An in-depth interview with anarchists Akihiro Gaevsky-Khanada and Andrey Chepyuk

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Part 1. “You definitely won’t be staying on the sidelines, because nothing’s over yet”

In 2020, anarchists Akihiro Gaevsky-Khanada and Andrey Chepyuk were among the first people detained in politically motivated criminal cases. At first, they and their comrades were charged with taking part in and organizing protests, even though some never even made it to any protests. Later, more and more charges under various articles of the Criminal Code were piled onto the case, and the defendants were labeled organizers and members of an “international criminal group” of anarchists from Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia. After almost two years of a so-called investigation and holding the guys in a pre-trial detention center, their trial began. It dragged on for months behind closed doors so the public wouldn’t see how absurd the charges were in a case cooked up by GUBOP (the Ministry of Internal Affairs’s anti-extremism and organized crime unit). Ten people ended up behind bars, with sentences ranging from 5 to 18 years for trumped-up crimes.

On the day he finished a six-year sentence and was due to be freed, Andrey Chepyuk was handcuffed and taken by GUBOP (anti-extremism unit) officers to Minsk for questioning over events from 15 years earlier. He was later released, placed under “preventive supervision,” and banned from leaving Belarus. A few months later, however, Andrey managed to escape.

Akihiro Gaevsky-Khanada was sentenced to 16 years in a penal colony. His sudden release as a Japanese citizen and expulsion from Belarus was the result of negotiations between the Trump administration and Lukashenko.

Today, five years after the first arrests in the case of the so-called international criminal group of anarchists, we’re launching a series of interviews with Akihiro Gaevsky-Khanada and Andrey Chepyuk. In this first part of our long conversation, we look into what it’s like to be among the first detained; to miss the surge of protest activity and its decline; to watch “generations” of political prisoners come and go and carry dozens of stories inside you; to lose hope and feel powerless because of the war in Ukraine; to be set free while your comrades remain behind bars?

It’s 2025 now; you’re among the few in your case who’ve been released (Andrei Marach and Daniil Chul were also released after serving their terms). But if we rewind to 2020 and try to remember… August, the protests are in full swing, truly confrontational for the first time in many years of Belarus’s existence and of Belarusians as politically active people. Then you, Akihiro, are detained on August 12, literally three days after the election. You miss everything that comes after and see it as if through the looking glass. Andrey, you’re detained on October 2; you had a couple of months to watch the protests, but you still ended up in custody while the streets were seething and it felt like any moment everything would change, that the regime was about to

crack. And you miss all of that. Did you have regrets about it? What was the mood? Did you hope for a quick change – and when did those hopes fade?

Akihiro:

The people who got imprisoned back in 2020 were running on emotion. Those who were jailed later, in 2021 or 2022, were a different story. I think the 2020 "generation" of political prisoners kept that energy. Later, when you meet them in the colony, and even now, when they're getting out, it feels like everyone who was arrested in the summer–fall of 2020 was more charged up emotionally, even though they didn't actually see the protests. Sometimes that takes a strange form — as you can see now, for example, with Sergei Tsihanouski: he's still running on that 2020 charge. I had it too, and it stuck with me while I was inside. Back then, in the fall, we kept saying: a year and a half at most, and something has to happen. The point of no return was behind us; the regime couldn't last long in that state. That's what we thought. I even bet someone that in 2025 Lukashenko wouldn't be on the ballot. And, well, I lost that bet.

Of course I regretted being arrested so early, especially later, when you realize the sentence will be long and totally out of proportion to what you did. You think: I should've ignored some caution or self-imposed brakes; I should've done more or at least ended up inside a couple months later. I really wanted to see that self-organization at the neighborhood level and at workplaces, to see how every sphere got politicized one way or another, how everyone was actively taking part – that surge across society.

For many years I'd thought that if mass protests ever happened, it would be a good, exciting time. And then you get arrested on one of the first days and see it all in a very limited way: through newspapers that still printed something; through lawyers who could still pass on news; through new people coming in. And by late spring 2021 it was already clear that nothing was going to work out yet.

Sure, I regretted getting grabbed so early, but I still felt like a participant in what was happening in the sense that there, inside [in prison], you can still make choices, although in a reduced form, and still take part in what's going on.

Andrey:

I'd put it a bit differently: for me it all depended on the environment, on the vibe around me. If the cell filled up with the political "intelligentsia" – more theorists than people who actually organized or took part in protests, like reporters, bloggers, and others who were more passive about the agenda – you'd hear all kinds of opinions about the prospects and where the protests might lead. But I definitely remember a period when the street protests were winding down: as far as I recall, in November pensioners marched for a couple of Sundays, and it already felt like the protest was fading and that this was the end. Then, when the neighborhood activity appeared, it gave even more energy and faith that it wouldn't end like that. I believed in that kind of civic self-governance, that was the ideal way for things to unfold, better than what happened on August 9–12. I liked that path; and later it really did take shape, and I was amazed at what it led to and how it looked: people just gathered and built their own infrastructure. It made me really happy, inspired me for a couple of months – probably up until the war.

At the same time, it was interesting to watch the repressive side of things. In 2020 and early 2021 in the pre-trial jail, from time to time you'd see people getting detained in groups, like ours, and it was interesting to track the trend – what charges, what groups, what criminal cases. At first they held basically everyone under a single article in one big "mass riots" case, and then they split people into separate proceedings. Later, by mid-2021, when the charges diversified and the

groups did too, it got quite disturbing: you'd see more and more rare, murky articles being used. Then the procedural code changed. And the streets had already quieted down by then, activity was almost suppressed, and you could feel how everything was shifting.

As for disappointment, I'd say I didn't feel it during my entire time in pre-trial detention. But after I was transferred to the colony, an information vacuum set in, and it got harder to analyze what was happening objectively. Too much time had passed, and it was impossible to tell what was fake news and what were real facts.

So it turns out that by analyzing your cellmates' stories, you could track which slice of society was being detained, who was fighting and how, what charges were being brought, and what kind of sentences people were getting. You've got a lot of invisible knowledge that, it seems, is often underrated.

Akihiro:

Yeah, in interviews people often ask about violence, tortures, conditions in the penal colonies, and so on. A ton has already been said about that. Conditions keep changing – usually for the worse – and it's important to talk about it so people know. Still, without seeing it from the inside, it's hard to grasp all the nuances.

But people rarely ask how the "generations" of political prisoners changed, how the mood of the newcomers shifted. It's one thing when it's the people who were already activists, folks already involved in politics; then came those who just took part in street protests; and it's a totally different story with people jailed over comments. They don't understand why they were detained at all; some don't even see themselves as political [prisoners].

Because our time in jail was pretty long, a lot of people passed through us, and you could clearly see these waves of political prisoners. Every time new people arrived, they'd say: "We didn't know they were still grabbing people for the protests; we didn't know it's a criminal charge, we thought it was just administrative." I look at the news now, in 2025, talk to people still in Belarus, and their relatives and acquaintances are still being detained over the 2020 protests. And in 2021 people were saying: "We didn't know they were jailing people for protests; I just didn't delete the photos." And you think: it's just a year gone by and people have already tuned out – don't know what's happening, aren't cleaning out their photos and chats. Every time new people showed up, it surprised me at first; then I got used to it.

When the full-scale invasion of Ukraine began, people tried to analyze how the Ukrainian state responded to the fact that in occupied or frontline areas there were prisoners who weren't evacuated and seemed to matter to no one but their families. When you heard that Russia had launched the war in Ukraine and that Belarusian territory was used in the first days, what went through your mind about being in a confined space without really knowing what was happening and with no way to influence or control it? What did you think about the possibility of ending up in a war zone while in prison?

Akihiro:

As for the war, I didn't really have those kinds of fears. It was more a feeling of resignation – like it became clear that our Belarusian "theater of operations," so to speak, was being pushed to the background. At first, in our region, Belarus drew all the attention—it was the flashpoint. But once the full-scale war started, I felt that compared to what was happening in Ukraine, what people there, our comrades and ordinary civilians, were facing – everything happening in Belarus faded into the background.

On the other hand, there was not exactly hope, but a sense that because Belarus was involved in the conflict, a bad outcome for Russia might also impact Belarus and speed up some kind of change in the country.

Even inside, there was this never-ending debate: some said that if the war hadn't started, things in Belarus would have wound down in 2022; the regime would've been back at the table, there would be negotiations, and people would start getting released. But because of the war, sanctions hit Belarus, it was treated as a party to the conflict, and the issue of political prisoners moved to the background. Maybe that's how it played out. For me, though, it wasn't so much about freeing the political prisoners specifically, as about the war potentially shaking the situation in Russia and Belarus as a whole.

Still, in the first weeks of the war, we didn't know what was going on. There was a fear that Ukraine would be taken very quickly, that Russia would just carry out the operation and reach Kyiv, as they initially claimed. Those first weeks were really concerning: is Russia about to seize Ukraine, and will it get away with it?

