined myself in the worst scenarios (rape, physical violence, etc.), when I didn't read about it happening to him, I felt some relief. Like, it's fucked up, but not as much as I imagined. He was released. It is clear that he will have nightmares about it all his life, but at least he's physically intact. After that, I began to feel a little less anxiety. No matter how terrible, wrong and inhumane this treatment was, it seemed that I could take that risk.

V

After two marches with the queer block, I felt an attack of decadence. Several of my friends were detained in other marches, and since then my activity in terms of taking to the streets has dropped very much. I went to another march when many people from the queer block were detained. We had been walking with the protest crowd for 5 minutes, and that was it. I was already in a very tired mood then. After that, I returned to other risky things only in December. And then I was in a much more depressed state. But all the

same, it rather supported me. I compare myself with other people from queer activism who publicly write about their moods, and I feel that no matter what, I still have more hope that not everything is gone. I think this is due to the actions that I did, which gave me strength, despite the fact that they were risky.

Despite all the horrors that happened in the world, 2020 is a very cool year for me. I participated in life and felt that I was doing useful things. I found new friends, and the protests helped me to get in better contact with my aggression. Without exaggerating, without trying to philosophically justify the benefits of something bad in my life, I really say with joy and confidence that I finished that year with the advantages and acquisitions, and I continue to receive them because nothing is over yet. Many people say about themselves: «Me a year ago and me now are two different people.» I feel it very strongly. A lot of radically new things happened in my personal life, I never thought before that I would dare or allow myself to do something like that. And I think that the whole year is like a transformational wave that pushes you and helps you to change yourself and do something new – not necessarily good or bad, it's unclear how to evaluate it, just something qualitatively new.

The Fourth Story

I left Belarus on the first days of the August events. People around me managed to convince me that it was not safe for me to stay, that the government would change and we would face trial. And I fled. I fled from the proponents of changes when I first left in August, and six months later I ran away from the adherents of the «dying era».

I felt like a part of the system for a very long time. Until August 2020, I did not support the movement of changes. I understood that the people who took to the streets did not know what they protested against. By virtue of my work, I understood what kind of regime we had very well. All disloyal people were removed 15 years ago. And therefore, the more euphoria there was, the scarier it became for me.

In a sense, I think this is due to the «Stockholm syndrome», when a naturally weak and vulnerable person appears on the side of strength and begins to feel secure, and confident in their position. This, of course, greatly affects our assessment of reality. Therefore, before this snarl of the era, before the terrible events of August, unprecedented violence, and the subsequent deep humanitarian and political crisis, I was not on the side of those who wanted changes. I was on the side of the passing era. I was convinced that we could achieve everything through evolution – do you really want to say that nothing is happening in this country and nothing is changing? This is not true. I believed in it very sincerely. But today I do not share this position. I suffered in many ways just because I was very close to this system. Because, of course, such «betrayal» and «infidelity» (in the terms of the regime) are severely punished.

I didn't see a single reasonable solution offered by the passing era and was very disappointed. There were many opportunities to make at least one

sensible step toward the people. They were not some political party, not an opposition. They were very different people, with very different views. I have not seen any steps towards the evolution that I once really hoped for. A lot of things started to change in me. In September, I received an invitation to attend a theater festival in Ukraine. And my employers forbade me to leave. I took another vacation. It was clear to everyone where I would go on this vacation.

Basically, that was the moment when there appeared a split between me and the system. Upon my return, I was blamed for that, it was regarded as a betrayal. And they began to perceive me as «ideologically unsteady». It was a counter-revolution, the revenge of the passing era. «Other people» were simply no longer needed. And this, of course, greatly affected me.

There had been a time of «multi-vector efficiency» when «other» people were needed for showing off («we also have this»). It was so disgusting for me to hear people commenting on me saying «let us have one official...» (faggot, they meant), and yet it was still some degree of freedom. I gained the greatest possible share of freedom for myself, being in this system, having access to its resources, and using them for some other purposes, far from just performing ideological functions. I have been inside this system, and I understand that these structures (the Academy of Arts, the Academy of Music, the Ministry of Culture) are completely useless, but for performing ideological functions at the right moment, at ideological gunpoint – as it has happened now. But I understand that I was not there for it. I had other goals. All the years of my work in this field, I advanced a completely different theater, I promoted something completely different. Being in this system, I was able to gain for myself the position where I could remain myself as much as possible. It was also possible because such people were necessary, they needed to have such «cards» in their deck. Now they are no longer needed. Now such people can be thrown away.

