

Another Europe

15 Years of Capacity Building with Cultural Initiatives in the EU Neighbourhood

Edited by Philipp Dietachmair and Milica Ilić

"In 1999, as Europe prepared to turn the page on a new millennium, the European Cultural Foundation was forging new partnerships and embarking on a journey that would criss-cross the expanding EU and its neighbours. Another Europe reflects on 15 years of catalysing social change through culture. During that time, ECF's work has engaged hundreds of organisations in a multitude of towns and cities, enriching the lives of tens of thousands of citizens. The lasting connections that have been built between independent organisations, local administrations, decision-makers and entrepreneurs have created an intricate web of links from Donetsk to Damascus, Chişinău to Çanakkale, Belgrade to Cairo and Kaliningrad to Istanbul."

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Photo: TA

Partisans and pARTisan: Belarus' Cultural Formation

Artur Klinaŭ

March 2014

The text below is made up of several excerpts from Artur Klinaŭ's most recent publication, which was published in German in 2014 under the title *PARTISANEN: Kultur_Macht_Belarus* (edition.fotoTAPETA: Berlin). It introduces the personality of **the (art) partisan** as a leading character for accessing and understanding the **mental landscape of Belarus** - both historically and as a creative figure of speech. Despite its politically closed and remote location between the Eastern EU borders and Russia, quite a few of the contemporary cultural actors and **independent initiatives** featured in his reflections below have found access to ECF's EU Neighbourhood programmes network.

Translated from Russian by Anna Platt

Prologue: The Wall

For our people 'the partisan' is both a conceptual metaphor and an actual state of mind. 'The partisan' reflects the anthological essence of the Belarusian both in his day to day life and his place in history. Even the Soviet Partisan Movement at the time of the German occupation during World War II could not besmirch the sacred nature of 'the partisan'.

Hide and seek is the national game of Belarus. 'The partisan' is the one who hides. 'I do not exist' is his mantra; only during subversive activity (in our case an intellectual or aesthetic subversion) does 'the partisan' appear, then he vanishes into his own nonexistence.

Valancin Akudovič (2004) *The Apology of Absence*, pARTisan #2

When we first started the *pARTisan* project at the beginning of 'the noughties', Belarus' cultural field mostly resembled a wilderness. The purge of the various liberties was nearing completion; newspapers and independent radio stations were being closed down. Pro-democracy professors were being dismissed from universities and the country's cultural life was at an almost complete standstill. Writers were leaving for the West in droves. The process of restoring the totalitarian system was in full swing. 'The Wall' that we thought had collapsed a decade ago appeared to be still intact. Moreover, the powers that be had also begun rebuilding 'The Wall', filling in the holes, smoothing over the cracks and polishing the surface to a dazzling grey shine.

Europe and the world were watching Belarus with great curiosity. Here was a republic considered to be one of the most developed in the Soviet Union, a country with a strong, technically-educated middle class, an excellent infrastructure of roads and sophisticated high-technology industry; in short a country in an advantageous position for a fresh start, and yet it consistently set its sights on the past, denying itself an historical chance to return to Europe. What was happening was akin to necrophilia. A man is presented with a choice between life and death and he chooses the latter; life on the 'other side' of the wall.

One felt a terrible need to justify oneself, to explain oneself to the world, and above all, to understand the reasons behind this process. In order to do this, there are some painful questions to answer and not just the ones on the surface in the realm of ordinary political science and sociology. No, one must go deeper to find the answers and examine the subconscious, the inner sanctum of fears and complexes, the nation's secret dreams and historical traumas. Only then can one begin to formulate a plan of action and an escape from this protracted social disease.

On the surface, the answers appeared to arise from historical facts. When Belarus received its independence in 1991, it was only natural to believe that at last all things had been fulfilled. The dream of many had finally come to pass

and we would begin our new life in a democratic society. However, it soon became clear that only a small, active part of the population was prepared for the changes that followed. The vast majority rejected change. As the overall mentality remained the same, no significant change was possible for society at large. It simply acquired the new prefix 'post', transforming itself from a Soviet society – and, in the case of Belarus, a colonial one – into a post-Soviet, post-colonial state but changing nothing of its essence. It was thus natural that, in the first democratic elections, this post-Soviet, post-colonial society chose for itself a regime after its own heart – and in a most democratic way. It elected a president who promised to remove the annoying prefix 'post' and to return the society to its most recent past. Instead of personal freedom, we were promised the return of the subsidised 'social' bread; instead of national freedom, the return of the 'mighty and powerful Soviet Union'.

Events took a different course in the Baltic republics and the countries of Eastern Europe. There, an intellectual revolution had happened quietly a long time ahead of the collapse of the Soviet Empire, so that when an actual regime change became a reality, these peoples already had firm plans as to their future development. Not so in Belarus, which was completely unprepared for any regime change. On the contrary, being one of the most stable and prosperous Soviet states, the revolution was perceived as an external element that had struck the country from without. What was needed now was a government that was able to calm these alien forces and to return the country to the *status quo*, which in turn would restore its prosperity and stability. It is entirely possible that had a different man been elected to the presidential office, this social experiment would have ended in fiasco much sooner. As it was, Łukašenka turned out to have a certain charisma; he accepted the role allotted to him by history as a personal mission. Indeed, all too soon, he earnestly believed himself to be the Messiah. "I will give you bread!" he would say to the people, and he did so. "I will restore order!", he promised, and proceeded to do the same. When his bread ran out, he travelled to Moscow for more. In fairness to Łukašenka, these tactics proved temporarily effective in returning stability; he was able to kick-start industrial production, which had ground to a halt, and to guarantee a minimum living standard to the lower-paid workers and pensioners.

All the same, it was clear that Belarus could not of itself return the country to the former Soviet *status quo*. Belarus is not a Caribbean island, but a transit state that could never be either self-sufficient or entirely isolated from the political processes around it. No one can turn the river of history back. Yet it is also true that the foundations of the new government were forged precisely out of the post-Soviet, post-colonial majority. One can go so far as to say that the entire governmental structure straddled these two pedestals – the post-Soviet and post-colonial heritage, much like the statue of the Colossus of Rhodes. Any government risks much in failing to heed the wishes of the electorate, so it was obliged,



if not exactly to stem the flow of history, then at least to attempt to control it, to erect metaphorical dams and artificial barriers that would slow down society's development.

