

Untouchables in prison hierarchy

The aim of this article is to illuminate some aspects of this complex and multifaceted phenomenon the informal hierarchy in Belarus prisons.

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20.07.2016

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The topic of prison caste system is often raised in the media in recent times, it is often discussed in connection with the political prisoners. However, almost all who write on the subject, know about it at best from the stories of former inmates or use common social stereotypes. As a result, there are often a lot of blunders and false representation.

The aim of this article is to illuminate some aspects of this complex and multifaceted phenomenon the informal hierarchy in Belarus prisons.

There are scientific works on this subject. And, of course, I do not aspire to consider the phenomenon in all its diversity in one article. The question will be mainly about one prison caste, the existence of which characterizes the system as a whole, and the knowledge of which is critically important for any falling prisoner in Belarus, especially for a political prisoner. The so-called "*petukhi*" ("roosters") (also "downcast", "bugger", "cockscorn", etc.).

So, from this text, you will learn:

- How did the "downcast" appear in prison;
- How do people become one;
- What are conditions of these people in jail and prison;
- What functions are performed by these people in prison;
- Why is the existence of this caste vital for the administration of penitentiary facilities.

Part 1. Blatnoy, muzhik, kozel and petukhi

How did the cast of "petukhi" appear

Let's start with a historical background. Caste of so called "*Petukhi*" is traditionally associated with homosexuality. And if you approach from this point of view, everything is simple: homosexuality in prisons has always existed, also in tsarist prisons and gulags. Due to the extremely macho and homophobic nature of prison code ("*ponyatiya*") and subculture, it becomes clear why a gay person in prison is automatically relegated to "downcasts". Machismo is characterized by contempt for all women, levelling of women to subhuman creatures that do not have the right to their own will. This attitude transfers to homosexuals.

But the "downcast" only consist of homosexuals to a smaller degree. For the most part it consists of people who have committed offenses against informal prison law - "*ponyatiya*". And it's worth to remark that "*petukhi*" as a cast with strict rules for entry and exit from it (or rather, the impossibility of exit) appeared not such long time ago. It was not for example inherent to tsarist prisons and the Gulag, according to those sources with which I am familiar. Emergence of a caste of prison untouchables (which includes also homosexuals) relates to the late Soviet period

Some researchers believe that the emergence of a caste of prisoners whom you may not touch with hands, is a reaction of the thieves' world to "Bitch wars", who wanted to save themselves. Thieves had to invent an alternative to murder for punishment of the guilty.

Others write that this was a reaction to the overcrowding of detention centers: in a situation of overcrowding and presence in view of other inmates 24 hours per day, 7 days per week the most effective and hard form of punishment would be all-out contempt and ostracism, an extreme form of ignoring.

About "*masti*" (castes) - a rundown

Historically, there are only three "*masti*" (castes or lifestyles) in the criminal world: a thief "*vor*", peasant "*muzhik*", rooster "*petukh*". In this hierarchy you can descend from the highest (*vor*) to the lowest (*petukh*). You can't work your way up the caste ladder. In modern criminal subculture in Belarus the prisoners are divided into somewhat different castes, namely: criminal "*blatnoy*", peasant "*muzhik*", jack-ass "*kozel*", rooster "*petukh*"

Blatnoy is a professional criminal who lives by conducting a criminal business when outside of prison. His mission is to promote the "thieves idea", wherever he is, to establish "backdoor" (conduct corruption of correctional administrators), transfer the life of the prisoners from the line of official rules and concepts into the law of thieves ("*ponyatiya*"), etc.

According to the "*ponyatiya*" only they have the right to classify a prisoner as downcast. However, due to the fact that not all Belarusian colonies have thieves ("thieves' movement" of Belarus in general is in a state of decay), this rule is not always upheld, that's why downcast classification is done by anyone: operating officer, "*kozel*" or sometimes simply by a "*muzhik's*" after a collective decision.

Muzhiks is the main group in a prison. "*Muzhik*" is not nosy, he works, not interested in anything, except for how to leave on parole. He is in a situation of "Cross-command" of several forces: thieves (if any), *kozel's* and prison administration staff.

Kozel (activist) is a prisoner openly collaborating with the administration. It is a convict usually with long term of imprisonment. Administration gives him duties and some power over other inmates. How big this power is depends on the degree of corrections officers' laziness. I know some cases where "*kozels*" drew up a violation act on the other prisoners and administration officials only signed it.

