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CULTURAL MOVEMENTS IN BELARUS. THE 20th CENTURY



*Ales Pushkin during his action in front of the President's Palace,
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Photo: IREX/ProMedia*

1. THE HISTORY OF CULTURAL MOVEMENTS BEFORE 1991

19th century

For many Central European peoples that lost or did not accomplish their sovereignty as states, the road to liberation or renovation went through the cultural revival of the nation. Belarus is no exception here. By the 19th century, the Belarusian ethnos, once dominant in the Great Duchy of Lithuania, lost most of its state identity. The top strata of society usually identified themselves as Poles or Russians (depending on whether they belonged to the Catholic or Orthodox Church) and used the corresponding languages. The lower strata, which preserved spoken Belarusian, either adhered to the same division or considered themselves *tuteyshiya* (indigenous), without defining their ethnic or historical origin. The written Belarusian language that had flourished during the Renaissance

was wearing out during late 17th and 18th centuries down to virtual extinction. In the first half of the 19th century, some Polish intelligentsia of Belarusian origin turned to the fact of existence of the Belarusians with their history and culture. They were romantically inspired by the folklore and the “roots,” as well as by the contemporary trend of being democratic and “of-the-people.” Of course, their search was also influenced by the occupation of the territories of Rzeczpospolita by Russia, Prussia, and Austria.

During the first half of the 19th century, the phenomenon of “Belarusianness” somehow fascinated such writers as Adam Mickiewicz (born in Navahrudak, the heart of Belarus, in a Belarusian gentry family), Jan Chechot, Władzisław Syrokomla, Jan Barshchewski, and Vincent Dunin-Martsinkevich. Some of them collected and reworked Belarusian folklore and used the Belarusian language and themes in their work. Generally speaking, most of those initiatives did not cross the boundaries of so called *krayovasts* — regional patriotism within former Rzeczpospolita and the context of Polish cultural domination.

In the second half of the 19th century, some ideas of a Belarusian state became to show through. Vincent Kanstant Kalinowski (1838–1964), one of the leaders of an uprising on the territory of the ex-GDL in 1863–64, expressed hope for uniting the Belarusian gentry and peasants in liberating a “democratic” Belarus. The uprising was harshly smashed causing poet Frantsishak Bahushevich (1840–1900) to voice the notion of restoring the Belarusian culture and — in the future — state. His words “Do not abandon our language, Belarusian, for not to die!” remain one of the key appeals to the Belarusian liberation and cultural movements hitherto.

1900–10

Thus was taking shape the ideology of the Belarusian national renaissance. Politically, it had a prevalently left, socialist orientation — a majority of its participants were members of the Belarusian Socialist Hramada. It is worth noting that almost all of them were activists of Belarusian culture: writers, publicists, historians, who went down in history not as representatives of some “national current” within the Russian or Polish culture. Their role as politicians was much weaker than that in the building up of the modern Belarusian culture.

In 1906, the Belarusian Socialist Hramada founded “Nasha Niva” (Our Cornfield), a Belarusian-language newspaper published in Vilna (Vilnius). It became a centre for almost all Belarusian cultural circles. Future classics of Belarusian literature — Janka Kupala, Jakub Kolas, Maksim Bahdanovich, Maksim Haretski, and others — worked for it and with it. The nine years of its activity, which included the preparation of the Belarusian Museum, promoting Belarusian culture among the broadest public in the country and abroad, “Nasha Niva” made a radical influence onto the moulding of Belarusian ideology, putting together a body of national culture, development of the literary language

and humanitarian science. Thanks to it, in the course of a decade from the Russian revolution of 1905–07 to that of 1917, the Belarusian movement had grown from a bunch of enthusiasts into a geopolitical factor.

On March 25, 1918, the Belarusian Popular Republic (BPR) declared its independence, which it had to be fighting for during the next two years. Modern historians refer to the beginning of the 20th century as the “Nasha Niva time” or “Nasha Niva Renaissance”; the newspaper and its manner of activity as a cultural and educational centre became a model for all the generations to come.

1920s–40s

The next decades of 1920s–1940s surely were the most tragic period in the history of Belarus: having lost the BPR initiative, the country found itself divided between the Bolshevik Russia and the 2nd Rzeczpospolita, and later, during World War II, completely under the German occupation. After the war, the whole of Belarus ended up in the USSR. The term seized country, invented by Janka Kupala for Belarus, continued to hold true despite the existence of the fictitious Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR).