The second part of the 1990s became an era of stagnation and a radical paring back. Any progressive process was perceived as a threat. The conservative method of governance called for a radical cutting down of all critical or independent movements. In the first place, the authorities sought to remove any alternative centres of influence. Thus it became necessary to marginalise and limit the efficacy of the nation's intelligentsia and political parties, to control business enterprises, mass media and the press, culture overall. The most acceptable form of Belarusian Soviet culture was that which the new government had inherited from the Soviet Union itself. In essence, this culture was moribund; it exhorted nothing, rejected all advances and produced practically nothing new: an ideal cultural model for the purposes of social preservation. It is true to say, however, that the overall effect was insignificant, especially as perceived by the younger generation that was no longer able to recognise the old cultural codes. For this reason, although the government supported and financed post-Soviet culture, it did not regard it as hugely important.

Alternative culture, as opposed to official culture, took a different course of development. Understanding the potential danger of a relevant cultural process, in particular the way it leads societies out of stagnation, the government began to disband organisations that threatened its policy of preservation. First it got rid of centres that had become the focus of independent cultural projects. Thus in 1997, the Soros Foundation – by this time practically the only financial backer of non-official cultural projects – was expelled from the country. Also in 1997, the building of the Belarus Writers' Union was confiscated and the long destructive policy aimed at the organisation that was the bulwark of the Belarusian-language intelligentsia¹ had begun. In 1998, The 6th Line Gallery, Minsk's one and only centre of contemporary art closed down. The last Viciebsk Festival of Modern Art, known as 'In-formation' took place in 2000.²

Despite its destruction of alternative and independent cultural centres, the Belarusian government nevertheless did not concern itself with constructing its own (rather than Soviet-heritage) models of culture and governance. At that point, culture was perceived as very much of secondary importance. Its significance came later, in the 'noughties', when the government was confronted with the need to create a national idea. Back in 1990, the national idea had no place in the post-colonial landscape. The traditional national symbols, the Pahonia coat of arms, the white-redwhite flag and the Belarusian language were likewise considered alien concepts (Belarus remained the only country whose register of prohibited symbols consisted of all its own historical national emblems!). However, this situation began to change at the beginning of the 21st century, when it suddenly became apparent that one of the pedestals of this Colossus –

its post-colonial narrative – was threatening its very existence. It was obvious that a return to the imperial fold would mean reduced levels of power for the national government, reducing its status from sovereignty to that of a mere regional ruling class. Thus, one of the pedestals had developed a serious fissure. Yet, any deviation from the post-colonial narrative seemed impossible – it had become a most profitable commodity. The national programme loosely entitled ‘Gas in exchange for fraternal kisses’ (as in: ‘When his bread ran out, he travelled to Moscow for more’) secured multi-billion dividends for the country. Above all, it was tradable goods that brought social stability. It followed, then, that the most prudent course of action was to preserve the post-colonial rhetoric for export only while taking a radical about-turn at home and to begin the construction of a new pedestal, namely the formation of a national idea, which would be for domestic consumption only.

Until then, the national idea had just two images. The first one, enthusiastically endorsed by the Soviet state, pictured an impoverished, wretched peasant (for example: “Belarusian peasant /Master of my plough and scythe/Bleached moustache, of swarthy cheek/Hair with a widow’s peak”³ – lines from a poem by a 20th century Belarusian poet Janka Kupała, which is still included as an obligatory text in the school curriculum). This is further summed up in the words of the Soviet Belarusian national anthem: “With fraternal Russia, we are Belarusian”, as if to say, without Russia we are nothing but an ignorant, oppressed, inadequate people. This anti-national idea was being fed to the people’s consciousness for decades and further endorsed by various Soviet Belarusian canonical authors.

The second image was its polar opposite: the *Revivalist* model, which was constructed on the basis of the nation’s aristocratic past under the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and its glorious history. However, this romantic and aesthetically attractive model could be embraced only by a small culturally-aware intelligentsia. It could also have been an appropriate model for the cultural majority, but this required political will on the part of the state, as was the case in Lithuania. However, in order to hold up the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as a national model, the state needed to accept the erstwhile culture of the free *szlachta* (noblemen) that is to acknowledge the rights of a free people on their own private land – all things diametrically opposed to the state’s interests.

Our aim, when we inaugurated the *pARTisan* project in 2002, was to find answers to the many ontologically important questions for Belarus, to dig down into the national subconscious and to diagnose its ailments, fears and traumas. We had also hoped to arrive at a semblance of understanding as to what constitutes the national idea. However, it soon became apparent to us that no real changes in Belarusian society would ever be possible without society first experiencing a revolution in its mentality, a complete reboot of its thinking process. While Belarusian society remains largely tied to its Soviet, colonial, and rural roots, no democratically-inspired social project would ever succeed. Nothing could

change until the mentality itself was changed. A government can stand down, and then, in accordance with a due democratic process, be replaced by exactly the same version, voted in by a people tied to its totalitarian heritage. The nation’s government is merely a reflection of the majority’s collective indifference.

Of course, a revolutionary change in thinking cannot happen overnight. And when we say ‘revolution’, we actually mean ‘evolution’, an on-going and lengthy process. Culture remains the most important driving force in this process, for it is culture rather than parties or trade unions that can penetrate the collective indifference of the nation. Moreover, when we talk of culture, we do not mean culture in general, but a live, relevant and active culture able to effect change. Thus, cultural revolution (achieved via the transformation of culture and the modernisation of society) became our banner, our motto, weapon and goal. And most importantly, culture became our voice, the survivors’ voice raised to those on the ‘other side’ of the wall – and a voice, crying out to those who have become frozen here, so that they might remember their right to life.