Often "*kozel*" is allowed to beat other prisoners to maintain subordination. And, of course, quite officially "*kozel's*" duty is to inform on other prisoners. The IK-17 (Shklov) (IK - penal colony), for example, one "*kozel*" put it baldly: "Trash-cops told me to keep an eye on you". At least two more didn't come out, but performed their "work" very actively.

In my own disciplinary case that led me being sent to internal lock-up ("*krytaya*" – closed) the decision was made on the basis of a written testimony composed by my roommate, which detailed how I was brought into the barrack, how I behaved, with whom I communicated, with whom I argued, what topics I discussed etc.

There is a nuance

In discussing the "*petukh*" caste it must-be noted that in addition to it there is another related "caste" - so-called "*separated before clarification*", those who are "*na kruzhke*" (on the mug) .

The point is as follows: for example, there is a suspicion that someone had homosexual contacts on the outside, but there is no sufficient proof of this suspicion, there is only a rumor. In this case, until confirmation or refutation of this accusation will appear, the person is "*na kruzhke*": he eats apart from the rest and uses only his dishes (thence the origin of the term - "*separate on mug*").

A person can be for years in this status, until "*blatnoy*" ("*kozel*" or operating officer – depending on the prison situation) confirms the accusation, i.e. transfer him completely into the caste of "*petukh's*" or refuses it, i.e. transfers him officially to "*muzhik's*" caste

The position of a person "*na kruzhke*" is very close to the position of a "*petukh*", but not equal to him. He can not drink tea with other inmates and has no right to vote, but no one can call him "*petukh*".

This is the only case when it is possible to transfer from a lower caste in the highest. A prisoner "*na kruzhke*" is in a kind of quarantine - in order to avoid physical contact with other convicts, because others don't want to initiate contact with buggered ("*zashkvar*"). Everyone, who, for example, drink tea with a "*separated*" person, automatically gets the same status.

In other cases, "*separated*" or people "*na kruzhke*" are equal in the position to the "*petukhs*", and it's quite easy to fall into this status.

How to become a "*petukh*"

Here is an exhaustive list of cases in which the person is transferred into the downcast ("in fag zone", "in harem"):

Passive homosexual contacts. Persons who admit to experience of homosexual contact, forever received the label of "*petukh*", "*fag*", etc. Active homosexuality is however considered normal and is not considered as homosexuality, it's normal behavior. Although it is noteworthy that in the last ten years this concept has been changed. Those who have sex with "*petukhs*" are considered as suspicious.

I myself have repeatedly heard the view, something like — "There is no difference who f*ck whom — both are fags". But, of course, a person who was active in homosexual intercourse can't be called "*petukh*".

Any non-traditional sexual relations with a woman. If the prisoner admits to performing cunnilingus or if she was doing him a blowjob and then he kissed her, or eating / drinking out from the same dish — he is a "*petukh*".

Naturally, is almost impossible to learn about this against the will of the person. So in most cases, people fall into the "fag zone" after their own revelation. You have to understand that no one has the right by threats or trickery to inquire about your sexual life. About it, by the way, in the 1990s there was a special message "*progon*" ("*Malyava*" (kite) containing innovation in rules) from the thieves, who tried to decrease an oversize amount of "*petukh's*" in prisons.

In some ways prison staff was trying to deal with this problem. For example, in Zhodino jail before a person was sent into a cell, the operating officer would instruct him: "Remember, you never sucked a dick or licked a pussy!"

This also includes communication with homosexuals at liberty. If someone suddenly mentioned that his friend is a gay, then that person immediately is counted as a "*petukh*".

Any contacts with excrements / urine and content of dumpster. Man splashed with urine or one, who popped his hands in the toilet, automatically becomes a

"*petukh*". For this reason, for example, plumbers are considered as "separated" in the majority of prisons.

There is a well-known story from IK-5 (Ivatsevichi), that could be a good example. In one of the section was «*zavhoz*» (main "*kozel*" in section — *person who controls conditions in section and is a right hand man of administration - TN*), who for a long time severely bullied one guy, abusing him verbally in every way shafted. In revenge that guy soaked the «*zavhoz*» with a jar of urine directly during the morning check in front of the line of inmates. Of course the guy was beaten and put in a punishment cell (solitary). In theory, the fate of «*zavhoz*» was foregone, but prison staff intervened in the situation. Probably «*zavhoz*» was a «valuable asset» for administration. They announced to convicts that «*zavhoz*» was splashed with ... green tea. And those, who would call him a "*petukh*", would be beaten. Anyway almost no one spoke with «*zavhoz*» after it. And the guy was sent to another prison.