The Polish authorities of the 2nd Rzeczpospolita did not take well to Belarusian separatism. Nonetheless, the Belarusian elites of Western Belarus managed to preserve themselves physically and bring up successors. In the 20s, the Soviet regime was pretty liberal toward the national culture in the BSSR built on the ruins of the BPR, which allowed a short period of flourishing of the Belarusian culture and science; it came to an end in the 30s with Stalin’s hard line for the creation of a single “Soviet nation.” Terror was the main instrument of that policy during more than two decades, and by 1941 it scythed almost all of the national elite, including the majority of writers, philologists, and historians. The rest of the nationally aware intelligentsia emigrated or was killed during World War II. After the war, it was the turn of the third generation whose sense of being Belarusian was brought up under the German occupation.

1950s–1970s

The generation that joined grown-up life after Stalin’s terror in mid-50s had to start everything all over again. The terror had left such powerful imprints that the generation continuity was virtually lost: the Belarusian intelligentsia that came from the countryside or demobilised from the Soviet army and graduated in the 1950s knew almost nothing about those who had been building up “Belarusianness” in the first half of the century.

By the end of the 60s, that was modern literature calls the “cultural opposition” had formed. At first it was unorganised individual statements of teachers, scientists, or writers, mainly in favour of the defence of the Belarusian language. (For example, in 1957 Branislaw Rzhewski, teacher of the Homel Pedagogical Institute, was arrested and sentenced to seven years in prison for

a campaign of written appeals to the authorities of Soviet Belarus about the discrimination of the Belarusian language. Same year, young philologist Lyavon Bely was sentenced for 10 years of imprisonment for spreading his own verses dedicated to the defence of his mother tongue.) In late 50s artist Lyavon Barazna, the founder and ideologist of the cultural opposition in Soviet Belarus started his activity.

The Khrushchev thaw in 1956 was clearly a new wave of russification and cultural nihilism through - out the USSR. The party leader said in 1959 in a speech dedicated to the 40th anniversary of the BSSR: "The sooner we all speak Russian, the quicker we will build communism." The anti-Belarusian state language policy, Soviet propaganda, the presence of teachers and officials from other Soviet republics made the Belarusian language and "own" country - side cultural tradition seem "not prestigious," and the new city population strove to rid of them as soon as possible.

The total sovietisation of Belarusian society and cultural life was assisted by the USSR's central system of management, both in the administrative and cultural fields. Moscow, the empire centre, divided finance among the regional centres — capitals of the union republics. Every republic had to feel as a Moscow's province. Everything important was created in the centre; the province was left to react to orders, directives, and campaigns. As a result, the periphery was losing creative initiative while most active creators sought to move close to the centre.

A cult figure for the national-minded intelligentsia was Larysa Heniush, a prominent poetess who was in the centre of the non-Soviet Belarusian life in the 1930s-40s, and never accepted Soviet citizenship after her release from a detention camp in 1956 — until her death in 1983 in a small provincial town, Zelva. Her house turned into a peculiar pilgrimage destination where she was visited by practically all adepts of the Belarusian movement. Vilnius, where some more representatives of the pre-war Belarusian movement lived, and where Belarusian affairs were not under such vigilant supervision of special services as in the BSSR, also attracted the Belarusians.

In the 60s, a circle of like-minded people group around Barazna; they collect information about history and culture, discussed on subjects forbidden under the Soviet regime. One of Barazna's closest companions was Zyanon Paznyak, then a young student of theatre criticism, who would become the leader of political opposition in late 80s. In late 60s and early 70s, Minsk had several of such small, more or less connected, groups discussing national revival. One of them was "Na Paddashku" (On the Attic), another — the Academic Centre, a circle that started in the Belarusian Academy of Science and some higher educational establishments and was mainly made up of young scientists studying history, literature, and languages.

In the opinion of the initiators of the cultural opposition, the preservation and development of the language, culture, national and historical awareness, and spreading them among the masses was to become the basis for democratic changes in society. Cultural oppo-

sition was what characterised the last three decades before the collapse of the USSR in 1991.