Partisan in search of self

The article ‘Partisan and anti-partisan’ intended for the first issue of *pARTisan* was one of my first attempts to come close to understanding the essence of the Belarusian mentality. The article presents a romantic image of a hero, engaged in a fight to preserve his cultural signifiers. Twelve years on, the text strikes me in part as somewhat naïve, and in part, as raising issues that are still of importance. However, there are aspects that are missing altogether, namely the negative aspects of being a partisan, the partisan’s flip-side, if you like.

‘The partisan’, as a concept, is of vital significance to Belarusians. “[It] describes best the ontological essence of a Belarusian man, both in his personal life and his place in history” (V. Akudovič). And yet, a partisan is not merely a man with a rifle, a hero fighting for the national cause, but a diagnosis: a pathological state of mind, deeply entrenched fears and the by-product of the traumas of history. He may be a man with a rifle, but, more commonly, he is a man in hiding, the one who is trying to be invisible. Valancin Akudovič’s *I am not here*⁴ is the partisan’s permanent strategy. The Belarusian partisan has the mentality of the ‘underground man’. His goal is not to conquer, but to survive, to remain living in a hostile terrain that is no longer under his control. Concomitant to this is his extreme individualism and his inability to engage in cooperative action. Cooperation is an important tool for survival in the face of a natural disaster, but under hostile occupation, survival is a matter for each individual. The statement ‘each man dies alone’, appeals above all to the instinct of self-preservation. Collective action calls for taking responsibility for the next man, thereby exposing oneself to greater risks. The psychology of the partisan also informs the Belarusian attitude to authority. So accustomed are they to living under centuries-old occupation that they can

acknowledge no government as their own. Moreover, they are reluctant to accept authority, because they do not believe in the very idea of governance. They are convinced that no authority can help them and this conviction is another expression of the aforementioned Belarusian individualism.

In Europe, individualism has its origins in the following understanding of Roman law: “I am a Roman citizen; therefore I have rights which the government has an obligation to guarantee”. Here, the understanding is different: a man wants to be left in peace to arrange his own life under occupation. For him, any form of government is an evil that must be tolerated out of necessity. The ‘underground man’, internalises the problems around him, erects a wall around his own little territory and aims only to defend his own patch. This attitude is in his genes; it took shape in this land over the course of centuries and is thus very difficult to change. Whenever war came, those who joined forces to fight inevitably died. Only those who wanted nothing but to survive remained alive.

If the partisan-underground man intended to chase away his occupiers, it would, of course, have been necessary to join forces with others, to commit himself to cooperative action. However, the underground man cannot join in with anyone else. The political history of Belarus in the course of the last two decades is an account of endless failed attempts to unite. There is one unifying factor that could have united these ten million individuals, and this is the national idea. However, the saying “Я мужык, дурны мужык з братняю Руссю” (“I am a peasant, a foolish peasant with a fraternal Russia [nearby]”) could do nothing but estrange Belarusians from each other. The concept of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL), even if it could be applied to the majority of the population, could not be a source of unity even in principle. It was precisely the convictions of the old free *szlachta* (noblemen) – *each man lord of his own territory* – that lay at the heart of the downfall of the GDL and the old *Rzeczpospolita*. Then, the central government was regarded as an annoying distraction, to be endured with ‘gritted teeth’. When radical decisions had to be taken, even in the face of an obvious common danger, no arguments in favour of unity could be found.

‘Partisan’ as a notion could be used as a paradigm for the national idea, as it is merely a strategy for national survival in the event of ‘The War’. ‘The War’ is by far the most important concept responsible for the formation of the Belarusian mentality. All European peoples experienced wars, but nowhere else did it leave such deep wounds, whereby the national population was reduced by half, as was the case in the Russo-Lithuanian War (1654), by a third during the Swedish War (1788–1790), by a quarter, in the course of the Napoleonic Wars, or when every fourth (or even third) citizen perished as happened during World War II. Belarus is described as the land of rivers lapping their banks with blood.⁵

Sharing their land with ‘The War’ has left such deep wounds and has had such a profound effect on the formation of the Belarusians’ psychology that the well-known Belarusian expression “Anything but war” can lay claim to being the

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Artur Klinaŭ

national idea all by itself, for it expresses the most sacred wish of the traumatised nation. The same idea is behind the national strategy for survival, a partisan's strategy sometimes personified by a hero with a rifle in hand, but more often than not, as an invisible man, who is simultaneously nowhere and everywhere. However, a partisan's strategy is effective only in war. When peace comes, the *one who is nowhere* cannot assume ownership of his own land. Then comes another and lays claim again on this no man's land.

Partisan in search of the now

It seems to me that, of all Belarusian democratic initiatives of the last two decades, the 'culture' project has turned out to be one of the most successful. Whereas the 'politics' project has suffered defeat after defeat, independent 'partisan' (or 'guerilla') culture has been developing, extending its territory, and reaching out to capture new bridgeheads.

Throughout these years, *pARTisan* has been searching for a city of its own. In 2004, when we had to find a place to launch the (symbolic) Minsk issue (*Minsk: The Mythology of a Contemporary City*), all exhibition halls closed their doors to us. Even the most democratic of institutions at that time – the Janka Kupała Library – was afraid to admit us. So we found a solution: we decided to stage our presentation in an alternative venue – a carriage of the Minsk–Maładziečna suburban electric train. On a sunny summer's day, several dozen invited guests gathered on the platform of Minsk station, boarded the suburban train and set off on a 40-minute journey-cum-presentation to Zialonaje station. In the packed third carriage, we did our first ever megaphone presentation of the *City of the Sun* concept to a group of rather mistrustful visitors – most of whom hailed from the countryside. Heated discussions and arguments ensued. The simple inhabitants of the *City of the Sun* refused to believe in their own happiness and, despite the sunny day outside, insisted loudly that Minsk was no *City of the Sun*. This was followed by an acoustic concert in a forest glade, meetings with authors, and the sampling of a wide selection of cheap democratic urban wines. New guests continued to arrive; for many of them, the presentation did not end until the early hours.

