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A RESISTING CULTURE

Why is the Belarusian culture so little known in the world? Why does it remain so vague even in neighbouring countries? On hearing the words "Polish culture," an educated European will recall Chopin and Kieslowski; Grieg and Munch spring to mind when one hears "Norwegian culture." Muscovites might associate the words "Belarusian culture" with the Soviet-era folk-rock stars *Pesniary*; while a Berliner probably has no associations whatsoever, apart from Chernobyl and Lukashenko.

The history of the partitions

The Belarusians had a traditional rural society when they started to become a modern nation in the very beginning of the 20th century, somewhat later than their neighbours.

National renaissance began along with the semi-modernisation introduced by the Russian colonial government. National self-identification was weak for the majority of Belarusians due to the absence of national schools, a national bourgeoisie, or a national church (the use of the Belarusian language was forbidden by the Tsarist government). The Uniate church came under oppression after the Belarusian territories were adjoined to Russia as a result of Poland's (*Rzecz Pospolita*) partition. Later, the Uniate church was banned, then forced into Orthodoxy in 1839. "Being indigenous" was substituted for identification with a national community. Cities were not Belarusian. A large part of the urban population consisted of Ashkenazi Jews who did not mix with the local inhabitants that much, while the upper classes appropriated Russian or Polish cultural tendencies. The conversion from Belarusian into the language of the ruling culture (Russian or Polish) was a condition for social promotion. That is why the gentry, officials, clergy, and Belarusian bourgeoisie declined any connection with rural "folk."

At the same time, the "intellectual enlighteners" identified the Belarusian nation with the peasantry, and saw the development of rural culture as the most promising strategy for national renaissance.

As a result, Soviet-type urbanisation presented a real challenge for the survival of Belarusian peasant culture, and made the very existence of the as yet unformed nation and its unripe nationalism doubtful. The Belarusian language and culture began to be forced out by Russian and the Russian culture.

Some of the more dynamic and aggressive neighbouring nations have even commandeered parts of the Belarusian cultural heritage. In the Georges Pompidou Centre, one can find works by two great Belarusian-born masters, Mark Chagall and Chaim Soutine. The inscription under a canvas by the former reads "Born in Vitebsk, Russia" while, similarly, the latter appears to have been "Born in Smilavichy, Lithuania." In fact, Belarus was also the birthplace of the linguist Elisar Ben-Yehuda, creator of Hebrew, Adam Mickiewicz, a classic writer of Polish literature, and the French poet Oskar Miłosz, people who never lost their spiritual bond with the country; and this list of famous people of Belarusian origin could go on and on.



The imprints of totalitarianism and reasons behind Russification

For the Belarusian culture, the 20th century ran red with all the blood it shed. The country was always under either German or Russian oppression. Since the Jews constituted a large part of Belarusian intellectuals, the Holocaust was especially devastating for the intelligentsia. After World War II, the forced emigration of thousands of Belarusian Catholics, ethnic Poles, and Belarusians to Poland was a real drama. Stalin's unprecedented repression struck its most destructive blow by aiming to extirpate every centre of cultural opposition (during the 1930s, 450 of the 550 Belarusian writers were subjected to repression, which few of them survived).

Soviet totalitarianism had a very profound impact. Since the early thirties, the regime demanded that cultural figures obediently participate in state policy under threat of imprisonment or prohibition of their work. This was not mere censorship or ideological control, as was the case in countries of the so-called "Socialist camp." The Soviet regime in Belarus set itself the task of completely annihilating the previous cultural tradition, with all its forms and content, in order to replace it entirely with culture of new, socialist content.

That new type of culture was required in order to provide unswerving propaganda for the new order and thus ensure its stability. Another imposed requirement was that it should base itself on the reference culture of Russia in order to bond this peripheral ethnic land with the mother country. Works in the Belarusian language were welcomed only for less esteemed art forms, while more prestigious ones such as the cinema or opera were almost exclusively in Russian. Scientific research into humanitarian disciplines was allowed in Belarusian, but all technical, exact and natural sciences were forced to use Russian. There was also an implicit veto on translation from world languages into Belarusian. The outside world was only supposed to reach Belarusian minds through Russian mediation.