Andrey:

I can still see the faces of the guards, who were really on edge. As I recall, we had some active proceedings going on then: either we were in court or the trial was coming to an end, so we saw the guards a lot. And I remember their faces: stress, fear, tension. You try to read their emotions to gauge how bad it is out there, how dangerous. Because second-hand updates on paper are one thing, but when you see raw, animal fear in someone wearing stars – that's something else. It makes you even more uneasy, because it's hard to grasp the depth of what's happening, how scary it really is. When I heard the first military reports about Chernihiv – close to where my relatives live, right on the Belarus border – It felt like in that first month Belarus could easily be pulled into the war, or end up as a third party to the conflict.

Which is basically what happened: de jure they kept everything razor-thin on paper. And that was really, really frightening, because you realize you won't be able to do anything for the next couple of years. Being locked up while your country is seeing military action is even more dangerous, even scarier, because you can't control what's happening with your family and your circle. It's worse than the repression because you can't influence anything.

Naturally the talks started: how would we live if the war spread, how would prisoners – political and not – get by; first there'd be problems with food, then communications, supply, and everything else. How would prisoners survive? We talked about that in our cell for a long time. People tried to forecast what would happen. Of course there were dark jokes that politicals would be the first to be shot against a wall. Later the war topic turned kind of surreal for me, because a lot of politicals in the colony – once the conflict became of low intensity – were spending their precious talk time on questions about Ukraine instead of asking family about their health, and so on. And you think: people must be in such a bad place if everything has slid into this kind of military obsession.

Akihiro:

It's great when people actually ask for facts, but in the colony we couldn't bring that up on phone calls, so everything slid into rumors. I tried to tune out the daily chatter about "the NATO Secretary General said this," "the Ukrainians took such-and-such city," "Russia's losses are this many, they're short on equipment." It usually came with a hopeful slant: Russia is about to lose, a mutiny is brewing in the Russian armed forces, and so on. And you know that a week later all those hopes will collapse, that it'll turn out to be made up.

The rumors got to the point where people were basically living on them, instead of coolly looking at the facts or just not wasting time on empty talk. It seemed to me that was destructive, even psychologically: over time people get disillusioned and see that everything they've been discussing turns out to be false.

Back to your case: this "international criminal organization" seems to appear out of nowhere. And it didn't pop up right away – you were detained in 2020, then others were detained in other cities, apparently to collect additional testimony against you. Only in November 2021 did they designate a broad, let's say, network of anarchists from Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus as an "extremist formation."

Everyone understands that being an anarchist in Belarus means your activity is criminalized; sooner or later it can end in detention – no illusions there. But in your case, legal lawlessness was in full swing, and you got huge sentences for earlier actions that, before 2020, were treated as administrative offenses. What's it like to get real prison terms on such inflated charges, clearly out of proportion to what you did?

Akihiro:

Before 2020 there was a certain understanding of the "rules of the game." If you took on some radical action or a serious initiative, you knew what you were risking, how it could be classified, you could manage the risks somehow; you knew what you were ready for and what you weren't, what made sense to do and what didn't. When Article 285 showed up – this "organized criminal group" case, I think it was in February 2021 – it became clear the article was crazy from a legal standpoint, especially in terms of proving anything. On paper it looked like a hard article to prove, and it was interesting to see what it would turn into, how they planned to dress it up. Then it turned out there were no difficulties at all, because there was basically no evidence. They just threw in everything that existed against us from before 2020. The key witnesses were a "legendized" (anonymous) witness from Brest Nikolai Tolchkov, an anti-extremism unit operative; and Ivan Komar, an associate of Nikita Yemelyanov, who got out in January 2022. What's more, we found out that back in 2019 GUBOP had already submitted case materials to the Prosecutor General's Office trying to stitch together some kind of group case, but it was rejected. And after 2021, once court practice shifted, it was clear that anything at all could fly.

Yeah, it stung to be serving time for episodes that previously would've been an administrative case or nothing at all – and suddenly it's a criminal charge. A slogan on a wall that never got anyone detained turns into an Article 130 charge. It all felt absurd. They really hung so much on us that you're like, "Wow, what an organization, look how much they did, what a structure!" It even sounds cool. But in reality you understand they spun it up from absolutely nothing. It brought to mind those Russian cases too, like the "Network" case. I was curious how it would all develop, but in the end it was done in a really crude, heavy-handed way.

Andrey:

I'd start with the point when the case was completed [December 2021], because that's when it became clear how the investigation (more precisely, GUBOP) put it all together. Investigator Tsybulski [head of the Minsk Investigative Committee team handling the case] was basically just GUBOP's hands in the legal field. I was curious how cases like this appear in a broader sense, so I tried to track trends in matters similar to ours – say, the case of the so-called terrorist organization "Busly liaciać" (lit. "The storks are flying"): the episodes are worthless, just hooliganism or vandalism, yet they opened a "terrorist organization" case.

What I realized from studying the case file was that GUBOP was just collecting anything at all, showing "activity," registering all those operational-search measures, knowing they'd be given a green light later to turn it into something. They just kept collecting and collecting. I wouldn't be surprised if they also pushed for changes in the procedural and criminal codes, trying to sow the idea in society, and not only in society but in backroom talks in the prosecutor's office and at Lukashenko's briefings, that we had a very dangerous extremism/terrorism situation and the laws needed changing; that there were some criminal cases and some people detained on such-and-such charges. They needed changes so all those materials and all that "activity" could be conveniently funneled to court, so the whole system would run smoothly, so the investigation could hand everything to the prosecutor's office without any issues or delays, and the prosecutor's office to the courts, without worrying whether the court would send it back for revision. That's basically how it went after the changes to the procedural code. I think it was a big, joint enterprise by GUBOP and the KGB together with the prosecutor's office.

As for our sentences and charges, I saw it the same way many others did: you have specific actions that used to carry one set of penalties, and now you realize you can get 10–12 years behind bars for a hooligan act. Sitting in detention, I understood that a post or a piece of graffiti could cost me roughly five years of my freedom – and my priorities shifted. You see there's not much you can do anymore, so you start thinking about other things: your family, your loved ones, comrades who are still free and facing the same fate. You think: as far as I'm concerned, it's basically already decided – so how do I make sure fewer people end up in this situation? You try to shift the focus away from yourself to something else; it calms you down, and it gets a bit easier.

Four years later, on July 15, Autonomous Action "Belarus," Indymedia, and Mikola Dziadok's blog and social media were designated "extremist formations," with the authorities pretending they're all "subsidiaries" of your international criminal group. How did you react to that, given the case isn't forgotten or shelved but has effectively become a springboard for tacking on new cases? And since your comrades from this case are still imprisoned, what do you think their prospects are?

Akihiro:

Andrey talked about how the security services might have pushed legal changes to make their work easier. Before 2020 there were plenty of rumors that GUBOP might even be disbanded, that people were unhappy with their work; there was conflict between them and the KGB, each trying to squeeze the other. Former officers I did time with confirmed that this was a real possibility.

In 2020 GUBOP basically gave itself carte blanche and racked up political points. 2020, in a sense, saved them. And these big cases they started slapping together let them work forever. Like now the Investigative Committee and the Ministry of Internal Affairs can endlessly find new people over comments, donations, and the 2020 protests, because there are tons of photos and comments. The only check there is the statute of limitations. But with a "criminal organization," there's basically no limitation period: they can claim a person belonged to it right up until 2020. In our case, someone allegedly did something in 2016, then never got in trouble again, and by 2021 the statute on that episode – say, hooliganism – was expiring. And they'd say: "No, you belonged to a criminal organization until your arrest in 2021." And there's nothing to prove. Now that they've added Autonomous Action and Indymedia into it – that's beyond a joke. On the other hand, take Mikola Dziadok: he initially got a short sentence, and I constantly worried it wouldn't end there. In a way, getting a huge sentence is "easier," because you don't process the

numbers – 15, 16, 20, 25 years all feel like the same order of magnitude; you hope they'll all end around the same time because events will happen and things will change, and those with long terms will be set fee. With short terms, there's more fear it won't be over, they'll just add more time. It's insane, and as far as I know there aren't other political cases being spun up like this right now; it's still a unique one.

As for the prospects for the guys behind the bars, it's hard to say or predict anything. Even two months ago it was hard to say anything concrete about myself. There are lots of factors we don't know; probably no one knows what'll happen. Compared to before – when anarchists weren't always recognized as political, or it took ages – anarchists were never a priority. Now there are lots of high-profile media people, rights defenders, journalists who are top priority, and then there are the "radical" anarchists, but at least everyone's being recognized as political prisoners. Of course there's still hope someone might get out early, but, sadly, there isn't much optimism.

