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YOUTH SUBCULTURES: ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT

Belarusian humanitarian thought has yet to define its attitude toward youth subcultures. The prevailing opinion is that any expression of young people's free-thinking is to be considered strictly within the traditional context of conflict between generations: as the young mature and assume their positions in society the conflict exhausts itself, and therefore there is no particular need to pay attention to this area of culture. This thinking has been in vogue since the late 1960s.

The danger of ignoring the phenomenon of youth subculture became apparent with the arrival of Lukashenka's authoritarian regime. As the new order began to eliminate the democratic achievements that had changed the Belarusian situation so radically, it faced events like the 1996 Minsk Spring when, for the first time, several thousand young people between the ages of 14 and 21 took part in street demonstrations to protest the establishment of Lukashenka's regime and to claim their right to be heard. To further ignore youth subcultures was to risk a deepening in the crisis of the general culture.

The History of Belarusian Youth Subculture

The term "youth subculture" first became applicable to the cultural situation in Belarus in the 1950s, when post-war Minsk was the home of several dozen "stylish" young people dressed in European fashion (hence the name "stilyagi"). Fashionable western outfits, unusual attention to appearance and their own English-based manner of speaking — the stilyagi were a great cultural shock to the grey "Soviet masses." Their subculture was extremely close-knit: the young people tried to create their own environment oriented at western cultural values. They were the first to wear American jeans, listen to jazz and rock'n'roll (popular in the West but unknown in the USSR) and to idolise Hem — the still banned American writer Ernest Hemingway. The close-knit



"The March of Freedom," Minsk, Oct. 17th, 1999.

Photo: IREX/ProMedia

character of this subculture allows it to be referred to as elitist, the more so if we take into account their homogeneous social status: most of them, their informal leaders in particular, were children of the Soviet party and cultural nomenclature who had the opportunity to regularly travel abroad.

Soviet society's initial aggressive response to the stilyagi, considered reactionaries against the established system of Communist moral values, gradually relaxed and took more liberal forms as a result of Khrushchev's thaw. The bloom of the stilyagi movement coincided with the appearance of beatniks in the field of Belarusian culture. The local version of beat culture was different from its American original: here the term "beatnik" was primarily applied to the musicians who played beat!

Beat music came to Belarus from Poland in early 1960s on smuggled Beatles' and other records, so it is little wonder that Belarus' first beatniks emerged in the border city of Harodnya. Hairy youngsters in bellbottom pants were repeatedly raided by the police who sometimes dragged them to police stations

and forcefully shaved them or cut their pants. However, beat soon became a mass movement and the Communist Party of the BSSR was forced to order the sole youth organisation, the Belarusian Komsomol, to explicitly supervise it. In 1965, the first festival of Harodnya beat bands was organised — under the aegis of the Komsomol, and in 1968 the first All-Belarusian beat festival was held in Minsk, co-sponsored by the Komsomol.

The situation changed radically in the summer of 1968: as Europe and America suppressed the Students' Spring, the Soviets attempted to eliminate beat culture and neutralise the hippies — a new youth trend that became very popular at the end of the 1960s. The local subcultures, previously amorphous ideologically, unexpectedly exhibited civil activity. On April 9, 1970 the hippies held an unauthorised meeting in Minsk in memory of Vyachaslaw Maksakaw, a young man who was mysteriously murdered. The police and KGB forcefully suppressed the meeting and harsh repression against all forms of juvenile free-thinking began. For example, Wladimir Kandrusевич (now a leading composer in Belarus) was expelled from the Conservatory for performing an English song at the 2nd beat festival.

For Belarusian hippies, fighting for their right to self-determination became a priority. Without permission from the authorities, they staged a demonstration in Harodnya's Central Square in 1971. Young people carrying posters that read "Let our souls be!" and "Hands off our hair" were beaten up by the police and a Komsomol "law enforcement" brigade. The next demonstration held in the summer of 1972, when Harodnya's hippies expressed political demands to the Communist regime, was met by several special-branch battalions. However, this action had repercussions: for months after, fliers were posted on the city's walls and anonymous appeals to schoolchildren and students to fight for their rights were circulated in educational establishments.