Soon, this search for a city of our own yielded its first fruits. From the 'partisan' forest glades, from small conspiratorial apartments, the 'underground' emerged onto the city's streets and began to win back its first bridgeheads. First to appear was *Padziemka* – a tiny gallery in a basement on *Niezaležnaści* Prospect. It immediately became a tiny island of freedom in Minsk, a city with no galleries, but only clean and empty exhibition halls for clean, empty and dead art. In *Padziemka*, artists found a place that they had long been waiting for and that was so essential to them.

Co-founder Valancina Kisialova:

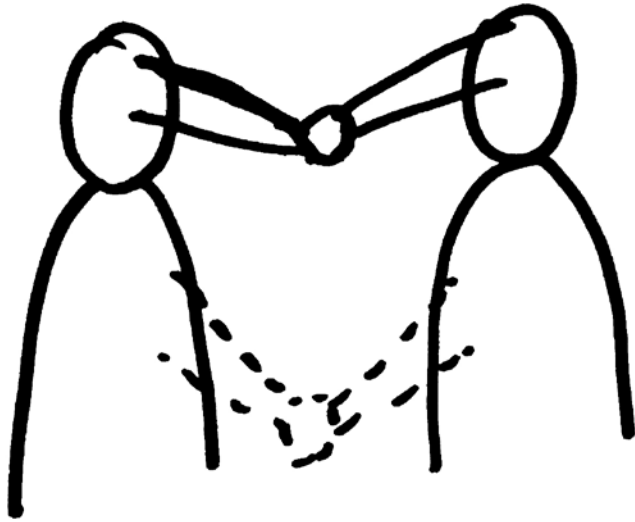
When Hanna and I set up Padziemka, we didn't even think in terms of a 'gallery'. Hanna proposed that we should open a shop for designer goods: toys, stationery, designer home items. I liked the idea and when we started brainstorming the project we came to the conclusion that we should sell the work of Belarusian designers. But just when we'd finished sorting out the Padziemka display venue and began looking for artists and designers, our friends from the art milieu suddenly began calling our shop a 'gallery'. We weren't really ready for this and only started referring to it as a gallery ourselves after a year and a half. But we understood even then that Padziemka was not just an ordinary souvenir shop. The very first pieces we put up for sale were by artists with established reputations. For example, we had ceramics by Tamara Sakałova who had never sold in Minsk before, and Artur Klinau's 'City of the Sun' series...

Our first exhibition space was a single wall of 3 to 5 metres. But in the end, on this one 'partition' we were able to show almost all the 'monumentalists' of our city. The capacity of this wall never ceased to surprise us. For example, when Rustan Vaškievič brought a dozen of his works, we thought it would be impossible to accommodate them all. But the wall proved to be 'elastic': growing in size or shrinking whenever necessary. And so, in the beginning we marked out a place – the 'Padziemka', then the 'wall' as an exhibition space, and then suddenly everything else began to take shape by itself. It all came together: our energy and enthusiasm, and the need for such a place which peaked at that moment within the Minsk creative milieu... Sometimes I think some kind of collective subconsciousness was at work here.

Valancina Kisialova (2012) *A place where one can breathe*, *pARTisan* #19

They began to hold small exhibitions, presentations and meetings. Very soon, the small underground space became too crowded, and the gallery curators (Valancina Kisialova and Hanna Čystasierdava) found a new space. The new *Ź Gallery* [*Ź кароткае* – in short] opened in 2009 in the building of a former glass bottle recycling centre at *Niezaležnasci* Prospect 37A. A new era had begun in terms of Belarus art, which might one day come to be called the 'in short' era.

The *Ź Gallery* immediately became an independent centre of contemporary art. This potential had been secretly maturing throughout the preceding years, and, finding a place to manifest itself, finally emerged into the public sphere. *Ź* quickly became Belarus' leading art venue, holding dozens of exhibitions every year, more than 100 lectures, presentations, round tables and film screenings. Other independent initiatives established themselves in the same building: the design-studio *Adliga* and the bookshop *ŁohvinaŹ*, which became a writers' club and a meeting-place where new literary work could be presented. Other spaces for free culture also began to appear in the city at the same time. A group of



young people rented an old house in the private sector, renovated it and opened DK La Mora: “An open platform for free communication and creativity... a place for those who want to expand their horizons”, is how the organisers described themselves. Art Siadziba, “a place for Belarus creative self-realisation”, opened in one of the empty workshops of the Horizon factory. Within a few months, the administration had taken the space away from the organisers; indeed, within a short space of time, Art Siadziba was forced to relocate several times.⁶ In 2012, the creative umbrella group Me100 began work in an old factory building. The group directors changed within a year and renamed the space the Cech (Цэх) gallery.

The partisan city gradually began to grow. With no support from the state, existing only by its own means and the enthusiasm of its organisers, these places became public stages for independent Belarus culture. Belarusian authors no longer wished to sit in ‘the underground’ – they had fought back for their right to the city.

Throughout this period, *pARTisan* continued its search for a hero figure. There were hardly any of them 10 or 15 years ago. Now, whole partisan detachments and groups of partisans – male and female – had appeared. Of course, many no longer wished to call themselves ‘partisans’; now, they needed a new strategy: *art-activism*. They proclaimed the concept of emerging from the ‘underground’. These new-formation art-activists dynamically embraced public space. In 2011, Sergei Shabokhin set up the internet portal Artaktivist, which immediately became one of the most important places for discussion on contemporary art. The artist Michaił Hulin emerged onto the city streets with his public art-performances (‘I am not a partisan’, ‘I am not a terrorist’, ‘I am not gay’ and others). But the city itself was not ready for this form of activism. After the ‘Private Monument’ project⁷ (when the artist, two volunteers and a photographer walked around the city’s main squares arranging abstract sculptures made out of three cubes), Hulin was detained by the police. But the accusations of hooliganism levelled against him were so absurd that even the Belarus law was obliged to drop them and he was freed without charges. Hulin develops public space not only as an artist, but also as a curator. He was the organiser of the *Palace Complex*⁸ project, which occupied the Paskievič Palace in Homiel for a month: a shock to some and, for others, a discovery of contemporary art in Belarus’ second largest city.