I also personally knew a "*petukh*", who fell into this caste, because his head struck against the toilet bowl during a fight in a youth colony.

As for dumpster contact, people can fall into downcast, when they overmuch want to smoke and search for cigarette butts in a dumpster.

This also should include such cases as unintentional touching of someone's genitals, for example, when slipping in a shower room.

To be honest it should be said that for people with health problems an exception sometimes is made (depending on the adequacy of decisionmakers). For example, if a man has urinary incontinence, he will not be transferred into the "*petukh*" caste.

Performance of any "*petukh*'s" work. Strictly "*petukh*'s" types of work are: cleaning of toilets (this applies to the penal colony; in pretrial custody / ward treatment any prisoner can clean the toilet in his cell), in some jails — cleaning of wash basins, as well as taking out the garbage. Doing these actions automatically relegates the person to "*petukh*" caste.

Here's an example that happen in IK-15 (Mogilev), when i was there. A man was standing at check line. Suddenly he really wanted to use the toilet. He ran, as fast as he could, but did not reach it — he took a shit before reaching the toilet. Being perhaps a shy and conscientious person, he decided to clean after himself. He took a broom, rag ... This was seen by some of the prisoners who called «*zavhoz*» as witness, who verified transfer to downcast.

Informal rules prohibiting the cleaning of toilets is very convenient for the prison staff when they need to put any prisoner in punishment cell (solitary).

Every section has an official schedule of cleaning, than not taking into account, of course, the caste system. At the same time everybody knows that only "*petukh*'s" clean the toilet. Political prisoner *Igor Olinevich* was many times put in the punishment cell for refusing to clean toilets. For sure, any prisoner in his right mind

would agree to serve any amount of days in a tiny cold room without personal belongings than to become a "*petukh*". Prison staff know this fully well and gladly use such a convenient tool for pressure on undesirable.

A similar incident happened to me in IK-9 (Gorki). Soon after I stayed once again in a punishment cell, I was approached by the chief of section. He said that today I am on schedule to clean a washbasin and take out the garbage. I made inquiries beforehand and found out that in this prison only "*petukhs*" can clean the washbasin. Probably, the chief of section thought that I did not know and would go to clean the washbasin. So, ceremoniously, he gathered half of the prison administration and local "*kozel's*" as witnesses, he pointed out a broom and a rag offering to perform the "scheduled *dut*".

Without any doubt, I refused, and then he said in a grave tone, that "*there will be a document drawn up about your refusal to perform the duty*", and soon I again went to warm a bench in my very own punishment cell.

Pedophiles almost always fall in the "harem". People say that in prison rapists are always raped, but they're not. With some rapists some prisoners can refuse to drink tea, but nothing more. As for pedophiles, they have a more unenviable fate.

Until very recently, they were forced to transfer to "*petukh*" caste from the moment of entering the detention center, without even waiting for the verdict. However, the spirit of the times and the trend of "everything under the law" take their toll. I myself have seen at least two pedophiles who were not "*separated*" and lived almost same as others. Of course, they were as quiet as lambs and not every convict allowed them to sit on his bunk or even to speak to them. But there is a tendency, especially in first-time convict prisons.

The "harem" receives everyone who spent some time in a cell with "*petukh's*". An exact period of time varies. Sometimes this is an hour, sometimes it is a day. According to the concepts, if someone enters into such a cell, it needs to be done so that the "*petukh's*" themselves would try to leave the cell and the man stayed. But it is clear that physically it's almost impossible.

Any man, who had a physical (except sexual) contact with a "*petukh*" or used his personal belongings, are transfered in downcast. In practice, it looks like this: mistakenly picking up "*petukh's*" dishes or eating from them, using "*petukh's*" personal hygiene articles, hugging or shaking hands, putting on his clothes (intentionally or unintentionally) and having a drink tea with "*petukh*" automatically qualifies you for in this caste.

Giving something to "*petukh*" is possible. Taking something from him leads to becoming a "*petukh*".