It is interesting that my break with the state system was not connected with any specific event, I was not blamed for any specific activity during the events of August or subsequent events. I was blamed for the fact that everything I had done before was wrong. The performances that I promoted, the texts that I wrote, everything that I did was «purposeful undermining of the ideology».

The management wanted to dismiss me because of the «loss of trust» related to «non-compliance with the instructions of the State Security Committee». I managed to get fired at the end of the contract. I didn't want to be fired for a political reason. I think, why? Probably, it was impossible for me, because I regarded it as the result of some period of my life. And I didn't want to be assessed this way. I didn't deserve it. I wanted us to part ways for some neutral reason.

When my employment was over at the end of the year, I left for Ukraine. It was very difficult for me, even in mundane tasks – I had no money, I moved a lot, I did not have any certainty there. It was such a big difference compared to my life before that. People who knew me as a fairly successful person in the

profession now saw me as someone who came to ask for help, for temporary residence. In total, I lived in Ukraine for a month. I lived in a house with a glass veranda, a light came through it, but there was no window in the room where I lived. All of it affected me very hard. I was there all alone. This brought me to such a state that I began to have involuntary nervous breakdowns, I began to cry, I was losing my breath and could not stop.

In the end, having celebrated the New Year in a hostel in Kyiv and having drunk a bottle of champagne, I realized that I was leaving for Minsk the following day. On January 1, in the evening, I left for Minsk on the last Minsk-trans bus.

I'm safe now. I'm doing pretty well. But the most terrible thought for me today is that it seems to me that I have nowhere else to go back to. That I have nothing else to do in Belarus. Of course, I want to have the right to return to my family, to the people close to me who stayed there. I would like to return to Minsk because this is the city where I have lived all my life.

What is happening now in Belarus greatly devalues my life, its various spheres. When it is a challenge to the academic theater, the Belarusian theater school, when it is a challenge to the entire civil sector – this is a very personal challenge for me. It feels as if the world is collapsing. As if everything around is.

I feel a lot of pain and loss. I came to the theater very consciously, at a fairly mature age, I gave up a lot, gave everything to this profession, and it was as if I had lost everything. My whole life was there – my personal life, all my plans. It turns out that I was forced to leave the profession. And if we talk about the state system – I came out of there with one suitcase, I didn't earn anything, I didn't get anything. I left Belarus with this very suitcase, and that's it... I have nothing else.

I was thinking, why is anonymity important to me? Because it seems that everything is already in the past. Probably due to the same reason why it was important to me that I was not fired because of the «loss of trust». I can't break the connection with that time. For me, saying such things openly means breaking up with the past. I don't have the strength to do it, at least not now. At the same time, anonymity in this very individual story which has not very popular and typical references still feels multipurpose in a certain way – it shows that there are people with such a view, with such an experience as well. People who found themselves in the system and felt like a part of it, and having experienced this revolution inside themselves, they completely left this system.

The Fifth Story

I

Both sides called each other «faggots». I don't remember a single word that was used so often and with such anger, meaning the utmost degree of inhumanity.

I remember when I was detained, my cellmates «discussed» LGBTQ+ issues now and again, of course, in a negative way. And I was so scared, hurt, and bitter, although this is not the first time, and it's far from the last one, but it seems impossible to get used to it. And you can't get away from these conversations, because you are locked together. We seem to protest for the same goal, detained for the same thing, but still. I didn't tell them anything because I was afraid to mess things up. I was in social isolation within social isolation.

I was kind of hurt by the fact that this is said by people who are on board with us. So even if this regime falls, we will still have problems. I saw the comments under the photos with rainbow flags. «Why did you take to the streets? We don't support you.» And it's young people who write this. You understand that you still have to live with these people in the same society, in same Belarus – new or old – and you understand that they are not with you. They see a new progressive Belarus in their own way. And it seems there is no place for us there, or we should just sit in the corner and do nothing («do whatever you want behind closed doors»). These comments are not just the way people talk on social networks. These are real people who really think that and really say that. And I heard it, I saw it, I was in detention with them.