Andrey:

Honestly, I was surprised that Investigator Tsybulski is still on the job and that the mechanism they tested on us is still in use. When they brought me to see Tsybulski after my release, everything was just like in 2020: Tsybulski looks much worse than the last time I saw him, but it was the same case, the same questions from the "criminal organization" file, the same rhetoric. That's when I realized they're simply using the same mechanisms – they just need to put someone behind bars. Same playbook, same work.

As for the case itself, they're just using their legal levers. If there's an earlier, ready-made case, they don't need to prove anything. In our criminal file there's the 2010 case against Frantskevich, Dedok, Olinevich, and others. They don't have to re-prove what was in the 2010 case in the context of ours. They're doing the same thing now: on the basis of our 160-volume case and the 2010 case, they tack on additional "formations," organizations, and so on – without proving context or anything else. They're just exploiting legal mechanisms that let them do this for whatever immediate goals they have – say, to lock up Dedok or extend his term. As far as I know, he himself didn't expect to be out in five years; that's a short term. Sure, the situation was different then, no war, etc., but even back then he understood they'd spin it up anyway, because such a relatively short term looked strange given the context and who he is.

As for our comrades who are still imprisoned, it's very hard to assess. When I got out, for the first few days I didn't even know which of my co-defendants were already free. I was surprised Akihiro was under a "prison regime" (as opposed to a penal colony), because I didn't know that while I was in the colony. Information barely reached me, let alone those on strict or prison regimes. So it's hard to judge, but I really hope people are doing okay mentally and physically, that the system hasn't managed to crush them or cause serious harm.

I don't think we should expect something horrible like the deaths of political prisoners. I hope the Department of Corrections controls that, doesn't allow people to become disabled, and prevents terrible incidents, because, absurd as it sounds, it's responsible for its "special contingent." Many will disagree with me, probably. But I hope that the attention to political prisoners from all sides – the Department of Corrections itself, the public, and from abroad – will have a positive effect on everyone, including our comrades.

Andrey left the colony after serving his term, while Akihiro's release took everyone by surprise. These days, though, anyone who walks out can't be sure they're truly free – It's like Belarusian roulette: some end up back in the crosshairs, others don't. You and

your comrades were part of the same case: some got longer terms, some shorter; some are released earlier, others aren't. What's it like to step out, knowing others are still inside?

Akihiro:

Every political prisoner has their own story. Some had individual cases, some were more politicized, some less; some got caught up "by accident," so to speak, and didn't plan to do anything political after release, and still don't. I think those who were involved in activism before 2020 expected repression and knew they might face it, so nothing ends at the moment of personal release.

And in general, people on the outside aren't always freer than those inside. A lot of people you know – comrades you did things with, or people you know of in a good way by reputation, even beyond political prisoners, just prisoners in Belarus overall – are in a state of rightlessness. Even if every political prisoner were released, the prison problem would still remain. There are tons of absurd cases; people are locked up for who-knows-what, and no one even hears about them. At least political cases get talked about (and even then, many aren't on any lists). There are people with no hope that anything will change, unless an amnesty happens to touch them, yet nothing is improving for them in any broader sense. And when you know your comrades are still there, then for someone like me, who got more than 10 years to serve and, by some stroke of luck, ended up free, that puts a certain burden of responsibility on.

Do you deserve this [release] or not? What can you do to help the people who are still inside? Is there anything genuinely useful you can do now, especially from abroad? There's definitely some confusion there. But you also realize you definitely won't be staying on the sidelines, because nothing is over yet. That's how I see it.

Andrey:

Yeah, "Belarusian roulette" is a beautiful phrase – spot on. But I wouldn't call everything above "responsibility," because responsibility, to me, is something else. As pompous as it may sound, it's more about duty: when you've shared all of this anxiety, stress, suffering in all those institutions. I didn't live through the times when political prisoners were kept in temporary detention centres crammed to the brim, with bedbugs. I was lucky: I caught that [volunteer] camp outside Akrestsina, heard the protesters shouting "Let them out!" and "Long live Belarus!" I was in slightly different, much better conditions, managed even to receive a care package. And still, when you share all those hardships with hundreds of people, spending more than a year in pre-trial detention, a lot of people pass through: some get detained, sentenced; some get released. After that, once you're out, it's very, very hard to be indifferent to the fate of those who are still inside.

My personal view is that we should help however we can not only political prisoners (though first and foremost those with whom you share ideas and a worldview), but also people convicted in absurd cases. I think it's right, it's needed, it's necessary.

At the same time, after such experience, I can understand those who won't want to share the burden, won't want to help someone, won't show solidarity, and will just focus on their own lives. That's absolutely normal, and no one should be forced into such actions or judged through a lens of misunderstanding.

Part 2. “The ‘brand’ of anarchists is highly valued in the Belarusian prison system”

*In 2020, anarchists **Akihiro Gaevsky-Khanada** and **Andrey Chepyuk** were among the first to be detained on political criminal charges. They were sentenced to long prison terms in a case involving an international criminal group of anarchists. Almost five years later, Andrey and Akihiro are free, and we talk about their views on the protests, their experience of imprisonment in Belarus, their attitude to the war in Ukraine, and their own forced migration.*

In the second part of our extensive conversation, we discuss with Andrey and Akihiro whether they managed to maintain their anarchist views during their years in prison and how their ideas have changed, whether they received special treatment from prison guards and other inmates, how the anarchist movement and the Belarusian political scene are perceived five years later, and whether they still have the drive to get involved and continue their activities.

Let’s go back to prison for a moment: in some interviews, you were asked whether your views had changed, and you said in different words that your beliefs had transformed, but at the same time you did not deny that you were anarchists, just that the experience of imprisonment had shaped a different view of reality, including from an anarchist perspective. Can you tell us more about how you managed to maintain your beliefs and whether you experienced any difficulties in doing so, given that you had no or very limited contact with your comrades?

Andrey

I’ll start with the transformation: it would be very sad and unfortunate if, after such a long/short period of time — it’s hard to say — a person did not change some of their views and thoughts, did not acquire something new after such a colorful experience. Whether it’s good or bad is, of course, up to each person to judge.

Even if you don’t read any literature or engage in intellectual activity, simply by communicating with such a large number of convicts, defendants, and all kinds of people, including cops, you gain something for your worldview and perception of the world. Of course, a lot depends on your attitude. If you are inclined, as they say, to “deny reality,” for example, like many ardent supporters of the opposition—they are so entrenched in their views and have a negative attitude toward anyone who does not share their views. And most often, they have some kind of everyday conflicts there, and then they end up in a PCP (a cell-type room), simply not understanding how the system works. But if you perceive information and people normally, you can learn a lot and simply broaden your view of reality and make your stay in these places more comfortable. This can also help in the future with self-realization and transforming one’s worldview.

As for ideas, I don’t know about Akihiro and the rest of my comrades, but I was lucky because I had wonderful people in prison. I wouldn’t say that the other prisoners in my cell shared my

ideas, but in the camp I was with Dima Rezanovich and Sasha Belov, and it was interesting to talk to them, discuss similar ideas, and simply share everyday life, knowing that you are with people who share your views. With Dima Rezanovich, you could talk about what had happened before, discuss things, talk about prospects, and that was really great. It helped both in practical terms and in moral and psychological terms.

Akihiro

We already mentioned in the interview that there has been a certain personal transformation of ideas, and I agree with Andrei that if, after five years, you have remained completely unchanged in your thinking and have not changed anything in yourself, having had such a special, truly intense experience, I think this reflects poorly on you as a person, suggesting a certain rigidity and dogmatism. What has always appealed to me about anarchism is that it is a certain way of understanding the world, a way of thinking; that you critically question established stereotypes, institutions, relationships between people, and authorities. But, unfortunately, in this regard, ideologization also often occurs among anarchists: people are not ready to listen to other opinions, cannot critically examine their ideas, or see their weaknesses. And for me, these five years were a good opportunity to get out of a kind of "ghetto," beyond my circle of friends, my comrades, my information resources, and to really communicate with a broad cross-section of society, from representatives of the opposition, fairly radical nationalists, bankers, law enforcement officers, former employees, lawyers, and attorneys. In normal everyday life, of course, these encounters would not have happened, and I am really glad that I had this experience.

Here is one of my favorite examples, which came as a surprise to me: I was talking to a manager from the banking system in a detention center who, despite working in such a crystallized capitalist structure — banks, financial technologies, and so on — was a staunch supporter of democratization, that is, the introduction of technologies that promote direct democracy. He told me a story about how, in 2021, Reddit users bought up shares in GameStop, which I believe is a chain of video game stores. A hedge fund decided to take advantage of GameStop's poor position and expected the shares to fall, thereby making a profit. But then a bunch of nostalgic old guys on the internet got together, quickly bought up the shares, literally chipping in a dollar or two each, for example, and they essentially beat a large company with huge capital. It's clear that this is purely a market story, on the one hand, but I found this example interesting: how instruments of direct democracy can work in real life, when a small person, joining forces with other like-minded people, defeated a large company. There were several such stories. I think that the opportunity to "get out of the ghetto" is a useful experience in prison.