The Soviet regime totally controlled and eliminated any freethinking among youth. It organised a campaign aimed to prove that youth subcultures were echoes of western, capitalist culture. Nevertheless, in order to control as many young people as possible, the establishment employed selected features of the subculture. The Komsomol initiated, and the Soviet ideology romanticised, the spirit of youth hiking tourism, prototyped by western hitchhiking.

Meanwhile, the mid-1970s in Belarus was marked by various developments within the subculture movement. The more popular among them were musical subcultures, like hippies, rockers and punks, formed as new western musical trends were absorbed and found their way into Belarus. Another, smaller current was the intellectual dissidents, ideologically inspired by Minsk-based intellectual Kim Khadeyev around whom young people, mainly humanitarian students, associated. Young people met, read books by Russian dissidents, listened to forbidden music and discussed philosophical and cultural subjects in Mr. Khadeyev's flat. The notorious flat

was vigilantly watched by the KGB who thus tracked down young freethinkers and probably set up a network of agents within this subculture.

The given subculture should be considered within the context of the Russian intelligentsia and its influence on the cultural province as this subculture was primarily influenced by Russian culture, its texts and figures. Many figures in today's Russian-speaking cultural and political elite in Belarus came out of this subculture.

It is interesting to note that these two types of subcultures found common ground in Russian rock culture, which sprung up in the mid-1970s and had a significant influence on youth subcultures throughout the USSR by the end of the decade. Russian rock, because of the music, was of interest to the musical subcultures, while its philosophical lyrics fascinated the "intellectual" subculture in Belarus. Thus, the 1970s were characterised by the growing dependence of local subcultures on the Russian cultural situation and self-identification within the system of the "cultural centre" (Moscow) and the "cultural province" (the so-called "Soviet republics").

In the 1980s, however, a new wave of youth subculture was born connected with the emergence of Belarus' own cultural and political non-conformism. Approximately ten young students of Belarusian philology faculties in various Minsk universities founded the "Maystrownya" (Workshop) group whose initial aim was the revival of ancient Belarusian holidays. "Maystrownya" in fact became the successor of the creative centre "Na Paddashku" (In the Attic) that had united Belarusian-speaking intelligentsia in Minsk from the mid-1960s to 1985. Ironically, most of Maystrownya's informal leaders were children of the party, military or cultural elite of Soviet Byelorussia — people marked by national indifference. These young people did not join the Russian-speaking "intellectual" subculture of Khadeyev, partly because the Maystrownya group came from the Belarusian province, while Khadeyev's circle mainly comprised people from Minsk who consciously excluded people from the provinces.

Studying and promoting Belarusian national history and culture, "Maystrownya" witnessed the emergence of Belarus' own cultural dimension. It developed alongside the Belarusian establishment, which was manifested primarily within the scope of linguistic culture. The Maystrownya group spoke only the pre-reform version of Belarusian among themselves, while the establishment promoted the use of either Russian or a russified version of Belarusian. The strong political impact of this national subculture is worth noting, which mainly focused on the idea of the de-sovietisation of culture and Belarus' political sovereignty.

It was at this time that Belarus obtained its own musical subculture, the best known representatives of which were the first Belarusian-language rock groups Bonda and Mroya. Through contacts with "Maystrownya" members, these musicians believed that the use of Belarusian in music had to transition

from being a quirky cultural shock to a natural phenomenon. Rock culture, being extremely fashionable among Belarusian youth, and the phenomenal success of Bonda and Mroya, greatly contributed to increasing Belarusian cultural non-conformism. With the arrival of the latter, the term "neformal" (the informals), applied to the young representatives of subcultures who stood up against the linguistic, cultural (musical) and political norms established in Soviet society, took its place within the active vocabulary of the Belarusian establishment.

Thus, by the late 1980s the national subculture stood against official youth culture on one flank and against the Russian-language subcultural stream (with its de facto orientation to Russian cultural traditions) on the other.

During the period of 1991–1994, in conjunction with the establishment of an independent Belarus, the elimination of the Party's and Komsomol's monopoly on determining youth policy, youth subcultures (and particularly original Belarusian subcultures) were on the rise and began to become formally legitimate within the general cultural environment. In Minsk and the regions, artistic activities, including big art and music festivals, were organised. Rock clubs took on a great importance to the subculture: between 1991 and 1995 Minsk had three to five such clubs. These clubs became the centres of music and artistic non-conformism providing a place for the regular exchange of information and the creation of new ideas, projects and concepts. The popularity of these clubs reflected the development and creative ability of Belarusian subcultures.