Artists, such as Yauhen Kulik, Ales Marachkin, and Mikola Kupava, portrayed in their drawings and paintings scenes from Belarusian history, staged underground exhibitions and ventured to bring the "forbidden" imagery to official ones as well as to book illustrations. They also collected folklore. Gradually, *samizdat* (underground publishing) was organised, particularly of banned Belarusian literary works of 1910s-40s.

It is worth noting that intelligentsia from the periphery also joined the cultural opposition. For example, Mikola Yarmalovich, a retired teacher in Maladzechna, in 1963-64 was putting out a hand-written opposition magazine called "Padsnezhnik" (Snowdrop), revived in 1975 under the name "Hutarki" (Conversations). In 1968 he distributed his book "Following the Traces of One Myth" that, for the first time after the war, attempted to formulate a national concept of Belarusian history. There were also some groups founded in Harodnya and Navapoiatsk.

Many lost their jobs, subjected themselves to party or civil baiting (e.g., the Academic Centre crushed in 1973-74.) Books were banned from publication and paintings from exhibitions. Lyavon Barazna, who was organising (together with Zyanon Paznyak) actions against the demolition of historical neighbourhoods in Minsk in 1972, suddenly died under circumstances still scarcely known.

The 1960s-70s were characterised by certain political indefiniteness and trying to avoid politics; activists were targeting nearest cultural tasks: education, the promotion of the language, national values, and history among as broad public as was possible.

The 1980s – early 1990s

As a new generation joined the Belarusian cause, the cultural opposition took on a new face. In 1979, students of the Belarusian Theatre and Arts Institute and the Belarusian State University formed what they called the Belarusian Vocal and Drama Workshop. It was the first cultural opposition organisation of the new type. Founded as a creative association, it was formally oriented at certain openness and public forms of activity. Folklorist orientation, traditional though for the Belarusian cultural opposition, was called upon to divert the security organs; the association actually set the task of taking over the power in the country.

The Workshop's example proved fruitful, and by mid 80s various folklorist, local-studies, and historical clubs and circles united mainly young people in Minsk and other places in Belarus. Their gurus were usually older people — the so-called sixtiers; however, it was mainly the younger members who held the initiative. In 1984, after the Workshop (*Maystrownnya*) was stopped, and an underground group called "Nezalezhnasts" (independence) was founded. Succeeding to the Workshop in Minsk was "Talaka," founded in 1985, which declared itself as a "fellowship for the protection of historical monuments." In 1986, a sister "Talaka" group appeared in Homel, and "Pakhodnya" in Harodnya. Those

centres were the background of many today's leaders of the political and civic opposition in Belarus, for instance, Vintsuk Vyachorka, Viktar Ivashkevich, and Ales Bialatski.

Youth cultural associations showed a distinct tendency to consolidate. In 1987, the 1st Free Assembly of Belarusian Associations assembled to work out a policy aimed at the national cultural and democratic revival of Belarus.

The founding of the Belarusian Popular Front in 1988 was a general outcome of the cultural opposition activities in 1960s-80s. Most of its elder leaders — Zyanon Paznyak, Yuras Khadyka, Mikhas Tkachow, Yauhen Kulik, Vasil Bykau, etc. — were in one way or another associated with that wave. Younger activists came mostly from "Maystrownya," "Talaka," and other youth cultural associations. In 1990, the declaration of the sovereignty of Belarus was adopted, and next year the country's independence became political reality as a new state took place on the map of Europe — the Republic of Belarus. Its official language was Belarusian, and its flag and emblem inherit the Belarusian historical symbols.

However, the realisation of the goals of the cultural opposition and the migration of activity onto the political field unexpectedly crushed that movement and the generation of its founders. Once in the middle of a rough political game and power fight, the cultural romantics did not manage to endure their rules.

In the field of arts, the revivalists, adepts of the old concept of cultural opposition, also found themselves facing a dead end. Art as a school and art as a poster no longer fascinated society. The "Pahonya" art group founded in 1991 by a majority of masters from cultural opposition and a lot of young artists demonstrated aesthetic eclecticism in its very first, "victorious" exhibitions. Those exhibitions were open on March 25, timed to coincide with anniversaries of the declaration of the Belarusian Popular Republic. In 1995, during the Lukashenka period, the authorities began to hamper the "Pahonya" exhibitions, which started to turn from art events into political rallies.

2. THE SITUATION AFTER 1991

In late 70s — early 80s, along with a significant folklore movement, there started to develop that of the "*neformaly*" (informals), which gave rise to most of the political parties and politicised NGOs of the 1990s. During that decade, we believe, the following movements played the most essential roles.