I know that Igor Olinevich, for example, also spoke highly of the KGB detention center: as we know, there is a very specific selection of people there—corrupt officials, government officials, and big businessmen. And Olinevich, as far as I know, also highly valued this experience of being with different people.

Nevertheless, I would also like to note that the "brand" of anarchists in the Belarusian prison system—I don't know how it is outside, but there, in the dungeons, the "brand" of anarchists is highly valued: people know that anarchists are steadfast people, people who stick to their principles. Prisoners, as a rule, do not often understand anarchist ideas — every time you have to explain who anarchists are and what our ideas are — but I think they respect the representatives of the anarchist movement who are in prison, and they know these examples.

But I also clearly saw how many stereotypes there are that are apparently impossible to shake off, namely that anarchists are something radically left-wing, which means they are somehow

connected with the Soviet Union: communism, Stalin, the Gulag, and so on. Every time, I had to explain that this is not what we are about. And, in my opinion, it is a big problem that you don't immediately tell people about your ideas, but first spend a lot of time explaining what you are not, what your ideas do not represent. In this regard, I personally felt that some kind of positive rebranding was needed, so to speak, in order to move away from these old dogmas and stereotypes a little, so that you don't have to spend time on such explanations.

As for communicating with my comrades, I was practically isolated the entire time I was in the Minsk detention center—in a cell where it was impossible to contact the other guys. This opportunity arose after I had been acquainted with the criminal case, during the trials, and it was, of course, great to meet comrades whom I knew personally, such as Andrei, and other guys or people I didn't know before, and to see that they too were keeping their spirits up. It was very supportive. And the very realization that there are other comrades in prison — you don't even know them personally, but you understand that you have some common values, a similar worldview, that this person is your comrade — the realization that there are such people and that they are holding on, helped me personally a lot. In difficult moments, I remembered this, and it somehow gave me strength.

And again, it seemed to me that Belarusians are interested in direct democracy, and we saw certain manifestations of this in 2020. Plus, now, five years later, many people feel dissatisfied and disappointed with the opposition structures that have formed in exile, seeing this division of power, these worst manifestations of power, which are being repeated here by people who showed solidarity in 2020, but now they are breaking up into different groups and no one wants to communicate with each other anymore, and here people have an unconscious desire for direct democracy. And it seems to me that the positive program of anarchism could work here at a certain point.

And one more thing that many people talked about five years ago, but now, it seems to me, they are talking about it even more — the rise of populism, isolationism, xenophobia, a shift to the right, and the fact that the "end of history" proclaimed in the 1990s — that liberal democracy would be the only possible and most ideal system — has not come to pass 20–30 years later. We see that the actions of Russia and China refute all this, and the situation in the United States is similar now. And so, I think many people in these established systems also feel a certain disappointment. That is why people there are rushing from one thing to another, and there is this crisis of liberal democracy.

Can anarchists offer anything now? It's hard to say. But at least it is a fact that the current system has had such big problems in recent years, and most likely in the years to come. Another question is whether other forces will be able to take advantage of this and how.

Did you manage to infect anyone with your ideas?

Andrey

When you're talking to someone in prison, it's hard to abstract yourself enough to try to philosophize or talk about some distant topics. It's hard to find someone you can trust and talk to like that, because you talk to many people through the prism of suspicion, wondering if they're lying, and you constantly have these fears. But among the people in the camp there were some with whom it was possible to discuss things, and in such circumstances, naturally, I began to engage in conversation, to draw people toward such direct democracy, to explain that there were alternatives. And it worked—people were impressed, people were interested.

Dima Rezanovich also contributed a lot there. And, of course, literature in prison helped to reinforce ideas: both for me, to support my convictions, and at the same time to recommend literature to other people so that they would be convinced.

Akihiro

Let's put it this way, there are people in captivity who are potentially very close to our ideas. Whether or not we have managed to infect someone with ideas, I think it will become clear when people are released from prison, because right now we can't offer them books to read, for example. You convey certain ideas, explain them, but I think many people are simply attracted to the example of specific individuals, anarchists. And this can be used, because people have a positive image of anarchists. Yes, there weren't that many of us compared to all the prisoners, but in each case, our comrades showed themselves in a positive light, and people saw that. Still, it's difficult to conduct such direct agitation for the reason that Andrey mentioned—there are a large number of informants and agents, and there is a feeling of mistrust.

It is often said that prison is a cross-section of society from which it is essentially impossible to isolate oneself: you cannot simply kick someone you dislike out of your cell or leave, refuse to communicate with someone; you are forced to remain in this cell and look for new ways of interacting with others. And that's what anarchism is all about — sooner or later, everyone will have to coexist and come to an agreement.

Did you feel any special attitude when people knew you were anarchists? Was it a kind of marker, for example, for guards or other prisoners?

Andrey

It was mentioned above that in prison you can't go anywhere, you can't hide anywhere, and this is quite a good method of putting pressure on convicts by the administration, by the cops. I experienced this myself when I was locked up in a double cell: when you're there with one other person, one-on-one for a couple of weeks. And in fact, it's not very pleasant; it's no longer a community, but simply a confrontation: who is stronger mentally, who is stronger morally, or in some other way. In this case, it's more harmful than beneficial.

Of course, if it's an artificially created society, when the cops just throw some "old-timers" into the 'hut' and you're a "newbie" who's only been there for a week, and they try to get you to testify or just intimidate you morally before the GUBOP guys arrive.

But in another situation, it all works as naturally as possible: if these are just random people, like in a "classic hut," then it's interesting to see who has enough wit, life experience, emotional and psychological intelligence to have a better influence, for whom it will be easier, and who will be able to better solve their personal problems. This includes helping others solve their problems once they have adapted themselves. I observed this very often when I was sitting in a cell under investigation and had enough free time, and I made some discoveries for myself, and sometimes I was just angry at people that they couldn't do some primitive things in their adult age, having lived their lives. And then it dawned on me that they had lived their lives completely differently: maybe they never cleaned their homes, they always had women hired for 50 rubles who came once a week to clean and wash the dishes. I just didn't understand that such a thing was possible at the time, even though I had lived with different types of people before, but I had never shared living space with people from the other side of that divide, and that was interesting. And social manifestations work well there.

But, again, unfortunately, most often everything is done artificially. It is difficult to make it all come together organically by chance. Most often, either the chamber is filled with people

who are not the best and most socially responsible, filled with operatives, or, conversely, there are many wealthy people and one or two socially disadvantaged people, who are supposed to coexist somehow. If everything had come together randomly, so that the group included representatives of the opposition, representatives of business, some poor people, and someone else, it would have been interesting. But more often than not, either everything is filled with politicians, or everything is filled with commerce.

At the same time, the cops didn't make any distinctions; they didn't differentiate or understand how our case—which they called the "Dozens" case—was different from other criminal cases. There was no difference. On the part of the convicted and those under investigation who had been involved in Belarusian politics before 2020, i.e., representatives of various organizations and parties, there was minimal understanding; that is, they could superficially distinguish our case from all the others. But, again, superficially and without much interest or delving into the details.

Some showed interest if they had previously been imprisoned with my comrades: people came from the KGB detention center and said that they had been imprisoned there with Rezanovich or had seen Olinevich. And this is more related to the previous question: did the anarchists prove themselves well or in any way help these people who mention them? And this positive image of anarchists worked in my favor during my meeting.

Akihiro

Regarding special treatment: in principle, there was no special distinction in the Minsk detention center—anarchists there, non-anarchists there. For many, the BCHB members, as they are called, or the opposition—it's all the same. That is, the majority did not understand the difference, including the staff and prisoners. But when people had been there for a while and met different people, they would say, "I was there with so-and-so," or "I read about anarchists there," and so on. It was more from personal experience than from knowledge about ideas or why we were there. Although many people knew about our criminal case, it was specific and word of mouth worked.

Later, when I arrived at the colony and was still in quarantine, almost everyone from the administration came to "meet" me. They asked me, "Do you consider yourself an anarchist?" and "Have you remained true to your beliefs?" These questions were repeated several times during my imprisonment in the colony. I know that there were political prisoners who said, "No, no, I've realized everything," or evasively avoided answering. But I don't like to be evasive or lie about such things, and I didn't deny my beliefs. At such moments, I felt that there was negativity, that there was a distinction: that you were not just an ordinary political extremist, but that there was a more prejudiced attitude. As I was later told, upon arrival at the colony, I was immediately a candidate for prison regime. And not because I had somehow shown myself in the colony — I had only been there for a short time and there had been no particular conflicts — but simply because the case was that of an anarchist-extremist with a long sentence, which was immediately a marker.

And in prison, there wasn't really any distinction either. Maybe somewhere in the leadership, but for ordinary employees, there was no particular difference; they didn't delve into the details there.