Unlike Western Europe, Belarus did not experience a decline in subcultural enthusiasm with the onset of perestroika. On the contrary, as the political paradigm changed radically after Lukashenka came to power in 1994, a new page was opened in the development of Belarusian subculture.

Youth Subculture During the Establishment and Consolidation of Authoritarianism

The few years of democratic changes in society and increased contacts with the western youth culture crystallised the ideas of personal freedom and the right to self-determination in the minds of Belarusian youth. Therefore the first incidents of political repression by Lukashenka's regime in the first half of 1995 were taken by most of young people as a threat to their own independence.

By 1996, the authorities directed by Lukashenka began to restore state control over youth and its subcultures, however, the process was sporadic. The new regime was busy resovietising the entire structure of state, so youth mainly attracted the government's attention only when it "stepped out of line." One of the first youth protest demonstrations was by the Free Students Union of Belarusian State University in Minsk on October 14, 1994. Three hundred young people carried posters through downtown Minsk that read "Milk and bread are the student's lunch," "We want to eat!" and "The presi-

dent is our helmsman." At the House of Government, Lukashenka's residence at the time, the protesters ate "the student's lunch" and composed a petition demanding decent student aid. Lukashenka's aide, Lyabedzka, appeared and promised to help the students thereby settling the escalating conflict. In May 1995, Belarusian State University students burnt the state symbols of the non-existent Soviet Byelorussia in protest against the public defamation of the national flag by the head of the presidential administration. Andrey Ramashewski, leader of the Party of Beer Lovers (PBP) and one of the participants in the demonstration, faced a criminal charge.

The period up to the spring of 1996 is characterised by the structural development of youth subcultures. Many new sub-groups emerged: the wide ranks of punks and rockers were joined by heavy metal fans, the Nirvana-worshipping grungers, the *hopniks* (youngsters from working class neighbourhoods oriented to Russian mass culture) as well as by aggressive subcultures, such as the skinheads, Satanists, etc. That period was also the prime time for the Belarusian anarchists.

The anarchists began in the early 1990s by founding the anti-government group "Chyrvony Zhond" (Red Government). Unlike other subcultural formations, the anarchists stood out as a group with an ideology (ultraleft in their case), that saw its activity exclusively in the national context (the title "Chyrvony Zhond" referred to the Belarusian national liberation uprising in 1963 led by Kastus Kalinowski). In 1994, pro-anarchist youth legalised their activity through the Party of Beer Lovers (PBP), one of the most successful projects of that time. The PBP's declared priorities were "the purity and quality of domestic beer and an independent, neutral, and nuclear-free Belarus." The party and its leaders shocked the public into civil thinking, often using the traditions of happenings and performances. However, repression exerted against the party leaders halted its activity.

Total aversion to Lukashenka's authoritarian policy of incorporating Belarus into Russia, de-belarusification and russification gave subculture a distinct goal. One of the main tasks of the Belarusian anarchists was to conduct cultural projects as an alternative to the establishment's conservative cultural policy. Their performances, happenings, and cultural provocations took unusual forms that often shocked Belarusian society. One of their first acts, the lively political and satirical religious performance *The Mournful Integrational Ceremony* was performed on April 1, 1996 in "honour" of the union treaty being signed by Belarus and Russia. On March 1, 1997 they staged a puppet play *The Tyrant's Death* featuring recognisable satire of the political situation in the country at the time. By 1998, the "Navinki" newspaper political pamphlets printed underground became one of the most successful endeavours launched by the anarchists to date. Its name challenged society: "Navyin" (News) was the name of one of the most circulated opposi-

cal subcultures) come to the organisation's meetings. The Young Front appreciates the importance of modern cultural and musical non-conformism. Belarusian rock culture, the "music of freedom" became the expression of young people's aspiration for preserving the democratic values abolished by the regime. It is characteristic in this respect that during protest actions young people shouted (along with the mottoes like "Belarus to Europe, Lukashenka up the arse!" and "Belarus to NATO, Lukash behind bars!") the song 'Partyzanskaya' by N.R.M. (ex-Mroya) that became a kind of an anthem for Belarusian youth in the late 1990s.