Belarusian culture was reserved for the backward countryside and peasantry, or for cultural rituals and a touch of "local colour," whereas the urban population and all the leading, attractive fields of life had to serve the Russian culture. This policy was eventually intended to lead to the complete assimilation of Belarusians, as urbanisation advanced across the country. In turn, the high rate of urbanisation was brought about by the unequal living standards and opportunities for social realisation which existed between the city and rural areas.

According to the official doctrine, Russification (in the form of Sovietisation) was considered to be progressive. However, the Soviet authorities' plans implied it should be pursued gradually and without force in order to avoid protests and dissatisfaction. The Soviet ideological and scientific doctrines presumed the Belarusian language and culture would vanish, giving way to their Russian counterparts. *"The sooner we start speaking Russian, the sooner we will build communism,"* claimed Soviet leader Nikita Krushchev during an inspection visit to Minsk. This put psychological pressure onto Belarusian-speakers, making increasing numbers of people accept and adopt Russian cultural codes. Belarusian cultural and artistic figures who

were forced to live in cities while trying to keep doing justice to the countryside were doomed to perish in an eternal cultural ghetto, surrounded by a Russian-speaking urban environment. Instead of growing richer, the Belarusian language was being steadily Russified.

On the other hand, the Soviet system also eliminated the need to study Belarus and its culture anywhere outside the USSR. There was no demand for Belarusian studies because they were covered by Sovietology (as were Ukrainian or Lithuanian, for example). As a result, by the time the Soviet Union broke up, the Belarusian language was virtually unknown outside the Slavonic world, and nobody was interested in Belarusian culture. The West saw Belarus through Russia's eyes (as is the case with Chechnya or Ukraine), having adopted without criticism the traditional imperialistic concepts created by Russian historians and cultural theorists. After encountering the magical world of Western culture in the early nineties, Belarusian culture also faced a lack of understanding and feedback. The discovery became a frustrating experience.



Viktor Piatrou during his performance in frames of the exhibition "Kingdom of Belarus," Podkova Lesna.

Photo: Archive of Modern History

As paradoxical as it may sound to a foreign ear, the lowly status of the Belarusian language and culture has always been a direct result of the stigma attached to Belarusians who speak Belarusian in the formally independent Republic of Belarus. The official propaganda of Alaksandar Lukashenka's Sovietising regime follows the old pattern of presenting Belarusian-language culture (feared for its independence and irreconcilability) as being the culture of a limited group of political semi-dissidents (*"either agents of the West, or horrible nationalists"*), writers (*"ungifted graphomaniacs"*), and backward, uncivilised villages with no future. This is exactly what makes many Belarusian intellectuals (Belarusian- and Russian-speakers alike) insist on the need for positive discrimination against Russian-language culture, and for affirmative action in favour of the Belarusian-language and cultural minority, if the political situation should ever change. In their opinion,

it is only through such action that further discrimination against Belarusian-speakers could be stopped, and permanent foundations for a Belarusian state system could be laid. Those intellectuals consider that supporting Belarusian culture would be more than the mere repayment of a historical debt and a restoration of historical justice: it would make a sizeable contribution towards cementing the country's national identity and civil society.

Undiscovered treasures

The 20th century saw the crystallisation of Belarusian cultural identity. However, wars and assimilation processes turned this country of four or five cultures (Belarusian, Russian, Polish, Jewish, and Ukrainian to the south) into a bicultural country, namely Belarusian and Russian. In fact one could say it became one Soviet culture, which the official ideology termed "*national in form, socialist in content*."