However, these rules have some easings, especially in high-security prisons. For example, "*petukh's*" can wash clothes of "*muzhik*", "*petukh*" is allowed to sit on the "*muzhik's*" bunk and so on.

Often people write or say that convicts can be transferred to downcast for any misdeeds against prisoner's etiquette. Previously it happened, but not now. At least, I haven't seen any such case.

The one who steals from other prisoners, can be called "rat" and snubbed, the one who turned state's evidence at the court, may be called "*suka*" (bitch) behind his back, and so on, but the transfer into downcast due to such violation is a relic of the days when thieves' code were still strong in Belarus prisons.

Thus, the concept of "contacted" ("*zashkvar*") is something akin to ritual blot of the Jews, Muslims and Parsis. Their characteristic features of custom are irrationality and superstitious fear of the "impure". But if, according to the Torah, a person who touches for instance carrion, will be "unclean until the evening", according to the prison code the man, splashed with urine, will be "*petukh*" the rest of his life, even if he will be released and will go back to prison after 30 years.

Part 2: Thieves code ("ponyatiya") in support of the state

Conditions of "petukh's" in prisons

What is the life of "*petukh*" in prison? In a nutshell, it is an absolute sheer hell.

According to "*ponyatiya*", "*petukh*" has no rights. He has no right to argue, to retort, to defend his dignity, because it is considered that he has no dignity. Others can beat, humiliate and mock him.

When an ordinary prisoner and a "*petukh*" walk over the barracks hall, the latter is obliged to lean against the wall, in order to avoid touching the other prisoner, otherwise he may be beaten.

"*Petukhs*" do all the dirty work: washing the toilets (as you can imagine, that is 8-10 toilet seats in a section of a hundred people), taking out the trash and that sort of thing. Some of the "*petukhs*" provide sexual services to other convicts in exchange for tea and cigarettes (although I must say that in prisons where I was, prison staff fight against this, and if they find "*petukh*" and his client, having sex, both will be placed in solitary).

"*Petukhs*" get female names, prisoners refer to them with "she" or "baby". Frankly speaking, it's pretty savage and sickening to watch how young guffawing prisoners call, for example, a 60-year-old toothless grandpa "Alenka" or "Marina" (*female names - TN*).

"*Petukhs*" are never allowed for a moment to forget who they are. They enter the dining room after everyone, they are the last to wash in the shower room. In

club or leninroom (the room for watching TV) they have a separate bench in the most uncomfortable place. Phrase "Get the fuck outta here!" in their address is something quite familiar and common. One convict persistently argued with me that "*Petukhs are not people*".

However, prison staff have even worse attitude to "*petukhs*" than inmates. Inspectors and often officers at every possible way disparage, publicly abuse, threaten and also can beat them.

Being powerless people with broken will they even less than ordinary prisoners fight for their rights. As a result - more than half of suicides that have happened during my presence in prisons and jails, were committed by "*petukhs*", despite the fact that this cast is not more than 3-5% of the prison's population.

Tellingly, the situation in pre-trial detention centers is not better, where "*petukh's*" stay in special cells. At "Volodarka" (*pre-trial detention center in Minsk - TN*) the "*petukhs*" cell is number 70. I heard from people, who have long lived in the neighborhood of this cell, that its inhabitants opened their veins almost daily.

What do they do?

Life "at the the bottom of the heap", constant hatred and humiliation from almost anyone hardly can yield a highly moral creature. According to my personal observations, most of "*petukhs*" are people totally unprincipled, low-down, ready to do anything for their own benefit. Although, of course, this characters is not rare among prisoners in general, among "*petukhs*" this is probably much more common.

The vast majority of "*petukhs*" are working for administration: snitching, performing "operative tasks", provoking, etc. The need to somehow survive in the over-aggressive and hostile prison air pushes them to an alliance with the strongest party - prison staff. Therefore, most of the functions that "*petukhs*" perform anyway are imposed on them by operating officer.

The official duties of "*petukhs*" includes cleaning toilets (no one except them will do this) and taking out the trash. Many of them earn their living by cleaning the rooms. "*Petukhs*" are divided into "working" and "non-working". The first — those, who for a fee (tea, cigarettes, sweets), provide sexual services to other inmates. Second - those who don't, and this means they can not be forced.