Art-activists also ‘seized’ public places in Minsk. The best example was the exhibition *Zero Radius. Art Ontology of the 00s. Minsk*,⁹ which took place in the empty workshops of the Horizon factory in March 2012. Over 5,000 people visited the exhibition over ten days. This active participation on the part of the Minsk public, tired of dusty post-Soviet classics, constituted an ovation for the project. A second large-scale independent project, *Dach*, in the halls of the Palace of Arts, got more visits in a month than the Palace’s usual activities attract in six months.¹⁰ Partisan-activists mastered space beyond the country’s borders: Marina Naprushkina, an artist from Belarus, now enjoys an international reputation and

lives in Berlin. In 2007, she began her project: *The Office for Anti-Propaganda*, in which she critically examines the ideological symbols of contemporary Belarusian power structures. The artist Andrei Dureika was expelled from the Belarus Academy of Arts at the beginning of the 'noughties' and now lives in Düsseldorf where he has begun to promote Belarusian art abroad, giving lectures on 'forgotten' names, and in this way re-establishing broken cultural links.

The year 2011 was important for Belarus culturally, as well in other areas. The events of 19 December 2010, when the crowds that had descended onto the streets of Minsk in order to express their 'opposition' to the results of the presidential elections were cruelly and cynically dispersed by the authorities, could not but influence the mood of society's progressive sector. For almost half a year, Belarus seemed to fall asleep, not knowing how to go on, or in what direction. It took a year for the country to emerge from its lethargy. But it was precisely 2011 that saw the appearance of two independent Belarusian phenomena in the art milieu: the artist A.R.Ch (Michai Siańkoŭ) from Žodzina and the Mahilŭ-based art-group Lipavy cviet [which means 'lime blossom'],¹¹ who diagnosed most accurately, according to many experts, that the country was sick, and that the sickness was located somewhere deep within its subconscious. The works by A.R.Ch and the Lipavy cviet actions exposed the essence, as it were, of Belarus, where cleanliness and order were merely decorative, hiding the country's true face – terrifying, distorted with pain, frozen in a heartrending scream. *pARTisan* has created its own pantheon of cultural heroes and heroines; it has constructed an alternative system of coordinates. In response to the dusty, statesponsored post-Soviet classics and pop figures that are riding the new era's wave of consumerism, *pARTisan* proposed its own reference system – real authors equal to a new generation of Belarusians.

In 2009, we initiated a new project – the *pARTisan Collection* – a series of full-colour albums that were to include all that was most important in Belarusian visual culture over the last 30 years. The *pARTisan Collection* is an alternative encyclopaedia of Belarusian art. Each album cover bears the series symbol, which is a letter. Since the Belarusian alphabet has 32 letters, this is the number of volumes planned for the collection.

The majority of the albums are envisaged to be author monographs, panoramic retrospectives of the work of cultural heroes: Uładzimir Češler, Rušan Vaškievič, Ihar Cišyn, Alaksiej Ždanaŭ, Michaił Hulin, Antanina Słabodčykava, Siarhiej Ždanovič, A.R.Ch and many others. In addition to author monographs, the series will also include albums about important phenomena that have been all but ignored by official critics. The 2011 album, *The Belarusian Avant-garde of the 1980s*, reveals for its readers a forgotten epoch – the revolutionary emergence of Belarusian non-conformist art from the 'underground' into the public sphere. The album *Belarusian Photography of the 1990s*, which came out in 2013, tells the history of the Minsk photographic school, renowned abroad, but practically unknown

to a Belarusian audience. By the end of 2013, *pARTisan* had managed to publish ten albums in the series. Important changes were also taking place in Belarusian literature. The legacy of the Soviet era – the rural novel – finally disappeared into the past. Belarusian authors are increasingly rarely preoccupied with their national traumas and turn instead towards universal themes. Literature begins to tackle the contemporary. One sign of recovery is the boom in poetry. It has been a long time since Belarusian literature has seen so many bright new young names: Andrej Chadanovič, Vital Ryžkoŭ, Valžyna Mort, Illa Sin, Volha Hapeyeva, Marija Martysievič, Vika Trenas and many others.

The year 2000 saw the appearance of the independent publisher Łohvinaŭ, which soon became the driving force behind all that was most current in the literary world. In 2007, the Belarusian men of letters Michaś Bašura and Žmicier Višnioŭ founded the publishing house Halijafy. Thanks to the activity of independent publishers, contemporary Belarusian authors who had never had a chance of being published by state publishing houses, which continued to be oriented towards post-Soviet literature, now had an opportunity to come out from the underground. The place of partisan spectacles like *Bum-Bam-Lita* and *samizdat* with its tiny print-runs, has been taken over by a regular – if not yet fully functioning – literary process: only one publishing house, Łohvinaŭ, managed to publish more than 700 titles between 2000 and 2013. The Belarusian reader is discovering a whole new pleiad of outstanding writers: Valancin Akudovič, Alhierd Bacharevič, Nataŭka Babina, Pavel Kaściukievič, Aleś Razanaŭ, Adam Hłobus and others.

The Belarusian author still writes for an audience much smaller than the country's population (9.5 million people, a minority of whom read in Belarusian). However, this audience is beginning to grow rapidly, primarily due to the new generation, which has no post-Soviet prejudices about the inferiority and 'rural' nature of the Belarusian language. In fact, the status of the Belarusian language has changed fundamentally. Whereas in the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, it was associated in the popular consciousness with low social status, spoken by those coming from the villages (who didn't even speak pure Belarusian, but 'trasianka' – a kind of pidgin Belarusian/Russian), towards the end of the 'noughties', using Belarusian became a sign of belonging to the most educated class. There was thus a polar change in the way the language was perceived. The majority now saw it as the language of the national cultural elite, which further stimulated an interest and desire to speak it, particularly among the young.

A fresh spur to the literary process was the appearance of around a dozen independent literary awards,¹² particularly the Jerzy Giedroyc literary prize.¹³ Each of the latter's awards provokes heated debate. Lively discussion forums are conducted regarding new literary releases, a multitude of reviews appear in the press, and independent literary criticism is developing. More and more internet resources are appearing (such as the internet journal *PrajdziSvet* [Rogues], *Bookster* and others).

