

Medical workers – the new social activists of Belarus?

LEAD: The pandemic and political crisis has added new dimensions to the health care profession in Belarus.

Belarus's pandemic crisis and subsequent regime crackdown played a key role in creating a new kind of civic solidarity between the country's healthcare professionals and society. Medical staff provide support to society and boost its morale and citizens respond in a similar way. Overall, medics have been one of the leading groups involved in mobilising Belarusian society during the political crisis. It now appears that Belarus's new social activists can most likely be found in hospital hallways, examination rooms and online comment sections.

Where the government failed, people delivered

In order to properly understand the origins of this story we need to go back to the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Belarusian government was quickly mocked for its, to say the least, bizarre methods of fighting the virus. Indeed, it seemed that Minsk did not want to fight it at all. The Belarusian authorities ignored any advice from the World Health Organisation, whilst President Lukashenka himself stated that the virus was only a cover for great power competition. He even claimed that the virus was a kind of psychosis and presented his own prescription for the disease. This consisted of frequent trips outside for fresh air, cycling (because it improves lung function) and drinking vodka, as it is supposed to disinfect the body. Sports events were still held in the country and cinemas, theatres, cafes and schools remained open. Even 'subotniki', the collective cleaning of urban areas, were still organised. There was also no quarantine or obligation to wear masks. What might appear as an unimaginable situation became a sad reality for Belarusian citizens and especially medical workers in the country. This mismanagement at the beginning of the pandemic helped encourage a growing alliance between medical workers and Belarusian society. Aware of the dangers posed by the virus, society and medical workers decided to cooperate in order to help each other through the pandemic. Subsequently, the *ByCovid19* initiative was created with the help of social media in March 2020. The campaign received information from medical facilities about supply shortages and attempted to solve these problems. The members of the initiative were all volunteers and its activity was based on organising fundraising and buying personal protective or technical equipment. The group also helped buy washing machines, shoes, food and hygiene products. Over the course of two months, the volunteers managed to collect approximately 250,000 US dollars in donations from citizens and the diaspora. Overall, they helped to equip 150 facilities with the necessary personal protective equipment.

The activists, despite their supposedly apolitical nature, initially attempted to work with the authorities. As one of the organisers, Andrei Stryzhak, said: "when your house is on fire, you do not sit with your arms folded and wait for the fire brigade paid for by your taxes, you try to put out the fire". Nevertheless, the *ByCovid19* volunteers grew increasingly frustrated with the situation, as the government still did not recognise the seriousness of the pandemic or the initiative's work to fight the virus. The pandemic has helped to highlight many long-term problems faced by the health service. These issues include a lack of adequate financing of medical staff, poorly equipped medical facilities and an insufficient number of doctors and nurses. Despite this, the pandemic also had some truly positive effects, as it encouraged organisation within civil society and became the basis for the unprecedented level of cooperation among medical workers that we see today.

"Doctors against violence"

Medical workers subsequently played a key role in the protests that occurred in August 2020 following the rigged presidential elections. Facing a government crackdown on the protests, some doctors also took to the streets to protest against the violence. Doctors called their campaign „doctors against violence“ (*vrachi protiv nasylya*) and carried banners with slogans such as „stop the violence“, „medics with the nation“, „medics against lawlessness“, „who will treat you?“, „I wanted to save people's lives, not people from OMON“, „enough blood“ and „you arrest us today, who will save you tomorrow?“

Medical workers also organised peaceful marches in different cities. Doctors and nurses in masks and coats walked through cities in order to draw attention to the problem of police violence during the protests. They also wanted to show solidarity with the protesting citizens and that they would not remain silent. Belarusian medics also decided to go to the protests in order to treat the wounded following clashes with the police. These figures dressed in white coats and carried first aid kits in order to make it clear that they were doctors and were carrying out their duty to help. Despite this, they are still being arrested by OMON without explanation. Much like other protesters, medical workers have also been poorly treated after being arrested by the authorities. One doctor who fled Belarus recalls how he shouted at the police officers to not break his arms as he needs them for his work. Healthcare workers are now regularly detained and sentenced to days in prison. The doctors are being given the maximum punishment under the country's 'Administrative Code', with many facing 12 to 15 days of administrative arrest. Medical workers are also being fined and fired from their jobs, whilst students are being expelled from medical universities for exercising their civic rights in their free time. As one of the arrested doctors has said, "I turned from a respected specialist into an inconvenient citizen". This statement is only partially correct as medics who are against the regime are only 'inconvenient' for the government.

Belarusian citizens now regularly send messages of support to Internet channels managed by protesting doctors in order to express their gratitude for everything the healthcare workers have already done and for what they are still doing. Doctors and nurses are showing up voluntarily at the gates of prisons in order to help citizens who were mistreated at these facilities. These situations show how close society and medical workers have become, as doctors are now sacrificing their own free time in order to help citizens who have been hurt during protests.