Upon the Attainment of Independence: 1991–94

Paradoxically, with time the "conservative" camp was also joined by some of the former oppositioners and revivalists, and in general, a lot of creative people and cultural functionaries. It was also due to the very heavy burden of Soviet mythology that had brought up several generations of Belarusian citizens. It was clearly illustrated by early 90s debate about renaming some streets and removing statues of communist leaders. In the argument about

whether to take away the "chief" Lenin monument in the country (the one in Lenin Square in Minsk), a majority of artists, art critics, architects, and ordinary capital dwellers spoke in favour of leaving the monument where it stood. The Minskians were rather frightened than inspired by the torn-away head of stone Dzerzhinskiy above the streets of Moscow after the defeat of the 1991 coup. The most frequent argument, among doubtful proofs of the Lenin's aesthetic values, was that "we have got used to him."

One of the first Belarusian cultural projects was the revival of the "Nasha Niva" newspaper in Vilnius in 1991. A group of young writers and journalists, once activists of "Maystrownya," "Talaka," and the "Tuteysiya" literary group (headed by talented publicist Syarhey Dubavets), wanted not only to print a Belarusian-language newspaper in neighbouring Lithuania, but to found a model centre for the creation of modern post-Soviet Belarusian culture, development of the classical literary language, and forming a new Belarusian cultural elite. The tasks were set according to the scale of the original "Nasha Niva" in the 1900s. The place of publishing — Vilnius — was to point out to the tradition, as well as ensure independence from the uncertain Belarusian political situation. A circle of (mainly young) cultural figures most of whom had not been connected with the Soviet tradition and envisioned their task as conscious ridding the Belarusian culture of Soviet "holy cows." "Nasha Niva" enjoyed active co-operation of writers and journalists from the regions of Belarus, in the first place from Polatsk and Harodnya, rich in cultural opposition. As a whole, the newspaper really succeeded in establishing a type of cultural organisation that was new for Belarus: it was simultaneously creative and pragmatic, with pretty high aesthetic criteria and far-reaching goals. Within a few years "Nasha Niva," with its cultural journal content, became popular and authoritative among Belarusian intelligentsia. Gradually, it expanded its activity beyond that of a mere newspaper, publishing books, involving in scientific research, and staging exhibitions and concerts.

In the first half of the 1990s, several other stable centres of "non-governmentalism" emerged in the Belarusian culture, for instance, the Fellowship of Free Writers (1993) in Polatsk, which up to now remains one of the most active organisations outside Minsk. Cultural centres were founded in Harodnya, Mahyleu, Homel, and Vitsebsk; a movement of publishing and local research was growing.

The Publishing Movement

A definitely important phenomenon of early 1990s was the beginning of what is known as the publishing movement. In the USSR, the printing of books and periodicals, and any copying of text was under strict control and monopoly of the state. Any attempts at *samizdat* (literally: "self-publishing") were harshly punished. Nonetheless, a chronic shortage of books wanted by the public inspired numerous private initiatives of underground printing in 1970s-80s political samizdat, persecuted with particular vigilance, was but a small current in that sea. The photo- and otherwise copied lot included works on

philosophy, psychology, and sociology that were not published in the USSR (e.g., those by Freud, Nietzsche, Kant, Schopenhauer, and other authors not accepted by the regime), as well as art and religious literature. The whole territory of the Soviet Union was covered by the contact network of science-fiction fans or those interested in oriental philosophy, who translated tens of texts from English or even Japanese and exchanged them, usually by post.

Meanwhile, Belarusian cultural opposition was looking for, making copies of, and spreading texts that were considered fundamental for the Belarusian liberation movement. Those were texts by Kanchewski, Lastowski, Stankevich, forbidden works by Janka Kupala, Larysa Heniush, and Western Belarusian press of 1920s–30s.

In early 1990s, a number of publishing companies were founded specifically to put out Belarusian books. At first those were mainly reprints of works dating back to the first half of the 20th century (a series of books like that was published via the Fellowship of the Belarusian Language). Among private Belarusian publishers founded at that time, it is worth mentioning “Batskawshchyna” (Fatherland), “Khata” (House,

cial exhibitions. The appearance of private galleries in early 1990s started a totally different period: the arts received access to permanent stage for uncontrolled contacts with the public and critics.