Andrey

Colony No. 22 is famous for having many "drug addicts," including members of subcultures and various punks. And these guys, who have already "served their time," have a desire to "strengthen" this time together, because they are a subcultural community or something else

that they value, and they understand that you are close to them, even though you are different from their lifestyle and way of thinking, but they are also drawn to you. This kind of solidarity happens at the subculture level after a certain amount of time, when you get to know each other and see if someone is a decent person or not.

During the five years you were away from freedom, the anarchist movement and the various groups and collectives you were part of either ceased to exist or scattered around the world. What is your impression of the anarchist movement now? What is it like to be released and see the current reality? Is it easy for you now to orient yourself, understand what you want to do, who to join, or maybe create something new?

Andrey

As a very famous anarchist from Gomel once said a long time ago, the anarchist movement in different countries is like a sine wave: it becomes active, reaches a peak, then repression and destruction occur, and after a while it gradually rises again. And I, already in the detention center, realized that repression, a terrible situation, is happening now, and the main thing is to get as few people as possible involved. Naturally, there will be minimal activity, or no activity at all. It's just a matter of time before people start acting under a different name, with different groups, but in roughly the same direction.

As for disappointment, there was none, because, as I said earlier, I took it in stride and understood that this is exactly how things would turn out. At this point, it is difficult for me to assess anything objectively. To be honest, I have not yet studied the transformation that has taken place, because right now it is very difficult to even resolve everyday issues. I haven't delved into it yet. But I am sure that the people who held everything together for so long, and those who were involved in some kind of activity, are still doing so, just perhaps in other organizations, in other places. And I don't rule out that after a while, more people will form some kind of groups or grow into something else.

There is a tremendous amount of energy that you accumulate during your entire time in prison. At the same time, you accumulate various ideas that you would like to implement, something you would like to learn, something you would like to try to do. And because you are constantly learning something new and communicating with someone during your time in prison, these ideas and desires that you want to realize when you are free accumulate, accumulate, accumulate. Later, when you are released, you need to first address the issues that will satisfy your basic needs. A lot of time has been lost, and you need to recreate what has been lost over these 4–5 years. And then you can do what you want in your free time.

Akihiro

I can't say that this month of freedom was enough to understand everything that has changed. I was pleased to see screenshots from the internet during the review of the criminal case (we found a lot of interesting things in the case materials that are still worth analyzing and reflecting on) from over a year after our arrest, showing how solidarity manifested itself, how people were doing something, how anarchists were participating in protests, and so on.

And later, in bits and pieces, I learned about the emigration of most people from Belarus, about the fact that many comrades took part in the war when the full-scale invasion of Ukraine began. And there is no disappointment, because, again, the specifics of emigration, the activities there are very peculiar, in general it is difficult to do anything, people face a lot of personal everyday problems, much of what constituted activities within the country makes no sense abroad. All this was clear to me.

And the fact that some things from the past will fade away, but something new will appear, seems natural to me. And personally for me, and I discussed this with the guys during the trial, during the investigation, with my comrades, meeting now after my release or corresponding on the internet, I see how petty many conflicts and disputes were, remembering all these situations that really divided people over nothing, how insignificant it all was and how much time and energy was wasted on it all. I would like the people who are now free, and those who will be released, to be able to overcome their differences, reorganize, and reach a new level. Because there is strength, energy, as Andrey said, and ideas, many new things that I have discovered for myself, many things that I want to try and learn. Again, I want the movement to break out of a kind of "ghetto": we should not exclude broad interaction with each other and with others in order to understand what is happening in society as a whole, not just focus on our own movement, our own groups.

But for now, I have to sort out everyday issues, and unfortunately, there are only so many hours in a day, so I can't get involved as actively as I would like. Although it's not so much that this limits me as the fact that I want to figure out for myself what I can do, what is really effective, and where I can apply my skills. Other than that, I personally don't feel any disappointment, apathy, or fatigue. It just takes time to get your bearings, and I hope that people who have been in exile for a long time will also be able to maintain their energy, continue their activities in new forms, and overcome the problems that have existed for a long time.

Given that we have very different experiences — some of us have been in exile for a long time, some have not been imprisoned, but you spent almost five years in prison — what are your first impressions or observations of the Belarusian political scene? What conditions do you think are necessary for change in Belarus?

Akihiro

We had, let's say, internal migration while we were in prison, because even though we were in Belarus, we didn't know what was happening outside the prison system, so I'm only finding out about many things now. How many restrictions and tightening of rules have appeared since we were released, how difficult life has become, and how this has simply become the norm, a new reality of sorts. Although in prison, I thought that things weren't so bad.

What I see in some media outlets that cover the situation in Belarus: it seems like news from Belarus, probably provided by someone from the country, but the way it is presented… I feel detached. This is probably inevitable — detachment from the Belarusian reality. Although, as it seems to me, without understanding the real situation in the country, without understanding who is in Belarus now, what people think, how they live — it is impossible to influence these changes from the outside.

I cannot imagine change without people acting in Belarus. That is, it is not very clear to me when there are arguments about why you did not leave, why he did not leave, why he stayed. Although I myself am already in exile, it is not clear to me why everyone should leave, who will then bring about change. Yes, there are currently no indications that something will happen in Belarus tomorrow. But if we don't build up some kind of critical mass there, if there are no people inside the country who want change, I find it difficult to imagine that anything can be changed from outside.

And the second point is the inevitable disappointment from prolonged migration, from the fact that no changes have taken place, from the fact that activities in exile are often ineffective, from the fact that the society that showed solidarity in 2020 ultimately disintegrates over time,

and the division of power, resources, and so on begins. It seems to me that this is a fairly classic path of political emigration, and it has happened to many people: the Czechs after 1968, the Lebanese when the civil war began — everyone thought it would be short-lived, that we would leave for a couple of years and return soon. But in the end, everything drags on, and it seems like you have to build your life there, you have to integrate, but you don't really want to, and you plan to return. And the question is, will the people who return be happy, will they be able to fit in, will their expectations of their homeland be realistic? And that is why the current situation is so complicated. I see that connections are breaking down, everyone is busy with their own little area of activity, and contact and interaction with others is decreasing because there is this disappointment and mistrust, and it is growing.

Unfortunately, I don't have an answer for what to do about this. But this is what I have probably seen in my month of freedom.

Andrey

As I said earlier, the political scene (or political situation) was not a priority for me in the early days after my release, as global changes were taking place, and because I had been in an information vacuum for a long time, it was difficult for me to navigate what was happening and make any objective conclusions. But after several months of freedom abroad, my feelings are as follows: the Belarusian political scene is quite extensive, but for some reason very modest. Of course, I don't know all the "inside story," but I get the feeling that there are many opportunities here, but these opportunities are either missed or realized not for the sake of results, but for the sake of the activity itself.

I think that now we need to make the most of all the resources available to us. This also applies to "big politics" — if there is an opportunity for dialogue with European officials or with the government of a particular country to help Belarusians who are forced to migrate, we need to use it!

Also, I think we must not forget what has happened and is happening in Belarus: the gross violations of the law by the Belarusian authorities, the crimes against the Belarusian people. We need to work on this, speak out about those responsible, and take concrete action in international institutions.

Clearly, everything should not be built around "one person." In order for this whole vile system to stop working the way it does, people who do not remember the USSR and know how people live in neighboring countries must grow up and take their places in institutions and ministries. This, it seems to me, is the minimum requirement for a person not to be attracted to "Belarusian stability" and the current model of life. Without the possibility of looking into tomorrow.

Part 3. “Solidarity is dangerous for the state”

*In 2020, anarchists **Akihiro Gaevsky-Khanada** and **Andrey Chepyuk** were among the first to be detained on political criminal charges. They were sentenced to long prison terms in a case involving an international criminal group of anarchists. Almost five years later, Andrey and Akihiro are free, and we talk about their views on the protests, their experience of imprisonment in Belarus, their attitude to the war in Ukraine, and their own forced migration.*

Today we are talking about solidarity and support. Over the past five years, we have seen how the regime has gradually tightened the screws. This immediately affected political prisoners’ contact with the outside world: correspondence was cut off, and transfers and parcels from non-relatives were banned. Later, solidarity activities were criminalized: dozens of people are in prison for making small money transfers, sending parcels, or even writing letters.

In this regard, please share what support from the outside meant to you and how it reached you. Were you aware of solidarity actions, or did you receive messages from comrades in some way? And what is it like when contact with the outside world is limited to only your closest relatives?

Akihiro

When it comes to solidarity during the five years of imprisonment, the possibility of receiving it in any tangible form was constantly diminishing because, indeed, the screws were being tightened, and less and less information was reaching us. I mentioned earlier that we were lucky to be in SIZO-1 for a long time, because there we still received letters from comrades and caring people, including from abroad. For example, I remember receiving letters of solidarity from Russia, specifically from anarchists. And, of course, it was nice to receive every letter or postcard. I was amazed at how some people knew how to write letters, how they found the time, how they found topics to write about. Other people who were closer to you, who sincerely wanted to help you, were not always able to write like that. I guess that’s a certain talent. And it gave me a lot of strength.