II

I was detained on November 13. When I was in prison, my mother wrote to me that my cousin gave birth to her son. On the day of my detention. I was detained, and somewhere out there my nephew was born.

When I've seen the news about Roman Bondarenko's death, I went to the Square of Changes⁷, lit a candle, put flowers... and the next day we were going to do something with my fellow students: to go out to the entrance of the dormitory, turn on flashlights on the phones, chat, and share emotions. I went out, and there was no one out there. I went to our second dormitory – there was no one there either. And then I don't know what got into me, but I went to the Bison monument. I thought if no one would be there, I wouldn't remain there. I was very nervous then – when you receive such shitty news all the time, you realize that today it is him, and tomorrow it is you or your friend. So I went there, and there were three women standing there. Ordinary respectable women. We turned on our flashlights, we didn't shout anything, didn't say anything, I didn't even talk to them. 10-15 minutes passed, then a blue minibus arrived. I tried to leave – but I was grabbed by my hand and put in that minibus.

In Okrestina, the doctor asked if I had any chronic diseases. I said that I have depression and anxiety. What do you take? I replied. And she's like, well, we don't have that. In short, I had a two-week break from my medications. I was afraid that I would feel super-bad, but probably my body had mobilized

⁷ The Square of Changes is a backyard in Minsk, which since August 18, 2020 has become the center of remembrance for the victims of state repression and the protest movement. Read more: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Square_of_Changes

a little. And I turned all these forces, all the anger into survival energy – I just had to survive.

On adrenaline, I wanted to laugh. I felt derealization. It seemed like it wasn't real, as if I was watching some movie. My brain coped this way. You wake up, and you want to rub your eyes and wake up again. It's a shame my detention was so stupid: not for a big march, not for some kind of super-action, but for a chain of solidarity made of five people. We didn't even have flags, posters, or anything. But they wrote in their reports that we were standing with posters and flags, shouting «Long live Belarus», disturbing everyone, and were super-dangerous. I pleaded not guilty, but no one was interested in it.

I was sentenced to 15 days of detention.

We got to Mogilev in a police van in a «stakan» [*a single-prisoner cubicle – translator's note*] one meter by one meter – and there were two of us, three of us there. We arrived, and again I had to undress. They scanned each item with a metal detector, every piece of clothing, even my mask. It wasn't enough just to undress and squat – you had to turn around, stick out your tongue, show your heels, elbows – everything was scanned and viewed. We haven't eaten for more than a day. We were taken for a walk just once. We didn't shower for two weeks – somehow we endured it all.

While we were in detention, the guys talked and talked. I don't remember what exactly, but they said something so offensive, something so untrue. Things like «I'm not a homophobe, but...» When they say that, they feel free and confident. They can say it and feel that the majority supports them. They think that you are also «on their side», that you will support them, that everyone thinks so too. I wanted to say to them, well, here I am doing time with you, I am like you, a normal good guy, we get along... but we still have to spend here many days, and if something goes wrong, then it's over. Of course, they won't put me near the shithole and won't spit on me, but who knows what they will do and what they will say. Because I can't go out for a walk while they're there discussing «if gays are humans or not.» And you understand that the people who are on your side, who fight for everything good and pure, for our victory – when everything is over, they will be against us anyway. And whatever you say – that we protested as you did, that we were detained as you were – you can't prove anything. You feel hurt and bitter. You can't go anywhere not to hear it. I chose not to get into trouble, just to be safe. Because I still had a long detention time ahead. And these conversations occurred now and again.

That's ordinary systemic homophobia which has spread its spider legs through the whole society and affects literally our whole life.

III

I was released from the Mogilev Temporary Detention Facility, first my mother met me at the door, behind her was my boyfriend, and then everyone else. He and I hugged for a minute. But even if we made out, mom wouldn't understand anything. She's sure we're just friends. He came to meet me and

booked return tickets for a minibus, he thought he would go back to Minsk in the evening. And I'm like, why won't you come to our place? I do not know why I said that. Well, and my parents were like, yes, yes, stay with us for the night. My boyfriend, whom my parents didn't know about, spent the night at my place. I was freaking out. In the morning he and my mother talked, and then she put him on a minibus to Minsk. She still thinks he's my friend, but we broke up a month ago. It hurt a little, but it's fine.

