

## **BELARUS: CULTURE AND CHANGE**

In order to see, what is happening with the Belarusian culture and whether it can influence other spheres of Belarusian life and trigger changes in the society, one should understand, what is going on in the country in general.

### **1. The situation in Belarus**

#### **What is Belarus?**

Belarus declared its independence in 1990. However, throughout the 90's, the policy of Belarusian governments was very Russian-oriented. This created an image of Belarus as some kind of political hoax, marionette territory of its big eastern neighbour.

Still, if we analyse the present situation, then Belarus is definitely an independent state, with its own politics, determined by the country's present regime.

#### **What is the Belarusian regime?**

Belarus is often defined as "the last dictatorship in Europe" in the western mass media. The politicians have already picked up this term into their vocabulary as well. Still, such definition seems to be simplified and even misleading.

Belarus is not a traditional dictatorship, as we know it from the Nicolae Ceaușescu rule in Romania, or see in North Korea. That is why all the standard western approaches towards it have failed so far. The Belarusian regime can rather be described as a "*smart dictatorship*". This is a very modern type of a populist authoritarian rule, which swiftly adapts to the wishes of the major part of society. As surprising as it seems, it relies less on the brutal force and more on the power of deception and persuasion, less on riot police and more on mass media. If you come to Belarus, you will find a rather modern Eastern European country with supermarkets, western cars, internet, and people, who, mostly, seem to be happy with the state of things in their land. One should live some time in Belarus, in order to see, that the seemingly normal spheres of life (culture in the first place) are lamed by fear and self-censorship.

The state propaganda machine is working hard in order to convince Belarusians, that they live on "the island of stability and prosperity", surrounded by the chaos in the Ukraine, poverty in Poland, fascism in Lithuania and Latvia, greedy oligarchs in Russia and military threat from the US. With very little opportunities to read free press, with no independent domestic TV and radio stations, with internet accessible only to the most educated and well-off parts of society, the Belarusian people tend to believe what they are being told – only because they hear no other opinion.

#### **What is the ultimate goal of the Belarusian regime?**

The Belarusian regime is a rule of not even a single party, but of a single person. It is very much unlikely, that Aliaksandr Lukashenka is manipulated by some "grey cardinals" in his surrounding or from abroad. He is pursuing his own, often contradictory and changing politics, which is aimed at a single goal – staying personally in power, as long as possible.

#### **Why is such a regime possible in Belarus? How was it able to survive for almost 13 years?**

The overriding problem of Belarus is a problem of *identity*.

Compared to other Eastern European countries, the process of forming a nation is taking place with a tremendous delay in Belarus. From this point of view, the Belarusians are now there, where most of the Eastern European nations were in the very beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In the 1990's the overall majority of Belarusians barely understood the very need to see themselves as a *nation*. Nor had they any experience of living in an independent democratic country. Now wonder that during the first free democratic elections in 1994 they voted for the populist candidate, who promised the most, and whose promises, utopian as they were, perfectly corresponded to the wishes of the people. This was Aliaksandr Lukashenka.

Craving for more power, and also feeling the strong sentiment among the older generation (his most loyal and numerous voters) for the Soviet times, he tried to enter the Russian political sphere in the 1990's by promoting the idea of Belarus and Russia uniting into a single state. The new century, however, forced him to change this policy. The Kremlin pushed him back, and the Belarusians were more and more getting used to living in their own, independent country. The Soviet sentiments were losing their topicality.

Today Lukashenka put aside his plans of uniting Belarus with Russia, and started to build "the independent Republic of Belarus". He is developing the state ideology, which praises Belarus as an independent land. At the same time, this ideology leaves no place for free, independent Belarusian culture. Instead, the ideology proposes a neo-soviet cultural surrogate, which we can call "*the official culture*".

There are indications, that Belarusians have finally accepted their role as a *nation* living in an independent state. However, they still have to decide, who they are, what kind of nation they are, what it means to them being *Belarusians*. The national form should be filled with contents.

This is where culture has its say.

Lukashenka's ideologists are feverishly developing their own cultural contents which will be used to fill the form of the nation. It is therefore vitally important to promote the independent, free culture, which will help to bring up the independent- and free-thinking citizens. The vital, self-developing culture will foster the development of the open, critically thinking, flexible-minded society, able to analyze the situation in the country and willing to actively change it. This also explains why Lukashenka's regime suppresses this independent culture so severely. Suppressing the culture by the Belarusian regime is, by the way, often commented upon as an exotic fact, but almost never explained by the foreign media.

## 2. The situation in the Belarusian culture

Due to the above mentioned reasons, the main characteristic of the Belarusian cultural situation is its *duality*. On one hand there is a culture, which is being developed by the state according to the regime's ideological ideas (the "official culture"), on the other hand – the culture, developed by the actors, which are independent from the state, and thus, most of the times, directly or indirectly repressed by the state (the "independent culture").