On the other hand, it was clear that this was something that the security forces would manipulate and try to restrict. It was also clear from the outset that correspondence was severely curtailed. And over time, fewer and fewer letters arrived. When we were transferred to the colony, correspondence was reduced to only letters from family members. But I never thought that solidarity had ended, that no one was writing to us or that we had been forgotten. In this regard, I tried to support those around me, because this is the narrative that the administration and the state press are trying to promote, trying in every way to undermine the prisoners, to present everything as if everyone had forgotten everyone, no one was interested in political prisoners, no one was writing, and everything had collapsed. I understood that communication was simply

limited and that in reality, of course, this was not the case. Although some, including political prisoners, fell into a bit of despair, thinking that we had been forgotten and so on.

Of course, it was harder for us to learn about solidarity in the form of street protests because it was difficult to obtain information directly. But we learned the most when we reviewed the case materials in December 2021 because, as we already mentioned, there were many screenshots from the internet, including some taken after our arrest. And there we saw protests in different cities around the world, in different formats. For example, when anarchists participated in the women's strikes [strajk kobiet], they also supported us there. And that was, of course, nice. With a certain delay, but nevertheless, I personally got energy from looking at these photos, I understood that the activity was continuing, and that was important to me. Especially since I remember the period before my imprisonment, when I myself participated in various solidarity actions, spreading information about anarchist political prisoners in Belarus, Russia, and other countries. And this was also a frequent debate: what is the point of actions if those who are imprisoned do not know about them, or if the letters we write do not reach them. I think that solidarity is important not only for those who are imprisoned, but also for those who are free: here are people who are imprisoned, and there are people who remember them. Understanding the motivation behind these actions on the outside, and how I myself participated in them, helped me understand what was happening when I was in prison.

I remember well how parcels from Scotland used to arrive at the Minsk detention center. They contained various hygiene products and food. There was one occasion, I don't know from whom (it would be interesting to find out), when the staff handed out parcels from Scotland and said, "Who is this anyway?" And we ourselves didn't know.

Of course, it's harder when there's less information, when you can only communicate with your parents, and even then only intermittently, and you always want to be able to communicate more. For me, again, from the perspective of the confrontation between the regime and those who are imprisoned, it was clear that this was one of the simplest levers of pressure—restricting correspondence and communication—that it was easy to do and had a significant impact on people. Therefore, I did not view this with understanding, but with the awareness that it was an inevitable move on the part of the state.

Andrey

Back in 2020, it was very important to me that no one be detained for showing solidarity, because I would have been very upset to learn that someone had been detained or repressed for showing solidarity with me. And I was worried about this first and foremost: how safe it is now on a global scale, whether solidarity is "accepted" or "not accepted" now. I received letters until 2021, but then, somewhere in the middle of 2021, the letters stopped, in an attempt to establish mechanisms to suppress solidarity, to crush the spirit of those detained at that time: to make people think that everything had calmed down, that no one needed us, and that everything was going downhill. In 2023, an investigator came to me and many other convicts in the colony and summoned us on the basis of a case involving money transfers to political prisoners. In 2021, a woman transferred money to my account — 6 rubles — and on this basis, a case was opened for solidarity with me, and I was a witness in this case. At that time, I had not even been convicted, I was not an extremist, but because a woman sent me 6 rubles in 2021, a criminal case was opened against her. Unfortunately, I do not know how it all ended.

I would also like to emphasize that it was very nice to receive even the slightest solidarity, even some greetings from strangers, and at different times it is perceived differently. At the be-

ginning of your sentence, when you have just been detained, it somehow gets lost among the huge number of letters, and you only pay attention, for example, to letters from acquaintances, which you identify by fictitious names or by the subject of the letter. And it was also very nice that friends came up with creative ways to get through the censorship. Later, when letters from strangers stopped coming and only letters from close relatives were allowed through, and it was very difficult to get information from the outside world in the camp, it was nice to receive even just greetings from close friends and family, to know that after all this time they were still interested in your fate and had not forgotten you.

I believe it is very important to show solidarity, even in the form of greetings, so that people understand that they are not forgotten and do not suffer from such psychological damage. Therefore, we must remind them in every way possible that they are awaited on the outside. Because sometimes there are moments of depression in prison, especially in the fall and winter, when you see no prospect of release, you don't believe in the value of release, you think that everything is very bad in Belarus right now, and there is a possibility of being imprisoned again, as there are already many precedents when people are released on political cases and then imprisoned again. And you start to think that you will be released now and then end up back in prison. But from the expressions of solidarity, you understand that people are waiting for you there, and in any case they will help you, and everything will be fine.

Akihiro

Andrey mentioned this, and I would also like to add something about the new wave of repression, which, in my opinion, began at the end of 2023, when people started being imprisoned for transferring money and providing support. And so I, like many other political prisoners in the Shklov colony and in the Mogilev prison, was summoned for questioning about people's solidarity. I personally had two cases where two women were linked to Dissident-BY [an initiative to help political prisoners, which was recognized as an extremist organization], as far as I remember. I remembered their surnames, of course, I don't know these people, but I deliberately memorized their surnames and periodically repeated them in my head to find out what had happened to them. And when I got out, I found out that one woman of retirement age in the colony had been deprived of her liberty, and the second was under house arrest. Of course, it's terrible that people sincerely, from the bottom of their hearts, spent their own money to support different people, and for this they themselves were prosecuted. It's hard to hear this, of course, and it's a pity that even solidarity has been criminalized, that people have suffered for it.

And I also want to say that support in the form of simple things like greetings is really important. When you can't write a letter and can't say much, knowing that someone remembers you is very important and really cheers people up. So if you have friends or acquaintances in prison, even if you have nothing to say or find it difficult to talk about something directly, just send them a greeting in some way, don't give up on this opportunity.

We encourage people to write online letters, people put in the effort and write, we collect and archive them, but only after some time can we pass them on. You have also received such messages. How do you feel about them: is it more like a past life that is now catching up with you, and it feels strange to read a letter from three years ago, or does it still have some meaning?

Akihiro

I think it's a good practice to keep letters that are sent, if only because it's a shame to lose all the effort and emotion that people put into them. And the fact that you can keep them this

way and they'll reach the recipient a little later is really cool. I got out, and gradually different groups started sending me these letters that had been collected. And I can find the people who wrote to me when I was in the detention center in Minsk, then we lost contact, and I don't know where they are or how to find them, even just to thank them. But there, people write their mailing addresses, so you can find them and get in touch.

Sometimes you get solidarity from unexpected places that you can't get directly. For example, through the ABC, I received letters from Japanese anarchists, local groups with some people I communicated with. It turns out that after 2020, they launched a project—a series of events to write letters to various prisoners in different countries, including coverage of the situation in Belarus. And it was also nice that even in this format, the letters still reach their destination, and you can connect with people. I think we should take advantage of these opportunities, and people will see the amount of support when they get out, they will be convinced that there really was support.

I often saw people writing in their correspondence that "nothing happens here, there's nothing to talk about." People who are free write like that. But in reality, prison is where very little happens. And there, as we've already said, every greeting, every name, whether familiar or not, is an event. That's why all sorts of everyday things—what movies you've seen, what has impressed you in recent weeks, what music you like—seem like trifles, but they are all interesting there, they all fill life with color, make it more diverse, because you touch on things you have no access to.

That's why there's always something to talk about, especially when you have the internet — an endless opportunity to share something interesting. You don't have to write about yourself, you can find information, find out what a particular political prisoner is interested in. After all, artificial intelligence can now summarize an article or tell a story. There are many options, and I think we should take advantage of them.

Andrey

I think this is a very cool idea. Thank you very much for this and for keeping it going. As far as I remember, back in 2010, when the guys were still sitting there, letters were already being sent. You could write online, and your letter would be printed and sent. Yes, times are changing, conditions are changing, and letters are being preserved. But there is a nuance in that people come out into different realities with different states of mind. For example, someone might have a "call" and come out into a safe environment where nothing threatens them. And that's one situation where letters are positive and great. But if a person comes out with post-traumatic stress disorder, then I don't know how appropriate it is and how it might affect their well-being, psychological state, and whether it will make things worse. But in any case, there will be words of support, and I think it will play a positive role if used later. So yes, letters definitely need to be kept. Perhaps if people in teams have the opportunity to feel out each situation, assess whether it is appropriate to convey messages from a psychological point of view, and whether it will be difficult for the person to read them — that would be ideal, of course. But as it is, this method is very good and necessary.

It is clear that no one goes to prison and immediately starts thinking and writing down in a notebook, "These are my expectations, and these are the things people will have to do for me." It is unlikely that you can have any complaints about those around you. But maybe you have something to share? For example, something you absolutely did not expect, but after your release you found out that someone was helping you in a

way you did not even count on. Or, conversely, you were sure that certain people would stay until the end, would support your family, but they just went on with their lives.