Many believe that a person becomes "*petukh*" through rape in prison or in jail. 15-20 years ago it was so. But today it practically does not occur in Belarus prisons. At least, I do not know of any such case, and none of those, who was inside with me, told me anything of this nature. Also there was no cases of rape of "*petukhs*" during my prison time.

Today's prison is much more under the control of the administration than before, and raped "*petukh*" can write a statement against the rapist and his custodial penalty will be then increased.

What is the benefit for the administration?

Surely you have a question: why the state, and, in particular, prison administration allows savage medieval caste system with its untouchable, vassals and prostitutes to exist in prisons? Indeed it's inhumane, cruel and, finally, illegal, indeed according to the penitentiary internal rules of conduct, all prisoners should toe the same line and any caste division is out of the question.

Can prison staff stop it and recover may be strict and tough, but anyway discipline?

The answer is simple: they don't need it.

For quite a long time, spent in penal institutions, I was in many places and saw a lot of people. I was in four closed and in three medium-security prisons, talked with simple "*muzhiks*", and "thieves", bandits, drug addicts, "traders" and "*polozhenec's*" (underboss), swindlers and murderers, "*kozels*" and even "*petukhs*" and, of course, had quite a lot communicated with prison staff.

Reflecting a lot on construction of Belarus penal system, I came to a firm conclusion that thieves and police system of prison management are two pillars that support each other.

The informal system of "*ponyatiya*" invented by thieves, and official internal rules of conduct today are more likely mutually integrated, rather than in a state of war and conflict.

Yes, indeed, prison officials forcibly cleaned up the practice of "*ponyatiya*" from those rules that prevents controllability and inconvenience them. The rest of the world of professional criminals and the MVD world (Ministry of Internal Affairs) get on well with each other. They get from each other what they need: prison staff - peace in facility, no incidents and control (why should they have to control hundreds of prisoners, if it is possible to control one "*blatnoy*" / "*kozel*", who keeps at bay the others?). Thieves / "*kozels*" receive privileges and power. Everybody is happy. Except, of course, "*muzhiks*" who, as usual, is a patsy in the middle, and is, de facto, in the situation of double subordination.

Many of the prisoners who have served time for more than ten years, and saw how all Belarusian prisons went from "black" (under prisoner control) to "red" (under administration) between about 2005 to 2010, told me openly: "*Now it's same as before. Only instead of the thieves - 'kozels'. Earlier vodka and mobile phones were under 'blatnoys', but now under activists. If earlier for screwups 'muzhik' was beaten by thieves, now by 'kozels'.*"

Tellingly, even faces of such informal leaders are often the same. During the active "breaking" of prison and its reshaping, where do you think, operating officers took loyal and dedicated activists - "zavhozs" and room orderlies, ready to fulfill any order? They were recruited from yesterday's thieves, who quickly betrayed their criminal idea, because they were threatened with, for example, being sent to "covered" prison or loss of privileges, or just a few times were put in the punishment cell.

As a result, today Belarusian prisons are run by administration together with prisoners who "firmly mended their ways", but every inch of whose body is covered by criminal tattoos and whose fists are pumped with Vaseline.

Despite the formal contradiction in functions, confluence of the criminal world and correctional staff is noticeable, not only institutionally, but also on the linguistic level.

The officers use prison slang not less actively than convicts. As I wrote, the same "petukhs" are snubbed and humiliated by prison staff worse than by criminals. They even have their own "separated" among prison workers, who are outcasts in a circle of colleagues.

When I was in IK-15, there worked a "separated" inspector. Colleagues didn't drink tea with him, he was the only one who could frisk "petukhs". And such cases are not unique: in IK-14 (Novosady), from stories of my cellmate, there was even a separated officer, about whom colleagues have found out that he has "wrong" sex with his wife. As a result they stopped to drink tea with him, and began to defiantly despise him, moreover, even prisoners snubbed this officer with impunity. And there are a lot of such examples.

Interestingly, many of the prisoners (on the wave of toughening of regime toughening and relative improvement of "petukh's" conditions (about 20 years ago they were beaten more often, and could also be raped) have expressed to me the opinion that soon "petukhs will not exist, because everyone will be forced to the clean toilets". They often added, that authorities need to "look decent in front of Europe" (yes, there were also this kind of political analysts). However, it seems to me, that this will not happen in the near future. The reason is the same, the existence of "petukh's" caste significantly facilitates prison controllability.