Neither mom nor dad knows that I'm gay. Cause I get everything: when they see something like that on TV, they scoff a little. I'm afraid that while I'm not financially stable, I don't have my own housing yet, and there may be problems. When I will live in a dormitory, have a scholarship, when I will be less dependent, maybe then I will tell them. But I believe they will change. Because mom and I have been through a lot. First I was hospitalized because of my depression – she was there with me, then I was detained – she bravely went through it all, supported me, said «I'm with you.» There's one last trial left: to tell my mom that I'm gay. I think maybe everything will be fine. Dad is also not a super toxic masculine person, not super homophobic. I believe in them. They are good people, they will learn.

IV

After the detention, I applied for free psychological help. I wrote that I want a psychologist (preferably a female psychologist) to be LGBT-friendly. So we went through my whole gay story with her. We didn't even talk much about my time in prison. I had to go through everything: my relationships, growing up, childhood, and parents. She helped me a lot. It turns out that I had to get detained so that I could get this help. It would be amazing if I just had to say that I am gay and that I need help.

I can already talk about it, joke about it, but my voice is still shaking. When policemen pass by, especially in uniform with batons – I'm freaking out, my heart immediately sinks. Even if it's not a policeman, but a security guard in a supermarket, or just a man in black... it's still scary.

I was supported by the fact that I knew that it would end, I would get out and life would be normal. I knew that at uni, probably, no one would expel me. At my faculty, they supported me and made the rector's office treat me well. That is, I had no problems at uni, I finished my semester without any stress, then, when my condition deteriorated, I got an academic leave. I got it with no trouble, just because I had my diagnosis on a piece of paper: I am being treated and I need a year for this treatment.

The letters were very supportive, and the care packages as well. I got letters from very unexpected people. From a girl I don't know – just a stranger wrote me a letter. Or from people I didn't expect to think about me, not even to write a whole letter. My friends wrote to me. They later said that they tried to pass me notes – it didn't work out, I received them later, but it still warms my heart. I keep them all, I remember. Letters are super-important, you definitely need to write letters – this is great support.

The Sixth Story

I. August 9 and 10

My name is Seth, I'm 26 years old, I'm from a small town in Belarus. When the protests began on the 9th, I had a work shift. I tried to move it, but it didn't work out. So I had to watch all those horrors from my tiny room – some news was sent to me by guys who were in my hometown, some was sent by guys who were here [in Minsk – editor's note] on the streets. When the Internet appeared literally for a second or two, you could see what was happening on the streets. Your guys get maimed and beaten, and you just sit and watch – it wasn't much fun.

So on August 10, we decided: screw the protest, we need to do one specific thing. We took medications, bandages, antiseptic, and water, and carried them to people. It was not so important for us to participate in the protest itself, it was important for us to pick up people who were injured, barely escaped, and help them⁸. August 10 was hell. We watched where the crowd was going, and moved at some distance from it. I had to constantly be on the lookout, run away and use the minimal experience that I had, just to protect people around me. We are not all warriors and fighters in the sense in which it was necessary at that protest. So at two o'clock in the morning, it was decided to call it a day and take the people who were with us home. We didn't manage to get everyone to their places, so we took them to ours so that they wouldn't be left on the streets – it would be easier in the morning.

On the 11th, I got a call from work, they told me: «You have an hour, get ready. We've gathered our team, found a car, you're all leaving.» We spent almost a month in Ukraine. Just stuck there. It was hard, but I had no way out. I couldn't lose my job. Upon arrival, after two weeks in quarantine, I immediately returned to the streets. But it wasn't as rough as on the 9th or 10th.

