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STRENGTHENING TRANSATLANTIC COOPERATION

East European Reflection Group (EE RG)

Identifying Cultural Actors of Change in Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova

Culture and Change in Belarus

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“Life begins for the counter-culture in Belarus after regime change”.
Anonymous, at the consultation meeting in Kiev, Ukraine, June 14 2007.

Introduction¹

Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine have recently become direct neighbours of the European Union. Both Moldova and Ukraine have also become closer partners of the European Union through the European Neighbourhood Policy. Neighbourhood usually refers to people next-door, people we know, or could easily get to know. It implies interest, curiosity and solidarity in the other living close by. For the moment, the European Union’s “neighbourhood” is something of an abstract notion, lacking in substance. In order to avoid ending up “lost in translation”, it is necessary to question and some of the basic premises on which cultural and other forms of European cooperation are posited.

In an effort to create constructive dialogue with this little known neighbourhood, the European Cultural Foundation (ECF) and the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) are currently preparing a three-year partnership to support cultural agents of change in Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine. In the broad sense, this programme is to work with, and provide assistance to, initiatives and institutions that employ creative, artistic and cultural means to contribute to the process of constructive change in each of the three countries.

ECF and GMF have begun a process of reflection in order to understand the extent to which the culture sphere in each of the three countries under consideration can support change, defined here as processes and dynamics contributing to democratisation, Europeanisation and modernisation in the three countries concerned. This reflection process attempts to assess needs and will use reported realities as the basis for discussing and developing proper cultural action and eventually new cultural instruments. Several principles guide this process of reflection.

Contextualisation: it is vital to differentiate the national and local conditions from immediately observable regional similarities. Countries of the region in focus face very different challenges and are differently accessible. Recommendations for concrete measures will have to sensitively consider contextual specificities on a case-by-case basis.

Reflection-Action-Advocacy: This process will combine a reflective phase, an action-oriented phase and an advocacy phase (overlapping to some extent). The exact content and shape regarding actions and advocacy will entirely depend on the outcomes of the reflection process but will address both EU countries and the countries in focus.

Outstanding actors: This process gathers outstanding individuals, representing institutions and organisations that are playing an important role in the areas of culture and change in the region. They are invited to participate in their individual capacity and they do not claim to represent their country of origin or any public authorities.

Results: This process is result-driven. It aims to deliver tangible results, including new means and instruments in support of cross-border and trans-national cultural cooperation in and with Eastern Europe. Several tools can be imagined (for example, capacity-building or mobility programmes, placement schemes, summer schools, an Eastern Europe Fund, scholarship programmes) but the concrete outputs should be decided upon only after assessment and discussion of the concrete local needs and aspirations of local actors of change.

Partnership: This process seeks cooperation with other foundations and organisations that have working experience in the region so as to enhance the coherence, complementarity and effectiveness of the initiative. It seeks to identify and involve artistic initiatives inside the European Union with the aim to increase knowledge and interest in the artistic and cultural scenes of the Eastern European neighbourhood.

¹ European Cultural Foundation and German Marshall Fund of the United States, East European Reflection Group (EE RG): Cultural Actors of Change in Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova, Project Description.

Impact: This initiative seeks to create synergies with existing networks, programmes and policies currently in place to support cultural and other actors of change so as to bring in players from the Eastern European neighbourhood and further afield, open up debate, and raise the public awareness of the region in focus.

An initial mapping of the situation, problems and issues facing actors of the culture field has been undertaken for each of the three countries. This mapping aimed at identifying outstanding individuals who combine intellectual strength and practical activity to the benefit of positive change within the arts and culture fields, but who could impact other areas of society. This meant exploring ways that influential individuals and collectives created or significantly contributed to change. The mapping laid out the main features of the cultural policy systems in each country along with the main problems respondents considered essential to their effectiveness or ineffectiveness in underpinning processes of change in a constructive manner.

This initial mapping has been conducted using a specially developed questionnaire. It focused on the opinion of respondents concerning the prospects for actors of the culture sphere in each country to constructively support processes of change in favour of democratisation, Europeanisation and modernisation. Target persons and institutions invited to answer the questionnaire were chosen on the basis of preparatory meetings in each of the countries – in Minsk, Belarus, in March 2007; in Kiev, Ukraine, in April 2007; and in Chisinau, Moldova, in May 2007. In addition significant use was made of existing secondary source material and, in particular, the Compendium on Cultural Policies in Europe, where the country concerned participates.

The present report is a compilation of the answers received from targeted respondents, information collected at country consultation meetings and the results of secondary source research. While it cannot be considered a representative survey and analysis due to the small number of respondents and the reliance on secondary source materials, the report does take stock of all major aspects of the socio-political situation in the country under consideration that are relevant for the development of the culture sphere. The country consultation meetings were the opportunity for in-depth discussion of the condition of the culture sphere, its potential for actively supporting change and concrete measures that might be taken by the partners involved in this process to support that potential and empower it. These meetings were held in June and July 2007 and brought together influential local actors and experts and to discuss the ideas presented in the individual country reports.

The reflection process shall be completed in September by a strategic workshop for the development of a 3-year plan to support cultural actors of change. The circle of partners will be enlarged to include other potential supporters of change through culture, especially also international donors involved in cultural activities in the three countries.

The expected results of the reflection process will be

- Facilitating networking and partnership building between individuals and organisations in the region, and of countries from the target region with EU countries;
- Triggering curiosity in the Eastern European region and introducing it to the mental map of cultural operators and artists in the west;
- Devising a policy orientation on the place of cultural cooperation in the European Neighbourhood Policy;
- Launching a concrete cooperation instrument tailored to the needs analysed in the course of the reflection process;
- Preparing a publication (on-line, and possibly off-line) and a public event in the Netherlands to publicise the results of the process;
- Contributing to ECF's diversity focus through supporting cultural actors of change in Eastern Europe (integration) and exploring the contribution of the Eastern European Diaspora to multiple European citizenship (migration).

Background

According to official information provided by the Belarusian government, the Republic of Belarus has a population of approximately 9.9 million inhabitants and occupies 208,000 square kilometres of land.² It is composed of six administrative regions (or oblasts) including the capital city Minsk, with a population 1,782,500

² Information current as of January 1, 2005. Source: Belta news agency online: www.belta.by/en/bel/culture.

inhabitants (March 2006 figures). The official languages in Belarus are Belarusian and Russian. The currency of the country is the Belarusian ruble.

According to official statistics, there are 12 towns of more than 100,000 inhabitants in Belarus, and a majority of 69% of Belarusian citizens live in urban settlements. The population consists of 81.2% Belarusians, 11.4% Russians, and smaller groups of Poles, Ukrainians, Jews and “other ethnicities”. Eastern Orthodoxy is the largest religious denomination, followed by Roman Catholics and smaller communities of Protestants, Jews, Muslims and Buddhists.

Belarus was one of the founding members of the Soviet Union in 1922. It was declared an independent state (the Belarusian People’s Republic) in 1918. This subsequently became the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1919. The Belarusian intelligentsia and what bourgeoisies existed in Belarus were decimated during Stalin’s purges, with a significant number being deported to the Gulag during the 1930s. Shortly thereafter it was laid waste by World War II, or the Great Patriotic War as it is referred to in Belarus, with approximately 25% of the population being killed during its ravages. Extensively sovietised and settled with Soviet citizens (Russian speaking) from elsewhere in the USSR, Belarus’ fortunes improved in the aftermath of the second World War, becoming one of the most developed Soviet Republics through lightening industrialisation and urbanisation programmes. The late Soviet period was again one of sadness for Belarus. About 60% of the radioactive fallout from the Chernobyl nuclear disaster of April 1986 in Ukraine landed in Belarus.³

Belarus declared its independence on August 25, 1991. This was swiftly followed by the dissolution of the Soviet Union on December 8, 1991, paving the way for full independent statehood for Belarus. Following independence, hopes were high that Belarus would quickly transform and develop democracy, the rule of law and a market economy. Yet unlike other Central and Eastern European countries, Belarus failed to make a sharp break with the past, and the main institutions remained in the hands of the former communist elites, only mildly reformed. The 1994 Constitution, however, created the opportunity for the direct election of the president and significantly increased the powers of that institution. In what was a surprise for many, the 1994 presidential poll led to the election of 39 year old Alexander Lukashenko, a relative new comer to politics and a politician without significant reputation or renown. From the very outset, he made it clear that he would not tolerate being contradicted, and under his rule, Belarus has become increasingly authoritarian in nature. For this reason, the Lukashenko regime is regularly referred to in the international media as the “last dictatorship in Europe”.

While abuses of power have been something of a hallmark of the Lukashenko regime from early on, recent attempts to maintain the grip over power in the country have been remarkable. In particular, Lukashenko has sought to use a quasi-legality to legitimise his authoritarian rule. In 2004, towards the end of his legal second term of office, he initiated a referendum to change the Constitution so as to remove time limits on presidential terms. In so doing he paved the way for his own indefinite rule of Belarus in the position of president. It is widely accepted in the international community that the referendum was not conducted according to accepted democratic standards. The press release issued by the OSCE after the referendum (October 18, 2004) states:

*“Although not specifically observed, the Election Observation Mission noted that the scale of the Republican Referendum, proposing the removal of the two-term limit on the office of the President, its unrestrained bias and its unregulated intrusion into polling stations, contributed to the a highly distorted campaign environment”.*⁴

With each new round of elections, whether presidential or parliamentary, the regime has flexed its muscles against critics and opponents. Using pretexts such as changes to the legal provisions for the registration of non-governmental organisations and the taxation rules on the receipt of foreign grants and subventions, the regime has practically made independent civic life and civil society organisations impossible and illegal. Opposition political parties are technically still legal, but the regulations pertaining to their establishment and functioning practically rule out political parties in any meaningful sense. Being involved in either an opposition political party or a non-governmental organisation is regularly punished. Again using pretexts, activists are thrown into prison for ten days at a time on charges of subversion, tax fraud, petty hooliganism, etc. The regime has literally decimated the independent press and media, closing or taking over all but very few outlets. It has also invested massively in its propaganda machinery, putting huge resources at the disposal of state media who present the official version of reality to the Belarusian public, largely deprived of any other source of information. Character

³ Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chernobyl_disaster#_note-Chernobylinfo

⁴ OSCE Press Release, “Belarus elections fell significantly short of OSCE commitments”, 18th of October 2004. Source: www.osce.org/item/8668.html.

assassination of opposition figures as terrorists, Western spies or even rapists is a regular feature of official broadcasting. In addition, the regime has managed to silence the small independent business community, while large parts of the economy remain state-owned and unreformed.