The burden of this Soviethood was much heavier for Belarusian culture to bear than Russian. A lot of what was allowed in the metropolis was considered to be ideological crime on the ethnic periphery. Creative Belarusians were under threat of being charged with "bourgeois" or "nationalist" deviation (the latter being a mortal sin), which hobbled their creativity and often rendered their artistic achievements anachronistic. Belarusian artists' chances of creating something modern and competitive were reduced because the centre was constantly creaming off the best creative talents. All competitive works that appeared, usually in opposition to official ideology, were stifled and kept away from the public. When something became impossible to hide from the domestic audience, it was then banned from being displayed abroad, since all foreign contacts had to be made through Moscow.

Even the best achievements of Belarusian culture (such as the films of Viktor Turau, the novels of Vasil Bykau, essays by Ales Adamovich, ballets by Yauhen Hlebau, paintings by Mikhail Savitski or Izrail Basau, tapestries by Alaksandar Kishchanka, songs by *Pesniary*, or sculptures by Andrey Bembel) have either failed to become worldwide phenomena due to their relative lack of talent; simply remained unknown to the world due to the language barrier or other reasons mentioned above; or were presented abroad as being Soviet or just "Russian" works. The most blatant example of the latter is the Belarusian Opera singer Maria Gulegina. When she became a soloist at the Metropolitan Opera and La Scala, the Russian media and musical critics unanimously described her as a "Russian singer," although she had never lived or worked in Russia.

Though it has produced masterpieces of high and pure art, given rare insights into servility, or presented unique examples of martyrdom and tragedy, 20th century Belarusian culture has nevertheless remained a culture unknown to the world.

With a millennium of Christian tradition behind it, plus a rich heritage coming from both East and West, Belarusian culture grew from a tangle of Latin, Byzantine Greek, and Slavonic roots. Unfortunately, in the West it is often seen as something exotic, Oriental and ethnographic, while in Russia it is perceived as something

local, regional, or even as a "Polish intrigue." These differing concepts are in fact two sides to one colonial approach. In the meantime, the Belarusian culture is still in existence, shaping the national consciousness, and coping with its post-colonial complexes and the handicap that has built up over years of national dependence and communist deformation.

Gerder wrote "*a poet is the creator of a people; he gives them a world to observe, holds their souls in his hands*." His words ring doubly true when applied to the national development of peoples with a short state tradition. Writers, philologists and historians were the smiths of national identity for Belarusians, just as they were in all the Central and Eastern European nations that started to form quite late and had no national bourgeoisie in the early stages of their nations were taking shape (e.g. Ukraine, Slovakia, Macedonia, or Bosnia). In Belarus, where the national formation process is not yet complete, culture plays an altogether special, exclusive role.

Divided nation, divided culture

The litmus tests to detect the historical and ideological divides in Belarusian culture today are, firstly, the (approving or critical) reactions to attempts made by Lukashenka's totalitarian state to control culture and, secondly, different attitudes towards affirmative action favouring Belarusian culture. Beyond these opposing world-views of various "pro-staters" and "independents," Belarusophiles and Belarusophobes, there is also a linguistic split between cultures based on the Belarusian and Russian languages.

The Belarusian-language, "non-Soviet" tradition declares itself to be the successor of dissident/emigrant culture and independent cultural centres. It mostly conforms to what is known as the "classic spelling" (or *Tarashkevitsa*), rejecting the changes made to literary norms during the Soviet period. This school's main objective is to accelerate the creation of a true nation.

The Belarusian-language "state-loyal" tradition is maintained under the aegis of "creative unions" founded in Stalin's time, and is controlled by a Ministry of Culture established under Khrushchev. It remains faithful to the "official spelling" (or *Narkomovka*), introduced during Stalin's rule. This tradition sees its function as being to serve state policy, whatever it might be.

The Russian-language imperialistic tradition is supported by Russian nationalist ideology. It does not consider the existence of the Belarusian people to be sufficient grounds for independent national state development, and therefore ignores Belarusian culture. To the followers of this tradition, Belarus is a historical error, whereas Russia can be found everywhere one hears the Russian language. Given the widespread expansion of the Russian culture, adepts of this tradition feel quite comfortable in Belarus.