Without any doubt, the administration of Belarusian prisons could force all prisoners to clean toilets and take food at tables regardless of caste.

There will be no riots or rebellions against it. This innovation will be fraught maximum with consequences like a few tens of diehard supporters of "ponyatiya", who will be sent to "covered" prison. Most prisoners in Belarus form such a down-trodden and speechless mass, that they could be easily forced to anything. And if they are offered prospects of a parole for cleaning toilets, they'll race each other to cleaning.

However, as we have seen, the administration isn't in a hurry to do so.

Another important point: the existence of this caste gives prison staff an invaluable assistance in pressing on prisoners who refuse to obey.

In every jail and prison are always individuals who refuse to play by the rules established by militia. Either these are antisocial persons that "*gazuyut*" (i.e. try to live strictly according to the thieves law), or prisoners who try to defend their rights, for example, complaining to various authorities, or those who only due to their status will be persecuted in prison, such as political prisoners.

So, many people from these categories are no longer intimidated by loss of parcels and visits, punishment cells or cell-type regime, or "covered" prison or the 411 th article of the Criminal Code (*Deliberate disobedience to the lawful demands of the administration of correction facility - TN*). Question: what do you do with them? And here comes the last argument - "*petukhs*" caste. And then even those who are not afraid of the isolation ward, or batons, of course, will think hard. this is because a life in this caste is the worst thing that can happen to a prisoner. A man with dignity can't stay in a group with this status, it becomes almost impossible. And there is no way out from this caste.

I conversed with a former prisoner of IK-2 (Bobruisk), who got a response from the head of the prison to his demand to comply with the law and noninfringement of his rights: "*Have you forgotten where the harem is?*". And this is not a singular example.

It's needless to say about the use of this tool against political prisoners. I myself know about at least three cases in which political prisoners were transferred into the "*petukhs*" caste simply for the fact that they are political prisoners

In all three cases, combination was very similar. After arrival of political prisoner in prison with an authoritative convict ("*blatnoy*" or "*kozel*"), he raises against the political prisoner an accusation of a "screwup": that he sat previously in the same cell with a "downcast", or drank from the "*petukh's*" mug, or he dealt with a "*petukh*" outside. Naturally, this accusation has nothing to do with reality. But, with a wave of a wand, one or more witnesses appear and confirm: "*yes, he drank, I saw myself*" or "*yes, he dealt with a fagot on the outside, I saw it myself!*", although the "accused" don't know these people. And now the decision can be made, everything according "*ponyatiya*"!

The result: the political prisoner is transferred into the "*petukh's*" caste, the actor ("*blatnoy*" or "*kozel*") gets a sop like a visit or a parcel, and the cunning operating officer, who developed the whole plan, receives administrative carrot from higher-ups.

I, fortunately, avoided this fate, although attempts, as I wrote above, were made. However, obviously, administration had no specific ambition to transfer me into the "harem", otherwise they would certainly have done so.

Such unanimity of informal prison elites and administration against political prisoners, allow me once again to say that the hierarchical punitive system always operates in unity, when they want to suppress and push out strange elements - potential rebels able to stand up for their rights.

And, of course, we can compare with the analogy of 1930-1940 years, when criminals have taken an active part in the elimination of "Trotskyists", "betrayers of the nation" and other "58th" (*an article "On counterrevolutionary activity" of USSR Criminal Code - TN*) (see. V. Shalamov "Zhulnecheskaya krov", E. Eppbaum "Gulag", Solzhenitsyn "The Gulag Archipelago", book 3).

Yes, these two heads of punitive hydra can sometimes squabble among themselves, but, nevertheless, they need each other, and at a time when they will need to destroy people such as us - they will certainly be together.

Is there a way out?

Here, I think it would be appropriate to give some advice for what to do, if you're in prison and you see, that an attempt is being made to transfer you to the "*petukh*" caste for disobedience or for "political" status (which is more often) .

First and foremost, you should change your attitude to what is happening. All of us, men, have been taught that "faggot" is insulting and disgusting, that it's a shame to be so. And now a group of adult and kind of sane men tells you that you are one. You need at first understand that your current situation has no shame and should not blame yourself. You are not a pedophile, not a rapist or even gay. It's just that feral caste norms, prevailing in prison are being used against you , in order to break your will and lower your status in the eyes of others.