The Belarusian Musical Alternative (BMAgroup), a non-commercial organisation that aims to promote Belarusian musical non-conformism originated from the ranks of Young Front. BMA publishes Belarusian-language music, stages the "Free Dances" rock concerts and assists in promoting the creative aspirations of nationally-oriented subcultural groups. One of BMAgroup's major ventures was a large open-air rock concert held in Minsk in 1998, the purpose of which was to demonstrate support for the political prisoners Alaksey Shydlovsky (18) and Vadzim Labkovich (16). Those Young Front members had been sentenced to two years in prison for painting political graffiti and "disrespect to monuments of architecture" (they poured paint on statues of Communist figures in Stowbtsy). The event's organisers and managers were arrested and fined before the show; after the concert, attended by 5,000 young spectators, the police carried out mass detainments.

Detainment and administrative punishment of young people following a rock concert of Belarusian bands has become a Belarusian tradition. For example, the Maladzechna police conducted a raid on underage teenagers after the June 1999 concert "Youth for Independence!" dedicated to the 9th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence of Belarus. Leader of the grunge band Happy Face faced an administrative charge for expressing his attitude to Lukashenka's dictatorship by showing the finger.

According to human rights organisations, during 1999 the police raided Alaksandrawski Square (a popular hang-out of musical subculture associates in front of Lukashenka's office) several times, detaining young people solely for their "non-standard" appearance.

In 1998 state-owned media supported the information campaign to eliminate Belarusian alternative music and subcultures. In April, *Narodnaya Gazeta* (Popular Newspaper) printed an article that accused the owners of the private club "Reservation" of "inciting" youth who came to rock concerts. The club was subsequently closed. In May, the managers of "Sphere," another independent club, were unable to extend their leasing agreement.

In 1998, Belarus' only magazine of extreme music "Legion" was closed allegedly because its editors promoted violence and Satanism.

Isolation followed by elimination was just one of many ways Lukashenka's regime dealt with non-collaborating subcultures. After the mass street rallies in

1996–97, given the increased influence of the Young Front and the Young Hramada on the youth, state ideologists voiced the concept of establishing an influential youth organisation modelled after the Soviet Komsomol that would be under the president's control.

"The Plan to Establish an Influential Youth Organisation in the Republic of Belarus" signed by prime minister, head of the presidential administration and chairman of the state committee for youth affairs, was placed on the president's desk on January 15, 1997. The organisation that was to be given the exclusive right to forge loyal youth (mainly through youth media) was to be built on the basis of the pro-fascist movement "Direct Action," the leaflets of which stated that *"if enemies stand in the way they will be destroyed."* A scandalous response to "Direct Action" caused its initiators to change the name to the Belarusian Patriotic Union of Youth (BPUY). From the very beginning, the "young patriots" expressed their devotion to Lukashenka's policy who responded by signing the edict "On State Support for BPUY" in the summer of 1997. The edict stated that *"supporting BPUY in all possible ways should be considered one of the main tasks of the government's youth policy."*

BPUY, christened by the youth as *Lukamol* ("Luka" as in Lukashenka + "mol" as in Komsomol), did enjoy total state support. First of all, the organisation began to receive all the buildings that had previously belonged to Komsomol and during the period of democratisation had been rented to youth organisations. BPUY founded its own (state-run) youth media and was granted FM frequency 101.2 MHz previously used by the only independent Belarusian-language station. The building used by the "Reservation" club was transferred to BPUY; it has now become a BPUY cell in the Belarusian Radio-Engineering University.

BPUY leaders declare total support for the policies of Lukashenka, who became the first honorary member of the organisation. To publicly demonstrate their love for the regime, the organisation continues to attempt to organise street demonstrations. The largest of these demonstrations was held on November 24, 1999 one week after the Freedom March. In six towns of Belarus schoolchildren and students were brought to the central squares carrying posters with such slogans as *"Youth for a young president!", "I'm a Belarusian, I'm voting for the Union!",* and *"Stop, NATO!"*. These meetings were to over shadow the Freedom March. However, they were attended by only about 1000 people, which pales in comparison to the 25000 people that marched for freedom.

While claiming a desire to co-operate with other youth organisations, the government actually inspired conflict. During the second congress of BPUY, held in April 2000, Lukashenka said that this organisation does more patriotic work than democratic organisations that only *"run around to meetings with calls for 'Belarus to Europe.'"* According to Wsevalad Yanchewski, first secretary of the BPUY Central Committee, patriotism *"is the strife for the restoration of our unified Fatherland"* [USSR — author].