II. Hometown

When you live in a city of 100 thousand people, you are brown with Middle Eastern face features, and all guys who are more or less socially active are ultra-right, you have to survive somehow. First, you internalize homophobia, you realize that you are far from straight, but you learn to hate it and hide it as much as possible through this hatred. When in your family any mention of the LGBT community is followed by «faggots should be burned and shot», when you have been trained for years to hate yourself, eventually, you start doing it. I joined the fascist movement, and so at least

⁸ During the first days of the protests a lot of people were injured and could not get help because the police were arresting ambulance staff, doctors, seizing medicine, and were scared to go to hospitals fearing police retribution, so ordinary people and professionals volunteered and providing services in the field and at home: <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2020-08-18/volunteers-brave-risks-to-give-belarus-protesters-medical-aid-food>

I wasn't subjected to constant violence. They knew me, I could name a couple of names, so they often left me alone. It was all racially motivated, and of course, no one knew that I was queer, otherwise I would have completely lost all my privileges. They despise you, they look down on you, they don't like you, but at least they don't beat you. That's how it works somehow.

When I moved to Minsk, I joined an online movement, and, to be honest, it turned out to be much worse than the offline one. Online, hiding behind the mask of anonymity, you can do terrible things, bully and drive to suicide, and organize campaigns of the most cruel humiliation of people. I remember one of these campaigns when a girl with a disability was bullied for making reposts from feminist blogs. She attempted suicide, the second attempt was successful. It felt as if I was hit in the face with an oar. I thought that we were calling for some kind of «power of the nation», that we were a part of this movement to avoid such cases, but it turns out that we are the evil that does not allow humanity to develop properly. I said no, I have to get out of this. The long process of getting out of this shit began. Now I'm here.

I cut off all social ties, sat at home all alone, didn't do shit. I was very lucky to meet one person (my fiancée), we are together now. She's queer. Because of my alt-right views, we didn't get on well in the very beginning. A year passed before we started communicating again. I was already a little less reactionary then, a little less messed up in this regard, and we got along with her. It was important to have a person who explained what was going on.

What do they tell you about prides when you are in that movement? That those are «degenerates who came out to convert children to their terrible faith.» What do you learn from the LGBT community? You learn the history of how it all started and why everything really happens. The guys take to the streets because they still feel shitty. And if there is at least some venue for freedom, then why not use it – why not show people around that being yourself is normal? What do you think about the transgender issue? These are either sick people, or people who want to earn money somehow, or these are people who had their brains fucked up by «scary terrible leftists.» What do you learn about transgender people when you come to the LGBT movement? That it's just people, that's all. There is no «common ideology», although before that I had a delusion that there was.

It was an identity crisis. I didn't know what to do. I've already come to terms with the fact that I'm queer, that I don't have to suppress it in myself («live and let live»). But I didn't understand what was going on inside this movement, why it was like that. If you don't know the history, you don't know the roots, you don't understand why people do certain things. So slowly, starting with prides (the easiest thing that can be explained to a person) and ending with the question of transgender women in women's sports – as soon as these things began to have more context, it became clearer and it was easier to accept them.

III. Queer block

When I saw the queer block at the protests, I got scared, I opened our neighborhood group chats⁹ and saw what people were saying about it. All my fears were confirmed: I saw that, unfortunately, society is not ready to accept allies in the form of the LGBTQ. There were allies there, but the general attitude was «Why do we need them?» My participation mostly consisted of opening the chat and suppressing this reactionary rhetoric. They were usually quite persuaded when I told them: «Are there too many of you? They are not fighting for legalizing same-sex marriage right now, they are protesting against dictatorship, against deaths, against violence, which they have experienced many times more than you – therefore, shut your mouth and accept your allies.» It seems to me that they don't want to see a political protest process at least a week in advance. They know that tomorrow «faggots will come», and they think «we want no faggots». That's their whole idea. And then, when you protest, you, of course, expand the window of what is permissible, but in the end, you are not particularly different from the movement you are fighting against if you cannot accept an ally.

A protest movement cannot just assemble, do something together, and not have a fight with each other later after the victory. But in order to overcome such a serious repressive apparatus as the state, and the state in the form it has here, 10 socialists will not be enough, we will also need conservatives and free-marketeers. Most people understand this. When some people flew black flags, I heard some say: «I don't like anarchists, but since they are with us, maybe these guys are okay.» If there was antagonism, it ended with «I don't care, they protest with us.» This was the case with everyone, the only movement that received harsher treatment was the LGBTQ community.

