



For Members of Security Forces: A Guide to Supporting Pro-Democracy Movements

A personal ID issued by Belarus' State Security Committee. A note: "3% Sasha, it is time to run!" (Sasha refers to Belarusian president Lukashenko, "3%" refers to the results of informal polling about Lukashenko's support in the country). Source: Twitter account @belamova.

by Maciej Bartkowski

When citizens wage civil resistance for democracy against authoritarian rule, how can members of law enforcement, interior security, intelligence services, and the military in the country help?

Recently in Belarus, some members of state security forces publicly threw their military ID cards and uniforms in the trash in protest against their long-time dictator.

In the United States, top generals are reportedly [contemplating resignations](#) in case their current commander-in-chief refuses to accept election results and orders the military to suppress street protests.



A Belarusian servicemember films himself throwing his uniform in a dumpster in protest of an anti-movement order, August 12, 2020. Source: Instagram account [@anatoli novitski](#).

Both countries have important differences, but each highlights the fact that popular uprisings significantly influence security force attitudes and behavior. In fact, quantitative research shows that in successful nonviolent uprisings against autocrats, security force defections occurred **more than 52% of the time**. Critically, when such defections happened, they made nonviolent movements 46 times more likely to succeed.

Let's say that you serve in the police, interior security, intelligence services, or the military. A ruler at the helm orders you to repress a pro-democracy movement and its unarmed people who are going out to protest against him. You do not agree with what the ruler and his political sycophants expect from you. Deep down, you know you would be no longer serving the country and its people if you were to follow those orders. You are looking for ideas on how to delay, derail, or go against the ruler's orders to suppress the nonviolent movement.

You are not alone. As documented by many scholars, journalists, and activists over the past century, security forces have taken brave yet often discreet actions to support pro-democracy movements—thus positioning themselves on the right side of history. Below is a list of those actions.

As a general disclaimer, a member of the security forces must use his/her best judgment in applying the following actions, relying ideally on a tight-knit, trusted group, and/or on external allies when possible, for added layers of safety and to amplify the impact of your individual actions.

1. STAY IN THE SYSTEM AND HELP THE PRO-DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT FROM WITHIN

If you choose this route you can:

Build a resistance network from within and with outside groups:

- Act on your own or, better, find and get together with others like you on the inside and *start building a resistance network of like-minded servicemembers*.
- Informally survey your colleagues on how they and their families feel about the ruler and his anti-movement orders. If you *sense dilemma and hesitation, ask them to work with you* from within.
- *Venture to identify movement participants whose family member(s) serve in the security forces* (perhaps relying on external allies). Reach out to these members to assess their loyalty to the ruler and, if the opportunity arises, build a resistance network across branches and services.
- *Establish contact with retired veterans* from your services whom you know are sympathetic to the movement or what it stands for.
- *Establish informal contact with legitimate domestic and/or international pro-democracy and human rights groups.*

Delay, delay, delay and screw up:

- Delay anti-movement orders and actions by *work-to-rule*: follow scrupulously and zealously all regulations and procedures of your department or agency.
- *Show lack of knowledge, or lack of required skills* if you are ordered to undertake anti-movement actions. In fact, if your superiors or colleagues want your help in anti-movement activities, *pretend that you*:
 - Do not know how
 - Do not know where
 - Do not know how to find
 - Do not know
 - Do not have
 - Cannot do
 - Cannot share
 - Cannot join
- *Show unwitting incompetence* and 'misunderstand' anti-movement orders. Do actions that turn out to be 'accidental mistakes,' either failing to harm or, in fact, helping the movement. If ordered to shoot, aim above the heads of the protesters.

Take time off:

- *Call in sick* when superiors give you anti-movement orders.
- *Take accrued and well-deserved vacation time* in case your superiors give you anti-movement orders.

Soften your colleagues' loyalty to the ruler and/or superiors:

- *Share with your colleagues jokes that mock the ruler or your superiors, saying you overheard the jokes. You know well that a strongman's worst nightmare is when people mock or laugh at him rather than fear or adulate him. A seemingly ambiguous comment—"Jokes about our dear leader are not really funny... only one person gets them"—might pave the way.*
- *Raise subtle questions about whether you and your colleagues are on the right side of history if they continue being loyal to and serving the ruler.*
- *Sow doubts about whether the ruler and your superiors can exercise effective control over the country in the face of widespread public noncooperation, and whether ineffective rule can be sustainable.*
- *Help shift your colleagues' loyalties away from the ruler, in favor of the constitution and/or the movement and its cause;*
- *Unmask and de-anonymize those servicemembers who diligently and with enthusiasm implement orders to repress the movement. Use different channels to provide information about them to the movement so that the latter may join in publicly shaming the unmasked individuals.*

Shape your colleagues' views about the movement:

- *Acknowledge that the nonviolent movement is comprised of *unarmed people that need to be protected, not repressed*. If incidents of violence happen on the fringes of the movement take note that *the vast majority of people in the movement remain nonviolent*.*
- *Point out that the nonviolent movement, even if engaged in nonviolent disruption that brings a country to a halt, *leaves the door open to genuine negotiations* on peaceful transfer of power and democratic reforms.*
- *Help your colleagues *distinguish between disinformation/propaganda about the movement and the truth*. Refer to legitimate independent sources of information and, if accessible, internally-collected (often confidential) raw data and information about the movement and its actions to present undistorted facts to your colleagues.*

Protect your colleagues:

- *Protect subordinates who sympathize with the movement and support democratic reforms to the best of your ability.*

Document and make good use of the information you have:

- *Document anti-movement orders and actions, especially those that violate human rights or are otherwise illegal, as much as you possibly can in a safe way.*
- *Pass on useful information to the movement via sympathetic veterans of your services or directly.*
- *Inform the movement *when and under what circumstances your superiors want you to use violent force* against protesters.*
- *Inform the movement *if, when, and where agents provocateurs are expected to infiltrate* their movement or/and its actions.*

Ask for written and signed orders and their constitutional compliance:

- *Ask your superiors for written and signed orders* if these orders are to harm nonviolent protesters or dissidents, and wait to receive them before you act.
- *Scrutinize orders from a ruler or your superiors against the constitution and fundamental rights* enshrined in it, and ask for written explanations from your superiors about how their orders comply with these principles.

Use the courts if you can:

- *Refer (or ask your allies to refer) anti-movement orders* you receive from the ruler or superiors *to the courts* to determine their compliance with existing laws, including the constitution, prior to implementing them. This can buy you and/or the movement extra time.

Help educate the movement:

- *Share with the movement suggestions* about specific actions and behaviors *that would be helpful in swaying your colleagues' views* about the ruler, shifting their loyalty away from him, and generating a positive attitude towards the movement.
- *Stress to the movement that its nonviolent discipline is critical* for you to bring other servicemembers to your and the movement's side. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to convince your colleagues to side with the movement if activists threaten violence against them.

Consider disruptive nonviolent interventions:

- If your internal following allows, *organize a strike or sit-in*. Issue both economic and political demands, including better working conditions, and *call on your families and fellow citizens to come*, bring food, and join the action to support and protect the participants. The ruler will likely accuse you of mutiny but he might be gone by the time he or his political minions are able to do anything against you.

Go public if you are exposed:

- If the ruler or superiors discover your actions and you know they intend to arrest you on politically motivated charges, *consider going public with your opposition*, and *seek protection* from human rights organizations, political allies, and even from ambassadors or in embassies of democracies present in your country.

2. RESIGN FROM THE SYSTEM AND HELP THE MOVEMENT FROM THE OUTSIDE

If you choose this route you can:



"Army with the people. Stop Luka" (meaning Lukashenko, the long-time leader of Belarus). "3%" refers to informal polling results about Lukashenko's support in the country. Source: Twitter account [@belamova](#).

- *Join or create a veteran group* that sympathizes with the movement and let your former, active colleagues know that they can trust and approach you in case they would like to confidentially pass on information that might help the movement.
- Coordinate your resignation with other like-minded colleagues and *resign en masse for greater impact*.
- *Engage in a "noisy resignation,"* including a video announcement condemning actions of the ruler and encouraging your colleagues to either follow in your footsteps or stay in the system but help the movement. You can then give them advice, in private or in public, on how they can help, including sharing with them the information included in this guide.
- *Gather any and all information that might help the movement* before you resign, and soon after your resignation, relay that information to the movement.

3. JOIN THE MOVEMENT

If you choose this route you can:

- Announce that you and many of your like-minded colleagues and/or subordinates will join the movement and you intend to *come to protest sites in uniform but unarmed*, to protect activists with your bodies. You can *form a human shield*, defending protesters against violence from the ruler and his loyalists.
- Join a movement action in your uniform but unarmed, and *ask the movement to give you the stage to speak* to other participants about you and others like you in the system who support the ideals the movement stands for.
- *Become a nonviolent activist* in your community in support of the movement's actions and goals.

- Use social media and available mainstream media to *go public with your motives to leave the service* and join the movement.
- *Make appeals to your former, active colleagues* to either leave the service or join you and the movement, or to remain in the system but resist it from within. You can give them advice on how they can help, including sharing information that is included in this guide.
- *Name and shame* those in your former ranks whom you know have used violence against unarmed protesters.

Whether you support a movement already or are still on the fence, make no mistake: one day soon, you may be asked to follow orders that you will deem unjust or unlawful. People like you, serving at other times, in other countries, and facing a similar dilemma, undertook actions listed in this guide often despite risk to themselves and their loved ones.

Think this through, prepare, and assess your options ahead of time. Where there is a will there is a way.

Pass this guide on to those who need to know.



Maciej Bartkowski

Dr. Maciej Bartkowski is a Senior Advisor to ICNC. He works on academic programs to support teaching, research and study on civil resistance. He is a series editor of the ICNC Monographs and ICNC Special Reports, and book editor of *Recovering Nonviolent History*. You can follow him [@macbartkow](#)

[Read More](#)