One of the most influential figures of the new wave was painter and performer Ales Pushkin, and active participant in the late-80s youth movement, who was many times detained by the police for involvement in “unauthorised rallies”: in 1989 he was put on probation for two years for organising a happening dedicated to the 71st anniversary of the BPR; in 1999 convicted for a happening that referred to the termination of Lukashenka’s legitimate presidency. A member of “Pahonya,” he managed to effectively combine the basic principles of the Belarusian cultural opposition with those of art avant-garde and the reality of contemporary social life. In 1993 Ales Pushkin founded a private art gallery “At Pushkin’s” in Vitebsk. It was an innovative gallery, not only because it was one of the first private ones in Belarus, but due to the fact that it turned into an active cultural centre that staged exhibitions, seminars, and actions. It was a centre of social activity with an expressed national democratic orientation. Soon it was closed.

Despite its short life, “At Pushkin’s” became the symbol of the Belarusian gallery movement.

In the first half of the 90s throughout Belarus there appeared tens of small independent galleries. The most famous, apart from “At Pushkin’s,” were “Shostaya Liniya” — The 6th Line — Minsk, “Vita Nova” — Minsk, “Kawcheg” — Minsk, “Zyalyony Dom” — Green House — Homel, “Alter Ego” — Minsk, “Salyaniya Sklady” — Salt Storehouses — Vitebsk, and others. Belarus not having a normal art market, most of the galleries existed thanks to the aid and enthusiasm of their founders. Almost none of them managed to carry on as purely commercial ventures.

Such galleries as, for example “Shestaya Liniya,” soon turned into influential centres of modern arts. In the course of a few years, the gallery movement changed the map of Belarusian art life radically: the bright new names of artists, including Ihar Kashkurevich, Viktor Piatrow-Khrutski, Artur Klinau, Alyaksandar Rodzin, surfaced from underground and began to outline the face of Belarusian art. Unlike Ales Pushkin, most of those artists were not connected with the Belarusian cultural opposition; however, after a while they rather energetically expressed their belonging in Belarus. It was also influenced by a radical change the Belarusian society underwent in 1995. The termination of “At Pushkin’s” opened the period of decline of the Belarusian art galleries. Actually, Lukashenka’s regime as such did not fight private art galleries. It rather created a situation in which nobody could help galleries. The authorities’ obvious dislike for anything private and free deprived galleries of support from the state and state-owned companies, while a general economic crisis in the country removed private sponsors.

Despite certain drawbacks, the cultural and educational policy of the Belarusian state in 1991–94 was on the whole based on concepts worked out within the Belarusian liberation movement. Censorship in its So-



Timofey Izotov's exhibition — new Belarusian realism

Home, or Hut), “Technology,” “Lecture,” the publishing company of the Belarusian Humanitarian Educational and Cultural Centre, the publishing initiative of the Polatsk-based Fellowship of Free Writers, “Navia Morionum,” “Arc,” and others. Later this movement of publishers was joined by the foundations “Nasha Niva” and “Euroforum”; there appeared a semi-governmental institution called “The Belarusian Books Collection.” The first half of the 1990s was marked by the liberty of publishing enabled by unclear legislation and chaotic attempts by Belarusian publishers to gain a stable place in the market.

The Gallery Movement

In the 1980s, as governmental control faded, underground artists, musicians, and writers began to appear in Belarus. Newly founded arts groups like “Form,” “Black Square,” and others organised unoffi-

viet form was practically non-existent during that time. The people's rights to freedom of speech and conscience, to cultural self-determination were being limited, if anything, by economic factors, while the stature and popularity of the Belarusian language grew noticeably. However, Lukashenka's era was marked by gradual but radical 90-degree turn in all the areas.

Upon Lukashenka's Coming to Power: 1995–2000

Although Lukashenka was elected president in 1994, the real turn the cultural (as well as linguistic and educational) policy began in 1995, after a referendum he called against parliament's will. The dubious results of that referendum were used as a basis for the returning of Soviet-like symbols and the assignment of Russian as another official language.

Old-school censorship was reintroduced to book publishing and the press: this moment can be distinctly identified as late 1994 when newspapers came out with express blank columns instead of a statement about corruption in Lukashenka's close entourage. The material was banned from the press and deleted from ready layouts by information minister Feduta.

