



## Prison health in Belarus

Belarusian political prisoners report worsening medical care, particularly since a crackdown on political dissent. Ed Holt reports.

For more on **Physicians for Truth and Justice** see <https://doctorsby.com/>

For more on **deaths of prisoners** see <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/belarus>

When Mikhail (full name withheld for security reasons) began what would end up as almost a decade in various prisons across Belarus, he was under no illusion about what he was about to face—overcrowding, poorly insulated and maintained facilities, and disease outbreaks are characteristic of the country's jails. Mikhail also knew that, as a political prisoner, he was likely to face even harsher conditions than other inmates. Even with this knowledge though, he was shocked at the poor health care he and fellow inmates routinely received there.

"I couldn't believe it. Doctors showed no interest in providing medical assistance and barely offered any treatment", he tells *The Lancet*. "By the time I got COVID-19 for the second time and was on the verge of death, I was no longer surprised at being denied medical assistance—by then it had become a systematic practice."

Mikhail, who left Belarus last year, is one of a growing number of former prisoners speaking out about how people in prison, especially political prisoners, struggle to obtain even basic medical care in prisons. "Political prisoners are now speaking the truth about extremely poor medical care", he says.

According to the non-profit organisation Physicians for Truth and Justice, which works to improve conditions for people in Belarusian jails, the situation has worsened since 2020 when President Alexander Lukashenko, who has ruled the country for the last 30 years, launched a crackdown on political dissenters after massive protests over a disputed election that returned him to power.

Vasily Zavadsky, one of the founders of the organisation, and who between 1998 and 2010 was Head of the Medical Service of the Department of

Corrections of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Belarus, told *The Lancet* there were two main reasons for this.

The first is a historical reluctance of doctors to work in penitentiary institutions, which, in recent years, has been exacerbated by mass emigration of medical professionals due to widespread societal repressions. "It is clear that with a catastrophic shortage of doctors in civilian clinics, the situation in penitentiary institutions is even worse", he said, adding that it was not uncommon for the post of prison medical unit head to be held by a paramedic due to a shortage of doctors. "Naturally, this creates additional problems for prisoners in terms of accessibility, quality, and effectiveness of medical care", he said.

The other main reason behind the worsening problems, according to Zavadsky, is the specific repression of people protesting against Lukashenko's rule, with prison administrations deliberately creating even harsher conditions for political prisoners.

Zavadsky said months-long stays in punitive isolation cells, where people are forced to sleep on boards or on the floor with no heating and sometimes without any bedding or heavy clothes to keep warm, were common for political prisoners. Keeping them incommunicado was another hindrance to proper care. In 2024, the deaths of at least three political prisoners, Aliaksandr Kulinich, Ihar Lednik, and Vadzim Khrasko, were preventable after delayed or inadequate medical care, according to reports.

Other former Belarusian political prisoners who spoke to *The Lancet* described how they were not just provided poorer care than other inmates, but in some cases denied it completely. "It took me 3 months to get an appointment with a dentist.

Political prisoners had a harder time obtaining medication—many were simply denied them, or their requests would go missing. We were constantly told, 'you're not at a holiday resort here'", Dzimitry (full name withheld for security reasons), who spent 1 and a half years at Correctional Facility number 1 in Novopolotsk, told *The Lancet*.

"I was shocked by the fluorography procedure. It was done just twice a year and the radiation source was placed at a distance, meaning our entire bodies were exposed to radiation. When I pointed out that my thyroid gland was enlarged, the doctor called over a colleague and said, 'Ludka, look at this—wow, impressive! Next!'", he added.

Gosha (full name withheld for security reasons), who suffers from arterial hypertension, served 3 months in Detention Center number 1 in Grodno. "Any request for medical assistance - medication, blood pressure measurement - was denied. The head of the medical service there told me that even if he were provided with medical documentation proving I needed the medicines on my prescriptions, I still would not receive them. All those involved in politically motivated cases were denied medical care", he told *The Lancet*.

Belarusian authorities did not respond to requests from *The Lancet*. But doctors who have treated political prisoners confirm they have seen the sometimes horrific results of poor health care in prison.

One Belarusian dentist who did not want to give their name for security reasons, told *The Lancet*: "After 3 months of detention, changes occurred in the jawbone due to poor oral hygiene, lack of nutrition, and a monotonous diet deficient in vitamins and minerals, leading to decompensated caries and generalised periodontitis."