IV. Detention

After the murder of Roman Bondarenko¹⁰, my fiancée and I first went to the Taraykovsky Memorial¹¹ to say thank you, then we were going to pay homage at the Square of Changes. It was November 15, when the detentions were quite tough. They dragged me into their bus, first they beat me with their fists, then they tried to kick me, but since the bus was moving, they couldn't. When they realized that they could not kick me, one of them stepped on the back of

⁹ Neighbourhood group chats on Telegram became a distinct phenomenon during the Belarusian protests. Villages, city districts, and sometimes individual houses organised chats, uniting neighbours and fostering cooperation: <https://www.internetjustsociety.org/how-telegram-shaped-the-belarusian-protest>

¹⁰ Roman Bondarenko was an activist stopped by plainclothes officers during an altercation between opposition and pro-government citizens. Eyewitnesses claim to have seen masked men, thought to be police, beating Bondarenko, who later died in hospital.

¹¹ Aljalexandr Tarajkouski was a demonstrator who was shot dead by security forces during the protests in Minsk on August 10, 2020. A video released on August 15 shows him approaching police officers with empty hands raised, stopping in front of them, and then being shot.

my head and pressed my face into the floor so that later a red crust remained. But compared to how others were tormented, you could say I was just tickled.

Then they took me out of the bus and took me to the prison truck, they asked: is this one normal or not? «Well, so-so.» They asked the question «normal or not normal» about every detainee. And when someone responded «not normal», the beating began. There's nothing to talk about with them, so you just walk in silence and do what they say. We were taken to a police department, where the 12-hour registration process began, after which they told us: this group will now go to Zhodino, this group will go to Okrestina, and these ones will be released. They took us to the prison truck, put us on our knees, hands behind our heads, and with our heads down we had to sit for another two hours – our compressor broke down, and we waited for a new one to arrive. They really wanted to talk, but as soon as you started answering and they didn't like something, they beat everyone around. By the way, they immediately «explained» all this violence to us. «Any move you make, any attempt to talk back will be considered as aggression in our direction and we will use special means against you, is everything clear?» When they brought us to Zhodino, twenty of us were loaded into a cell for eight. The first couple of days were not very good. During the day we were not even allowed to sit on the bunks. Where to sleep at night? Twenty people can't fit properly in the cell, so someone had to sleep near the radiator, which was so hot it could make your head spin, someone slept on the floor, those who were lucky to get to the bunks slept on the bunks. But they didn't even give us mattresses.

Then the trials began. They were held via Skype, mostly no one had any witnesses – only those who demanded them. At the trial, I told the truth that I came not to protest, but to honor the memory of the dead. That I didn't shout slogans. They sentenced me to 10 days.

V. Homophobia and violence

The riot police asked every group that fell into their hands, «who supports the faggots here»? And it's better not to say that you do because you will get a much more horrendous treatment. And if you are «one of them» – never talk about it in your life. The only ones who could say something about it were clearly straight people. In that situation, only they could somehow protect this movement.

When you see a very closed male collective that talks endlessly about fucking each other – clearly this subject means something to them. I think it's a way to show a domineering attitude. Here I can draw a parallel with my former community. Antagonism against homosexuality is a very simple way to assemble a toxic masculine group when people are not educated when they do not meet LGBTQ people in their lives, and all they hear is exclusively state propaganda. This homophobia is so overemphasized because they have no other excuse for antagonism. To talk about social problems, and politics, you need a deep understanding of these things.

Inside our LGBTQ circles, we discussed what was going on. When there were some victories, we rejoiced, when it got worse, we cried. I don't have extensive social connections, but almost all LGBTQ people I have ever talked to (with very rare exceptions) have always opposed violence as much as possible. That is, even if we are beaten, killed, tortured for several days in Okrestina – we will still be peaceful. I think the reason for this is the history of violence against the LGBTQ community itself. Like, we have been subjected to so much violence, and we understand that violence is always bad, no matter who is its target. Being in the movement for not so long, I don't understand it. In my previous movement, guys wouldn't do that. This is the main problem and the main strength of the right: they are ready to use any venue to promote their goals, it doesn't matter, the main thing is the result. But their result is an endless continuation of violence.