Most worryingly of all, however, is that the regime has not hesitated to use physical violence and even murder to silence opponents. In 1999-2000, four well-known figures from the independent media, business and opposition politics disappeared without a trace, presumed abducted and murdered by the state security apparatus. A Council of Europe enquiry clearly lays the blame for the disappearances at the doorstep of the Lukashenko regime.⁵

The human rights violations and democratic deficits of the Belarusian authorities have been widely condemned internationally. Both the European Union and the United States have imposed travel bans on state officials and a variety of economic sanctions have been progressively put in place. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, to whose Cultural Convention Belarus is signatory, has expelled Belarus. There has been vociferous international condemnation of the treatment of political prisoners, and more generally the regime's disregard for international standards of protection for the civil and political rights of citizens. Forthcoming and supportive as the international community has recently been, however, their condemnations have so far not deterred Lukashenko.

The March 2006 presidential elections in Belarus were something of a turning point in international criticism of Lukashenko's regime. On the one hand, the apparent gross violations of electoral standards and civic rights of Belarusians led to harsh international responses. On the other hand, the international democracy assistance community invested substantial amount of financial and technical support prior to the elections. But, the scale and duration of the protests that ensued in the centre of Minsk after the elections came as a surprise for many, as did the solidarity of the general population with the protests. This created an atmosphere of possibility and hope that few had anticipated, and it galvanised the resolve of both the domestic and international pro-change movements.

No matter how encouraging the anti-Lukashenko and pro-democracy rallies that took place before and after the elections may have been, one would be mistaken to underestimate the significant level of support Lukashenko enjoys among ordinary Belarusians, who are primarily concerned with their material well-being and the economic stability of the country. Importantly, Lukashenko has, until recently, managed to consistently raise wages and pensions in line with price inflation. By contrast, the regime's propaganda portrays as worse and deteriorating the economic conditions of ordinary Poles and Lithuanians, Belarus' neighbours who recently joined the European Union. This misinformation is very effective, as most Belarusians rely largely on state-run electronic media as their sole source of information.

Lukashenko's material populism has been compounded by the relative weakness of the democratic opposition, especially given its inability to convince Belarusians that it is a viable political alternative. While it has managed to rally and unite, especially in the period preceding the March 2006 presidential elections, fronting Alyaksandr Milinkevich as their single candidate, the political parties that make up the democratic opposition have a reputation for infighting, rivalry and disunity. They have little or no experience of governance, something that seems to count for ordinary Belarusians. But, most importantly, they have little social base and are weakly grounded in traditional constituencies. The regime has been successful in playing on these weaknesses with virulent propaganda in the state media and with a series of clever and effective "pre-emptive strikes" to undermine the opposition's campaign efforts, including bringing the date of the elections forward by several months to March, denying the opposition access to state-run media, confiscating campaign materials and arresting leaders and activists.⁶ Nevertheless, the opposition put up a brave fight, succeeded in presenting its candidate to large segments of Belarusians, and eventually staged the largest public protests seen in Belarus in many years. After the elections, the government struck back. Numerous opposition leaders and civic activists were thrown into prison, where some remain to this day, and the regime has become even more brutal in suppressing independent civil society and media.

Of critical importance to developments in Belarus is the special relationship of that country with Russia. Although both sides have paid much lip-service to this relationship and there is little love lost between President Putin and

⁵ <http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/WorkingDocs/Doc04/EDOC10062.htm>.

⁶ Vitali Silitski, Signs of Hope Rather than a Color Revolution, in "Prospects for Democracy in Belarus", Joerg Forbrig, David. R. Marples and Pavol Demes, editors, second edition, 2006 (German Marshall Fund of the United States and Heinrich Boell Foundation), pp. 20-26.

his Belarusian counterpart, both countries have long negotiated the creation of a state union between the two countries. The Belarusian government has granted Russian language and culture a status equal, if not superior, to that accorded the Belarusian language. Nonetheless, relations have cooled and soured recently. President Putin of Russia does not hide his contempt for his colleague in Minsk, and the closer integration of both countries has hardly progressed beyond rhetoric. The citizens of Belarus, no matter how severely their language and culture are suppressed or marginalised, have become quite used to having an independent state of their own, and they seem less and less inclined to consider union with Russia as being in their interest.

Nevertheless, the Kremlin continues to both tacitly and actively support the regime in Minsk. In political terms, Russia actively supported the incumbent leader and legitimised the clearly fraudulent election result of March 2006 by being the first government to congratulate Lukashenko on his “victory”. In financial terms, the Kremlin has long bankrolled Lukashenko by supplying cheap energy resources and continues to do so. Despite doubling gas prices in 2006, Lukashenko still pays significantly less than market price for gas received from Russia. Both politically and economically, however, Russian attitudes seem to be changing. The Kremlin seems to be increasingly reluctant to maintain the status quo if the August 2007 brinkmanship over the payment of Belarusian debts to Russia is an indicator. Russia has started to push more strongly for the integration of Russia and Belarus, whatever the format, and energy prices are to gradually rise to market levels. The change of policy on energy prices by Russia may not have bankrupted the regime in Minsk yet, but for ordinary people in Belarus, the growing gap between the cost of living and salaries set by the government is becoming more obvious.

Commentators are somewhat divided on Russia’s motivations for continuing to support Lukashenko. Some believe that for as long as the Kremlin cannot identify a reliable successor to control, they will continue to put up with Lukashenko, considering him more of a pest than a threat. Others believe that Lukashenko is still an essential ally for the Kremlin in its increasingly obvious attempts to monopolise energy transport systems to Europe, most recently through the partial purchase of the Beltransgaz pipeline company by Russia’s Gazprom. Yet other commentators maintain that Lukashenko is not as thoroughly dependent on the Kremlin for political and financial survival as it may seem to the outside observer, and that he has so successfully brainwashed the majority of the Belarusian population and emasculated the political opposition through repression that there is hardly a domestic threat to his rule.

Given recent economic developments, Russia’s increasing of energy prices and the resulting difficulties in the Belarusian economy and state budget, some observers are looking to 2007/8 as a possible turning point in the stability of the Lukashenko regime. The political opposition struggles hard to survive the difficult circumstances imposed by the regime and to retain a degree of unity. Civil society has basically gone underground and continues a non-violent guerrilla war on the regime in an effort to liberate the hearts and minds of the general population from their stupor. Foreign support for democrats in Belarus is considerable but, clearly, the international community is not able to intervene directly and remove Lukashenko. The consensus, initiative and momentum for democratic change in Belarus will have to come from within, and its advocates will have to succeed in mustering the support of the general population. At this stage, most commentators say it could go both ways.

Official versus Counter-Culture: Society versus State

When discussing the culture sector in Belarus one is immediately confronted with an important duality: there are two culture sectors in Belarus. On the one hand, there is the “official” or state-sponsored culture sector. This sector includes commercial and state-funded culture producers that serve the neo-Soviet state ideology, in other words, the prolongation of Lukashenko’s dictatorship. On the other hand, there is what is increasingly referred to as the “counter-culture”. This is the independent culture sector and includes all forms of cultural production that do not conform to the “official” line proposed by the state culture sector or that dare to demonstrate critical liberty and freedom of expression. While the official culture is associated with propaganda and servility, the independent “counter-culture” is associated with resistance and change. And, while some incidences of overlap or inter-penetration of these culture sectors can be observed, they exist at two extremes and are diametrically opposed to each other. In the understanding of those involved, the official culture is protected but servile. The “counter-culture” is suppressed, but free.

The official culture can be identified by several characteristics. In the first place, it is a product of the official ideology of the Lukashenko regime. This has its roots in Soviet pan-Slavism. In the 1990s the regime attempted to justify its efforts to create a state union between Belarus and Russia through the active promotion of Russian language culture and Soviet iconography, the ethnic affinity of the Belarusian nation with the Russian nation and the active suppression of Belarusian language culture. In more recent times, as the project of a state union with

Russia has floundered on the rocks of Putin and Lukashenko's poor relations, the response of the regime in Belarus has been to promote Belarusian state independence, nationhood and self-sufficiency. But, this nation building project has been focused on the creation of a Belarusian identity in the image of the leader and has not led to any rehabilitation of Belarusian language culture. Rather the opposite. Those who favour working through the Belarusian language are suppressed and marginalised.

Our respondents characterise the official culture as folksy, conservative and dusty. But, most of all it is obedient. A somewhat shocking example (for the outside observer) is provided by the singer Anatol Yarmolenka and the band "Siabry", who were popular already during the Soviet period. In the immediate aftermath of independence Yarmolenka sang lyrics by written Zyanon Pazniak, today an opposition politician in exile. Today Yarmolenka regularly performs a song called "Listen to Bat'ka" (Bat'ka means "father" in Belarusian and is a popular nickname for Lukashenko).

The song goes like this:

*"Well-built and tough-composed,
He won't teach you bad things
Bat'ka can put everyone in order
Bat'ka is cooler than the rest
He will solve all the troubles
With a single movement of his hand
He is reliable and confident
Just a look at him is enough to understand
Who's the master in our house
LISTEN TO BAT'KA!"*⁷

For our respondents, this kind of obedience means that the official culture is morally corrupt and moribund. Typical products of the official culture include folk culture (folk dancing, music and arts and crafts), soap opera style TV series, Russian language "chick-lit" style reading material (romance novels, etc), mass pop entertainment, especially Russian language pop-music and, of course, the production of the state media. Importantly, the official culture promotes "home grown" Russian language cultural production, mostly in the field of pop-music and entertainment. This should be distinguished from the importation of mass cultural and especially entertainment products from Russia. As one respondent put it, the Belarusian regime a. produces its own ideologically charged cultural and entertainment products in the Russian language and b. uses the imported Russian mass cultural products to "cover the gaps" that appear due to the insufficiency of the domestic cultural production.