Medical workers unite

The regime in Belarus is reacting to protests in its own, violent way as it tries its best to suppress the anti-government movement among medical workers. However, this does not mean that doctors are giving up. A very important initiative was recently created called the *Belarusian Medical Solidarity Foundation (BMSF)*. The initiative aims to protect the rights of medical workers suffering from the lawlessness of the authorities and to develop professional cooperation at an international level. It was established in November 2020 as a response to the way the authorities were treating health care workers. Its origins can be found in the aforementioned *ByCovid19* initiative. The initiative started collecting funds to help repressed doctors and has offered support for the families of arrested doctors, legal assistance during trials, assistance in organising employment abroad for dismissed medics, and education for expelled medical students. The campaign's site tries to keep people informed about the detained doctors and the real reasons for their detentions. In addition, the BMSF is also looking to the future, as it is talking about creating new structures and medical programmes that would help the Belarusian healthcare system and the independent doctors' trade union. The initiative is very active online, with a Facebook site (more than two thousand followers), Telegram channel (44 thousand subscribers) and Instagram account (almost 14 thousand followers). This is extremely important since social media allows medical workers to access a huge number of people and especially the younger part of society that is increasingly active during these difficult times. All of the organisation's posts receive a significant amount of reactions and this shows that the accounts' followers are active. Apart from this, it is important to remember that the Internet is the only possible means of communication since Belarusian mass media is flooded with propaganda and unreliable information.

One particular protest organised by medical professionals generated an impressive response from society and clearly showed how medical workers are increasingly creating a real social movement. This campaign has been called "Each of us" (*Kazhdyj z nas*). It all started when Dr. Artem Sorokin was arrested after he revealed that protester Roman Bondarenko, who died after leaving detention, was totally sober when he was admitted to hospital. By doing this, the doctor revealed that the government had lied about Bondarenko being drunk. This was given as the main reason for his death. Sorokin was considered to be a whistleblower and prisoner of conscience.

Medical staff responded almost immediately by organising the „Each of us“ campaign and this was promoted on BMSF’s Facebook page. Medical workers all around Belarus started taking photographs of themselves with signs that said „0 per mille“, which promoted the fact that Bondarenko had no alcohol in his body when he was arrested. They also wore badges with the phrase “Artem Sorokin, 0 per mille“, in order to show solidarity with their arrested colleague. This action soon spread into society and citizens started taking pictures of themselves facing the wall with their hands up as if they were being arrested, all while holding the sign „0 per mille“. By November citizens in almost every part of Minsk were showing their solidarity with Artem Sorokin, who was arrested for telling the truth. This event speaks volumes about the level of solidarity among the medical profession and the support for doctors offered by the rest of society, who are also fighting against the repressive regime.

While fighting for the health and dignity of Belarusian patients, medical workers also decided to fight for their rights as workers. In the long run this will help to improve the whole healthcare system in Belarus. The independent trade union “Panaceum” was created at the end of March and its goal is to represent all medical workers in Belarus. As doctors themselves say, they refused to be part of the official trade union, as this organisation has done nothing to stop the many violations of medical workers’ rights that have occurred throughout the years, such as detentions, beatings, imprisonment or layoffs based on political motives. The union also hopes to tackle the problem of medical workers having too many shifts and very small salaries. Since the state trade union of medical workers has never reacted to these issues, hospital work remains extremely disorganised and this has posed a direct threat to the wellbeing of patients. Medics, who have been extremely active during this time of political crisis, have also created their own independent trade union under the auspices of the Congress of Democratic Unions.

Doctors against lies

As already mentioned, Artem Sorokin refused to lie about Roman Bondarenko’s death. At the same time, he was not the only medical worker who decided to stand up against misinformation. Others include Wladimir Martow, Igor Tabolich and Nikita Solovey, who have made the public aware of the government’s attempts to hide the truth. Of course, there are many more medical professionals who have chosen to tell the truth. There were and still are many more of these heroes in Belarusian society too but there are simply too many to name.

Dr. Martow did not remain silent in January when Vitebsk hospital ran out of oxygen and several COVID-19 patients died. Igor Tabolich also openly told reporters about the situation with coronavirus and revealed how government statistics are false. Moreover, Dr. Tabolich informed the public how it was forbidden for medical staff to put COVID-19 as the first diagnosis. The doctor admits that he did not want to work in such a system and “cover up lies and propaganda”. Nikita Solovey gave explanatory comments and many media interviews.

He also conducted online streams on virus prevention and treatment and vaccination against COVID-19. After the protests in August, Nikita Solovey openly spoke out in solidarity with other doctors and criticised the actions of the authorities. By doing this, he opposed the government's political pressure and its detention of doctors and medical workers, who are so needed at their workplaces during the pandemic.

Of course, all these actions and statements had consequences for the medical workers who dared to speak out against the official line of the government. Wladimir Martow was fired but he decided to stay in the country. Igor Tabolich was arrested during one of the protests. Following this, he resigned from his job and left Belarus. Nikita Solovey was also fired from his position. However, thanks to their actions Belarusian society has remained informed about the reality of healthcare despite continued misinformation.

New social activists

Medical workers have managed to organise themselves amidst the pandemic and protests and have been quite successful in their actions. In exchange, Belarusian society has shown solidarity with the health workers, as well as gratitude and appreciation. The population has also provided medical workers with material goods (such as money) that are necessary to maintain the health care professionals' continued actions against the government. Moral support that is given by Belarusian citizens is also important, as it shows doctors that their job is not in vain. The nation is feeling safer as it knows that medics are on their side. According to one definition, social activism is an intentional action with the goal of bringing about social change, whilst an activist is anyone who is fighting for change in society. This sentence shows perfectly that the medical workers of Belarus today really are social activists. Medical workers, who are trying their best to ensure that the citizens of Belarus are not treated with violence by the authorities despite the consequences, are still willing to speak out against the regime. Due to this, it can be said that health professionals truly have been one of the key groups that has mobilised Belarusian society during the crisis.

By: Aleksandra Oczkowicz, a master's student in Eurasian Studies at Jagiellonian University and vice-president of the "Eurasia" discussion group. She is interested in international diplomacy and the human rights situation across post-Soviet space
Participant of Poland