We should stress here, that the independent culture develops itself naturally, and the official culture is being artificially cultivated. At the same time, the phenomenon of the state control over culture is primary, and the opposition to this control from the independent culture is secondary. This is the control itself, which causes the opposition and politicisation of culture, not vice versa. Therefore, the blame for such an abnormal situation in the field of culture should be attributed to the Belarusian regime.

Quite a few artists in Belarus believe that they are able to maintain some kind of neutrality by neither being a part of the official culture, nor opposing it. Still, this attitude seems to be an illusion. Any artist, who positions himself as "independent" in Belarus, sooner or later faces the challenge of choosing between resisting the ideological influence or subduing himself to the state control. Often the artists begin to avoid addressing certain themes, cooperating with certain artists, or attending certain events, in order not to be repressed or discriminated by the state, and have a chance "for a peaceful work". Even the very need to postulate this illusory

“independence” is often caused by a mere fear of being labelled as “the oppositional”. The neutrality out of fear is not a true neutrality, at least not for someone, whose main occupation is art, creativity and culture. Therefore, the “independent” art is usually situated in the shadow of the official culture, more or less in the field of its control.

One could also suppose that the pop culture, disinterested in politics by definition, may be forming some kind of neutral sphere. However, it is, in fact, the pop-culture in the first place, which has become a major instrument of the official culture.

A very interesting phenomenon is people, who, working within the infrastructure of the official culture, manage to transmit the values of the independent culture. We shall talk about such “hidden agents” below.

**Conclusion:** the Belarusian culture is strongly politicized.

The general politicization of the culture is also an indicator, that it can play a major role in shaping the country politically, and triggering the change in Belarus. On the contrary, if using a culture as means to influence the politics is neglected, than the authoritarian regime will use it to cement the present state of things and prevent changes in a very long run.

### **3. Main characteristics of the official culture**

The official culture is an offspring of the official ideology. Despite Lukashenka getting power back in 1994, the need to create such an ideology appeared only in the early 2000's.

As mentioned above, during the Lukashenka's rule in the second half of the 1990's, the Belarusian regime was striving to unite Belarus with Russia. Lukashenka obviously nurtured the dream of being able to run for the presidency in the “united state” some day. In practice it meant, that the elimination of the Belarusian statehood was being prepared.

The main principle of the ideology of that time was pan-Slavism. The Belarusians were seen and described by the regime as the same folk as Russians. No wonder, the creation of a special official culture for the Belarusians was not only non-topical, but even disadvantageous for the regime. It was automatically substituted by the Russian culture (the Russian mass culture in the first place). The majority of Belarusians were watching the Russian TV (despising the Belarusian TV channels as boring and old-fashioned) and listened to the Russian and western pop-music. The Belarusian pop-singers could almost never be heard on the popular commercial radio stations – and there were a very small number of these singers anyways.

Unlike Yeltsin's regime, the Putin's regime for a number of reasons pushed Lukashenka away by making clear, that his active participation in the Russian political life is out of question. As a result, in the early 2000's the Belarusian regime adopted a new policy – building an independent state, which will be highly self-sustainable, and thus able to resist the pressure from the outside and ensure the lifelong presidency for Lukashenka. Only then the regime has actually begun to see its task in constructing a Belarusian *nation*, obedient enough to tolerate the infinite rule of the single person.

For the first time in the history of the Lukashenka's rule, the concept of the state ideology was presented.

This ideology is still very raw. It is being constantly adapted to the wishes of the population and the outside factors. Still, its major provisions are:

Belarus is an independent state with a multi-vector policy (in reality it means balancing between Russia and the West in order to avoid revolutions and get the energy sources)

Stability (Belarus is depicted as the island of stability in the world, with the president as its only warranty. Stability here is the euphemism for the unchanging regime).

The present regime (“strong presidential power”, and Lukashenka as its best embodiment) is seen as the ultimate achievement of all preceding Belarusian history, its “golden age”, which allegedly will continue, as long as nothing is changed.

The history of the country is being revised. Everything, which led Belarus to becoming an independent democratic pluralistic national state in 1990 is being pushed aside (especially the anti-Russian uprisings in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and, (sic!) the proclamation of the independent Belarusian People’s Republic in 1918). On the contrary, everything, which justifies Belarus turning into the “strong presidential republic” in 1994 (undemocratic, centrally governed, isolated, Russian-speaking), is being promoted (especially the Soviet period of Belarus as a Belarusian Soviet Socialistic Republic).

These provisions are used as the foundations of creating the new official culture for Belarus.