Akihiro

I think that, from a reasonable point of view, people who are imprisoned should not have any strong expectations. Although, of course, among political prisoners, there is an opinion that they should do something, that they should help us out. At the same time, most of the people who say this did not do much themselves when they were free to help others; they usually did not have time for this and were often not particularly interested. But when they experience it themselves, they start to think that others owe them something. Unfortunately or fortunately, however, no one owes anyone anything.

Personally, I didn't have any disappointments. It was important to me that the people I expected to be active would not give up, that they would continue to work as much as possible, as much as they could. And, of course, there are comrades, acquaintances, and friends who, for one reason or another, gave up and went back to their personal lives. I understand this. Because this happens to almost everyone in emigration, there are certain difficulties, and I understand that, I don't consider it some kind of betrayal or anything else.

But there were many more cases when, over time, I learned about unexpected forms of solidarity. It turns out that people I had met a long time ago, whom I had forgotten about, were helping in different ways, contacting me, sending their regards. This gave me strength. The scale of support and solidarity from society at that time, in the first year of my imprisonment, pleasantly surprised me. For me, it was one of those things that made it worth going through all of this, experiencing it from the inside and feeling that it was not all in vain. For the same reason, the regime is trying to limit all this solidarity, imprisoning pensioners for transferring 5 rubles. Because solidarity is dangerous for the state.

Andrey

In 2020–2021, I was very pleased to receive postcards and letters from neighborhood groups in different districts of Minsk. It was very important and interesting to me that a group of people cared about the fate of the detainees, who were already numerous at that time, and that they collectively showed solidarity, that is, they organized themselves, gathered, wrote kind words, signed their names, and took very nice photos. This led me to believe that these were not just people expressing their political will or taking a civic stance, but something more, namely collective solidarity.

Of course, you feel positive emotions from the support of loved ones you can count on. In my case, it was the hope that your loved ones would not forget you.

And there were very unusual emotions, difficult to describe, but positive, when I received kind words and drawings from children. It was so unusual to receive a letter with a gouache drawing made by a small child. It is very pleasant and extremely sweet.

How are you doing now? How are things? How are you coping with being forced to leave Belarus? How do you feel without the things you were used to in your previous life?

Akihiro

In my case, everything happened very dramatically and completely unexpectedly: one day you're eating prison porridge in the morning, and the next day you suddenly find yourself in Vilnius. Of course, everything was turned upside down. On the other hand, there is no shock, more of a strange feeling: "Is this really real?" It still comes up from time to time. With my

belongings, with my past surroundings, it's not like I'm detached. Maybe it's because five years have passed, and I've already said goodbye to everything in my mind — not to people, but to everyday things, to my home, to the objects that surround you, realizing that I may never see them again and that, in principle, it's easier to live when you don't get too emotionally attached.

I managed to recover many things anyway. Over the last few weeks, I have restored many of my accounts because I had saved some encrypted backups and constantly repeated my passwords while I was in prison. And somehow, I managed to do everything successfully. I'm glad that not everything is lost, because, of course, it's a shame that some memories that you had stored in the form of photographs, for example, are now gone. It's a pity, but it's not the worst thing that could happen.

The fact that my release happened so abruptly and unexpectedly attracted a lot of attention, so many people immediately stepped in to help, both here and in general. Of course, it is much easier for me than for those who left in 2020 or 2021. Many acquaintances who left earlier, without having any social connections here in exile, went through a lot of difficulties, and this is still happening. But I am probably more fortunate: I know who to turn to for various issues, to find out something, and it is a little easier for me because I studied in Vilnius before, I used to come here, and so the city is not foreign to me, and I don't feel like I have completely abandoned my homeland. And I think anarchists are internationalists, cosmopolitans, so they should try to feel at home everywhere.

And, of course, there are a lot of things that have suddenly piled up, I just can't get anything done, and the amount of unfinished business only increases with time. It seems like you think about it in prison: what to do first, what to do second, but in reality everything is more complicated, more confusing, especially in an unfamiliar environment — even mundane procedures cause difficulties.

On the one hand, it's nice when you get released and people immediately write to you, offering to meet up, see you, or call you, but few people understand that you still need to take a break, that you need to give the person a little time to collect their thoughts, that there are really a lot of questions, and I still haven't managed to call some people back or write to everyone. It's just hard to do everything at once. Some people are understanding, but others immediately start pushing. But you have to understand that it's not always easy to do something right away, it's practically impossible — to dive into all of this at once. You need a break, you need to get into sync with the world around you.

Andrey

My situation is a little different. My integration into society took place in two stages. First, you integrate into Belarusian society, and you have one emotional state, one emotional tension. When you are released, you come to your city, and there you have this pattern of behavior—I don't know if it's typical or atypical—but it seems to me, judging subjectively from some books, TV series, and movies, that this is exactly how it happens: you are released and you are simply afraid to raise your head because you are branded as a prisoner, you have been released from prison, you are just like all the other convicts, and you are treated as if you were expendable. You also get extra attention from the police, as if you're the kind of person who will definitely commit a crime in a week or two. There are these constant checks and invitations to all kinds of interviews. You've just been released, your local police officer hasn't even started a file on you yet, and you're already being invited to a preventive interview about not committing administrative offenses. It's just nonsense.

And you're in such a depressed state that you feel liberated and afraid to even lift your head or talk to anyone, because they always ask you for your phone number, at the very least, and you say you don't have a phone. And try explaining to them why you don't have a phone. A week ago, you were eating porridge, as Akihiro puts it, and marching in formation, and today you don't even have the opportunity to get your life in order. And that was normal, it "nailed you down" and prevented you from integrating into society in Belarus.

And, of course, I encountered problems leaving the country. When I solved this problem and managed to leave the country, the second stage of socialization began. Outside Belarus, you face new problems — the problems of emigration. I had not thought about the existence of these problems before, that people treat you completely differently. I had heard about it, but I thought it was something from a parallel universe, that it would not affect our nationality, roughly speaking. It turns out that it affects all nationalities; these problems have no nationality. And you face language problems, problems integrating into society. I myself am not yet sure that I have fully adapted after my time in prison, that is, that I have fully accepted this healthy and adequate society.

At the same time, many people who, like me, were released from prison said that they were "overwhelmed" literally six months after that, that they began to experience some kind of depression, and that I should keep in mind that the same thing would happen to me. They predicted this for me. And you keep thinking about it: they told you this, so wait—soon you will have problems. Plus, there is a slight panic about your health, not only psychological but also physical. Because in prison, you lose your physical health, and very often this manifests itself once you are free, because in prison your body is constantly under stress, and you get sick less often. And when you are released, everything starts to "fall apart." Many prisoners have noticed this, both men and women. And so you think about all this and worry about it. Well, little by little, you try to solve all these issues.

At the same time, you have a lot of other things to do, work, skills related to work. You need to pursue some new interests that you thought about and hoped for while you were in prison. And at the same time, you need to make up for what you lost while you were in prison. And, of course, there is never enough time. You need to squeeze everything out to the maximum, but sometimes you just want to do nothing, just relax. But you understand that you can't count on that because you still have to deal with your problems; no one will solve them for you.

But, of course, the support of your team helps me a lot. I am very grateful for your help. Without it, it would be much harder.

Over the past five years, more than 30 people have been imprisoned for criminal offenses in one way or another, which is a large part of the movement. Someday, all these people will be released, and this will have a significant impact, including on the dynamics of the movement. And now we understand that it is not only support during imprisonment that is important, but also rehabilitation afterwards. We are still trying to figure out the right approach to these issues so that it doesn't just look like handing out money and saying, "Here you go, bye." Do you have any ideas about what we as a community, as your friends, closest comrades, or organizations need to do to make the transition as smooth as possible?

Akihiro

In itself, a large number of offers [for those who have been released] is not a bad thing. But often people offer help without saying anything specific. That is, they say, "We can help you,

write to us, contact us," but first of all, you don't know what you need, what your primary needs are, what questions you will encounter, and how specifically this person can help you. It would be much easier if people said specifically, "I can do this, I can advise you on that," because, again, there is a reluctance to ask for something or to bother someone, since you don't know whether the person will be able to help or not. Therefore, when people say specifically and precisely how they can help, it's good, because everyone has different needs. Some people have been in prison for a short time and haven't lost their skills — that's one story, but when a person doesn't know the language and finds themselves abroad, that's a completely different story. The third story is when a person remains in Belarus. There were enough prisoners who were released and, for various reasons, remain in Belarus.