With all the financial and ideological support from the regime, BPUY has been unable to produce a single original idea to attract young people to their ranks. Its attempts to patronise and control electronic music and hip-hop culture as alternative to non-conformist rock culture failed due to BPUY's low popularity among young people.

Meanwhile the regime secretly supports radical groups, the most well-known of which is the Belarusian branch of the fascist Russian National Unity (RNU), also known as the "Russian skinheads." Their appearance in Belarus coincided with Lukashenka's coming to power in 1994. The RNU declares its adherence to pan-Slavic national socialism, with its primary goal being to attain power.

The activity of the Russian fascists is based on feeding the media with scandalous news which suggests that the regime uses them as a scarecrow for the man in the street, a sort of "extremists on call." Their biggest scandals include an attack of several skinheads on a peaceful march dedicated to Independence Day in July 1998 and the beating up Charter '97 leaders in downtown Minsk's Victory Square, where the memorial flame burns in honour of liberation from the fascists.¹ It is characteristic that Lukashenka's comment on the latter incident implied that the Charter '97 members attacked the skinheads. The president also added that Belarus has "*no soil for fascism to spread.*" RNU members keep declaring their loyalty to Lukashenka's regime and mentioning their invisible lobbyists in state institutions. RNU head Andrey Sakovich claims that once members of his group, together with police officers, "*patrolled the streets of Minsk. And were even honoured with a diploma and a letter of thanks.*" Circumstantial evidence of RNU's connection with the regime's armed forces is the fact that a Mr. Ihnatovich, arrested on the charge of having murdered Dzmitry Zavadzki, an independent journalist, and Mr. Samoylov, an ex-leader of the Belarusian RNU, once had served in an elite special forces unit and later supervised the physical training of RNU members.

One of the most active antifascist organisations is the unregistered sports and patriotic organisation "Kray" (Country). Juggling the concepts of patriotism and extremism, the regime publicly identifies "Kray" and the RNU as similar fascist organisations. This is happening against the background of the president's enmity to all organisations that do not adhere to the pan-Slavic ideology professed by Lukashenka's authoritarianism. Compared to the Young Front, "Kray" can be said to be more radical, in terms of the moral (patriotic) and physical qualities of its members. The goal of the organisation is "*building an independent state on Belarusian land.*" "Kray" stands

for openness and strict obedience to the laws of the Republic of Belarus.

Thus, it can be stated that during the seven years of Lukashenka's rule youth subcultures have become more structured. The more popular and influential movements began to form organisations or organised groups that associate weaker subcultures around them (the most vivid example is the anarchist subculture). An important issue for Belarusian subcultures is their conformity or non-conformity to the regime, as the regime bases its youth policy on the criterion of loyalty. Some youth subcultures operate on the basis of not engaging in the situation modelled by authoritarianism, for example, the Young Front, BMAgroup, "Kray," etc. Most noteworthy is the phenomenon of the Belarusian linguistic subculture.

However, there is an original group (the largest in Belarus) that is receiving increasingly greater attention from engaged and not-engaged subcultures alike. Based on sociological research, the independent media began speaking about the "pofig generation." The origin of this term is derived from the youth slang expression "po fig" ("I don't care a fig") denoting flagrant indifference. The "pofigists" are people aged from 17 to 27, who most often study or work, live with their parents, hold liberal views, are pointedly apolitical ("*it can harm my career*") and consume the mass culture offered by the Russian media. According to the Independent Institute of Social, Economic, and Political Research, the pofigists support neither the engaged nor the non-collaborating subcultures. The former are not supported because the policy pursued by Lukashenka through the mouthpiece of the BPUY and similar organisations is totally rejected by youth: the pofig generation sees the BPUY as a successor to the Soviet-era Komsomol and has only negative connotations. The latter are not accepted by the pofigists because of the state-drawn image of "political radicals" as well as a lack of a clearly formulated idea and a charismatic youth leader. Given the obvious lack of a pofig structure, an acceptable programme is precisely what is needed to draw them to the side of the non-conformist groups, which as a result would become the most effective force in Belarus.

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¹ The Soviet (and then post-Soviet) mentality mixes the terms "fascism" and "national socialism." Victory Square refers to the 1945 victory over the Nazi — translator.