In the opinion of our respondents, the counter-culture is everything which the official culture is not: dynamic, modern, free, experimental, creative and fun. It is characterised by the use of the Belarusian language, its attitude of resistance to the regime (through which it has become intimately bound up with the democratic opposition) and its value based approach to its production, including its European outlook. Its typical products include rock music and literature in the Belarusian language, innovative, experimental contemporary art and theatre, satire and a variety of forms of political comedy.

In this time of polarisation, some cultural actors continue to believe they can maintain a neutral position, neither supporting nor opposing the Belarusian regime. But, our respondents consider this position to be naïve, as any artist that has attempted to position themselves as independent or as "apolitical" has sooner or later been faced with having to choose between "towing the party line" and some form of punishment. An excellent example of this is pop-culture, which in many contexts is considered as mere entertainment, with no political value or objective. But, in Belarus it has become an important political instrument in the hands of the regime, which uses it to present its own version of reality (the prosperity and success of the Belarusian model, the failure and misery of Belarus' EU neighbours) to the masses. The Belarusian entry to the 2007 Eurovision song contest is a case in point: the fabulous looking Belarusian man, singing a modern pop-song in English and frantically waving a Belarusian flag in the greenroom in Helsinki was clearly bankrolled by the regime as a means of presenting its particular version of normality to both the Belarusian people and the outside world.

⁷ Ales Kudrytski, Official Culture in Belarus: Listen to Bat'ka!, in Office for a Democratic Belarus, "Belarusian Headlines", Issue XII, June 29 to July 10, 2007, www.democraticbelarus.eu, pp. 8 – 9. Look at the "Listen to Bat'ka" video on www.youtube.com/watch?v=J2s2XenL7N4. Official website of "Siabry": www.syabry.com.

Culture in Belarus has become politicised and polarised, a battle ground for the attention and loyalty of the people.

Priorities, Sources of Policy, Investment in the Field of Culture and Problems of Official Cultural Policy

Public Priorities and Sources of Policy

According to information available from public sources (i.e. information published through state channels on the internet), the Belarusian state

*“pursues a consistent policy aimed at preserving the cultural heritage of the Belarusians and their best moral traits, which are respect for people of different ethnic origins and religious beliefs, tolerance, humanism and peacefulness ... and at shaping ideology of the Belarusian state, crystallising the Belarusian national idea. The shortest and most accurate expression of the national idea has been voiced by the president of the Republic of Belarus: ‘For a strong and prosperous Belarus!’”*⁸

According to one government source, the core of the state policy is the preservation of the historical memory of the people, which is equated with victory in the Great Patriotic War (Soviet terminology for World War II). In order to achieve this, the government has introduced a new subject to the school curriculum, under the title “The Great Patriotic War of the Soviet People”.⁹ Equally indicative of this is the recent opening of the “Stalin Line” open air museum on the outskirts of Minsk.

It is evident from both official documents and from other sources consulted that for the current regime, culture has a specific and instrumental function. Cultural policy and activities are expected to serve the purpose of disseminating and promoting the state ideology to the masses. The state ideology has one overriding purpose along with all other state policy: to maintain and prolong the rule of the current president. To the extent that this is a dynamic process, so, therefore, is the state ideology. Logically, culture must follow suit. Official culture is made and remade in the image of the president according to his latest priorities.

It is in this way that culture also plays an important role in the nation building project of Lukashenko’s Belarus. In the opinion of our respondents, Belarusians suffer from a severe identity crisis. Belarus became an independent nation state in the true political sense of the term in 1991, despite the fact that the origins of Belarusian national consciousness go back much further. Centuries of russification, integration into the Soviet Union as one of the core republics and the total rape and pillage of Belarus during World War II did not provide too much opportunity for nation building. It is hardly surprising that Belarusians weakly articulate their sense of belonging to each other and the place called Belarus. Today, Belarusians live in the independent state called Belarus. But, their president has long sought integration with Russia, presents Soviet history and morality, as well as, Russian mass entertainment, as Belarusian culture and makes all this an obligatory tenet of the state ideology. The Belarusian language and specifically Belarusian aspects of history are played down, delegitimised and marginalised. Respondents complain that their compatriots are confused and susceptible to indoctrination.

This brief excursion into questions of Belarusian identity also demonstrates the extent to which the identification of priorities for cultural policy is wholly colonised by the all seeing-all knowing president. It is noteworthy that in official documents and information available publicly, common sources of cultural policy such as a country’s constitution or a variety of laws are not mentioned. However, the executive orders of the president and his speeches are quoted copiously. It appears to the outsider that relevant state bodies simply implement the president’s will.

An illustrative example is the “Executive Order of the Head of State ‘On the approval of the Measures for Perpetuating the Memory of the People’s Artist of the USSR V.G. Mulyavin’”, which establishes special prizes named after V.G. Mulyavin for the winners of youth pop song competitions that take place at the International Arts Festival “Slavonic Bazaar” held regularly in Vitebsk and the International Musical Festival “Golden Hit”. According to Belta (the official Belarusian news agency), the state budget guarantees financial support for culture and the arts. An important aspect of this statement of responsibility is that it focuses on continuity in cultural

⁸ From the entry on “State Policy in the spheres of culture and public life on Belta, the Belarusian state information agency, www.belta.by/en/bel/culture.

⁹ Ibid.

policy, as demonstrated through the decision to preserve and maintain the infrastructure of existing cultural establishments.

One of the main instruments for the implementation of the cultural policy in Belarus is the “Fund of the President of the Republic of Belarus for the Support of Culture and Arts”, which according to official sources stimulates the development of culture in the country. The activities that receive priority for implementation are laid out in the official documentation and include major popular music and traditional folk culture festivals in Minsk and around the country, young talent competitions including the provision of financial support for educational advancement in their field of talent and the Belarusian film industry through film festivals. In addition, state activities extend to the maintenance and operation of 27 professional theatres, some 70 orchestras and music ensembles, approximately 750 local cultural establishments described in the official literature as “cultural clubs”, state museums (which acquire works of Belarusian art and heritage), libraries and 16,000 heritage sites and monuments including several that are indexed by UNESCO.

According to our respondents, all of whom are members of the independent culture sector¹⁰, one can observe several trends or tendencies in the official state cultural sector. These include the promotion of home-made Russian-language pop culture rather than the importation of such from Russia, an increasing emphasis on Belarus as an independent state with a unique and historic mission, the promotion of Soviet nostalgia, and in particular the glorification of the Great Patriotic War, an emphasis of grand, large scale, televised pop music and sport events, open air concerts and festivals (e.g. folk festivals). This diversity notwithstanding, the trend that is most observable is the linking of all cultural achievements to the person of the president.

Investments in Culture

According to the information provided by our respondents and some anecdotal evidence,¹¹ it is possible to discern a relatively high level of state investment in culture. As an indication of scale, approximately 715 million Belarusian rubles¹² (approximately, US\$ 360,000) were spent on supporting talented young people from the President’s Special Fund for Supporting Talented Youth in 2005. Some of this money was spent in support of “official” pop stars, such as singer Polina Smolova (www.polinasmolova.ru) who was sent to represent Belarus in the Eurovision Song Contest in 2006. Nevertheless, it is also acknowledged that many truly talented young people did also benefit from these financial allocations. In 2006, the State Investment Programme is reported to have provided approximately 70 billion Belarusian rubles (approximately, US\$ 27 million) for investment in the culture field. For 2007, the state budget allocation for culture is reported as having been set at about 120 billion Belarusian rubles (approximately, US\$ 46 million). According to our respondents, architectural heritage sites, state run orchestras and theatres receive the lion’s share of these budget allocations, with the main focus of expenditure being on ensuring the structural renovation of buildings, etc. Neither our respondents nor additional literature were in a position to reveal the extent of non-state investment in culture. Since many if not most independent organisations and cultural actors have been outlawed, it has become increasingly difficult to estimate how much money is granted to culture activities from outside donors. Our respondents were also not in a position to reveal specific information concerning the financial investments of “private business”¹³ in either the public or independent culture sectors.

Nevertheless, the responses to our questionnaire revealed some information about the financial scope of culture projects in the independent sector and, therefore, about their potential capacity and impact. According to our respondents, the average budget of an independent cultural project in Belarus ranges from US \$1,000 to 3,000. This money usually comes from a source outside the country and more often than not, the artist or cultural producer has done the ground work of acquiring it by themselves. But, it is acknowledged that if used wisely, even the very small scale projects from a financial perspective can have a positive effect on the sensitisation of the

¹⁰ It is noteworthy that a large proportion of those who today work in the underground and independent culture sector were previously employed in the state cultural apparatus, but feel foul of the regime as a result of their opposition stance, and were fired.

¹¹ For example, while it is not possible to verify the exact sum of expenditure, it is obvious to anyone who watched the Eurovision song contest that the Belarus entry cost the state a significant amount of money.

¹² At the time of writing (August 2007), the exchange rate of the USD to the local currency (Belarusian ruble – BYR) was 1 USD = 2,151.50 BYR, of the USD to the Euro was 1 USD = 0.74155 Euro and of the Euro to the BYR was 1 Euro = 2,901.94 (source: www.oanda.com 21 August 2007). Note that some of the economic data presented in this report is valid for years previous to 2007 and, therefore, currency equivalencies may not be completely accurate using these exchange rates.

¹³ As we have indicated in a previous section, it is difficult to categorise the business actors functioning in the Belarusian market reality in terms of private business as understood in regular market economic contexts.

public. However, our respondents clearly indicate their belief that many small projects in the culture field are equally needed and important as the implementation of large projects. In the experience of our respondents, small scale projects have been an effective and realisable way to use the limited resources available for culture from international and local sources.