The practice of the 'noughties' has shown that the most lively cultural developments in Belarus took place in those areas where 'partisan' or 'guerrilla' strategies could be applied, namely: contemporary visual art, criticism and literature. In these spheres, the author was most self-contained: a self-sufficient combat unit, independent of circumstances, and therefore most mobile. The ability to manoeuvre quickly was the most important quality in 'partisan' strategy. In art and in literature, the 'partisan' adopts the strategy of the flanking attack on official culture. In the 2000s, the latter came across as a hulking Soviet-style 'trust' (*trest*) that stubbornly held the line of defence on behalf of post-Soviet culture. A frontal attack was completely unrealistic; independent 'partisan' culture did not have the resources to create an equally powerful structure. But the flanks of a monster have weak spots. This official 'trust' which monopolises cultural space cannot satisfy the growing appetite of a new generation of Belarusians for contemporary Belarusian literature, music and art. Partisan culture targets precisely these points of the flanks and begins to win an audience.

Towards the end of the 'noughties', the 'trust' began to realise the loss of its positions and made attempts to seize the initiative. Thus, in 2011, Belarus first announced its intention to participate officially in the Venice Biennale and also created its first state Centre for Contemporary Art. In 2012, Minsk's BelExpo hall was the site of a grandiose parade of 'the achievements of the national economy' in the area of modern culture – the first triennial of contemporary Belarusian art. However, since these projects use old Soviet methods and personnel (any radical, critical artistic input was barred, of course), they are obviously going to fail – the Triennial has simply turned out to be the continuation of the city's Dažynki, the national festival-fair for rural workers, held annually with large-scale state sponsorship. The 'trust' also made attempts to counter-attack on the literary front. In recognition of its special contribution to Belarusian culture, on 23 September 2013 the publisher Łohvinaŭ was stripped of its publishing licence.¹⁴ The 'trust' cheers itself up with the illusion that by closing one of the 'partisan' bases, it can halt the literary process. In fact, it can only slow it down temporarily: adjusting its 'username and passwords', the publishing house Łohvinaŭ has registered itself in Vilnius under the name 'Literary House Łohvinaŭ' and continues its work.

The situation is more complicated in those spheres of culture where the author is not self-sufficient but linked to an institution – for example, in the Belarusian theatre, or cinematography. The flank-attack is not so straightforward here, although the success of the Belarusian Free Theatre shows that here, too, opposition is possible. Regardless of official prohibitions and 'blacklists', the theatre put on shows in Minsk, gathering its audience via newsletters and social networks. This, too, was a kind of game: the authorities knew about the 'hut' used by the theatre, of course, but somehow tolerated sharp attacks on the part of its dramatists. In 2013, this tolerance suddenly vanished and, as in the case of Łohvinaŭ, the 'trust' awarded its 'diplomas' to the troupe: under pressure from the

authorities, the owner of the house refused to let them use the space. In other words, the project had become too successful; its attacks had ceased to be harmless pricks to the side of the 'dragon'. It became necessary to cut short the game.

The 'noughties' saw an outstanding crop of brilliant Belarusian dramatists: Pavał Pražko, Kanstancin Sciešyk, Dzmitry Bahasłaŭski, Miakałaj Rudkoŭski, Jula Šaučuk and many others. Contemporary Belarusian drama today is a special phenomenon, recognised by the European theatre community. Unfortunately, the plays of Belarusian authors can be seen more frequently in Moscow, London and Warsaw than in Minsk. However, as in the case of contemporary visual art, recently the 'trust' has also set about appropriating these plays whose vitality has so long alarmed the 'dragon'. The playwrights have begun to be performed in state venues also, only the result has the same 'low season' feel to it. Placed in the traditions of Soviet theatrical art, bold texts lose their fire.

The situation in cinematography has slowly begun to change, although there has not yet been a breakthrough on the scale of Andrei Kudzinienka's *Mysterium Occupation*. However, here too, the developments in digital technology in the last few years have provided opportunities for potential flank attacks. The cinematic process has become more democratic and less expensive, which has made independent, small-budget projects possible. In 2011, Bulbamovie, an annual cinema festival of independent Belarus cinema, began in Warsaw – another alternative 'partisan' base to counteract the official leviathan of 'Belarusfilm'. A new generation of 'undergrounders' organise a short film festival and arrange apartment-based cinema clubs.

The most notable phenomenon to appear in independent culture in the second half of the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s has been Belarusian rock music. A whole generation has grown up with such groups as NRM, ULIS, Krama, Pałac, Nejra Dziubiel. Not surprisingly, the significance of Belarusian rock and its influence on young people has also been noted by the authorities. Musicians occupied first place on the 'blacklist' of cultural phenomena constituting a threat to the system. In practice, this meant denying halls for concerts, unexpected cancellations of scheduled performances, and the impossibility of getting air-time on FM stations or TV music shows. Since the most popular groups are unable to appear in Belarus, they are obliged to perform abroad. At the beginning of the century, the Belarusian rock festivals held in Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine were very important.¹⁵ The most important event in Belarus itself is the Volnae Pavetra festival, which is held annually where there is neither censorship or 'blacklists' – in remote Shabli, on the private estate of the music producer Uładzimir Šablinski. The most notable and successful group at the end of the 'noughties' was the rock-band Ljapis Trubekzoi. Unable to appear at home, the group goes on tour in Russia and Ukraine. Tens of thousands of Belarusians come to the Ljapis concerts in Vilnius and as many more watch online. The video *Don't be an animal* posted

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on YouTube has had well over a million hits. But the most dynamic area of all in Belarusian culture in recent years has been the internet. The city is still not ours; the voices of the living continue to be suppressed as before and resound only on small islands of freedom, although they are growing all the time. But the new generation does not want to tolerate this. They are laying claim to the city and the spaces of the country. The internet is the partisan's new tool. Public activity enters the virtual sphere, which becomes the place of debate, discussion, authors' readings, the birthplace of new projects and the creation of a new way of life for the country.