Frankly speaking, the new regime never put together a particular cultural policy (there was nobody to do it), and it was pursued, if any, intuitively, to "please" president. Thus, the state generously backed pompous events called upon to extol "Slavic brotherhood," like the "Slavyanski Bazar" or "Zalaty Vityaz" (Golden Knight), or collectives particularly close to the authorities, like the court big band directed by Mikhail Finberg. Generally, the president was more into sports and physical education: the construction of "ice palaces" in almost every large town of the country used up budget funds that could have been used to support museums, libraries, theatres, or culture clubs.

Creative intelligentsia and intellectuals in general were once again facing the choice of whether to adjust themselves and service the regime or oppose the regime that ultimately showed itself as anti-Belarusian and anti-democratic.

The year 1995 can be marked as the return of cultural opposition in Belarus, or, more precisely, the rise of its new wave, qualitatively different from the previous ones. Firstly, it was much stronger: as an old "opponent" put it, "twenty years ago we could all be put in one bus, whereas now we would perhaps take several trainloads." Secondly, there had been founded various political and other non-governmental structures and centres (parties, creative associations, local studies clubs, NGOs, galleries, publishers, independent press) interested in national culture and involved in the cultural process. And thirdly, the total Soviet lack of freedom was no longer there.

One result of that situation was an exodus of talented authors from Belarus (not to work for some time but for good), another was social marginalisation of non-conformist creative intelligentsia. It might look as if a new underground movement was forming; however, unlike the Soviet underground whose relations with the regime sustained a certain status quo for de-

acades, the majority of the new cultural opposition were not content with the niche of underground art. Writers, artists, actors, and musicians wanted contacts with audience, the press, their colleagues in Belarus and abroad.

It is possible to say that the mutual disliking between the state and culture made independent cultural centres more active throughout the country. The state's lacking resources for and interest in culture damaged the state-run sector of culture more. Those who had abandoned the state "trough" were now better off with their hands free and relying on their initiative and talents, although without certain "social guarantees."

Mid 1990s were marked by the consolidation of existing cultural forces into rather established centres. In 1995, "Nasha Niva" founded a foundation under the same name, whose tasks included to set up an information, educational, and cultural infrastructure, not only for the needs of national democratic political opposition but with to enable the rise of a fully-fledged European nation. During the next years the foundation was publishing both the newspaper and books. Within it, the Archive of Modern History was organised in 1996, a new type of organisation for Belarus: it functioned as a non-governmental education centre, collecting and registering "traces" of modern history of the Belarusian society, mainly episodes of the liberation movement and repression. In 1997 "Nasha Niva" began to unfold a large-scale programme of presenting newest non-conformist culture of Belarus under a general title "Kingdom of Belarus" which we will return to below.

At that time in Minsk there was a strengthening group of young philosophers and writers associated with the centre "Euroforum" which published magazines "Fragments" and "Forum" as well as books. Another centre that influenced the cultural situation was "Bumbamlit," a group of young writers inspired by philosopher Valyantsin Akudovich. In Polatsk, the Fellowship of Free Writers directed by Ales Arkush and Vintsjes Mudrow became an influential centre: it published the "Kalosse" (Ears of Crop) literary magazine and many books, mainly collected poetry and prose by young authors, and staged various art events.

In 1995–96, Minsk even had an independent FM radio station, "101.2," which to some extent functioned as an cultural information centre. It was this station that stimulated Belarus' most famous musical project in the 90s — "The Popular Album."

General tendencies that prevailed in independent culture of middle and late 1990s were formulated in the above-mentioned programme "Kingdom of Belarus." The name, borrowed from a story by Marian Brandys, symbolised the final shaping of another, parallel to the official one, culture of Belarus. That alternative culture did not want to abide by the rules suggested by the regime. The civil enthusiasm of 1996–97 essentially formed a distinct parallel society in Belarus — the society of those who did not want to live in Lukashenka's Republic of Belarus. That society had

its own language — the Belarusian *tarashkevitsa*; its own national symbols — the flag and emblem banned by Lukashenka; its own press, literature, and arts. Paradoxical and romantic, the “Kingdom” was a precise, essential opposition to the artificial puppet “republic” painted in dead Soviet red and green.