In practice, one of the first steps in this direction was cutting off the Belarusians from the Russian TV channels. It was done not abruptly, but in a very cunning way: by creating the clones of the Russian TV channels. Even in minor visual detail and the style of reporting and behaviour of TV anchors, these new TV channels resembled the Russian ones. Their contents, however, was created in Belarus and was based on Belarusian themes, problems and the new ideology. Only some entertainment shows, movies and sports programmes are now being transmitted directly from Russia. The new Belarusian channels capitalized on the popularity of their Russian predecessors, and also cut off the Belarusian people from the “hostile propaganda” from the East, which was turning increasingly Lukashenka-critical. (This critic, however, had less to do with criticizing the nature of the regime and more with the regime’s failure to fulfil its obligation of uniting Belarus with Russia, and its refusal to obey the demands of the Kremlin).

The state-owned mass media is the main instrument used to transmit the Belarusian state ideology (another one is education establishments – schools, universities, etc). At first, it was the newscasts, which were filled with the new ideological contents. Then, a need to create a broader official culture context appeared.

The culture was never seen as an independent sphere by the regime, but merely as the effective instrument to transmit the ideological ideas. True: the public has no interest in consuming dry ideological articles, but will easily absorb them within cultural offers, like a pill dissolved in a glass of sparkling water.

The regime wanted to reach the maximum amount of people with its ideology. Logically, it turned to the **mass culture** as the basis for the official culture.

The emphasis is made on music and all kinds of shows, which can be easily presented to the wide public. The main forms of presenting the official culture are television, festivals, and concerts. The „Eurovision” song contest (preceded by the long preparation campaign in Belarus) and the song festival “Slavyanski Bazar” in Vitebsk (a city in the eastern part of country) are, perhaps, two major official cultural events with the vast resonance in the state-owned media.

One of the first steps of creating the domestic official mass culture was introducing the quote for the singers of Belarusian origin in the radio and on television. No more than 25% of all broadcast time can be given to foreign performers in Belarus. At the same time, all the singers, which somehow proved to be critical of the political situation, were banned from radio and television, and faced major difficulties in organising their concerts. As a result, the Belarusian show business began to develop – being heavily protected from the Russian rivals by the obligatory state quotas and direct state financial aid. However, only the “ideologically

cooperative” performers got a chance to earn money – the “untrustworthy” independent performers have lost access to the media and thus to the major source of promotion and income.

**Folk culture** is the minor, but in many cases obligatory element of the official culture, especially during the public festivities. The reason for that is, obviously, the faceless nature of the official pop, which is different from the Russian and international pop music in the only way – it is still done on a less professional level. The elements of folk culture serve to give the official pop culture a distinctive “Belarusian” spin.

The creation of **TV film series** is currently getting more and more important for the culture ideologists. The attempts to create the “**new Belarusian cinema**”, full-format movies, to be shown in movie theatres, are also being done, but so far they haven’t been successful.

The **literature** hardly plays an important role in the official culture. First of all, the Belarusians are generally not a “reading nation” any more. If something is being read relatively massively, than this are Russian paperback detective or women novels. This is where the state interference in culture has reached its boundaries. There are, it seems, no authors in Belarus, willing to fulfil the ideological tasks, and still able to write so skilfully, that people would prefer the “official Belarusian pulp fiction” to the Russian one.

*Interesting fact:* if you dig deeper, you will be surprised to find out, that the Belarusians actually read many books of Belarusian authors, who write these paperback pop-novels for the Russian publishing houses. But, as a rule, they hide their names under the carefully conceived pseudonyms. This is not all: in Belarus these authors often write in Belarusian, with the Belarusian-speaking readers as their target group! (Adam Hlobys and Uladzimer Sciapan are such examples). These authors earn their money within the Russian mass culture, and work for their pleasure within the Belarusian independent culture.

There have recently been an interesting development in the sphere of literature. The state has “cloned” the free-thinking “Union of Writers of Belarus” (Sajuz Pismennikau Belarusi) by creating the obedient “Union of Belarusian Writers” (Sajuz Belaruskich pismennikau) (not to be mixed up with each other!) This was also a very vivid example, when the writers, who openly declared their “independence” and neutrality from politics, joined the notorious state-created union, headed by the former police officer by the name of Charhinets. As a result, the Union of Writers of Belarus has lost the last financial support from the state. All this has caused a big resonance in the independent society, and many authors have joined the suppressed Union out of solidarity. The existence of the official Union, however, has not yet had any significant impact on creating the cultural context in Belarus.

Although, most of the **theatres** are state-controlled and rely heavily on the state financial support, they retain a rather big level of creative independence. Many actors, directors, etc. are formally working in the context of the official culture, but to some extent find opportunities to transmit independent ideas. Still, at the same time there have been a number of incidents with artists of directors being fired because of their political beliefs.