Relations between the Authorities and the Counter-Culture

Given the political situation outlined above, it will not surprise the readers of this report that our respondents clearly point out that there is almost no contact between the state sector responsible for culture and the independent sector beyond that which can be categorised as some form of repression. The state basically refuses to acknowledge the existence of the “counter-culture” and where it shouts so loud as to eliminate any possibility of simply ignoring it, the official culture actively seeks to repress it. On the other hand, the state authorities responsible for culture are also active in the promotion of the conformist and servile official cultural producers. The ministries concerned (Culture and Education) are very active in making sure that the counter-culture cannot gain access to the schools or the universities, where they would undoubtedly find some support among young people.

Nevertheless, one of our respondents does acknowledge that some clandestine contact between cultural officials and the actors of the independent culture does exist. While this acknowledgement was made without comment or interpretation, this could be considered to be an interesting development. On the one hand, it could be an indication that not all members of the apparatus are fully indoctrinated by or loyal to the regime. On the other hand, there is always the risk that such contacts are a form of espionage that the state undertakes in order to undermine the counter-culture.

Neither is it surprising that our respondents complain about the attitude of the authorities to their counter-cultural activism. This response, as mentioned above, can range from merely ignoring counter-cultural initiatives to active and even violent forms of repression, including forced dismissal from positions held in public structures, removal from radio and TV programming, beatings, arrests, fines, closure of organisations and so on. However, our respondents also demonstrate a certain resignation to this reaction, stating openly that it is what they expect from the authorities at this stage.

When it comes to the attitudes of the general public to counter-cultural activism, it is not as simple as all that to describe. The response of the public has, at various points in time ranged from plain bewilderment at the politically motivated persecution of cultural activists to enthusiastic support for cultural activities that demonstrate opposition to the regime. All agree that public opinion is not united in this respect. While many people do believe what the government feeds them about the independent cultural sector, there are many people who also approve of the activity of activists and oppositionists (even if only tacitly) and some have even been known to turn to activism themselves in reaction to an experience with the counter-culture. Nevertheless, it is important to mention that counter-cultural activism and support for it is an elite phenomenon in Belarus. To the extent that the counter-culture is such, most “ordinary Belarusians” rarely, if ever, even come into contact with it. They, therefore, cannot be said to have an opinion one way or the other, positive or negative.

Main Problems of the Cultural Field

In addition to the above, the cultural field suffers from a number of important problems that are not exclusive to Belarus, but common for countries in transition and even for established democracies. For example, our respondents raise the fact that in Belarus the training available for cultural managers and other personnel of cultural institutions is outdated, of poor quality and inadequate. In addition, our respondents point to the fact that Belarus lacks specific media that treat culture, whether independent or official, and its development (periodicals, critical magazines, etc).

The seriousness of these common problems of the culture field notwithstanding, Belarus remains an exceptional case due to its political situation. Under the circumstances, it is clear that systematic discussion of cultural issues and trends in the public sphere is not possible. Hence, the development of the culture field is subject to chance. The identification of trends takes place on an *ad hoc* basis. This makes the conscious and constructive development of the culture field next to impossible.

The primary and overriding problem of official cultural policy in Belarus is, therefore, that it is thoroughly instrumentalised by the state for the purposes of the indoctrination of the Belarusian people and the perpetuation of the rule of Alexander Lukashenko.

Official information published by the Embassy of Belarus to the United States on the internet, nevertheless, provides the following definition of the cultural policy of the Republic of Belarus:

*“The cultural policy of the Republic of Belarus is aimed at guaranteeing cultural rights both to the entire society and to every individual, and at political, economic and spiritual renewal of our country”.*¹⁴

But, the reality of cultural policy in Belarus is another one. Our respondents point to gross abuses of the civil and political rights of actors involved in the independent culture field in Belarus. In the first place, independent cultural actors are not permitted to associate. If they have managed to maintain some form of legal association, their activity is regularly harassed and they are discouraged from performing or publishing using a variety of methods, from making it too expensive to outright banning. The regime strictly censors anything published or broadcasted. Freedom of expression is not respected. Even freedom of religion, an important cultural right, is not respected in Belarus. Any religious activity other than that of the Belarusian branch of the Russian Orthodox Church is actively discriminated against by the state. The little known Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox Church is actively suppressed, as are Belarusian Protestant and Roman Catholic communities. As for political rights, including freedom of conscience, the regime openly disregards international standards on human rights, arbitrarily imprisoning politicians and political activists without hesitation or embarrassment.

This political situation has led to the complete isolation of Belarus from practically all forms of international cooperation, including those which are specialised in the development of the culture field (for example, the cultural cooperation mechanisms of the Council of Europe). However, in many ways this kind of isolation, while a deserved sanction for the abuses committed by the government and a reasonable reaction on the part of the international community, also isolates the independent culture field.

The Situation and Status of the “Counter-Culture”

The social-political environment in which the counter-culture develops in Belarus is, therefore, one of extreme polarisation. Whether they are ordinary citizens or more active members of society, Belarusians find themselves confronted with the choice between acquiescence to the regime and marginalisation in its broadest sense. Those who support the government are suspicious of those who do not, feeling threatened by their choice to follow another path. Those who have taken a stand against the regime feel disenfranchised and misunderstood, and objectively suffer the consequences of their choice to position themselves outside the mainstream. There is little mutual understanding between the two groups. And there is little communication between the two camps on matters pertaining to that over which they disagree.

This polarisation is very perceptible in the cultural field. Those who are active in the counter-culture consider those active in the official culture to be naïve and instrumentalised collaborators of a criminal regime that uses culture and cultural actors for ignoble purposes. Their inherent belief is that culture is independent and must not be used for social engineering. They will do everything they can to subvert the official culture, to open the eyes of the public to the abuses of the regime, to valorise that which has been suppressed by the authorities (e.g. Belarusian language culture or experimental forms of art). Those active in the official culture consider those active in the counter-culture as misguided spoilers and dangerous revanchists. The ideologists among those active in the official culture feel threatened by the open and questioning nature of the counter-culture and by the challenge it makes to official morality and the right of the president to decide what is and what is not Belarusian culture. The pragmatists working in the official culture realise that they have bound their destinies to that of the regime. Cultural production that, in their estimation, might further the cause of regime change will be actively combated. As mentioned above, despite the continuing presence of some persons who can and do discretely act as a bridge between the two poles, there is little contact between them, for fear of denunciation as a collaborator with or infiltration by the “enemy” faction.

Ever stricter censorship is only reinforcing the polarisation in the culture sector and the society as a whole. Only officially vetted information and cultural products reach the wider public. Very few sources of independent

¹⁴ From the entry on “Belarusian National Culture” on the website of the Embassy of Belarus to the United States, www.belarusembassy.org/belarus/culture.htm.

information can still operate, and these have small reader- and viewer-ships. Most Belarusian citizens are not sufficiently negatively affected by the way the regime behaves to worry that what they are being told by the regime is not true. Even if they sometimes feel that there is a discrepancy between what they hear from the regime and the reality they experience, they also understand that it is not prudent to voice their concern. Thus, official censorship is further supported by self-censorship. In the culture field, little innovative cultural production gets out into the public sphere. Any cultural production that openly criticises or even obliquely alludes to the deficiencies of the regime has already been brutally suppressed and continues to function underground or clandestinely. Hence, Belarusian citizens, deprived of true information and self-censored, are further deprived of alternative cultural production that might push them to question their reality. The few initiatives that have survived the official crackdown have taken to waging a sort of non-violent guerrilla war on the regime, from deep underground, consolidating the ranks of their faithful supporters and slowly but surely gaining new enthusiasts. These cultural guerrillas, or as Klinau characterises them, partisans, are particularly effective in the use of satire, theatre techniques and information technology for making their message heard. He maintains, however, that all forms of independent art or cultural production are in a position to act for change if they accept their partisan nature.¹⁵

Another, but nonetheless, determining factor shaping the environment in which the counter-culture develops remains the socio-economic condition of the country and the society's apparent dread of a loss of its economic stability, such that exists in Belarus. As mentioned above, many commentators of the Belarusian situation believe that one of the very fundamental reasons why the Belarusian citizenry has not yet risen up en masse against its "bad king" is that they fear terribly their economic fate, should any democratisation of Belarus take place. People fear the loss of their material well-being, their limited but nevertheless relatively adequate level of purchasing power and their stable employment, for all of which they are indebted to the regime and to Lukashenko himself. In the official propaganda, citizens are shown the catastrophic suffering of the poor workers in Poland and Lithuania as proof of what could happen to them should there be a change of leader. Hence, the threat of economic collapse, while potentially quite real and existent (for example, if Russia would discontinue its economic support to the regime by raising the gas price to full market levels), is portrayed to the public as something that will happen if Belarusians are not loyal to Lukashenko. For their loyalty, it is assured, they will be rewarded with salary rises and economic stability. And, so far, it has to be admitted, Lukashenko has not disappointed.

At the same time, the purchasing power of the average Belarusian citizen is rather limited. Private consumption of alternative cultural products is also determined to an extent by this. Internet, which could be a gateway to independent media and cultural products, is not yet sufficiently widespread in the population, especially outside the larger towns. State controls on domain and server establishment and internet monitoring make their maintenance from inside Belarus expensive and complicated¹⁶, even if the cases of massive internet filtering are quite rare and occur mostly before elections. And, while Belarusian citizens are not yet banned from leaving the country for the purposes of tourism, they do have difficulty to obtain visas for European Union countries and foreign travel remains expensive. Hence, the "mind-opening" functions of the internet and international travel and their potential to create interest in independent cultural production are not something that the Belarusian counter-culture can simply rely on. On the other hand, Internet has been an essential locus of dissidence and counter-cultural activism. According to our respondents, Internet is being used actively to organise and mobilise citizens, through weblogs, email and most recently using Skype and other communication programmes and is the major source of independent information, including that which pertains to the products and performances of the counter-culture, for most young and active Belarusian citizens. Nevertheless, even taking into account this differentiated picture, some commentators describe the socio-political environment as comparable to the dark days of Soviet Communism in the USSR and state socialism in some of the hard-line satellite states (e.g. the German Democratic Republic or Czechoslovakia) during the 1970s and early 1980s.¹⁷

According to our respondents getting active and staying active in the counter-culture is determined by a number of interlinked factors, often especially related to demographics. In particular, our respondents point to the fact that getting involved in counter-cultural activities has a lot to do with an individual's age and education. People already in their 50s or older, tend to accept the official cultural offer and have little inclination to question its

¹⁵ Artur Klinau and Katharina Narbutovic, "Neues aus den Partisanenwäldern", Artur Klinau über subversive Kultur und die Kultur des Subversiven, in Eurozine: <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2007-05-10-klinau-de.html>.

