

Belarusian ‘railway partisans’ face death penalty

Thursday 21 July 2022, by [PIRANI Simon](#) (Date first published: 18 July 2022).

The Belarusian regime is threatening “railway partisans”, arrested for sabotaging signalling equipment to disrupt the Russian invasion of Ukraine, with the death sentence.

Criminal investigators have passed a file on the first three cases – Dzmitry Ravich, Dzianis Dzikun and Aleh Malchanau of Svetlagorsk – to court prosecutors.

The state Investigations Committee says they could face the death penalty, although lawyers say there is no basis for that in Belarusian law.

On Saturday 23 July, Belarusians will [protest at their country’s embassy in London](#), in support of the Svetlagorsk defendants and eight others arrested on terrorism charges.

Ravich, Dzikun and Malchanau were detained in Svetlagorsk on 4 March this year – a week after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine – along with Alisa Malchanau, Aleh’s daughter, and Natalia Ravich, Dzmitry’s wife, who were released a few days later.

Dzianis Dzikun’s brother, Dmitry, said in [an interview](#) last month that Dzianis had wanted “to help Ukraine somehow”. Three people had been arrested, he said, and:

As far as I understand, people knew [at that time] that all the Russian equipment was moving towards the north of Ukraine through Belarus. And for that they used the railways. They wanted to help Ukraine somehow – to stop these armaments, to make sure they couldn’t go further.

There are 11 people in the “railway partisans” case, and now the first three are going to court. For me, these people are heroes. They didn’t sit at home, like the “armchair battalion”. At least they tried to do something.

Dmitry said that Dzianis, who is in a detention centre at Gomel’, had been able to send and receive letters, and had been visited by his partner and his sister.

Straight after his arrest in March, it was very different. Dzianis was severely beaten and forced to record a so-called confession on video – one of the Belarusian security forces’ standard techniques. Dmitry said:

On the so called “confessional” video it is clear that my brother’s face was smashed in. A black eye, swelling on his chin. The day before he was arrested, we spoke [on line] in the evening. I saw how he looked; not so much as a scratch. He was feeling fine. [But after his arrest] he was limping. Other people saw him. He was holding his side, his face was

bruised.

The case against Ravich, Dzikun and Malchanau concerns an arson attack on a railway relay cabinet. This is reportedly the most common form of rail sabotage: it wrecks automatic signalling systems, disrupts schedules and forces trains to move at reduced speeds of 15-20km/hour.

The Svetlagorsk trio have been charged with: participating in an extremist organisation; acts of terrorism; deliberate harm to the transport system, resulting in serious damage and threats to life; and treason.

The Investigations Committee said the trio could face the death penalty. But *Zerkalo*, the independent news site, [published legal advice](#) that the death penalty for terrorism offences, introduced on 29 May this year, can not be applied retroactively. Prior to that date, it could only be applied if the offences had led to deaths.

Obviously there is no reason to think that Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime will obey its own laws, and so the lives of the Svetlagorsk accused are in danger.

On 21 April, a coalition of six human rights organisations [recognised](#) the Svetlagorsk three, and eight other "railway partisans", as political prisoners.

An [overview](#) of the "railway partisans" movement by *Belarus Digest* estimated that in the first two months after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, there were more than 80 actions.

"Incidents at this scale have not been seen since world war two", Lizaveta Kasmach wrote in that report. Railway workers had been among those arrested, and in the last week of March, independent Telegram channels had reported that more than 40 of them had been arrested.

The authorities charged the detainees with high treason, espionage, and terrorist acts. By 30 March, Telegram channels affiliated with the security forces posted more than three dozen "confession" videos featuring arrested railway workers.

The fate of these detainees is unknown to Belarusian activists I have been in touch with. They are not included in the human rights organisations' list of political prisoners, but that does not mean they are safe. There are so many detainees that activists are struggling to keep track of them all; people are only included on the list according to narrow criteria.

In April, the Belarusian opposition politician Franak Viačorka [reported](#) that, as well as sabotage, there were "dozens" of smaller actions, e.g. by train drivers who refused to carry equipment.

A decentralised network, including Bypol (former security services officers now in exile), the Community of Railway Workers (organised on Telegram) and the Cyber Partisans (Belarusian IT professionals now in exile), helped facilitate action against Russian military transport, the *Washington Post* [reported](#).

The "railway partisans" actions are indicative of widespread discontent with the Belarusian regime over its support for Russia's war on Ukraine. In response, the authorities have lashed out with renewed repression of trade unionists, journalists and other opponents.

The Supreme Court of Belarus last week (12 July) [ordered](#) the liquidation of the Belarusian

Independent Trade Union, which for thirty years has played a leading role in the struggle for workers' rights.

"The union's activities have always been about increasing workers' wages, workplace safety, and fair and dignified relations with people in the workplace", its organisers [stated](#) prior to the decision.

Since 1991 members of our trade union, united in primary organisations of Mozyr, Novopolotsk, Soligorsk, Grodno, Bobruisk, Minsk, Mogilev, Vitebsk, independently defended their legal rights by concluding collective agreements.

The union's president Maksim Poznyakov was [arrested](#) in May in Novopolotsk. A week previously he had been elected as president of the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions – to replace Aleksandr Yaroshuk and his deputy, Sergei Antusevich, who were also arrested.

This month, Katsiaryna Andreyeva, a journalist, had an eight-year sentence for treason [added](#) to her two-year jail term for participating in the 2020 protests, and Danuta Perednia, a student, was [sentenced](#) to six-and-a-half years for reposting an anti-war statement.

Human rights organisations say there are now more than 1200 [political prisoners](#) in Belarus – although the total numbers detained in response to protest activities (such as the rail workers mentioned above) is far higher.

Railway workers' support for the antiwar movement this year follows their active participation in the wave of protests that swept Belarus in 2020.

Those actions, too, led to dismissals, arrests and jailings, which are documented, together with information about the "railway partisans", in [a report](#) by Our House, the civil society campaign group. (A downloadable version of the report, that Our House has circulated among trade unionists in the UK, is [here](#).)

In September last year, three railway workers – [Sjarhei Dzjuba](#), [Maksim Sakovicz](#) and [Hanna Ablab](#) – were rounded up as part of a "treason" case against the Rabochy Rukh labour rights group.

□ On Saturday 23 July, Belarusians and their supporters in the UK will [demonstrate](#) in support of the "railway partisans" and other political prisoners. 12.0 midday, at the Belarusian embassy, 6 Kensington Court, London, W8 5DL.

The demonstration is called "in support of the rail workers of Belarus, who despite facing tremendous repression from the regime, successfully disrupted the Russian invasion in Ukraine by sabotaging the railway network. We will be demanding an immediate release of the imprisoned heroes".

Earlier this month, a conference of the UK rail workers' union RMT [resolved](#) to support Belarusian rail workers facing repression. This welcome stand will help to strengthen desperately needed solidarity.

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