**Visual art.** There is no major movement of servile visual art in Belarus. There are a couple of painters, who are favoured by the state, but their influence can not be compared to the “socialist realists” of the Soviet time, who constructed the visual image of the soviet ideology. The present Belarusian servile artists do not create images, which can be used by ideologists as icons. In Belarus, visual art can, to a large extent, be considered as independent art, also because the painters, graphics, etc. are in their majority openly or secretly regime-critical. This has a lot to do with the liberal traditions of the Academy of Arts in Minsk and the general mood in the artistic community.

**Innovative contemporary arts** such as performance, videoart, etc. play practically no role in the official culture. The ideologists see these marginal elite spheres as non-lucrative in terms of reaching the public, and the independent art actors are usually critical of the state interference in their work.

The official culture accompanies and arranges the **political campaigns**, such as elections or referendums. All of these campaigns are united as the slogan „For Belarus“, which is clearly interpreted as „for Lukashenka“. Most of the campaign concerts and shows are held under this slogan.

One should mention, that the ideologists are smart enough, *not* to create the *personal cult* of the president. There were some timid attempts to do so, but the result was so ridiculous, that the ideologists obviously abandoned this idea. However, there is a brand new trend – attempting to turn the non-popular politicians into some kind of show figures, in order to legitimise them in the society. Thus, Lidzija Yarmoshyna, head of the State Election Committee (widely believed responsible for the fraud of elections), is now taking part in a Belarusian TV show “Two Stars” (also a clone of the Russian TV show). There she also counts the votes, thus trying to create an image of herself as a strict, but honest judge.

The official culture is slowly gaining popularity, especially among the youth in the province and in the less well-off city districts (i.e. among young people with less money and thus less access to the alternative sources of information, less chances to travel abroad, etc.). Still, the official artists are basically *not* yet seen as *pop idols*. The public is just getting used to them.

In fact, the world “culture” is not the best one to define this phenomenon. At this point the official “culture” is merely the *instrument* of propaganda. However, with the state continuing to develop this instrument, it is gaining the capacity to turn into a fully-fledged *pseudo-culture* some day. Why *pseudo*? Because, similarly as culture, this pseudo-culture will be able to develop and reproduce itself, but, unlike culture, unable to reflect the world and analyze itself critically. Thus, this will be a *pseudo-culture of the state-orchestrated entertainment*, but not a real culture of the creative reflection and communication.

**Conclusion:** the official culture in Belarus serves to transmit the state ideology to the masses. It is, in its form, a mass culture, with an explicit campaign character.

Here is a link to a photo report from a very typical official-culture pop-concert in Belarus. It gives you a very good feeling of what it’s like: <http://www.nn.by/index.php?c=ar&i=7479>

#### 4. Main characteristics of the independent culture

The late 1980’s saw the emerging of the independent culture, not controlled by the state. With Lukashenka getting power in 1994, this independent culture got under tremendous pressure, and was forced to politicise itself even more, that it was before. The “Belarus-Russia-fusion” policy of Lukashenka of the 1990 and his “For Belarus” policy of the 2000’s had no direct impact on the pressure, under which the regime put the independent culture: it was simply constantly increasing. Now this pressure is especially acute with the official culture and the independent culture as rivals. The Russian culture, though still very present, is losing its topicality, the western culture has also somewhat worn off.

In its present state, the independent culture in Belarus is, in fact, the *normal cultural scene* as we know it in western countries. The major difference is that in the West the culture is not subject to such direct interference and repression from the state and does not have to define itself as an alternative to the machinery of the official culture.

The Belarusian regime does not tolerate any *alternative*, especially the independent culture, which is threatening it with its aspiration to openness and free expression. The regime does not

yet dare to make all independent artistic activity criminal. What it does, is creating the maximum amount of obstacles to the independent culture.

The regime deprives the independent culture of state support, and makes the support from business or from abroad very difficult. The actors of independent culture have very *little opportunities to gain access to the public*. The regime also degrades the culture consumers by thrusting the primitive official mass culture upon their taste, thus trying to reduce the potential audience for the independent culture.

### Language problem

While reading reports about Belarus in the western press, foreigners often stumble upon such a phrase: *„the Belarusian regime suppresses the Belarusian culture and the Belarusian language“*. However, this paradox (which is one of the major problems of the present-day Belarus) is almost never explained clearly.

In fact, the meaning of this phrase is following: *„the regime of Lukashenka suppresses the independent culture and the Belarusian language as its most distinctive mark and instrument“*.

