

Eva Yarrow

‘Herbarium of Female Protest’

The project includes portraits of female participants in peaceful actions that spontaneously evolved in August 2020 as a reaction to the rigged presidential election and the manifestation of unprecedented violence by the Belarusian authorities.

There were white clothes and flowers symbolically indicating the womens’ position – they had no weapons and were longing only for peace and justice. It was a time full of hope for quick changes for the better.

Less than a year later, the authorities launched a large-scale methodical repression of dissent. Thousands of criminal cases were started, almost all the independent media and NGOs were closed down, and the opponents of the self-proclaimed president were forced to flee the country. The symbols of the protests (the white-red-white flag and the historical Belarusian coat of arms) were recognised as extremist, and people risked their freedom for the photos taken during the marches and then posted on social networks and in the media – using AI facial recognition technology, the police meticulously tracked down the participants.

Classic photojournalism became a crime in Belarus, and journalists like Eva Yarrow had to look for new visual methods to show the events unfolding in her country. She turned the bedroom into a photography studio and started shooting “mugshots” of her project participants. After printing the images, she suggested to the women to use dried flowers as an addition to their portraits: they could choose both the type of plant and the degree to which they would like to leave their faces visible and thus recognisable – depending on how much they feared possible arrest for expressing their civil rights at the time of the meeting. Thus, transformation became one of the key ideas of the project: during several months of peaceful confrontation, not only the seasons and types of flowers the protesters were holding changed, but also the protesters themselves. Some were imprisoned, others had to flee the country or rethink the very concepts of fear and safety.



Kama.Deva

Rape victims are said to be often unable to describe the rapist because during the assault they try to focus on something abstract to avoid letting those awful things in. One cannot literally own such moments – and these feelings are familiar to me. I am focusing on anything but the monstrous stuff happening in my country – otherwise I would go crazy. I seem to no longer have any energy left. I realize there is nothing I can do.

Now all the Belarusians share some incredible experiences. This sense of connectedness with others has given me a lot, but at the moment it is making my life more difficult. All these endless searches and new criminal cases, 14 acquaintances of mine have left the country in one week only. It's a lousy feeling – shouldn't I be happy for them now being safe and able to do more than behind bars? But I feel abandoned and keep asking myself, "And what about me? I'm still here..."



Gdezakon

After my friend's conviction, I decided to volunteer as an observer at the court, so that every minute of the lawlessness was documented. A drummer who performed at the protests was sentenced to 4 years in prison. He was accused of clapping, walking, messing up with decent citizens' rest, and running a Telegram group. I don't know why judges were not afraid of doing such things. Their cases will not disappear – I was there and documented everything. They should be brought to justice and made accountable for the stolen lives.

The girls I met in Zhodino prison are my close friends. The cell was meant for 6 but there were around 15–23 of us, aged from 20 to 72 years old. Recently we have “celebrated” our detention's anniversary.

I could stay home, but my heart and conscience made me take to the street. Such situations are like a litmus test showing who is worth what: my mother, a Lukashenko supporter, when hearing about my prison experience, said, “So what? This is not a sanatorium!”. It is awful that we didn't manage to bring it all to the end and it caused mass arrests.



Yorick

I have always been apolitical – my family was my country. I have not somehow valued Belarus as a place where I would stay for good. But a year ago, I found myself as a part of a creative environment and started speaking Belarusian and appreciating our cultural values. Official system of education does not teach love for the homeland. It is a personal thing you can get from the close ones or come to its understanding on your own. People cannot be forced to love their country and language.

Because of recent events, I came up with a strong wish to change our country so that I would not feel like leaving it.

I want it to be a place where human rights are not violated. I have just started to be interested in them and the data on Belarus are scary. I want to be respected and capable of introducing changes. I do not want to be afraid of imprisonment just because I disagree with something. I need a sense of having room for growth, I want to have a future.



Yasna

Only political leaders who had taken a meaningful decision to follow this dangerous path used to disappear. And when a repressive machine started to mow down people like me, I realized that either my husband or I could be in place of anyone killed, raped, or imprisoned. And I felt scared to live without going out (to protest) and not trying to change anything. But every Friday night, before the Women's march, I had a physical urge to climb under the sofa and stay there till Monday, pretending I wasn't there. But such thoughts gave me the shivers, so I eventually took to the street.

My home, my husband and kids are most important to me, and I want to know that all of us are safe – that no one would come for us. My home is my fortress, but now it is just an illusion. I will never forget the feeling I had when I was lying in the heart of downtown Minsk, surrounded by government buildings, on a huge white-red-white flag realizing that finally it was my city.