Epilogue: the Partisan strategy must be changed

The partisan was searching for a national idea. The authorities were searching for one too. The nation's post-Soviet and post-colonial heritage was fading into the past, and this affected the course that the search was taking. The authorities had rejected the model exemplified by "I am a Belarusian peasant, with a fraternal Russia [nearby]", and had partially appropriated the *Revivalist* model, based on the aristocratic principles of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. However, the authorities were selective and chose only certain heroic examples from past history, bypassing the heritage of the free *szlachta* with its liberties and rights.

It has to be said that some vestiges of 'with a fraternal Russia' still remain but it is expressed more along the lines of 'to a fraternal Russia'. Feeling themselves constantly under threat from 'a fraternal Russia', the authorities are obliged to preserve this connection for pragmatic reasons: the provenance of cheap resources and a ready market for its manufactured goods. Today, the latest redaction of 'with a fraternal Russia' sounds something like this: "I am a Belarusian – not a peasant, but a descendant of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. I want to sell my products to fraternal and highly dangerous Russia: a fridge, a TV set, a tractor, cement, cheese, milk [...] and a whole inventory of other manufactured goods". In other words, the country still remains at the cross-roads between a dangerous Russia and Europe, and its authorities have not yet formulated a coherent national idea. They have succeeded only in creating a highly eclectic construct, encompassing a range of notions: from the *people's heroism* in World War II and the *romanticism* of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, to *Orthodox atheism* and *hockey* as the main cultural festival.

In practical terms, however, the government is clearly adopting the course of building up a consumerist society, which it assumes will best guarantee the authorities' stability. The government is aided in this by the Belarusians' entrenched individualism, their indifference to any form of governance and their dearest wish to be *left alone, to order my life as I see fit*. Instead of a policy of post-Soviet conservation, the government proposes a new common agreement,

according to which each citizen has a right to order their private space as they see fit, but in return they will not attempt to meddle in politics or change this government in any way. In practice, this means soft economic reforms and, most importantly, a movement, albeit a slow one, in the general direction of Europe. In essence, the government-sponsored new consumerism has become an *ersatz* national idea. It is simply impossible to propose anything else. Any truly national idea is considered awkward and even dangerous. A national idea is a unifying factor for a disparate, individualistic nation; it always calls for collective action and it requires the ‘underground man’ to leave his hidey hole. On the other hand, consumerism is nothing as dangerous; it invokes nothing but a comfortable consumption, nor does it summon the nation to ‘The Square’. Consumerism can pose a threat to the authorities, but only in the event of their being unable to guarantee that the expectations of comfortable consumerism are met.

pARTisan understands that the search for a national idea must be relocated to ‘The Square’, taking this as a metaphor for collective action. The partisan as a conceptual figure and the anthological essence of the Belarusian’s place in history was only ever effective as a tactic aimed at self-preservation. *Hide-and-seek is the Belarusians’ national game* can no longer be considered a productive concept; it has no future in influencing an emerging nationhood. Today, being a partisan can be considered above all as a diagnosis pertaining to a protracted, chronic illness. The age of the partisan comes to an end, but the ‘underground man’ remains within. After all, it is not the government that erects walls; the wall is erected by the underground man between himself and another underground man. Thus, the most pressing task for today’s Belarusians is to tear down these walls.

What can unite them all? One possible answer is Europe. It has already united the Ukrainians in Maidan, the Ukrainian equivalent of ‘The Square’. Perhaps, there will be something else too. It is improbable that *pARTisan* alone can give a definitive answer; what is indisputable, however, is that it can be a part of the most important project for today’s Belarus: its cultural formation. This does not mean that it seeks merely to change society’s views; a cultural revolution presupposes, above all, the formation of an intellectual elite. The weakness of this elite is Belarus’ main problem. Perhaps, this is difficult to appreciate in those societies where the voice of the cultural elite has never been interrupted; where its consistent influence was assumed *a priori*. Yet, democracy is impossible without a strong intellectual elite. Those countries that lack them are taken over by tyrants. Belarusian history has always been particularly merciless towards the cultural elite. In times of strife, it was the gentry, the intelligentsia and the city-dwellers who rose up first to defend the country – and they were the first to perish. Later, at the time of the Russian Empire, the Belarusian elite looked variably to the West or to the East; some allied themselves with Polish culture, as was the case of Adam Mickiewicz, some, like Dostoyevsky, with Russian culture. In the

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Artur Klinaŭ

1930s, Stalin's regime decimated the burgeoning Belarusian cultural elite. No empire is interested in harbouring a strong national elite. After all, deprived of such an elite, the people are, as it were, headless and "we are Belarusian, with a fraternal Russia [nearby]" becomes their best hope.

An elite is not (necessarily) the best educated or the most prosperous section of society; it consists of those who are happy to assume responsibility for others, responsibility for the nation itself. When a strong cultural elite emerges, collective action will become possible and move, consequently, to 'The Square' where the national idea will finally emerge. 'The Wall' is always the antithesis to 'The Square', but the former will buckle under the pressure of the latter.

