

## **Committing Thoughtcrime: A Step-by-Step Tutorial (2021)**

An artist from Belarus

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## Committing Thoughtcrime: A Step-by-Step Tutorial (2021)

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The 2020 Belarusian presidential elections provoked a severe political crisis that continues to this day. The Belarusian political regime has always treated its opponents harshly, but over the past two years, Belarusians have faced unprecedented brutality from the authorities including purges, persecution, and repression. Moreover, with each new round of arrests, the cruelty of repression and the absurdity of the charges against protesters increase. Tens or even hundreds of thousands of people have fled the country, making it more and more difficult for the regime to find enemies among those who remain.

A year after the elections, people could be arrested not only for attending protests, but also for merely showing solidarity with prisoners, for expressing any thought that differed from the official narrative. During 2021 graduation ceremonies at Belarusian State University, one graduate gave a speech thanking her law teachers—including Maxim Znak, who by that time had been convicted of 'attempting to seize power through elections.' A few days later, this young woman, Ekaterina Vinnikova, was arrested for 15 days.

The repressive machine's writings speak for themselves. In the twenty-first century, smartphones make it impossible for the state to keep its terror completely hushed up; the state may try nonetheless to make its actions appear legal and official, but this only increases their absurdity. Take this extract from the police report on the above-mentioned case: 'While monitoring the Internet, I found a video showing that Vinnikova, speaking onstage, expressed her gratitude to Maxim Znak, thereby violating the rules for organizing public events. She was also wearing a white dress with a red belt.'

This wording reveals a practice of silencing, albeit through indirect allusion: the real reasons for detention, arrests, and sentences are left unsaid, but in such a highly bureaucratic state as contemporary Belarus, at least something has to be presented as evidence.

This performance, in which I gaze silently into the camera, was an emotional reaction to the news of Vinnikova's detention as well as a number of other similar cases. The stronger the oppression, the more I wanted to respond. At the same time, it is becoming more and more obvious that it is not safe to do this and that there are no means left for expressing one's disagreement, since disagreement in itself—in any form—is punishable. This performance is an attempt to test how far the repressive machine can go:

Will I be arrested for this? It is flirting with the system, first and foremost an attempt to convince myself that I have done at least something.

The use of YouTube as a platform reflects the state of Belarus today: protest on the streets is impossible, while protest on the Internet is possible (?), but only in the form of silence. The title simultaneously refers to Orwell's *1984* and to various similar YouTube tutorial videos.

- 00:00 Warm-up
- 00:09 thinking about hundreds of political prisoners in Belarus
- 00:30 repeating 'Zhyve Belarus' ['Long Live Belarus'] twenty times in a row
- 00:59 thinking about the kidnapping of Maria Kalesnikava by Belarusian special forces
- 01:20 thinking about police torturing people in the Akrestsina Detention Center
- 01:48 thinking about thousands of Belarusians who had to leave the country
- 02:17 thinking about KGB threatening activists
- 02:39 thinking about the destruction of the independent press in Belarus
- 03:01 thinking about riot police killing people in Belarus
- 03:15 repeating 'Zhyve Belarus!' ten times in a row
- 03:34 thinking about ugly state propaganda
- 04:00 thinking about the falsified 2020 Belarusian presidential elections
- 04:17 thinking about Raman Bandarenka, killed almost on camera
- 04:33 thinking about the refugee crisis provoked by Belarus
- 04:57 thinking about rewriting history in Belarus
- 05:11 thinking about Maxim Znak
- 05:29 thinking about arrests for white-red-white stickers
- 05:59 repeating 'Zhyve Belarus!' twenty times in a row
- 06:22 thinking about rewriting history in Belarus
- 06:48 thinking about the provocation against Siarhej Tsikhanouski
- 07:03 thinking about Vitold Ashurak
- 07:21 thinking about long, politically motivated sentences for students
- 07:36 thinking about the mass strike of workers in Belarus
- 07:50 repeating 'Zhyve Belarus!' thirteen times in a row

### **Artist's bio**

An artist from Belarus (the author of this article chose to remain anonymous) is a documentary photographer and visual artist. A foreign language teacher by education and a polyglot, he works with photography, video, and modern digital archives. His projects focus on national and personal identities, collective memory, global issues, and the media's impact on the world. After the events of 2020 in Belarus, he has been working on a series of projects on propaganda and violence in the region from a historical perspective.