As already mentioned in the very beginning of this essay, the main problem of Belarus is the problem of *identity* of its people. In the 1990's Lukashenka deliberately silenced this problem, preparing the fusion with Russia. In 2000's, facing the need to secure its existence as the lifelong president of the independent state, the regime began the urgent search for the *solution to the identity problem*.

Looking for the ideologically „safe“ basis for defining the Belarusian identity, the ideologists have handpicked or falsified such *traditions*, which aim to prove the existence of the *„strong and stable“ (authoritarian) state*. They took the „prosperous and heroic“ Russian-speaking Belarus of the Soviet times as the example of the state tradition.

Generally speaking, the regime's solution to the identity problem is a *soviet idea, realised in Belarus as an independent country*.

*The independent culture* solves the identity problem in a radically different way. This solution is based on the traditions and myths, which are the most suitable for the independent culture to realise itself - freedom, free speech, the right to choose. All this can only be realised in the democratic state, so much dreaded by Lukashenka. The Belarusian language is the *embodiment* of this tradition, the most effective *instrument*, and the most distinctive *mark* of the independent culture, which helps Belarusians to define themselves in the world, and thus enrich the world culture with the distinctive Belarusian culture. All this doesn't hinder many Russian-speaking or bilingual people to be active in the independent culture of Belarus.

### Language problem from the historic perspective

Similarly to the Tzar times, in the Soviet Union the Belarusian language was officially lagged out as the language of uneducated and non-intelligent villagers. The Russian was allegedly the language of civilisation and culture. In fact, this was just the means to erase the cultural difference between the nations of the Soviet Union, in order to neutralise the disbalance of Russian culture dominating the national cultures and soften multiple national conflicts (which was never fully achieved and finally resulted into the disintegration and breakup of the Soviet Union, as well as causes the constant national problems in the modern Russia).

The stereotype of Belarusian as a „village“ language is slowly dying out in Belarus. Now, speaking correct Belarusian language is increasingly seen more as the sign of being a person from the city, educated, and wishing changes for the country – or, depending on the political attitude – as a sign of belonging to the hated opposition. Thus, Lukashenka mocks Belarusian as the language of pro-western nationalistic opposition.

Russian and Belarusian are two official languages in Belarus, however, if you are a Belarusian speaker, you will never manage to make career in the state authority bodies, in the military, police, etc. – basically, in most of the state institutions. You would even hardly be able to accomplish a simplest bureaucratic matter by filling out a form in Belarusian. The number of Belarusian-language schools has been reduced to the minimum in the last years, and there are no Belarusian-language universities.

The language intolerance of the official culture triggers the spreading of the language tolerance within the independent culture. Even when using Russian, the actor of the independent culture is still thinking in the categories of the national culture, based on the Belarusian-language.

Generally speaking, the independent culture's solution to the identity problem is a European idea, realised in Belarus as an independent country.

### **But why doesn't the regime of Lukashenka use the Belarusian language in order to reach its ideological goals?**

The Belarusian language is very closely connected with the democratic national movements, which resulted into establishing the democratic Belarusian state in 1918 and reestablishment of the national statehood in 1990. Lukashenka never gets tired of expressing his despise of these democratic movements. Now Belarusian has become the language of the democratic opposition. Merely using Belarusian in the daily life in Belarus is already a political statement. The Belarusian language is the symbol of change and the instrument of the independent culture – this is another reason why the regime rejects and suppresses it.

### **Is independent culture popular?**

Unlike the official culture, the independent culture is more about underground and innovative than mass and popular art. However, this doesn't mean the independent culture can not be popular. The increasing number of people is turning to the independent culture. The recent development of communication technologies and the large number of loopholes in the regimes' ideological machinery allow the independent culture to develop itself and gain popularity, which in some cases outscores the popularity of the official "stars", even though they are backed by the financial and media resources of the state.

Contrary to the official culture, the independent culture doesn't clone the Russian or any other culture. It tries to create something new, something which would be distinctively Belarusian and still internationally topical.

The independent culture does not play by some strict rules, nor is it being orchestrated by the opposition politics. In fact, the mobilizing power of the independent culture in many cases exceeds the political power of the political opposition.

The independent culture is innovative in its nature. It has all shades of politicisation, from some actors taking part in political activities, to other being merely irritated by the ideological interference with their work and the stuffy atmosphere in the country.

The landscape of the independent culture is much more picturesque and complicated than that of the official culture, and therefore more difficult to be suited into some kind of strict classification system. There is no need to deeply dwell on the principles of functioning of the independent culture – they are not much different than these of any Western European country. Below I will only shortly touch upon on some spheres, which are the most vivid, or have some peculiarities in their development.

The independent culture embraces a full scale of generations, not just the youth. In this regard, one can speak of the "traditional" and "new" independent culture.