¹⁶ Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that the use of mobile communications (SMS, etc) are widespread especially by young people, and are, therefore, used extensively by independent actors to gather their faithful for performances or concerts.

¹⁷ Vitali Silitsky, Still Soviet? Why Dictatorship Persists in Belarus, *Soviet Legacies*, Vol. 28 (1) - Spring 2006 (<http://hir.harvard.edu/articles/1372/>).

quality or truthfulness. These segments of the population often harbour nostalgia for the communist period and do not fundamentally disagree with the way the country is being run by Lukshenko. They are risk averse and do not deal well with change. They are even aware that their skills would no longer be required would there be a significant change in political orientation. They are, therefore, inclined towards acquiescence and resignation. They are not the type of people to consider experimenting.

Those aged 18 to 40 years have received a different kind of education than their elders. They have benefited from the openness of the first years of Belarusian independence and have, thereby, developed a more critical level of thinking. They want to consume good quality cultural products and are not really satisfied with what is currently on the mainstream market. As elsewhere, and despite the atmosphere of fear and oppression, young people in Belarus tend to be more progressive and have more differentiated tastes than their elders. Youth sociology documents the natural inclination of young people in general towards experimentation and risk taking, and while young Belarusians may be discouraged from experimenting, they are naturally tempted to do so. This is borne out by anecdotal evidence provided by our respondents, according to whom young people are better represented among audiences, users and producers of counter-cultural products (for example, art-house cinema, contemporary literature and new forms of visual art).

For these younger people, the official culture is at best obsolete and unattractive, at worst morally bankrupt and dangerous. Their motivations for getting involved in the counter-culture, whether as consumers or producers, are certainly quite varied, but one can observe some commonalities. From the perspective of the consumers of the counter-culture, individual young people themselves or one of their close friends may have been directly affected by the repressiveness of the Lukashenko regime (many students and young people involved in youth organisations have been banned from studying or arrested as the regime has become increasingly paranoid), thereby, finding themselves in solidarity with the “other side” and its value orientations. On the other hand, young people like to have fun and the official culture and its inherently oppressive morality is simply not adequate to allow them the freedom to enjoy their youth as they see their counterparts in other parts of the world doing. From the point of view of the producers of the counter-culture, the regime’s war on fundamental freedoms such as that of expression and association has created a situation whereby they cannot say what they want to say in the way they want to say it. If they do they are branded subversives and stopped from producing their art. Our respondents testify to the fact that many did not consider themselves politically motivated by specific values before they were banned or marginalised. For these it is a means of survival, of not losing one’s soul, of not giving up one’s vocation. Another important point to remember here is that many of these culture producers have been motivated to become active in the opposition because they work primarily through the Belarusian language, actively suppressed by the current regime. Hence, they sing, write and speak in Belarusian, rather than in Russian. Their cultural product, in turn, is aimed at a particular community within the Belarusian society, those who both recognise the distinctiveness of the Belarusian language and who can actively engage in its use.

It is, therefore, not surprising that the ranks of the democratic opposition (and not just the ranks of the opposition political parties) have been swelled by members of the counter-cultural community. Many of our respondents are active in the civic democratic opposition movement in Belarus. These actively participated in the civic campaigns that preceded the March 2006 presidential elections, using their art and culture methods to “get out the vote” and educate citizens about their right to free and fair elections. Individual artists also lent their support to the democratic opposition parties, playing concerts during campaigning and the ensuing protests and advertising pro-democracy messages to their audiences. A good example is the band *NRM (Independent Republic of Dreams)* fronted by Lyavon Volski, son of Belarusian poet and opposition figure Arthur Volski, and dissident rocker. In the first place, singing in Belarusian distinguishes this band from the mainstream. It makes a significant statement in the Belarusian context, saying “we are not like you!”. This necessarily puts such artists on the wrong side of the regime.

According to a recent article,¹⁸ *NRM* are

“inspired by the likes of Jimmy Hendrix, Nirvana and The Doors ... (and are) living proof of the popularity of hard and other variants of rock, which took their first steps of development during Perestroika ... (they) immediately had an enormous influence on local youth ...”

¹⁸ Jef Bonifacino, “Belarus Rocks”, (Paris, 02.07.2007), in www.cafebabel.com, translated by Andrew Burgess.

According to Jef Bonifacino, quoted in the same article,

“... As the level of artistic creation is in freefall and some are comparing the situation of the artistic world and local culture to a ‘Chernobyl Part II’, the efforts of resistance are coming together ...”.

This is significant because attitudes to politics among ordinary Belarusian citizens, even in the cities, are rather negative. According to the discussions held at the consultation meeting, opposition politics and especially political leaders are not trusted by ordinary Belarusians. This certainly has a lot to do with the effects of a decade and a half of rule by Lukashenko and his propaganda machine. But, it also has something to do with the attitude of the seemingly rather fractious and self-interested opposition parties. Ordinary Belarusians are not significantly inclined to listen to the political opposition, so other methods of communication have to be found to raise awareness among Belarusian citizens about their right to free and fair elections.

One observer of the elections in March 2006 described the communication dilemma facing the counter-culture as follows:

“Thursday, March 23, 2006. Another warm, sunny day began at the tent camp that had grown overnight to about 35 tents. A cheerful atmosphere reigned, music was being played and throughout the day people gave public and often emotional accounts of their encounters with the Lukashenko regime, at universities, in workplaces and in public offices. One man even presented a poem he had written in the last days that called for the true Belarus to rise above the current regime. The only disturbance was that the municipal authorities turned on the sound system in the square to ‘entertain’ the public.”¹⁹

Our respondents identify individual artists, the chief editors of the few remaining independent newspapers and magazines, free-thinking experts in the fields of politics, culture and philosophy, film directors, rock musicians and certain theatre troupes as actively using their artistic medium to promote the cause of change in Belarus, especially through the development of the critical and free thinking faculties of their audiences.

While not an exhaustive list, in their questionnaires our respondents specifically named the rock groups *NRM*, *Tavarish Mauzer*, *Krama*, *Troitsa*, *Chyrvonym pa Belamu*, *Drum Ecstasy*, the managers and actors of the Belarus “Free Theatre”, Yury Khashevatsky’s *Free Cinema Studio*, the magazines *pARTisan*, *ARCHE*, *Dzhyaslou* and *Studenckaya Dumka*, the weekly newspaper *Nasha Niva*, artistic associations such as the Association of Contemporary Art, Belarusian Collegium, the Belarusian Designers Union, the Belarusian Music Alternative, The Belarusian PEN Centre, The Belarusian Writers Union (independent), The Belarusian Language Society, the galleries *NOVA* and *Podzemka* and the promoters of the following websites: www.musicfromby.net, www.dramaturg.org, www.charter97.org, www.litara.by, www.tesler.com, as influential in forming public opinion in Belarus.²⁰ One respondent also pointed to the fact that several international organisations are active in promoting change within Belarus (even if they themselves cannot have a physical presence in the country) including through culture. Among those named were the Open Society Institute, the Robert Bosch Foundation, and the National Endowment for Democracy, but there is also a broader range of foundations, cultural institutions and embassies of countries, such as Poland, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Norway, Sweden, and the United States that support cultural initiatives in Belarus.

However, as one respondent candidly pointed out, the Belarusian state is, in fact, the largest and strongest institution promoting change through culture, actively using culture to indoctrinate Belarusians into acquiescence to the will of the current regime. A “home grown” and locally produced mass culture in Russian language is gaining momentum as a result of high state investments. So called “high culture” (art museums, ballet, etc) also seems to be receiving slightly more attention (i.e. funding) from the state and from commercial sponsors, such as tobacco companies. At the same time, the state has been quite successful in suppressing independent civil society. This is causing the number of institutions that promote change through culture to decrease. The organisations that remain outside the control of the authorities are forced into cooperation, because it is the only way they can broaden the scale of their activities. This is not always an easy position to find oneself in, as partnerships should be freely chosen rather than forced. Nevertheless, several respondents point to the fact that these independent cultural actors have managed their cooperation quite effectively. In fact, their influence is considered to be due, in some significant part, to their effective interaction and mutual coordination of activities inside and outside the

¹⁹ Dispatches from Minsk, in “Prospects for Democracy in Belarus”, Joerg Forbrig, David. R. Marples and Pavol Demes, editors, second edition, 2006 (German Marshall Fund of the United States and Heinrich Boell Foundation), pp. 111-112.

²⁰ European Cultural Foundation, “ECF in Eastern Europe: Belarus, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine – Support for Cultural Cooperation Programmes”, (www.eurocult.org).

country, making good use of the remaining channels of public dissemination available to them, including the Internet.