References

- 1 In 2005, a number of eminent authors resigned from the Belarus Writers' Union and formed themselves into a new organisation, the Union of Belarusian Writers. The two organisations still co-exist today: the pro-government Belarus Writers' Union (headed by a writer who is a former Chief of the Internal Ministry) and the independent Union of Belarusian Writers (headed by the writer Barys Piatrovič).
- 2 'In-formation' was an independent exhibition that took place annually between 1994 and 2000 in Viciebsk. From 1995, the 'In-formation' exhibition became international, drawing artists and art historians from Belarus, Russia, Switzerland, Norway, USA and France. The main curator of the exhibition was the Viciebsk artist Vasil Vasiljeŭ.
- 3 'Я мужык-беларус, пан сахі і касы. Цёмен сам, белы вус, пядзі дзьве валасы' – translator's own version.
- 4 Akudovič, V. (2007) *Code of Absence (the Foundation of Belarusian Mentality)*. Lohvinaŭ: Minsk; Akudowitsch, V. (2013) *Der Abwesenheitscode. Versuch, Weißrussland zu verstehen*. Suhrkamp: Berlin.
- 5 Snyder, T. (2010) *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin*. Basic Books: New York.
- 6 Art Siadziba made several attempts to rent new premises but new landlords would suddenly terminate their contracts without even giving them a chance to open. It was not until mid-2013 that they finally managed to settle in small quarters in a Minsk office block.
- 7 The 'action' was part of the international *Going Public* project, organised by the Goethe Institute and held in Klaipeda, Riga and Leipzig.
- 8 The project took place in May 2012. The original title was *Palace Coup* but the museum administrators requested that it be changed. The curator was Michaił Hulin. Artists and participants included the art-group 'Revision', Andrej Busieł, Zhanna Gladko, Michaił Hulin, Siarhieŭ Ždanovič, Alaksiej Ivanoŭ, Taciaa Kandracienka, Sergey Kozhemyakin, Alaksiej ĩunioŭ, Alaksandr Niekraševič, Taciaa Radziviŭka, Arciom Rybčynski, Ihar Saŭčanka, Kanstancin Sielichanoŭ, Antanina Słabodčykava, Hanna Sakałova, Tamara Sakałova, Sergey Shabokhin and Oleg Jushko.
- 9 The exhibition *Zero Radius*. Minsk was part of the project *Zero Radius. Art Ontology of the 00s*. The project curators were: the artist Rustan Vaškievič, the art critic Aksana Žhiroŭskaja and the philosopher Volha Šparaha. They chose to show Belarusian artists whose work, in their opinion, best typified the art of Minsk in the 00s: the art-group 'Revision' (Andrei Dureika, Zhanna Grak, Andrei Loginov, Maksim Vakulchik, Maksim Tymirko, who also showed individual works in the exhibition), Rustan Vaškievič, Michaił Hulin, Siarhieŭ Ždanovič, Alaksiej Ivanoŭ, Sergey Kiryuschenko, Artur Klinaŭ, Alaksiej ĩunioŭ, Andrei Liankievich, Marina Napruskina, Arciom Rybčynski, Ihar Saŭčanka, Uładzimir Češler, Sergey Shabokhin. The outcome of the project was the catalogue: Žhiroŭskaja, A., Šparaha, V. and Vaškievič, R. (eds) (2013) *Zero Radius. Art Ontology of the 00s. Minsk 2000–2010*. New Europe Series: Łohvinoŭ.
- 10 The alternative art festival *Dach* was born in the Berlin Kunsthau Tacheles in 2001, where it was first held as perhaps one of the largest exhibitions of Belarusian art abroad. From then on, *Dach* became a kind

of cultural bridge between the two countries, which united both Belarusian and German artists and others from around the world. The festival's permanent curators are Žmicer Jurkievič and Alaksandr Rodzin. In Minsk, the festival first took place in 2003 in ONIK Gallery. Later festivals were held mainly at the Palace of Art.

11 We first learned of the art-group Lipavy cviet (founded by Dzianis Limonaŭ and Julij Iljuščanka) on the internet: these young artists were staging actions and performances in Mahiloŭ, which they then posted on the internet (beginning in 2010). Their first action was *Turmoil on Bus no. 23*, in which Dzianis Limonaŭ turned to the passengers with an appeal to wake up and think of their civic consciousness (at that time, the country was being swept by a wave of arrests and bans that most Belarusians preferred to ignore). Another memorable action by the group was the *Letter of Dzianis Limonaŭ to the Attorney General's Office*, in which the author claims responsibility for a series of bombings in Viciebsk in 2005, in Minsk in 2008, and finally, for the April attack in the Minsk metro in 2011 (just when the trials were taking place of Kanavałaŭ and Kavalou, who had been accused by the authorities of terrorist acts and were convicted in December 2011). The 'Letter' was ignored by the authorities and the only consequence was that the group split. Immediately after the appearance of the 'Letter', Julij Iljuščanka revealed that this action had nothing to do with the group directly. It was a unilateral action on Limonaŭ's part without the agreement of the other group members. Lipavy cviet went on to function without Limonaŭ, but it no longer achieved the same resonance of that autumn.

12 For example, the *Golden Apostrophe* (of 2003, founded by the editorial board of the journal Дзеяслоў – The Verb), *Debut* (2010, founded by the Belarus PEN-centre, Union of Belarusian Writers), *The Blue Pig* (2006, founded by Literary Suburb).

13 Founded in 2011 by the Embassy of the Polish Republic, the Polish Institute, the Belarus PEN-Centre and the Union of Belarusian writers.

14 The justification for the stripping of the licence was that, in 2011, the publishers had released the album *Press-photo Belarus – 2011*, featuring the winners of the independent photo-journalism competition. The contents of the album were branded 'extremist' in April 2013 by the Ašmiany District court. An expert commission headed by the chief of the ideology department of the Hrodna Oblast executive committee, Pavel Skrabko, declared that the album "contains deliberately distorted and untrue allegations about the life of the Republic of Belarus in political, economic, social and other spheres, offending the national honour and dignity of the citizens of the Republic of Belarus".

15 For example, the Basovishcha festival (Białystok, Poland); Be Together (Lithuania); Be Free (Ukraine).

Biography

Artur Klinaŭ is a writer and visual artist from Belarus. His straw bale installation *The Last Supper* was part of the Belarusian contribution to the Venice Biennale 2012. In 2002, he established *pARTisan*, which is the only magazine for contemporary arts in Belarus. ↗ www.partisanmag.by His unconventional architectural guide book *Minsk – The Sun City of Dreams* was translated into German in 2006 (*Minsk – Sonnenstadt der Träume*. Suhrkamp: Berlin) and later on was also published in Polish, Swedish, Hungarian and Russian. Two more of his novels were released by the independent Belarusian publishing house Łohvinaŭ in 2012 (*Shalom. A War Novel*) and 2013 (*Šklatara*). Klinaŭ's long-standing observations from an artist's point of view have produced some of the most original and colourful reflections on contemporary culture and thought in Belarus.