The programme organisers succeeding in staging a performance very innovative for Belarus: it involved artists, writers, musicians, and new generation theatre. Their “Belarusianness” was not confined to painting horsemen with swords or Zyanon Paznyak’s portraits, like that of former “Pahonya” classics. The key point was that for them Belarus, with her traditions and problems, became a creative centre. In all other respects they were within most modern trends of world arts.

State pressure and ripen internal conflicts destroyed “Nasha Niva” and “Euroforum,” influential and structured organisations, by 2000. They were succeeded by more mobile organisations, not burdened by staff, bank accounts, and personal superambitions, and capable of taking over their functions — “Dyaryush,” “Cultural Contact,” and the Belarusian Musical Alternative. Gifted youth that left “Euroforum,” started the “Arche” and “Arche-Skaryna” magazines, which immediately occupied prestigious places in the Belarusian cultural set. The Young Front also showed itself as an organiser of cultural actions. In 1999, an organisation called the Association of Contemporary Arts was founded in Minsk to unite those who had co-operated within “Kingdom of Belarus” and artists from other groups and regions. The Association founded its activity on the following criteria: to be non-conformist, avant-garde, and Belarusian in the broad sense. The Association’s most famous action was “Navinki,” an annual international performance festival.

The Publishing Movement

Lukashenka’s regime tried to re-introduce state control over the publishing business and books’ content. The main instrument here was “regulation of taxation and legislation.” In 1997, a majority of publishers lost their legal status as a result of “re-licensing” the publishing business which was carried out with the account of the political loyalty of organisations.

Since 1998 many of them operated unlicensed — illegally or under cover of someone else’s licences. The themes on their printing plans were as follows: Belarusian history and other humanitarian subjects, little-known books by Belarusian classics, newest Belarusian literature, and translations into Belarusian.

Simultaneously with the establishment of a number of relatively stable publishing initiatives, there appeared a circle of small private printing houses associated with them. The printers were also subjected to tax and legislative pressure.

The Belarusian branch of the Soros Foundation realised the importance of co-operating with the publishing movement, and in 1995 a number of publishers were invited to the programme “Open Society Series” that consisted mainly of Belarusian translations of the basic texts of the world humanitarian science and

democratic theory. Thus was formed the circle of mainly Minsk-based and quite professional Belarusian publishing groups.

With the help of the Soros Foundation, a state-independent book distribution network was underway (in Belarus today the majority of book stores are state-owned or connected with the single state-run distribution network — the “Belkniha”). As of now, there are only two private book stores, one in Minsk and another in Harodnya. One of the remaining independent book stores selling linguistic international literature at the linguistic faculty of the Belarusian State University was closed in 2000, simultaneously with the termination of the British Council in Belarus.

And still, despite all obstacles, a set of publishers had formed over the past five years who collectively managed to publish an influential body of Belarusian texts. It is worth mentioning books by the Belarusian Humanitarian Educational and Cultural Centre, the “Archive of Modern History” series (started by the “Nasha Niva” foundation and now continued by the association “Dyaryush”), publications of the Polatsk Fellowship of Free Writers and the “Brama” (Gate) association in Mahyleu, a series of the Belarusian Historical Review magazine, publications of the Belarusian Book Review, “Technology,” “Lecture,” etc.

Those are mainly publishers who try to stay on the surface by retaining certain lawfulness of their books which means the opportunity to influence a broader, “uninvolved” reader. Their books are distributed via regional NGOs and their branches, by post cash on delivery, and through official book stores whenever possible. Distribution remains one of the main problems of the publishing movement.

Given the situation of political fighting and censorship, attempts have been made to start totally underground publishing bodies, modelled after those under the military regime in Poland. One of the examples is “KONTRA-PRESS” which published in 2000 a collection of pamphlets about Lukashenka titled ‘Idiot the Most Real One’.

The musical movement and other movements, increasingly influential mainly among young people, are described in separate sections, therefore we shall proceed with an account of the cultural situation in Belarus before and after Lukashenka’s election — from early till the end of the 1990s.

Regions

The Belarusian periphery has changed greatly over the second half of the 1990s. There has been a noticeable rise of the number and quality of non-governmental organisations which are in one way or other involved in cultural activities. This happened both due to internal tendencies and assistance of some western sponsors, above all the IDEE foundation. Traditionally, the prevailing type of regional organisations are those involved in local studies, however, there is no shortage of creative groups and folklore collectives.