Geographically the absolute majority of independent cultural activity takes place in the capital, Minsk. According to the estimations of some respondents, the extent of activity in Minsk runs to 80%, with only 15% of activity taking place in regional capitals and the remaining 5% in other larger towns of Belarus. The counter-cultural community considers its weak coverage of the country beyond the urban centres to be significant for the potential for change in Belarus. Respondents point to the fact that the populations of rural areas are less inclined to be interested in their cultural production or any form of opposition to the regime. And they are less likely to take risks in order to engage with the counter-culture. These citizens are less likely to access Internet, to have significant contact with foreigners or influences from abroad or to have access to alternative sources of information in a language they can understand. The mass media they have access to is either state run or imported from Russia. For those who have already entered their forties, what can be understood as their resistance to change is also necessarily determined by the fact that they were educated under the Soviet system and into an attitude of silent acquiescence. They are not likely, therefore, to question the accuracy or truthfulness of the information they receive from the authorities for as long as it is not glaringly obvious that it is not false. Adding to this is the “bad reputation” of the opposition political parties, created by unrelenting propaganda in the state media. But, breaking the information blockade on the rural areas of Belarus is not at all straightforward and would require enormous resources, the likes of which the counter-culture does not possess and does not necessarily have the capacity to absorb at this stage. As one respondent candidly put it, revolutions are not only made by the masses. Elites have an important role to play too.

Due to the fact that many of these activities are deemed only semi- or even illegal by the authorities, finding premises to hold concerts, DJ parties, theatre performances and film screenings is rather difficult, even if some types of concert, exhibition and DJ party can still be conducted legally. Cultural producers often use pretexts such as corporate events or family celebrations (e.g. weddings, with bride and groom and wedding guests!) when renting spaces to hold their activities. More often than not those events that are deemed illegal take place in private apartments, out of town cafes and bars owned by opposition sympathisers, country cottages or in the open air in the countryside. Well known locales that host counter-cultural activities include the *Graffiti Bar* (music concerts) and the *Podzemka* art gallery (performance, video-art), both in Minsk. One respondent pointed to the fact that a couple of state-owned galleries (e.g. the Minsk based *Mastactva* Salon, Palace of Art and Museum of Modern Art) have also been known to hold exhibitions of artists deemed to be involved in the counter-culture. But, this usually involves some form of concession on the part of the artist in question and not all members of the counter-cultural community, especially those surveyed for this report, would agree that artists who make such concessions can be considered members of the counter-culture.

While many independent cultural producers and members of the counter-cultural community enjoy a high level of respect and recognition from other elements Belarusian society that consider themselves independent, and some of them are even considered to be cult figures and heroes, the vast majority of the Belarusian citizenry barely knows them. This silent mass is neither particularly aware of nor particularly interested in the counter-culture, as such, and its products by association. A good example is rock music performed by several bands in the Belarusian language. According to our respondents, bands such as *NRM* and singers like Lyavon Volski are considered to be pop-icons by only those who participate in the counter-culture or the independent civil society. They are undoubtedly well known for their counter-cultural stance, but they are not seen as real “stars” in the same way as stars from Russia or the West. Nevertheless, the state has also not yet managed to create a “cult following” for its loyal home grown Russian language pop stars (for example, those who participate in independence day celebrations organised by the authorities and Eurovision song contests²¹) among the citizenry. It seems that people just do not consider them to be at the same quality level as foreign pop music, even if they will listen to them without too much objection.

Nevertheless, our respondents consider independent culture to be vital for its consumers. It provides them with at least one place where they can feel free. In their daily lives at work or in university their activity is strictly controlled by the state because any “deviance” from the official ideological position is considered a threat by the regime. And, demand of a more critical nature seems to be growing. According to our respondents the educated, urban public is interested in a broader range of higher quality cultural offerings than that which is currently available to them through official channels. This is apparent in the generally large and growing attention that is

²¹ Ales Kudrytski, Official Culture in Belarus: Listen to Bat'ka!, in Office for a Democratic Belarus, “Belarusian Headlines”, Issue XII, June 29 to July 10, 2007, www.democraticbelarus.eu.

attracted by new and innovative cultural projects, despite their lack of access to state run media. According to one respondent, the economic situation of enough Belarusians has improved to the extent that they are no longer exclusively concerned with so called “bread and butter issues”. This is especially true for the populations of large urban centres and Minsk. They are inclined to afford themselves some “luxuries” and better quality entertainment and leisure. This said, such increases in demand that have been observed still cannot be characterised as more than an elite phenomenon and there are enough pragmatic members of the elite that, even having the means, will not risk their positions and economic prosperity to be associated with the subversive counter-culture, even if only as a consumer. This remains one of the main challenges faced by the counter-cultural community. It is simply counter-intuitive for Belarusians to take such risks as are involved in openly partaking of the counter-culture as consumer or as producer.

And, given the nature of the Lukashenko regime, being active in the counter-culture is certainly not without consequences. As mentioned above, the regime in Belarus tends towards totalitarianism. Opposition of any kind is punished and the authorities use rigid methods of suppression. Respondents to our questionnaire, all of whom belong to the counter-cultural community, complain that the government employs an ever diversifying repertoire of repressive measures ranging from character assassination to making opponents simply disappear without a trace (four such cases have so far been documented. The persons in question have never been heard from again and are presumed murdered).²² The state is both neglectful and actively discriminating. Commercial sponsors fear government reprisals if they support independent cultural activity. The counter-culture can, therefore, only rely on financial and moral support from its enthusiasts and foreign individuals and organisations. Getting involved in any form of independent activity, including the counter-culture, can lead to being expelled from university, being fired from one’s position without the prospect of finding another, forced exile or even acts of violence being committed against one’s person. One way or another, surveillance is expected, harassment by different types of law enforcement agency and general disruption are to be expected. Such harassment and repression has clear social and economic consequences for the persons concerned and their families and acquaintances. In the first place, going underground means one does not have a clear source of income and must endure the hand to mouth existence and marginalisation of organisations that exist in semi-legality. For those that have not yet been forced underground, there is the constant fear that one might lose one’s job or cause trouble for family members, colleagues or friends.

In sum, our respondents characterise the problems facing the counter-culture as follows:

- overly centralised supervision of cultural production by the state;
- rejection of contemporary art and the independence of its subjects;
- strict censorship and violent methods of control;
- absence of young personnel with a modern education adapted to the field of cultural management in the higher echelons of the Ministry of Culture;
- lack of exchange of information between cultural actors from various communities;
- insufficient communication between actors of the counter-culture and international institutions that support cultural projects;
- absence of a cultural market (in the sense of market economy);
- penalisation of potential sponsors through the taxation system;
- isolation of Belarus from the international community and cultural cooperation (as a result of ongoing abuses of human rights);
- suppression of the independent Belarusian language culture;
- suppression of any form of independent civic activity.

The Content of the Counter-Culture

Issues and Themes

In relation to the content of the counter-culture, our respondents candidly refer to their inspiration as intimately related to the social and political reality of Belarus today, the reality which has resulted in their own precarious situation. Clearly, one of the main themes of the art is the regime itself and their struggle against it. This can take the form of the expression of specific values – European, democratic – through artistic expression. Or, it can take the form of the presentation of another perspective on the reality that people are living – the other side of the coin, the not so pretty face of life in Belarus under Lukashenko. In many ways, the performances and art products

²² <http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/WorkingDocs/Doc04/EDOC10062.htm>

of the counter-culture in Belarus are about “human ecology” – real people, real lives, real problems, real value struggles. These “real” stories are about every day heroes. In some way, they replace the missing national heroes Belarus never had the chance to grow. For them, Belarus is a “belated nation”. It has been excluded from “normal European development”, not only as a result of the Lukashenko regime, but because of its integration into the Soviet Union and the vagaries of its earlier history. For the actors of the counter-culture, these stories form the mythology of Belarus’ contemporary struggle for freedom. Independent intellectuals in Belarus also try to understand what the fall of the Soviet Union, independence and dictatorship mean for Belarusian identity formation and the development of Belarus as a modern European nation state.

According to our discussions with respondents at the consultation meeting, Belarusian society is weighed down with taboos. Taboos about politics, about religion, about history, about Belarusian identity, about social relations, about human relations including sexuality and so on. The counter-culture tries through its art to address these taboos. In so doing, it becomes taboo of and in itself – the simple act of doing something which is considered “non-traditional” or outside of mainstream norms makes it suspect, something to speak about in whispers.

In practical terms, for the visual arts, other related genres and in music, this means to engage in aesthetic conflict – to confront the Soviet and contemporary Lukashenko aesthetic with its own moral bankruptcy and to destroy it in the eyes of its audiences and to open up to modern and foreign influences from the contemporary art scene. According to several of our respondents, this means that contemporary art can be quite aggressive – in its imagery, in its message and in its emotional impact. It goes to the heart of the matter, it leaves no space for escape from the hard facts, it shocks. In so doing, the counter-culture develops a form of dialogue – one which is not polite nor politically correct, but which goes to the core of the issue and asks the hard questions: Who are we? What do we want from our lives in this space we call our home, this country of ours? Where this dialogue is established, there can be curiosity, critical thinking about culture and art and about the cultural offer of the regime: should art be about “love of the president” pure and simple? Is passive consumption of mass entertainment culture enough for people living in Belarus? This process of dialogue can be quite painful. Individual lives and personal issues are intimately bound to such questions as are raised by the counter-culture. Theatre and film are good examples of this. Films and plays are developed on the basis of real life stories and individual members of audiences can identify with what is happening, even if the scenario playing is fictional. They can empathize from closer or more distant personal experience. Lives they recognize are mirrored and held up to scrutiny. People are often shocked, but it offers them the opportunity to begin to address their experiences under the dictatorship in an honest manner. It can bring them to admit the need for change. Rock music is not so fraught with emotional hazards for audiences, as they are less involved in the experience of listening to music, even if lyrics may be more explicit in their message. But, in all cases, the products of the counter culture are about establishing open, honest and authentic relationships with audiences so that open, honest and authentic discussions about basic values may develop over time.

Trends

On the basis of the information provided by our respondents and other sources, it has been possible to identify three main trends in the development of the counter-culture in Belarus at present. These refer to civic education using cultural methods and forms, the promotion of Belarusian language culture and diversity within the cultural sphere, and experimentation and diversity in forms of cultural expression and the counter-culture as a subversive “avant garde”. Each of these is dealt with in some further depth below.

