

Culture as a Battlefield: Belarus's Struggle Over Culture and Identity

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Executive Summary

Despite being a terrain where major battles are being fought for the minds of Belarusians, the significance of culture remains underevaluated. The ongoing full-scale war in Ukraine, spanning both physical and media battlegrounds, has spurred a concerted propaganda and disinformation campaign, which also targets the population of Belarus. Facing the failure of its official cultural policies, Aliaksandr Lukashenka's authoritarian regime is unable to counteract. With official culture offering scant appeal and alternative expressions being marginalised and forced into exile in the aftermath of the peaceful revolution of 2020, there is a growing risk that Belarusian society further gravitates towards Russian popular culture and the influence of Russian state propaganda. Supporting Belarusian culture and identity is vital for bridging ideological divides within the populace and countering Russian ideological influence. Where open political struggle is difficult and dangerous for its agents, cultural resistance can yield nuanced and sustainable outcomes.

Culture as a Battlefield

Locally produced culture, whether Belarusian, Yiddish, Polish, or even Russian-speaking, often found itself in a contested space in Belarus. Rarely, if ever, were there periods of free, unrestricted development as the dominant powers — Russian, Polish, German, and Soviet — treated local cultures with suspicion, spreading external influences to strengthen their hegemony. Beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century, when it was first articulated, throughout the Soviet period, and until the present day (with rare exceptions), the idea of the modern Belarusian nation, grounded in the existence of an autonomous state, the Belarusian language, and the (re-) invented tradition was in opposition to the official state politics. At different times, attracting more or fewer supporters, Belarusian culture and language were continuously relegated to the alternative spaces, which authorities sought to control and supervise.

Cultural Politics or Lack Thereof?

Aliaksandr Lukashenka's cultural politics in post-1994 Belarus relied on the ideological arsenal of Brezhnev's era. Its three main pillars were the centralisation of historical knowledge (with the WWII heroic narrative as its principal element), Russification, and tight control over the media and public sphere. An alternative, predominately Belarusian-language culture, could appear when the control mechanisms languish and external funding is raised. Additionally, from its very beginning, Lukashenka introduced elements of Stalinist cultural governance, when the state used its influence to stimulate the confrontation between different agents of culture, pitting them against each other and exploiting internal contradictions to eliminate dissent. For instance, the authorities created a parallel state-controlled Writer's Union in 2005, subduing and subsequently liquidating the independent Union of Belarusian Writers, blacklisting, stretching control over intellectual outlets, and compelling denunciations and public repentance. These (Stalinist) elements became more pronounced after the Belarusian revolution of 2020 and its violent suppression, when the agents of non-government cultural production — publishing houses, musical groups, and theatre troupes — were closed down or forced out of the country in large numbers; many cultural workers were repressed, deprived of their jobs, and arrested, while some were beaten and tortured to death. The number of those listed as unwanted by the state, dubbed as "extremist" media projects, resources, and literary works soared. The latter included works authored not only by contemporary writers such as Svetlana Aleksievich or Alhierd Bacharevich, but also those written and published in the nineteenth century.

Nonetheless, unlike its Soviet counterpart, Lukashenka's administration failed to develop an effective and sustainable strategy for cultural development. The 2016 "Code of Culture," adopted during relative political relaxation and aimed at prioritising the cultural sphere, did not bring tangible results. The investments in culture, which amount to approximately 0.41 percent of the total state budget, remain disproportionately low. The state cultural infrastructure, including main republican theatres, music halls, museums and art galleries, festivals (with such rare exceptions as the "Slavic Bazaar" in Vitsebsk, which is a forum favoured by Lukashenka), and publishing houses and outlets, was largely a continuation of the Soviet period's and mostly functioned along a well-worn track. Over the past thirty years, the state has not opened any significant new museums, apart from two devoted to the history and memory of WWII in Minsk and Khatyn, built any new state-sponsored theatres or music halls, or initiated any new cultural or literary journals.

Under such conditions, it is unlikely that a competitive state-sponsored culture could appear. If we agree with the interpretation of Lukashenka's governing style as adaptive, his cultural policy has been even less consistent. Despite widespread opinion, the Belarusian incumbent did not become a good student of Soviet history. Dissimilar to the heritage of socialist modernisation in Belarus — machine-manufacturing plants and refineries — Soviet cultural production could not be easily reset under the new conditions. The attempts to exploit old Soviet symbols of state patriotism, such as the Khatyn memorial that regained its importance after 2020, can yield only limited results.

The failures of cultural politics could be explained by the blatant lack of education of Lukashenka's political elite, which failed to recognise its importance. It is also possible (although less likely) that keeping culture on a tight leash was a conscious strategy, so it could not produce an alternative from within its boundaries, as was the case with Soviet Belarusian culture.