What to do?

If the process has not yet entered irreversible stage, for example, you are thrown into a "*petukh*" cell or convicts publicly provoke you by asking tricky questions, it makes sense to fight to the last - fight, commit acts of self-harm, provoke any conflicts, but to get out of this situation, to show your unstoppable determination.

If the moment is gone, and you are in this caste, then you have to request the administration of your legitimate right to personal safety (Article 11 of the Criminal Executive Code of Belarus) - transfer to a safe place (usually in solitary confinement). According to this article, "*in case of threats to personal safety of the convicted person, he is entitled to apply for personal security ensuring to any official body of institution which carries out criminal sentences. In this case official body shall immediately take personal security measures of the convicted person*".

I don't know a single case, when a convict's claim was denied. However, everything is possible, and it may happen that for stronger effect the person, who was declared "*separated*" and demanded to be removed from common barracks, is intentionally left there. For a night, for example, that he has experienced all the beauties of "*petukh's*" life. In this case, you need to be ready for humiliation, and to fight, and to do anything. Again, this is the situation, when you should use extreme measures in the form of self-harm or self-protection at every possible way.

It is worth to remember that the more problems you create for the administration, the faster they will provide you with security, because prison administration does not have a goal of physical destruction of political prisoners, it is only about to break them down mentally. They don't need an excess corpse or disabled person in prison.

Of course, it should be understood, that a request to the administration to put you in solitary is a "screwup" in terms of "*ponyatiya*". Such people are called "*charged in*", "*covered*", etc. According to the same "*ponyatiya*", if you think that you were "*separated*" "on outrage" (ie unfair), you should find a superior in the criminal hierarchy ("enforcer" or thief under the code) and ask him for appeal, and don't ask administration to put you in a safe place.

You decide yourself what to do. However, my opinion is: an appeal to "*ponyatiya*" that is itself a tool of dissenters breaking, is at least short-sighted. And operating officers will always find an approach, the easy way or the hard way, to any criminal decision maker. And between saving your destiny or his own well-being, he unequivocally will choose the latter.

The very first thing to do in such cases is to make public what happened with you, inform the lawyer and relatives, so that the information gets into the media. They are still a kind of a shield for political prisoners from outright tyranny, so it is necessary to speak frankly and openly about everything that happened to you; talk without shame about castes and "*ponyatiya*" and provocations of prison staff. Indeed administration will put pressure on prisoners in this way, just playing on their male feelings and sense of shame for the fact that "*now I'm like a faggot*".

Thereby the vast majority of similar stories, that take place not only with political prisoners, never come out. People are simply ashamed to talk about them, by that reproducing the vicious circle of silence and allowing prison staff to continue using informal prison rules for pressure on undesirables.

We can stop it, only if we will start to talk about the problem out loud, conquering this absolutely unreasonable shame and fear.

As I said, I wasn't in such a situation, but I considered all the time the likelihood that I will be put in "harem" due to KGB orders. And by long reflection, observation and analysis of experiences of others I came to the conclusion that in that case, I will behave exactly as described above.

To sum up, I would like to conclude this text with something optimistic and life-affirming. But reality dictates a slightly different tone. The number of people entering the prison for their beliefs is gradually increasing and with it grows the pressure in prison. Important part of this pressure is precisely the caste system and informal hierarchy, which I described above.

It is not an individual, but the mass system of "practicing" on special categories of prisoners being tested on drug-addicted convicts. An innovation was introduced in prisons was: the preventive registering of "extremists" - they are forced to wear a yellow label. It is logical to assume, that in the light of the radical deterioration of the socio-economic situation in the country, next after drug-addicts will be "political", for whom separate prisons will be created.

All in all, I think that all of us, those, who stand today for changes and deposition of the dictator, should cast off illusions and realize that it would not be better and will only be harder. Of course, the prison administration will continue to use pressure against political prisoners by a thieves' *"ponyatiya"*. This tool is easy to use and has repeatedly proved its effectiveness.

Only demolition of archaic caste system can change the situation for the better and as a first step we should start with demolition of silence and taboo on discussion of the topic in society.

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Mikola Dziadok

Untouchables in prison hierarchy

The aim of this article is to illuminate some aspects of this complex and multifaceted phenomenon the informal hierarchy in Belarus prisons.

20.07.2016

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