“One young woman told me she was grateful to prison doctors just for extracting a tooth and administering anesthesia even though they removed the wrong tooth because the bleeding helped drain the pus.”

The dentist, who treated prisoners outside prison settings, added that in one case a prisoner had needed to have their jaw reconstructed after their release following poor dental treatment when inside prison. “I am convinced medical attention is only being provided to political prisoners if their life is in serious danger”, they said.

Meanwhile, the former head of the medical department at a prison in Brest admitted that, although he had no personal experience of the treatment of political prisoners, there were systemic problems with the provision of health care in Belarusian prisons. The former head of the medical department at the Brest prison, who is a doctor, described medical staff being subject to “chaotic and often absurd demands from management at all levels and constant pressure and oversight from various security agencies”.

General staff shortages also meant that doctors were regularly taken off their normal duties to perform tasks such as escorting prisoners from one location to another, overseeing exercises for inmates, and cleaning non-medical facilities. “Often, these non-medical tasks are prioritised over actual patient care, leaving doctors with insufficient time to examine inmates”, he said.

The former head of the prison medical department, as well as other experts and former prisoners *The Lancet* spoke to, said another factor affecting the quality of medical care is that prison medical units do not answer to the Ministry of Health but to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. “This isolates prison medicine from the broader civilian healthcare system, making oversight more difficult, limiting medical staff’s ability to maintain professional knowledge and skills, and hindering

the adoption of modern medical practices”, the former prison medical department head said.

“The overall health of inmates is also significantly impacted by the conditions in which they are held. Many prisons are housed in extremely old buildings with little to no natural light, insufficient ventilation, and poor control over humidity and temperature levels”, he added.

The former head of the prison medical department denied, however, that during the 10 years he worked at the prison, that he or other medical staff had ever received orders to withhold care from certain prisoners.

Of the former political prisoners who spoke to *The Lancet*, most said the medical personnel in the prisons they were in were either indifferent to the problems they were having securing health care, or actively participated in denying them treatment. But others, such as Anatoly (full name withheld for security reasons), who served almost 2 and a half years in total in different prisons between late 2021 and early 2023, said provision sometimes seemed completely arbitrary.

He said at the last facility he was held at in Vityba, “medical treatment was selective—I either received it or was denied it based on decisions made by people who had no authority to make such decisions...staff with military ranks, the quarantine chief, an operative officer, the official for ‘ideological work’, or the prison warden. Essentially, anyone but the medical staff.”

Zavadsky pointed out that medical workers had no real choice but to do what prison managers told them. “Medical workers have very little opportunity to resist such pressure...The remuneration for a medical worker, prospects for career advancement, and even workload depend on the leadership of the penitentiary institution”, he said.

Any doctors refusing an order from a superior, even to do something illegal,

would be unlikely to ever find work in another state institution again, he added.

According to the Belarusian human rights group Viasna, at the end of 2024 there were more than 1200 political prisoners held in jails in Belarus in what the group said were “appalling conditions without access to proper medical care”. Of those held, 104 people were in a precarious health state, 11 people had disabilities, 46 people were older than 60 years with many of those suffering serious health problems, and 16 people had mental disorders.

Although it is theoretically possible under Belarusian law for prisoners with serious medical conditions to be released, this rarely happens, with only some cases of those in late stages of terminal illness being allowed to go home to die, according to Zavadsky.

Despite concerns raised by international human rights bodies over the treatment of political prisoners and notwithstanding the release of more than 100 political prisoners in the run up to the January presidential elections, there appears to be little hope of an improvement in health-care provision for these people following Lukashenko once again winning elections at the start of the year.

“We cannot talk of any serious positive changes in the healthcare system for prisoners in Belarus at present, unfortunately”, said Zavadsky.

Former political prisoners say international advocacy and pressure on Lukashenko’s regime must be kept up to help release all political prisoners.

In the meantime, Zavadsky said his organisation would continue work “facilitating access to medical care for prisoners in Belarus”, although for security reasons he could not say exactly how that access would be facilitated.

“We maintain communications with colleagues in Belarus, and are helping prisoners and their relatives individually”, he said.

Ed Holt

For the *Viasna report on political prisoners in 2024* see <https://spring96.org/en/news/117068>

For more on the **concerns of rights groups** see <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/10/belarus-inmate-ill-treatment-and-possible-enforced-disappearances-ongoing>