Civic education using cultural methods

The effectiveness of the use of cultural methods and forms (theatre, film, literature, music) for the purposes of civic education has been documented the world over. From “edutainment” through “Theatre of the Oppressed”²³ which focus on the development of attitudes and values rather than educating facts, pedagogical approaches to civic education have consistently relied on cultural methods to bring across messages and facilitate difficult debates in sensitive situations. In the Belarusian context, theatre and music have had particular success in sensitising the public to their civic rights and the importance of citizen control over political processes in the country. Young people have responded with particular enthusiasm to the impromptu guerrilla-like performances of the Belarus “Free Theatre” and to the social messages contained popular songs like “*Mayo pakalennye*” (My Generation) of the group NRM (Independent Republic of Dreams).

²³ See www.theatreoftheoppressed.org for a full description of this civic educational methodology developed by Augusto Boal.

Satire has also played an important role. The Belarusian opposition and the counter-culture have drawn heavily on the tradition of dissidence elaborated in the Central and Eastern Europe of the 1970s and 1980s. Excellent examples can be found on <http://www.belzhaba.com/>. Finally, if in the 1970s and 1980s *Samizdat* was the vehicle for the expression of literary freedom and opposition, that tradition has been taken up and carried further on the internet through the publishing of “free literature” and “citizen journalism” on weblogs and internet magazines. On the one hand these promote discussion of relevant issues, on the other they network likeminded activists. It is estimated that there are some 20,000 weblogs in Belarus today. Good examples include www.pozirk.org and <http://blogs.tol.org/belarus>.

Of further importance is the culture criticism magazine *pARTisan*, published by Arthur Klinau. It has only a small, and admittedly, highly specialised readership, but it tackles important social and political debates from the perspective of the artistic community and tries to explore the response that the artistic community could potentially have to these. It is a vehicle for both the expression of opposition and the debate of contemporary socio-cultural issues that are fundamental to the success of change and transformation in Belarus. In the sense that it raises these issues and opens them up for a broader debate, it has a civic educational function, even if only for a small elite within the counter-cultural community. At the same time it provides an important platform for reflexive debate among cultural producers concerning their role in relation to change in Belarus and the post-Lukashenko direction the country and its cultural sector should take. In a recent interview with Artur Klinau in Eurozine (www.eurozine.com) he speaks about the inherently partisan nature of the Belarusian culture historically and today. In the political context of dictatorship that currently exists in Belarus this is an interesting proposition, as the metaphor of culture as guerrilla waging a just and non-violent war on a criminal regime may be motivating to more than just the already “converted”.

Belarusian identity and the promotion of Belarusian language

As explored above, our respondents believe that one of Belarus’ crucial contemporary problems is its identity issue. While Belarusian national consciousness does exist, what it means to be “Belarusian” is neither obvious nor agreed. Lukashenko and his regime have a very circumscribed image of what this is. But, ordinary Belarusians and members of the counter-culture have several others. One of the main points of disagreement is the Belarusian language and its place in the Belarusian identity and citizenship. The authorities have consistently suppressed the Belarusian language in favour of Russian. However, members of the counter-culture consider the Belarusian language to be an important marker of their identity. In terms of cultural production, the use of the Belarusian language is increasingly popular among musicians and film makers, writers and other artists. It has become something of a “medium of resistance”. It is a marker for opposition to the regime and for membership of the counter-culture. It is diametrically opposed to the sovietised Russian language mass cultural offer of the official culture (whether that has been produced in Russia or locally). It is one pole of the polarised Belarusian cultural sector.

But, at the same time as it binds people together in resistance, the use of the Belarusian language is also divisive. Not all Belarusians feel at home speaking and working through Belarusian, but this does not mean they like or support Lukashenko. It is not the mother tongue of all Belarusians, but that does not mean they do not feel Belarusian or consider themselves members of the nation. There are more linguistic and cultural markers that could define the Belarusian nation, even Russian language, no matter how controversial that statement might be. Historically and linguistically, they are intimately intertwined. Modern societies are not exclusively homogenous, even if some people would prefer them to be. Attempts to define Belarusianness more or less only in terms of adherence to the use Belarusian language will necessarily create exclusivities and exclusions.

In the context of the democratic opposition, the cultural “nationalist” element is growing in strength, because it is seen as taking the hard-line against Lukashenko, although it is not alone in doing so, and some opposition politicians who espouse a variety of political positions and take an equally hard-line also speak Russian in public. It is only pragmatic on their part to do so, given that a good part of the electorate is Russian speaking. It probably does not indicate an ideological position, although in the highly polarised political sphere that is Belarus it can be interpreted as such. The counter-culture, in working explicitly and implicitly on the question of Belarusian identity, including the issue of the position of the Belarusian language for Belarusianness, is making an important contribution to overcoming the inevitable divisiveness that characterises the public sphere after the common enemy has been removed and to the elaboration of a longer term vision for the post-Lukashenko development of the country. In this sense, the counter-culture is a truly transformative project because it provides a space and a platform for the discussion of an inclusive Belarusian citizenship that takes into account the leading role of

Belarusian language at the same time as recognising the cultural diversity that has historically been present in Belarus.

Experimentation and diversity of forms of cultural expression: subversion and the “Avant Garde”

As explored in some depth above, the counter-culture is considered by our respondents and most international observers as the sector where cultural innovation can take place. The official culture is characterised as moribund and clearly considers with suspicion any form of cultural experimentation, fearing its “liberating” potential for the population and any open confrontation with the officially promoted value of obedience to the president. In the context of the counter-culture, experimentation and innovation are particularly evident (according to our respondents) in the fields of literature, visual arts, design, theatre and music. There is evidence that these forms of cultural expression and their experimental products are growing in popularity among young people, in particular. In addition, they are considered as intimately associated with resistance to the Lukashenko regime, supporting openly the political opposition or simply voicing their espousal of democratic values. In many ways, those active in the counter-culture consider themselves members of an “avant garde”. While for some this term is loaded with the bad memories of Soviet propaganda, in social science literature it does not have this politicised connotation, but rather is a descriptive category.

According to Webster’s encyclopaedic dictionary “avant garde” refers to:

“... the advance group in any field especially, in the visual, literary or musical arts, whose works are characterised chiefly by unorthodox and experimental methods.”²⁴

While it is clear that the official cultural sector does not correspond to this description, it is worth exploring the extent to which and ways in which the counter-cultural community can be understood in such terms. In relation to the political situation and the conditions that govern the existence of the counter-cultural community, of course, its methods may be understood as unorthodox because they do not correspond to the official definition and purpose of culture. Many observers of the Belarusian situation make the distinction between innovation as “something completely new” and innovation as “something completely new in the context”. This is probably the most appropriate way of considering the cultural production of the counter-culture, as if one were to take into account the latest trends in European contemporary art or culture, it would be difficult to make a comparison. For example, and not unimportantly, cultural innovation also requires financial investments and support that the counter-cultural community in Belarus simply does not have access to. Creativity for the sake of survival cannot be compared to artistic production under normal conditions, economic or political. The kind of isolation experienced by the tiny underground community that calls itself the counter-culture in Belarus has been known to stifle and silence even very strong personalities. Ironically, though, one participant of the consultation meeting pointed to the fact that it is precisely that isolation which forces cultural innovation. There are so few other influences that true artistic talent is expressed in a very pure and unique manner.

On the other hand, the dimension of subversion is clear. Much of the production of the independent cultural sector has been put at the service of the democratic opposition whose stated aim is regime change in Belarus. The consultation meeting revealed several examples of counter-cultural projects in preparation. One funk DJ, for example, has begun to integrate Belarusian poetry into the music he creates, making that which had always been considered irrelevant in relation to youth culture attractive to young people. One musician who attended the meeting is in the process of writing a song entitled “Under Control”. It is about places where people experience control in their everyday lives such as school, the army, work and the ways in which they experience that control. Three interesting theatre based projects were introduced at the meeting. The first foresees a triptych of performances entitled “Legends of Childhood”, that will document the childhoods of several people who are adults today to better understand first, why they are the way they are today and second, what it was like living life “before Lukashenko”. It will, in particular, address the idea of “zones of silence” – aspects of life and society that simply are not spoken about under the current regime. The second will involve three different genres (acting, music and visual art) and is entitled “Monologue for Four Persons”. One actor, one DJ, one painter and one graffiti artist will create simultaneously on one stage in real time in a kind of performance art production. Their common theme is the “mission of the artist”. The third will be a woman’s monologue and will be based on the story of Irina Krasovskaya, whose husband was one of the four persons known to have been disappeared by the regime, presumed murdered.

²⁴ Webster’s encyclopaedic unabridged dictionary of the English language, p. 142.

What is clear from the above is that it is almost impossible to separate the counter-culture, its artistic choices and the contents it espouses from politics. Even if many artists would like to see their product exclusively in artistic terms, and to avoid getting involved in any way in politics, it is difficult because everything, which is different is somehow criminalized. To the extent that this is the case and that artists are daily confronted with the only quasi-choice of succumbing to the regime or resisting it, the independent cultural sector has an explicit transformation project, even if consensus on “transformation to what” among the actors of the counter-culture is not very strong or developed.

Culture and Change in Belarus

If in the Belarusian context, and as described above, the stated objective of the official culture is the ideological education of the citizens, then it is obvious that the function of the counter-culture is dual: first to counteract indoctrination by mirroring the “real” society and second to provide a platform for free expression and identification with values other than those presented by the official culture. In this respect, it is clear that the counter-culture is inherently transformative. Nevertheless, the debate about transformation in Belarus seems to be relatively limited, at least to the untrained eye of an outsider. It appears to be limited to the one overriding common goal of regime change, with the counter-culture having its part to play. Of course, this is more than understandable. The condition for any form of progressive democratisation, Europeanisation or modernisation to take place in Belarus (in the culture or any other sphere) is that Lukashenko be removed from power. Hence, it is clear that there is an overriding priority. But, many actors of the counter-culture also speak of “national rebirth” and “renewal”, the development of a modern nation state, of integration with Europe and the rest of the international community and of the special role that Belarus could play in that community. Their imagination of their country and its place on the world stage goes further than just the removal of the current strong man.