The traditional independent culture is preserving the dissident traditions of the national culture, repressed in the soviet times. The older generation, rooted in the national movement of the late 1980's, has more emphasis on literature (mainly poetry) and visual art. Many actors of the "traditional" independent culture are united into some kind of creative unions, such as the Union of Writers of Belarus, the Union of Artists or the Art Association "Pahonia", which unites painters and graphics. The "traditional" independent culture is characterised with the piety towards the Belarusian national heritage – there is a cult of Belarusian language and history.

The *“new” independent culture* is represented by the younger generations, which came into culture already after the break-up of the Soviet Union. This culture is more rebellious, innovative and less faithful to the tradition. One can not single out a certain sphere of art, which would be emphasised by the “new” independent culture. This culture has less piety towards the language issues and, perhaps, is more tolerant. At the same time, it is more persistent and courageous in claiming its right to use Belarusian language as its instrument. It also has less fear in experimenting with the language and thus developing it.

### **Music**

The music scene of the independent culture is, perhaps, the most vibrant and reaches the biggest amount of people, competing with the pop culture. The rock singer Lyavon Volski, for instance, is undoubtedly a cult figure among the youth (despite of being in his 40s). He is also active in other branches of culture – such as writing essays and publishing satiric comics. The main problem of musicians is the complicated communication with the public. There is very little access to radio and television, especially to the banned music bands. Simply singing in Belarusian can cause problems: such music is often rejected by the radio stations and television as “non-format”.

At the same time, it is the sphere of music, where the independent society managed to create the successful infrastructure, which helps to bring the culture to the public. The “Belarusian Music Alternative” is an initiative, or better to say a network, which helps the Belarusian independent musicians to record, sell and promote their music. The internet-portal “Tuzin Hitou” is the largest media platform for disseminating and popularising the independent music. The independent music fests, such as “Basovishcha” (held on Poland) or “Rock-Coronation” are also helpful to break the ideological blockade.

### **Literature**

Along with the Union of Writers of Belarus, which mostly represents the traditional independent literature, one should also mention the Belarusian PEN Centre, the branch of the international PEN network, uniting the authors of all kinds in Belarus.

However, the most young authors are less willing to associate themselves with the formal organisations. They discuss, coordinate, and present their work with the help of the internet or meeting in informal groups.

### **Contemporary visual arts**

The independent culture embraces a wide range of visual arts, including its most experimental branches. It is important to mention, that artists were one of the most active groups in the late 1980’s, which helped the new movement for national independence to emerge. As already mentioned, the artistic scene in Belarus is quite free-thinking and liberal. The independent visual art is, perhaps, the most multi-faceted and manifold sphere of the independent culture.

### **Performance**

One should mention the performance art, which in the late-1990s and the early 2000s was on the verge of its popularity, but still is quite topical in the Belarusian independent culture.

### **The media**

The independent media play a tremendous role in popularising the independent culture.

Founded in 1906, “Nasha Niva” is the oldest newspaper published in Belarusian. Re-established in 1991, it has become not just a source of information, but an informal cultural centre and network, uniting the a very big number of the independent artists, authors, artists, culture scientists, historians, etc. The newspaper’s input into creating the independent cultural context is immense.

Other important media are “ARCHE” (monthly analytical magazine), “Dzeyaslou” (the literary magazine), “Frahmenty” (the magazine, dealing mostly with philosophical issues), “pARTisan” (a splendid magazine about contemporary art). “Radio Svaboda – Radio Free Europe” (based in Prague) also unites many prominent Belarusian actors of the independent culture.

“Logvinau press” is a small publishing house, which, nevertheless, manages to print a significant amount of modern Belarusian literature, first of all – young Belarusian writers. It is, perhaps, the most active private publishing house in the field of independent Belarusian literature.

### **Institutions**

Despite the suppression, the independent society has managed to develop and maintain many successful associations and NGO’s with a wide interdisciplinary approach, which combine political, educational, analytical, and cultural work. The most influential of them are the Belarusian Collegium, PEN Centre, Belarusian Association of Journalists, Association of Contemporary artists, TBM (The Belarusian Language society), etc. (this can also be seen from the information in the chart of the regional mapping of Belarusian cultural organisations).

### **The criminal persecution of satire**

The regime of Lukashenka reacts the most nervously to political satire. This is when the suppression turns into severe repression or even the criminal persecution.

Thus, the satiric duo „Sasha and Siarozha“ merely made some hints and rather kind jokes not even of the regime, but mostly of the way of life of Belarusians. They were promptly driven out of the country.

The non-governmental organisation “3<sup>rd</sup> Way”, creators of the satiric web-animation, which made fun directly of Lukashenka and his officials, had to flee Belarus in order to escape imprisonment for defaming the president.

