

The Phenomenon of Belarus: How to Build a Better Future

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Executive Summary

Belarus is a European country now facing the most important choice in its history: whether to become part of the “Russian world” or to preserve its independence. This is an existential matter for a post-colonial nation like Belarus. Culture has a special place in this choice, which goes far beyond battling misinformation. Cultural and artistic actors provide the space for a reassessment of the values of the past, reflections on the challenges of the present and social imagination of the future. Independent Belarusian culture faces violent repression within Belarus and beyond its borders. A new “iron curtain” is descending between Belarus and Europe, which impedes the circulation of culture, people and ideas, and culturally isolates Belarusian society. However, Belarusian artists, writers and producers both inside the country and in exile continue to create significant works recognized by critics and audiences. It is essential that cultural figures receive recognition and support from both Belarusian and external stakeholders in order to recover and strengthen their powers and influence on society. Our recommendations outline the main directions of such support.

More than Culture

Imagine a town square, people high up in the branches of trees in eye-catching, brightly coloured outfits, joking and singing. This is a picture from Minsk during the Soviet stagnation – the first Belarusian hippies who climbed trees to make it harder for the police to arrest them. This is an image of Belarus – a European country with a rich experience of survival in unfavourable conditions thanks to creative practices and a unique culture formed through the centuries not thanks to, but in spite of the circumstances.

Belarus has always balanced between West and East. Its flexibility has served as a distinctive national trait, as well as an excuse for its reluctance to adopt a particular system of values. However, it is now time to make a choice between a future where the rule of law and human rights are respected, or to become part of the “Russian world” where there is no rule of law and human life has little value.

Culture is a crucial factor because every action of every Belarusian has a cultural dimension and affects the balance of power on the “East-West” scale. The manifesto, *More than Culture*, drafted in 2023 by prominent figures in Belarusian culture, explicitly states that culture for Belarusians “is a form of social action, through which the nation is engaged in self-determination. And, more importantly, a resource for self-organization....To invest in Belarusian culture means to support social responsibility and civic activity”.

Under Lukashenka’s rule, the Belarusian cultural sphere is under constant pressure from neighbouring Russia, which aims to fully absorb Belarus into its media and cultural bubble, and from the Belarusian regime, which has created unbearable conditions for free creative self-expression. Nonetheless, Belarusian culture – or rather counterculture – has produced a large number of world-famous artists in the past 10 years: a Grammy nominee, two Nobel laureates and two holders of the Order of the British Empire, hundreds of poems written in prison, music and theatre without censorship, and children’s projects in which children define themselves as Belarusians.

Independent culture in Belarus does not just face restrictions, censorship and neglect by pro-state structures. The creative elite, opinion formers and authors of cultural products disloyal to the authorities face dismissal on political grounds, bans from their profession, psychological pressure, arrest, raids and long terms of imprisonment. There are currently over 150 political prisoners in the cultural sphere. Artists sometimes die in prison in unclear circumstances, as was the case with activist Vitold Ashurak and artist Ales Pushkin.

The audience for the creators – consumers of cultural context – also faces repression. Visitors to underground events, fans of blacklisted bands and readers of literature considered “extremist” face the same risks. In Belarus, prison sentences are handed out for comments and reposts on social networks and donations to cultural projects. Meanwhile, the Belarusian regime working with Russia has drawn up a joint “black list” of artists who have advocated change in Belarus or protested against the war in Ukraine, and are preparing a unified list of “prescribed cultural heritage”, which will provide the “correct interpretation” of history.

Public opinion identifies four categories of creative artists. The first category is forced to serve the ideological needs of the regime consciously, for profit, or from a lack of strength to quit the system. The second category attempts to balance, to communicate with the state for the sake of self-expression, while at the same time not allowing itself to be turned into an instrument of state propaganda. These artists try to do something constructive for Belarusian culture in the official sphere while avoiding sharp political and social topics, or politics in general. The third category of creative artists has broken off relations with the state but remains in the country and has gone underground. The fourth has been forced to emigrate under the threat of repression and is included in the field of communication of other countries, but remains an actor in Belarusian culture.

The connection between all these categories is ambiguous. Everyone can accuse everyone else of betraying national interests and defending independence in their own way but it is safe to say that the most important work for Belarusian culture is done by collaborative efforts of individuals within Belarus and those operating outside its borders.

Today, the Belarusian cultural space is full of interesting ideas waiting to be realized. In little more than a year of the ArtPower programme – which is implemented by the Belarusian Council for Culture together with the Danish Cultural Institute, with support from the European Commission and a budget of €2 million – 678 applications have been submitted

with a total budget of more than €12 million. According to experts, most of the applications are of value for Belarusian culture. The demand is simply unimaginable and cannot be even 10% satisfied.

Since 2020, however, there has been a deepening gap between the artists and the audiences for Belarusian culture, who exist in two different contexts of the production and dissemination of cultural products. The division in the cultural community is not based on the principle of “those who left vs those who remained” or “official culture vs counterculture”; it is far more complicated. This cultural gap, in turn, deepens the values-based and worldview contradictions between different parts of Belarusian society. These circumstances pose new challenges for Belarusian culture.

Recommendations

Concerted action is required by various stakeholder groups if the Belarusian independent cultural space is to be able to respond to the above challenges. In addition to the individuals and entities that directly represent Belarusian independent culture and civil society, these stakeholders are European Union policymakers, European cultural institutions and civil society, donor organizations and cooperation partners in Europe, as well as Belarusian businesses in exile.

EU policymakers should make it easier for Belarusians to obtain Schengen visas and simplify residence procedures for Belarusians in EU member states. In addition, public support could be provided from individual EU member states for certain areas of Belarusian culture for a period of one year to stimulate their development. This could manifest itself in joint projects by institutions in the partner country together with Belarusian organizations and involve the creation of a joint product, such as a play, a film, an exhibition or a book, scholarships and internships for Belarusians in the patron country, or programmes for the rehabilitation of repressed cultural figures.

EU cultural and civil society organizations should facilitate the inclusion of independent Belarusian artists in the European context and the emergence of new connections such as art residencies, internships and cultural exchanges.

Donor organizations, cooperation partners in Europe and Belarusian businesses in exile should organize systemic investments in independent Belarusian culture on two levels. First, long-term investments should be directed at reconstruction of the infrastructure of Belarusian culture, such as foundations and institutions as centres of attraction in various cultural spheres, network communities and creative platforms, and educational and professional development programmes. Second, short-term support should be provided on a competitive basis at all stages of content creation, production and distribution, and to build a competitive environment. In addition, they should support: (a) research in the field of culture and dialogue between cultural workers and civil society for the joint formation of cultural policy; (b) the education of a new generation of consumers of Belarusian culture, in particular to create quality Belarusia-oriented educational and entertainment content for children; (c) non-formal cultural education programmes for adult audiences that provide support for aesthetic and cultural education for all age groups – both potential and current audiences – to qualitatively increase understanding and appreciation of more complex cultural content; and (d) the practice of translation so that significant and important works in

European languages (from scientific works to popular literature and film series) are published in Belarusian and vice versa, so that Belarusian works are available in different languages abroad.

All stakeholders should take actions to strengthen Belarusian independent culture inside and outside Belarus, promote openness to the global community among Belarusian creative artists and facilitate their integration into the international community. Furthermore, efforts should be made to broaden the scope of knowledge accessible to Belarusians; and create awareness of the importance of cultural policy.



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