For example, it is difficult for me to imagine how Andrey spent some time in Belarus after his release, and how he says: you can't lift your head, you can't say hello, that is, there is another external prison — it's hard for me to even imagine that. In essence, people who are released, who are, for example, under preventive supervision, who must constantly report in and find work, are, in fact, still political prisoners because they are still in the same position as if they were under house arrest. And the fact that there are various programs, both in medicine and education, is great, but perhaps it is necessary for all of this to be aggregated so that people can immediately familiarize themselves with the list and make a choice. And some kind of reputation or recommendation system would be useful, because you don't know who to trust and who not to trust, where you will really get help and where you won't, because there are different stories. And when people you trust recommend something to you, it helps you get your bearings faster, because there is so much out there and it's difficult to figure it all out.

Andrey

It has now been five years since the events of August, and many people will soon have been in prison for five years. The more time passes, the more difficult it will be for them to socialize. This is an important fact, and it is necessary to understand that with each passing month, it will become increasingly difficult for those who were detained in 2020 and 2021 to orient themselves and adapt, and they will need more attention and more financial resources to improve their health and simply feel normal. The specific help that would be appropriate here, that would be ideal, is a mentor who will simply take you by the hand and tell you and show you how things work.

Also, the most basic help is simple information support, so that someone is in touch, initiates dialogue, and can always answer simple everyday questions. Of course, people are different, of different ages, with different backgrounds: some will look and figure out how everything works on their own, without any help, while others find it difficult, and it's good when there is someone nearby, and it's psychologically easier. Because psychological support is a very serious need, it should always be taken into account.

In general, good support means mentoring and constant attention. Because, as I said before, the longer people stay, the harder it is for them to fit in. With each passing month, it becomes more and more difficult to understand what is going on and to come to terms with the modern world.

Akihiro

In addition to Andrey's previous comment, I would like to note that I have heard that five years is considered a threshold, a kind of boundary before "professional deformation": mental and cognitive flexibility decline, and a person who has been in prison for a long time begins to change, and it becomes harder and harder for them later on. When a person is released and says,

for example, absurd things, or is clearly out of context, it is important to understand why this is happening, what is behind it.

We recently expressed our (in russian only) opinion about the split among pro-democracy forces over whether to engage in dialogue with the regime and "trade" political prisoners. In our article, we tried to show that it is not only prison that infantilizes people, but also we, as a supportive community, often do the same. It is as if the political prisoner himself has no opinion, as if everything can be decided and thought out for him. Nowadays, many relatives prefer not to even disclose the fact that a person is imprisoned on political charges. As a result, prisoners are deprived of their subjectivity. Do you think, for example, that a parent or close relative who is involved in providing support has more weight in discussions about tactics for release, or should one try to find out the prisoner's own opinion on the matter?

Akihiro

I understand this problem because I see this discussion everywhere: to bargain or not to bargain, to free or not to free. And I agree that political prisoners should not be objectified. Political prisoners are very different. There are indeed people who are just waiting to be released, ready to write a pardon, and their relatives are "competing" to get on the exchange or release lists faster. But there are other political prisoners who are serving time for their beliefs, who understand exactly why they are there, and who are willing to endure hardship if it will bring about significant change.

Now that I am free, it may be easy to say this, but I personally have always understood that we are part of a broader context of events, and therefore, we may have to spend more time there, but if it brings benefits, if changes occur, then I think that is more important. That was the case for me.

I really want my comrades, acquaintances, and friends to be released, and on the one hand, there is an internal contradiction, because none of them should be sitting there, and every release is certainly positive news from a human point of view. But on the other hand, if everything just rolls back, the regime will be legitimized, it will become acceptable again — which is already happening to some extent — there will be tweets saying what a wonderful leader he is and so on. When I was in prison, I didn't want that.

And now I also have mixed feelings about this. Natalya Dudina spoke about this in an interview: on the day of her release, she immediately asked why no one had asked her if she wanted to be released, if she wanted to serve out her sentence. I don't think it was just for show, but that a person really chooses their position, and it must be taken into account. And often there are disagreements between relatives and political prisoners on this issue: it is understandable that relatives are worried about those who are in prison, but those who are in prison may have their own opinion — whether to publish, publicize, or disseminate information or not. And it is desirable to listen to those who are imprisoned, as they often understand more in their own way. Not always, of course, so there is no clear answer on how to proceed. But I don't think it's worth keeping quiet in any case, because things are getting worse there anyway, the screws are being tightened there anyway, even without this, without attention. Therefore, it is necessary to speak out, taking into account what this may lead to, where it can be done, and where it cannot. In other words, it is necessary to approach this thoughtfully, including discussing it with those who have been imprisoned, because they understand the inner workings in this regard.

Personally, I would not want to be released at the cost of everything going backwards, negotiations starting, concessions being made. Again, I still don't know on what terms we were released, what the state got in return, or whether it's just a situation where they are talking to the regime, or something more. For me, this is a moral dilemma: I have been released, which is good, but everyone else is still in prison, and not only that, but new people are still being imprisoned, and their number is much greater than the number of those who are being negotiated for. So it may seem that the regime will now release a large number of political prisoners, but no conditions will be set that new people will not be detained. The Belarusian security forces need something to do, and for these reasons they will continue their repression. Having been there, I know many comrades, people who would not agree to be released under any conditions, with any concessions, just to be free. And this opinion is also important. Perhaps they are not in the majority there, perhaps there are few such people, but if we look at it from the point of view of achieving goals, I think it is much more important to understand what we want and what the people there want, to take into account that they are not ready to just give up. Because then it would negate all their suffering over the past five years; it would simply turn out that, yes, they sat down, agreed, you left — and that's it. What was it all for? For me, that's the question. I know people there who think the same way.

Andrey

I have also heard about all these conflicts between different groups. My view is that the reality is different now. Take 2010, for example: there were a small number of political prisoners, and their position was clear: they would all stay until the end, they would fight the regime, they were prisoners of conscience, they would not sign any pardons, they were prepared to invoke Article 411, they were prepared to shed blood in extreme situations, they understood the situation, who they were, and what was happening.

Now the situation is different. The regime has simply taken over en masse, filling prisons and mixing ordinary people with people who are imprisoned for their beliefs. This needs to be understood and distinguished: there are a huge number of people who are imprisoned for their comments, they have been recognized as political prisoners because their criminal cases are related to politics, related to 2020, but they are passive about politics. Many people do not consider themselves political prisoners, and I understand their parents and loved ones perfectly well. I also understand the representatives of the initiative who want to free these people. I understand and support this; these people have no place in prison. And I fully understand their position that they need to write petitions for clemency; it is their right, and if they believe so, they should exercise it. But there are also those who are imprisoned for their beliefs, for whom it is simply unacceptable to cooperate with the regime in any way, to sign a confession of guilt, to write a petition for clemency.

By the way, just a small note, as far as I remember, the penal code has changed, so if you want to be eligible for the improved regime, you now have to admit your guilt. There are many people who are not serving time for political crimes, and they also believe that they were imprisoned, as they say, "for no reason." They do not admit guilt and want to challenge their cases after their release. It is very difficult for them to qualify for parole, as they are also required to admit guilt. It is very important for the regime that a person admits guilt.

And as I said above, there are many people for whom this is unacceptable, who are imprisoned for their beliefs, who understand what the future holds for them, that they may be further persecuted, and they are prepared for this. I have known such people, and I was one of them. It

was unacceptable for me to write a pardon and agree with the charges in my criminal case, and I did not do so. I share the opinion of other people, and I understand them perfectly well.

To sum up, I believe that these two sides simply should not interfere with each other's activities. But they (the initiatives) must remember that their actions will only be truly effective if the repression of citizens ends, which, unfortunately, we have not yet seen.

In conclusion, is there anything else you would like to say?

Akihiro

I would like to thank everyone whom I have not had the opportunity to thank personally, whom I have not been able to contact, and whom I have not yet been able to locate. I would also like to apologize to those whom I have not been able to respond to or devote sufficient time to. I am very grateful for all the help I have received over the past five years and continue to receive now—it is very important. And, of course, I hope that people do not think that it is all in vain. Any support matters. And for me, the most important thing was that people continued to take action. And those who maintain their energy and try to take action in different areas — that is the most important thing for me now. So I hope that people will continue to find the strength within themselves and continue to do what they are doing. Once again, many thanks to everyone who supported me!

Andrey

First of all, I would like to thank you for your support. I haven't met many people in person, but if you're interested in some feedback, or if you want to know whether your message got through, you can contact me and I'll tell you everything. Words like "thank you very much" and "I'm grateful" don't convey the feelings I had from the support of people who cared about my fate.

I would also like to note that many people are still serving their sentences. If you helped me and you still have the opportunity and desire to help, you can visit the [ABC website](abc-belarus.org) and help other comrades. I declare that this is very important and will be very pleasant for these people. Use the online letter form, all the methods we talked about in today's interview, don't forget to make a note somewhere on a piece of paper and, if possible, send your regards, tell an interesting story — this really makes a difference. Especially when autumn is approaching, the most unpopular season for any prisoner. We must always remember the people who are in prison!

Anarchist Black Cross
An in-depth interview with anarchists Akihiro Gaevsky-Khanada and Andrey Chepyuk
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