### **Cooperation with the foreign partners**

Official culture is often reluctant to work with foreign partners – this is often seen as unnecessary and suspicious. Perhaps, folklore or classical art is more or less cooperating with the partners abroad.

On the contrary, the independent culture is actively looking for contacts with the foreign partners, because this is one of the few possibilities to reach new audiences and also earn money. It is often so, that the most repressed artists have much less opportunities to perform at home than abroad.

### **The role of internet**

The state has deprived the independent culture of access to the state-manipulated media, limited its access to book-printing and performing infrastructure. It is also rather risky for the actors of the independent culture to come together for discussions or form some kind of circles or informal groups, because they instantly draw attention of the secret services.

Looking for the opportunities to communicate, the people active in the independent culture have turned to the internet, which proved to be very effective. Now, there are many thematic web-sites, which unite the people active in certain spheres of the independent culture. People are using web forums and their personal weblogs in order to organise the continuous communication with each other. The most outstanding platform is the Livejournal.com weblog system, which now has grown into the vast and highly effective network, uniting thousands of active Belarusians, many of them working in the field of independent culture. These are not just young people – many prominent artists have also opened their weblogs, which is very helpful to make better ties between the generations.

### **Fusion of culture and politics**

While a large number of actors of independent culture try to preserve their creative independence from politics, others deliberately turn to political art. The “Free Theatre” group from Minsk unites the actors banned from the state-owned theatres and performs politically

critical plays. The “N.R.M.” rock band or the young rap singer Krou write political lyrics and take part in the opposition rallies. Artists like Aliaksej Maratschkin, head of the artistic group “Pahonia”, are creating politically explicit paintings. Noteworthy, that most of the politically active artists persistently use the Belarusian language in their personal and artistic communication.

### **The “secret agents” of the independent culture**

There are some actors in the field of the official culture, who, when one pays attention to their work, have an independent cultural thinking. Once in a while they manage to present the independent ideas in the context of the official culture. Working within the infrastructure of the official culture, they manage to transmit the values of the independent culture.

This is often seen in the state-owned media when, for instance, a state-run television features a program about independent culture, created without any ideological concessions. It is no rare, that the music stores sell the disks of the “banned” musicians, or that the theatres use some kind of politically critic hints in their plays.

These agents are, of course, the exception. Some of them are simply not being noticed or taken seriously by the ideologists, others are tolerated because they are highly professional and can not be easily substituted.

There are no such “official agents” in the independent culture. Perhaps, the only such agent is the fear of repression and, as a result, self-censorship.

**Conclusion:** The independent culture in Belarus is a culture in its European sense. It’s innovative and open to the world. It is being severely suppresses by the regime in general, and the Belarusian language as its instrument – in peculiar. The independent culture in Belarus has to coexist with the artificially cultivated official culture and fight its way to the public despite the state-created obstacles.

The independent culture is creating a unique Belarusian cultural product and cultural context, which enriches the European and the world culture. This is a sharp contrast to the official culture, which is copycat and hermetic, failing and unwilling to create anything, which would be of the value for other cultures.

The Lukashenka’s ideology on one hand and the independent Belarusian culture on the other are competing in shaping the identity of Belarusian people.

## **5. Is it possible that the culture triggers the change, and what needs to be done?**

The culture, undoubtedly, can trigger the positive changes in the country. However, more importantly, the culture is the main instrument, which can make these changes irreversible by shaping the identity of the Belarusian people.

Lukashenka’s regime is often seen in the West as some kind of mystery. Still, there is nothing mysterious about it. It’s only goal to stay in power at all costs, by fulfilling the wishes of the majority of people (or, to be more exact, using the media propaganda in order to create the illusion, that these wishes are being satisfied). The West often tries to influence Lukashenka, but it is senseless. One should influence the wishes of people Belarus, so that they are aimed at changing their life. The shaping of these issues can be done through: direct information (through mass media) and promoting the open thinking (with the help of culture).

### **Isn’t Belarus closed for any influence from outside?**

The main natural resource of Belarus is its geographic position as a transit country between Russia and the Western Europe. This explains why Lukashenka has not shut the country off from the rest of the world completely and tolerates some, though limited, freedoms. This factor of the relative openness of the country should be used.

### **Why helping Belarusian culture is profitable for the Europeans?**

Belarus is often described as a “small European country”. This is a stereotype. If you look at the map, you will see a country with the almost the same size as the UK. The frightening thing is, that this country is populated with 10 Mln of people *without a clear identity*. If Europe does not encourage Belarusians to define their identity as a European nation, then the continent will have to live with a 10.000.000-strong nation, swinging from one ideology to another, vulnerable to the influence of populists and extremists of all kinds, and subject to the increasingly aggressive authoritarian ideology of Kremlin.