I understand that after the protests it will become better, freer, but the protest itself will not solve deeper social problems, will not solve the problem of the small group of people I belong to. In the next 10 years, same-sex marriage will not be legalized here, it will not be normal to be an open gay of my color on the streets. This will require fundamental changes in society. Therefore, I plan to leave, if not now, then someday. And this desire is not connected to protests. I've always thought about leaving. I'm not particularly happy with this society, I don't see myself in it... I don't feel at home here, and I never have. For the first time I felt at home in Dubai where no one even looks at me, no one cares, you're just one of a huge number of different people, nations, cultures that co-exist here.

The Seventh Story

This text is about visibility and invisibility. About my attempt to integrate my experience as an LGBTQ person into the general protest experience of Belarusian people last autumn. As a starting point, I want to take a small period of time and take a closer look to try to consider how different lines are intertwined in it and what pattern they form.

* * *

In 2019, the Open Hearts Foundation, with the support of the Catholic Church of Belarus and its then head, Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, collected 52,000 signatures on a petition calling for criminal liability for spreading information about LGBT people. In February 2020, together with other LGBT initiatives, we gathered and brainstormed, thinking about what we, as an LGBT community, could do about it. One of the decisions we made was to write a letter to the Pope asking him to condemn hatred. Our goal was for the Pope to pronounce the word «Belarus» publicly, addressing the world from his rostrum. We wanted people to hear about us.

On March 5, 2020, we sent the letter to the Pope.

On March 9, 2020, the Open Hearts Foundation held a press conference on the results of collecting signatures. «The church supported this initia-

tive because it corresponds to the teachings of Jesus Christ,» Tadeusz Konrusiewicz said at that meeting.

We started preparing our press conference with the parents of LGBT people, but we didn't have time to hold it. On March 11, 2020, WHO announced a COVID-19 pandemic, and there was no room left in the media for any other agenda, so we canceled the meeting.

Today it seems that it all happened in another life.

August 16, 2020, during the traditional sermon in St. Peter's Square in the Vatican, Pope Francis says: «I entrust all Belarusians under the protection of Our Lady, the Queen of Peace.»

* * *

What do I know about (in)visibility? As a Belarusian. As an LGBT+ person. As a non-binary person in Belarus.

Until August 2020, my experience as a Belarusian overlapped and coincided with the experience of an LGBT+ person. Just as I felt my invisibility as a queer person in a heteronormative world, Belarus has always remained invisible to the outside world. And my affiliations here had to be described through many words and other names. – Where are you from? – From Belarus. – ? – It's between Russia and Poland. And suddenly, with every cell of my body, I felt what it was like to be the center of attention when all eyes were directed at me. Belarus has become part of the global agenda. Extreme violence has made us visible and put us on the map of the world. Why was it difficult to digest this new and long-awaited experience of visibility? Maybe because «with every cell of my body» at the same time I felt the opposite – that there is no place for me here, and I am not there. I experienced visibility and invisibility all at once. I've been thinking a lot about how to cope with such active attention directed at you at a time when another important part of you remains invisible. And how is it possible to experience two opposite processes at the same time?

At marches, standing next to other people, I felt excluded as a queer (non-binary) person. This experience was most acute at the moment when a feminist block was formed in the Women's marches. The way people chatted (addressing everyone as «girls», etc.), how I was invited to join, but I noticed that my cis male friends were not invited as well. Many of my friends joined the feminist block at the march on August 29. And I just physically couldn't do it. And it was hard. No matter how I tried to explain to myself the irrationality of my action (that «all this is unimportant now», «it doesn't matter who calls me and this march which way», etc.) – I couldn't do anything about the fact that uncontrollably, against my will, at that moment my entire trans experience came to the forefront. I felt that when I was included in this march, I was included as a woman (*). But I'm not a woman (with or without an asterisk). It seems to me that cis men at the Women's marches were automatically read as allies (and in this regard, there was also a place for them there). And where was mine?

I was reliving the painfully familiar experience of the impossibility to be myself, it was the thing that did not allow me to join the action, whose values I deeply shared, which did not allow me to stand with the people close to me. And it was only with the appearance of the queer block that I realized that there was a place for me in the Women's marches.