The recent years’ tendency of setting up regional resource centres has been playing an important role. Many organisations functioning as information and

coordination centres together with media, educational, or social programmes, carry out or support projects in history or arts, publish books, compilations, or magazines. The cultural life of the third sector is most active, of course, in regional towns: in Harodnya, for example, a lot of cultural initiatives are supported by "Ratusha"; there operates the Western Belarusian Cultural Initiative, the Norbut Local Studies' Fellowship, "Pakhodnya," etc. In Mahyleu, apart from "Brama," there is an organisation "Kola Syabrow" (Circle of Friends) to help cultural activists. Among Byerastse organisations, worth noting are the "Bergamot" creative group and the Napoleon Orda association. However, strong cultural organisations are now operating in many district centres of Belarus, namely Navahrudak, Baranavichy, Lida, Polatsk, etc. the Fellowship of the Belarusian Language works in this field virtually everywhere, as do associations of ethnic minorities. Cultural structures are usually closely connected with the local independent press.

The Local Studies Movement

In Belarus today there are several large regional associations for local studies, namely the Norbut Local Studies Fellowship in Harodnya, the Local Studies Fellowship in Vitsebsk, the Ramanaw Local Studies Fellowship in Mahyleu (which operates as an NGO). Apart from that, there is a growing number of local organisations in districts, towns, or individual schools. The search of one's own "small" history, even perfectly apolitical, inevitably end up in a certain conflict with the Soviet or Lukashenkist concepts of history, inspire in young people interest and respect to the ethnic and historical traditions of their land, which makes for adequate self-identification of citizens.

The Archive of Modern History in Minsk, with the methodological assistance of KARTA from Warsaw, held in 1998–99 a national contest for schoolchildren titled "Daily life in Belarus: 1945–65" with about 200 individual and group contestants. In 200, the Archive initiated the contest "My Genealogy. The Family Fate in the 20th Century."

Today a tendency is felt for a nation-wide democratic movement of local studies NGOs and, possibly, their national association.

As for international ties, the cultural NGOs traditionally have close contacts with Poland. It is worth noting Germany, Sweden, other Baltic countries, and the Ukraine. Until recently, there have been practically no contacts with the Balkans, whereas those with developed Western European countries are rather close. Unlike the official cultural ties, contacts with Russian colleagues play a much smaller role, and some Belarusian organisations consciously avoid such partnership.

Sometimes cultural initiatives in the third sector are really more influential on the cultural situation in the regions, on the "outward face" of the contemporary Belarusian culture, than the whole work of the ministry of culture, no matter that they have much less funds at their disposal and are usually not welcomed by authorities. The tendency to take over the

state in cultural initiatives witnesses the real essential role of the non-governmental community in Belarus. This was noted during a round table meeting of cultural organisations in Minsk in February 2000, and by the 2nd Assembly of Non-Governmental Democratic Organisations in January same year.

Traditionally, Belarusian opposition politicians and leaders of civic movements treat culture as a second rate issue. It is a paradox, given that many of them came from the cultural opposition. However, as time went on and they began to influence the situation, they adopted a traditional Soviet approach to culture.

In 2000, the non-governmental initiative "Cultural Contact" developed a programme of support of cultural initiatives in Belarus, aimed exactly on the widening of inter-organisational contacts, joint actions, information exchange and cross-advertising. The bulletin of the Belarusian Association of Resource Centres started to deliver information about cultural events.

The state institutions of culture are so inefficient and hefty that it is impossible to remedy the situation without a radical reform — even if they had money. However, in our opinion, it is the third sector structures that are capable today of producing an essential positive effect — even with relatively tight financing. It is through the development of people's initiative that this country in the middle of Europe can be effectively salvaged from a cultural and ethnic catastrophe.

To summarise this account, we can say that the Belarusian nation in the second half of the 20th century did not give birth to people like Jerzy Giedroyc, Andrey Sakharov, or Vaclav Havel. There emerged no periodicals equal to Parisian "Culture" by neither thought, nor influence. The Belarusian non-Soviet, free culture has been building up on the work of thousands of less respected, less famous persons — soldiers of the cultural movement. However, their exploit does not seem to be in vain. Today we have a well-formed body of a modern European culture, have all the necessary basis for development, for the integration into the community of free nations. However, today Belarus finds itself in a situation where it needs a helping hand and real support, in the political and economic fields as well as culture.

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