### **Is there a demand for a change among Belarusians?**

There is a joke in Belarus: a small boy is watching TV with his mother. They are watching a newscast from the state-owned TV, which, as usual, positively depicts the life in Belarus. In the end the boy says: “Mommy, I would really like to live in this country called Belarus! It’s much better than here!”

It would be a mistake to think, that the majority of Belarusians are totally satisfied with their life. The problems, which are noticed, perhaps, by everyone, are the atmosphere of fear, the cynicism and corruption of the authorities on all levels, the obvious lie in the state-owned media, and the lack of perspectives. Still, the people are often not able to put these factors together and draw a logical line between the regime and their problems. They curse their life, but praise Lukashenka – as yet.

### **Support culture, not just politics**

It is needed to develop the good taste among people. One should promote the critical reflection as the means to see the problems and creative thinking as the means to find solutions.

There should be no condition that the cultural project has to be obviously politic, in order to be supported. The main criteria should be the artistic quality of the project, and its topicality. Otherwise we will end up in controlling the independent culture, with its actors tailoring their project to our demands. If presented in Belarus, such tailored projects have a big risk of being tapped as insincere and too moralistic. Speaking about presenting Belarusian culture abroad, this “political” approach towards the art has already influenced Belarusian artists. It is common knowledge, that it is precisely the authoritarian regime in Belarus, which draws foreign attention to our country. In order to get the public interested, it has become common practice to present almost any cultural project from Belarus under the label “made in the last European dictatorship”. In some extreme cases the trademark “I’m a repressed artist” is used to “sell” rather poor projects to the foreign public, or simply promote and find funding for the projects, which are not really subject to any serious repression at home.

### **Language issue**

Speaking about the support of culture (especially of its verbal forms, such as literature, or, to a large extent, music and film) one should always take into account the language issue.

Decisions, neglecting the Belarusian language, can cause serious discontent in Belarusian independent circles. The example – the decision of the “Deutsche Welle” radio station to begin broadcasting to Belarus in Russian only. It not only caused the powerful wave of protest in the independent society, but also deepened distrust into the European policy towards Belarus.

By supporting the Belarusian-language projects one helps the oppressed independent Belarusian culture to its feet. Promoting Belarusian language also decreases the influence of the still alive totalitarian ideology of the Soviet times, praised by Lukashenka’s regime, and of the imperialistic Putin’s ideology, transmitted from Moscow, both of them similarly hostile to the Belarusian independent national culture.

### **Encourage self-confidence and creativity**

The regime leaves some niches for the independent society to exist. The independent newspapers are not shut down, but have to distribute themselves on their own. The singers are not jailed, but are not allowed to radio and television. The main goal of such a policy is not to

eliminate the cultural actors and their public, but to make the dissatisfied circles think they can not reach anything, that their case is hopeless.

Belarus is a “smart dictatorship” because it relies on the “self-censorship” of people. They don’t do many things not because they will really be repressed, but because they fear that they might be repressed. It is therefore very important to inspire hope to people, to show them, that they can be free – and can also create freely. This can be done with the help of culture.

### **Provide information**

Many artists in Belarus are not even aware of the fact, that they can initiate some projects, and find partners and funding abroad. They are simply not familiar with the principles of project work. It is very important to provide them with this information.

### **Promote contacts and networking**

Belarusian artists are using their acquaintances and personal contacts to share ideas. However, it would be great, if there were more networking opportunities for them. If there were a way for the Belarusian artists to find and contact their colleagues at home and abroad, learn about contests, study courses, etc. Such contacts will be the source of new ideas and creative inspiration.

### **Reach new audiences.**

So far the cultural projects, which receive support from abroad, are usually reaching the most active part of society. In many cases, this is preaching to the preached. However, a new challenge is to reach new audiences –middle-aged, for example, or elderly people, and, the most important, children. By supporting the independent cultural projects for children the long-lasting effect can be ensured.

### **Concrete forms of support of the Belarusian culture:**

- Support to domestic, Belarus-originated cultural projects of all kinds;
- Creating the information and networking source for culture actors. This may be a magazine, a web-site, or a supplement to the existing media;
- Exchange program for culture actors. Even the short-term visits could be very useful, especially, if they will involve creative activities. Promoting contacts between art schools and artistic groups, both formal and informal;
- Promoting joint projects of foreign and Belarusians artists;
- Organising language courses for the artists with the aim to make communication with the world easier;
- Organising the project-making workshops for the artists;
- Develop projects, which involve the existing domestic free media in Belarus, aimed at promoting culture;
- Launching a creative contest for the Belarusian artists;
- Promote the emerging of the independent pop-culture;
- Support for independent cultural projects for children and other audiences, rarely reached by the independent culture (belarusian-language projects in the first place).

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