The Russian-language, Belarusophile imperialistic tradition is the youngest of all. Its supporters are Belarusian in the political sense. They stand for the independence of Belarus and respect the same historical symbols and myths that Belarusian-speakers do, but in most situations opt for Russian language and culture. Unlike the rulers of the empire, they do not doubt the full value of the

Belarusian language, nor do they reject Belarusian culture, and even agree to participate in benefit actions to support it. They do not, however, believe in reviving the civil role of the Belarusian language and culture, considering them to be museum exhibits, and nothing more than symbolic figures. It goes without saying that this cultural model is very attractive to the newly-emerged Belarusian official and business elite, which is often of Russian origin. The vulnerability of this position lies in its ambiguity and inconsistency. The weakness of this "Creole" world-view is that a Creole culture is easily conquered and diluted by that of the mother state. A striking example of this is the band *Lyapis Trubetskoy* — outstanding proponents of a Creole culture.

The "independent Belarusian" and "Creole" cultural models are most popular among the young people who will be shaping the outlook of Belarusian culture tomorrow. Whether society is able to overcome its internal divide depends on mutual recognition from both sides. This mutual recognition and interest are on the increase thanks to joint resistance against the authoritarian regime that has taken hold of the country.

Cultural resistance

Contemporary Belarusian culture is facing many challenges.

The challenge of "degovernmentalisation" and supporting independent initiatives also means working to fill the void created by Sovietisation. The only possible way to achieve cultural diversity is by means of painstaking daily work, ranging from translating world classics into Belarusian, to designing new teaching curricula for schools.

One of the most important tasks is to overcome political nihilism, the allergy to politics which the art world developed as a reaction to compulsory Soviet ideology. There is an urgent need for cultural figures to regain their former involvement in social affairs.

The creation of a mass culture is high on today's agenda. It will be a decisive factor to promote self-healing of cultural mechanisms as such, allowing them to free themselves of state control, and will certainly help in strengthening the Belarusian state.

Another vital task is to develop Belarusian studios and promote Belarusian culture in the rest of the world. A more active dialogue with different cultures will help it respond to other challenges, and give it the self-assurance it lacks today.

Returning to the beginning of this article, that is to the question of who the new Belarusian culture is associated with, one has to say that today's Warsaw or Kyiv intelligentsia will perhaps think of the poet Slavimir Adamovich (the first political prisoner of Lukashenka's regime, who went through two KGB prisons on a charge of "calling for an attempt on the head of state's life" in his poetry); the performance artists Ales Pushkin

(another "political recidivist" banned from travelling abroad by the authorities) and Artur Klinau; or perhaps Lavon Volski, lead singer of the right-on rock band *NRM*. A philologist specialising in Belarusian will mention the fundamental *Belarusian Historical Review*, the "scintillating" literature and arts journal *Arche*, or the kitschy satirical newspaper *Navinki*¹. All these projects are produced by young people born in the 1960s and 70s who are not stifled by the burden of the Soviet legacy. They are now creating a new "humane" and attractive look for Belarusian culture. Their work under pressure from the last dictatorship in Europe is fascinating for its courage, inventiveness, nonconformity, and world intellectual context, as well as its radical aversion to any manifestations of autarchy and chauvinism.

The names of Bykau and Nyaklyaeu are now well-known even outside the restricted academic circles of Warsaw and Kyiv. The demonstrative emigration of Vasil Bykau, the patriarch of Belarusian literature, and Vladimir Neklyaeu, head of the official Belarusian Writers' Union, were acts of protest against the oppression of freedom, and totalitarian manipulation of the mass consciousness in Lukashenka's Belarus. Now they are gone, Belarusian culture has begun to recover its intrinsic, fundamentally united attitude towards the key problems of today.

For Belarusian culture, in its fight for democracy and national independence at the turn of the millennium, the formation process is almost complete.



"Navinki," Ales Pushkin's performance

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¹ Literally meaning "novelties," this is also the name of a village near Minsk where Belarus' largest psychiatric hospital is situated. The name also resonates with *Naviny* ("News"), a serious newspaper which has been banned in the past.