Russian Cultural Expansion in Belarus

Starting from the expansionist wars of Ivan the Terrible and Catherine the Great through the Russification politics of Nikita Khrushchev, the existence of a distinct Belarusian identity and culture was perceived as a threat to Russian and Soviet imperialism. Located on the (imaginary) frontier between East and West, Belarusian territory was treated as one of the last strongholds of the Russian civilisation in its standing against the allegedly hostile influences of the West, so the battles for cultural influence were particularly fierce here. Throughout its entire history, the Soviet state waged war against “Belarusian nationalism,” in fact, against the slightest attempts at cultural self-determination and political autonomy. Triggered by the democratic transition and the largely pro-Belarusian cultural politics, the cultural field immediately diversified in the first half of the 1990s, although the presence of the Russian-speaking popular culture and media, produced in Russia and propagating the Russian worldview remained uninterrupted. This trend only intensified with the sweeping digitalisation of the media space. From its beginning, the promise of freedom that the internet ushered in for Belarus carried the dangers of cultural and ideological dominance from its rapidly digitalising Eastern neighbour. The new Russian “cultural expansion” campaign, which experts attribute to the rise of Putinism, had already begun in 2010–11. Over the past few years, and especially since the beginning of the full-scale war in Ukraine, these often multidirected efforts have intensified in Belarus.

Waged both on the battleground and in the digital media sphere and often deemed a “hybrid,” Russia's war against Ukraine appends a massive disinformation campaign, also targeted at the Russian-speaking population of Belarus. This implies both the vindication of the war and an obtrusion of Russian cultural influence. There are reasons to believe that this cultural expansion is part of Russia's elaborate strategy of “quiet” political and economic incorporation of Belarus, in which cultural unification occupies one of the central places. Since the resources that the regime allocates to culture are so meagre, and external funding opportunities are systematically cut off, the official culture under Lukashenka is incapable of resisting this expansion. With over a hundred cultural workers jailed, hundreds fired, and thousands forced into exile, this risk only increases. To prove that Belarusian culture has an international presence, the regime seeks cooperation with Russian regions and, less often, within the loyal countries of the Commonwealth of the Independent States, as well as China, India, Iran, and some African countries. However, instead of confirming the internationalisation of Belarusian culture, these cooperation projects only underscore its limitations and dependency.

Cultural Spaces of Resistance

The Belarusian revolution of 2020 was undoubtedly a political protest. By demanding free elections and a democratic change of power, it epitomised the birth of the political nation. Nonetheless, the revolution also relied on cultural resistance. Artistic and musical performances, poetry and prose readings, and history workshops were an integral part of the street protest movement. It would be a mistake, Ales Bialiatski remarked in his 2022 Nobel Lecture, delivered from behind bars, “to separate human rights from the values of identity and independence.” Among other things, the Belarusian Revolution was a magnificent demonstration of the cultural agency of producers and consumers of Belarus culture, which dispersed an intellectual monopoly on Belarusian and Belarusian-language culture and history writing. The events of 2020 and the subsequent anti-war manifestations in Belarus

confirmed the mobilising potential of the national culture and language. While forced into alternative spaces, it can flourish and expand at the sight of the slightest relaxation of control.

The past years have witnessed a surge in Belarusian cultural endeavours in exile, with numerous artistic projects, music, literary festivals, and book-printing initiatives thriving in Europe and beyond. Also inside Belarus, despite the increasing repression, there remain areas where cultural activism continues, such as architectural restoration, archeology, children's book publishing, folk art and music, and museum management, to name but a few. The question remains: How can we ensure the visibility of this activity without endangering concrete individuals? Simultaneously, transborder activity and connections are possible and continue in the sphere of culture: books printed abroad are smuggled back to Belarus, and the exchange of information, even with considerable precautions, endures. The new digital technologies will certainly offer more opportunities in the near future. Although some authors point to a growing chasm within Belarusian society, further cultural work should be built around the possibility of unification, rather than deepening the divide. The common experience of resistance can lay the foundation for reconciliation and become a powerful stimulus for future cultural development.

Recommendations for the European Union, European Governments and the International Academic Community:

- support high-quality cultural products in and for Belarus;
- aid educational opportunities for Belarusian youth and additional qualification programmes for exiled and repressed cultural activists, enabling online participation and certification;
- offer hosting programmes for the exiled cultural institutions;
- assist in the documentation of experiences of violence and repression;
- develop digitalisation programmes for the preservation of material and non-material cultural heritage;¹
- where possible, make physical borders more open to ensure the movement of books, people, and ideas. As is known from the history of the Cold War, this kind of movement was one of the reasons why communist regimes collapsed. In the countries where freedom of movement at least partly existed, the transition to democracy was more successful.

¹ The multicultural architectural and historical heritage of Belarus is undergoing latent destruction through careless reconstruction, neglect, and intentional demolition. The digital preservation of this heritage and the thorough documentation of its present condition are urgently needed.



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