On September 5, 2020, during the next Women's march, a queer block appears at the protests for the first time. A day when, in some miraculous way, many stories intertwined for me (including personal ones). And there was a place for everyone. The march began at the Komarovskiy market and ended at Independence Square. When prison trucks and police vans arrived at the square, when people in camouflage uniforms and masks came out, we all climbed the steps of the Red Church and lined up in several rows. I looked at the masked people and thought if they start pushing us back and detaining us now, will I be able to hide in this church where they had collected signatures against me quite recently? Because of these contradictions, it seemed, my brain was about to explode. But I felt that there was a place for me, as well as for everyone else.

The queer block created a place for me at the Women's marches. It was not there a priori, but as soon as it appeared, it became something very tangible and quite stable – I continued to go to the Women's marches even when queer people no longer publicly expressed their identities because at some point it became dangerous. I knew that *at that point* there was a place for me anyway.

I wonder how this place appears? After all, it didn't have one single creator. It was something that seemed to be in the air, many thought about it at the same time, it was already ripe and ready to appear as soon as someone would announce that *obvious*, but still not *self-evident* idea because it had a long history of fighting for its place.

«Are they with us or not?»: a history of acceptance and rejection

On September 5, in a bright, noticeable group, we quickly walked through the rows of Komarovka market to a gathering point, trying to break away from the police in plain clothes. Market workers and random passers-by looked at us, and there was a question in their eyes, I saw that they could not put us in any of the available «boxes». Our symbols were incomprehensible to them. What does this rainbow mean? What are their slogans about? Who are these people?

– *Are they with us or not?*

– *They are with us.*

Words cannot convey what I felt after overhearing this short conversation while we were walking between the rows of Komarovka. I still have tears in my eyes when I write about it. Such an unusual and long-awaited feeling of acceptance, which you have not expected for a long time (I remember all the stories of the exclusion of LGBT activists from the protests of previous years), but suddenly you get it. You are «with them».

Later, acceptance was also followed by rejection. Again, two ambivalent oppositely directed experiences. It turns out that at the same time you need

to be visible in order to get a place for yourself, but at the same moment when it appears, this visibility makes you vulnerable. LGBTQ people were the only social group that, after it identified itself, others tried to exclude from the protests. That is, you «get your ass kicked» for your visibility, but at the same time you are being forced to be visible, otherwise, you will not be able to say that you took part in the protests. It is telling that in many media sources the appearance of the queer block in the protests was described as «the LGBTQ community also joined the protests in Minsk.» Such recognition of our contribution brought satisfaction, but at the same time, it brought pain, because we did not «appear», or «join», or something like that. LGBTQ people have been here from the very beginning: we were observers at polling stations, in teams of alternative candidates, on the streets, and in volunteer movements – we have always been here, and now we have simply identified ourselves. And as soon as we did it, we faced aggression in our direction.

«This is our city»

The slogans «This is our city!» and «We are the power here!» appeared first at one of the Women’s marches, and later became one of the staples at big Sunday marches. I have devoted a lot of time in my activism to appropriating the history of the city by the LGBTQ community. I recorded interviews with activists of the past years, told stories about places memorable for the LGBTQ community, returning queer places to the general map of the city. That is why the slogan «This is our city!» contained several meanings for me at the same time – in it (again) my two identities – of a Belarusian and a queer person – were able to connect and coincide. When I shouted it together with other people, everything inside started to tremble, and I finally felt whole.

My second favorite chant was the roll call which was born in response to attempts to marginalize the protesters, calling them «sheep», «prostitutes» and «parasites». At first, protesters tried to reject these names, it was possible to see quite a lot of posters like «We are not sheep,» «I am not a prostitute, but a mother,» etc. But gradually they began to be replaced by other posters. «Prostitutes with the people», «Junkies with the people», «Minsk has flourished under junkies and prostitutes». And finally, these statements transformed into a roll call, which I fell in love with as well as the slogan «This is our city!». It caused the same quivering in my body.

«Are the sheep here?» – «Here!» – «Junkies here?» – «Here!» – «Prostitutes here?» – «Here!» – «Parasites here?» – «Here!»

«Everyone is here.»