Nevertheless, assessing the extent to which the counter-culture (specific to the Belarusian context) or culture (as a generic vehicle) is in a position to serve both the priority purpose and the longer term change project that its protagonists hope it will, remains a complicated task. The problem is of a structural nature. On the one hand, the counter-culture remains an elite project. Few are involved, few are interested and there is the ever problematic issue of access to larger audiences. Resource penury and growing restrictions by the state make the access problem very difficult to overcome. This remains an important weakness, even if our respondents tell us that audiences are growing. Mass culture as produced by the state, however, is consumed without much question, even if our respondents point to audience fatigue because of the very uninteresting and dusty product being broadcasted. At the same time, culture has been politicised. The state uses its cultural resources for the indoctrination of the people. The counter-culture has tried to counteract that. But, its perceived closeness to the democratic opposition may not always resonate positively with the wider Belarusian population, precisely because of the politicisation of culture. On the other hand, and to its credit, the counter-culture, where it has access to audiences, and especially young people, has had a profound effect on hearts and minds. This is most likely because the actors of the counter-culture take an inherently ethical, rather than instrumental, position of their work. First, the work is art and art of the highest possible quality given the material circumstances. Second, they communicate and defend values through the subject matter of their art. Audiences experiencing the performances of the Belarus “*Free Theatre*” or watching Khashevatsky’s short documentary films are profoundly moved, drawn out of their position as passive spectators and are engaged at the level of their emotional and psychological experience of the regime. People have described their experience as one of “waking up” or “being reborn”. Many have taken the path from private individual minding their own business to critically thinking and reflexive activism within the civic democratic opposition as a result of their contact with the counter-culture. At first glance, then, one would be forgiven for considering the counter-culture to be the handmaiden of the democratic political opposition, the catalyst that would create the necessary reaction. In the opinion of this author, however, this would be naïve. Democratic political theory tells us that regime change to democracy cannot be achieved by civil society alone.²⁵ Political parties are essential. But, the contemporary Belarusian political party spectrum is perceived as fractious, somewhat ego-centric and rather distant from the real concerns of Belarusians. Worse still, they are variously seen as puppets of a variety of differently positioned someones. And, this is where the counter-culture in Belarus can be seen as really different. It does not belong to anyone. It has simply chosen freedom. Ordinary people, once they have the opportunity to get into contact with the counter-culture, understand that choice and position. It is authentic.

²⁵ Forbrig, Joerg and Demes, Pavol (editors), Introduction, in “Reclaiming Democracy – Civil Society and Electoral Change in Central and Eastern Europe”, German Marshall Fund of the United States and Erste Foundation, 2007.

At the same time, the idea of “national rebirth” with which many actors of the counter-culture associate themselves openly is a complex and controversial one, often harking back to 19th century ideas about nationhood and focusing on the steps Belarus was not able to make towards nation-statehood because of the course of history. At the same time, the counter culture espouses European values, human rights, inclusiveness and progressive attitudes to minorities and the development of a modern society. There is necessarily a tension between these positions. So, even if the metaphor of the counter-cultural actor as partisan is an attractive and revealing one from the point of view of a comparison of its guerrilla style methods and clandestine existence, as well as from the point of view of the value it gives to the long history of Belarusian partisanship, it seems difficult to equate the counter-culture partisanship that can be observed in Belarus today with a 19th century style national movement belatedly awoken. The answers of our respondents indicate that counter-cultural partisans are counter-cultural primarily for two distinct reasons. In the first place, for the sake of culture itself, for its quality and authenticity. In the second place they are counter-cultural partisans to liberate their environment from a dictator that makes their lives, professions and existences as artists almost impossible. Even if some espouse higher order national ideals, most are interested in cultural production as a mind-opener and as a space for creative experimentation and not only that which has an underlying political motive, its impact being a deeply emotional for those involved in and touched by it.

It appears to this author, therefore, that the transformation project of the counter-culture in Belarus is intimately bound up with a transformation of political culture and attitudes among the Belarusian people through practical acts of freedom and free thinking rather than being inspired by any specified national political goal beyond the removal of Lukashenko. To this extent, it is inherently modernising. To this extent, it is also inherently generational, in the sense of a generation as people of similar experience. It is to this extent that the counter-culture can be understood as an “avant-garde” and can be understood as having a unique role, distinct from that of the political opposition, to play in changing Belarus for the long run. It is for this reason that the work of the counter-culture must come to be seen as a specific contribution to change, rather than exclusively as a vehicle for articulating political messages and goals.

The Presence and Role of International Actors

The regime in Minsk has chosen to actively isolate itself from international cooperation in the cultural sphere. To the extent that it does not respect the fundamental human rights of its citizens and actively contravenes basic international agreements on standards of accountability and transparency, it has incurred both anger and sanctions on the part of international organisations active in Europe and globally. For example, and as mentioned above, the European Union has imposed a travel ban on some thirty top officials of the regime and decided recently to withdraw Belarus from its system of trade preferences. The United States has imposed a variety of sanctions under the provisions of its, recently renewed, “Belarus Democracy Act”. Human rights abuses in Belarus have been investigated by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, leading to the expulsion of Belarus from the activities of the Council of Europe under the European Cultural Convention. With the 2006 presidential elections Belarus has gained notoriety of the worst kind, and is openly referred to by prominent members of the international community as the “last dictatorship in Europe” whose international contacts are limited to the likes of Presidents Ahmedinejad of Iran or Chavez of Venezuela.

In the culture field in Europe, Belarusian officials have been excluded from processes of cultural cooperation in such as that promoted by the Council of Europe,²⁶ although some “official” cultural producers such as state run classical music orchestras and ensembles are still invited to participate in festivals or cultural exchanges by their equivalents in other countries. And, of course, there is Belarus’ enduring participation in the Eurovision song contest. The independent cultural field is, however, an active participant in those processes of European and international cultural cooperation that choose to invite them to participate, can support their participation financially and can facilitate their travel to international events and conferences. Our respondents mention their participation in such international activities as essentially important to the survival and development of the independent culture sector because only those who live and work inside the country can authentically raise the awareness of the outside world to the situation and need for more attention to be paid to Belarus. Nevertheless, most would characterise opportunities for international cooperation as under-developed and fraught with complications.

So while Belarusian artists still have the opportunity to exhibit and perform abroad, according to our respondents, the demand in other countries for their cultural products is relatively limited to neighbouring countries, émigré

²⁶ For example the Compendium on Cultural Policies and Trends in Europe (www.culturalpolicies.net).

communities, activists and organisations promoting democracy or change in Belarus from abroad or interested parties in the international community. For example, Belarusian independent music is quite well known in Poland and Ukraine. Nevertheless, those who have the opportunity to perform or exhibit abroad are received with applause and the quality of their production has been praised. For example, the Belarus “Free Theatre”, which is a member of the European Theatre Convention, has been nominated for the prestigious Europe Theatre Prize in 2008 by playwright Harold Pinter (the 2007 laureate), former President of the Czech Republic and playwright Vaclav Havel (the 2002 laureate) among others²⁷ and Arthur Klinau’s book “Minsk: the Sun City of Dreams” has been published by the acclaimed German publishing house *Subrkamp*.²⁸

Our respondents cited the following concrete artists and culture producers as being well known both at home and abroad in their responses to our questionnaire (this list is certainly not exhaustive):

- documentary filmmaker Yuri Khashevatsky (most recent film “Ploshcha”)
- author Svetlana Aleksievich (known for her oral history entitled “Voices from Chernobyl”)
- playwrights, including Nikolay Khalezin, Natalya Koliada, Konstantin Steshik and Pavel Priazhko (who form the Belarus “Free Theatre”)
- singer Lyavon Volski and rock group NRM (*Independent Republic of Dreams*)
- architect and author Artur Klinau (editor of *pARTisan*)
- painter Alexander Rodzin (working at the *Tacheles* Art Centre in Berlin, Germany)
- the satirical project “*Sasha i Sirozha*” of Alexey Khatskevich and Syarhey Mikhalok (on Ukrainian TV)
- music groups *Liapis Trubetskoy* (popular in Russia and Ukraine), *Krama*, *Nejra Dżiubel*, and others
- photographer Andrei Liankevich
- Syarhey Sakharau, journalist and magazine editor, and Vital Supranowytsh, musician (NGO *Belarusian Musical Alternative*)
- Navinki Home Video

It became clear during the consultation meeting that émigré cultural producers are not very present in the independent cultural scene in Belarus. Our respondents indicate that they personally have little contact with émigré cultural actors and only one or two could be considered an important actor of the cultural scene at home. Our respondents speculated about the reasons for this. On the one hand it was mentioned that Belarusians abroad often have difficulty identifying themselves as members of a “Diaspora” as some other national groups have done traditionally. Many of the relevant persons of the culture sphere were exiled and, therefore, the regime is careful not to let them access audiences inside Belarus. Their cultural products and their names have more or less been removed from the public sphere. In figurative terms they have “disappeared”. One exception seems to be contemporary artist and painter Lyavon Tarasevich, a member of the Belarusian Diaspora living in Poland, whose art is well known there. In addition, there is the continued problem of the “poaching” of young talent from Belarus by Russia or other countries. This is a deliberate and accidental phenomenon at one and the same time. On the one hand, young talents leave as opportunity arises in order to pursue their studies and develop as artists. Russia is an obvious destination given the relative ease of the visa regime for Belarusians and the fact that language is not an issue. On the other hand, they have a tendency to a. become the property of their patrons and b. forget where they came from because there is simply no chance for them to make a living or a name for themselves at home.

Very few international actors and their cultural programmes are in a position to have a presence inside Belarus. In addition, the regime is very cautious about the kind of mass entertainment it imports from the West, fearing that it may raise questions among its consumers. Another factor is that touring or performing in Belarus is not what one would consider particularly profitable so few international stars would choose to hold large scale concerts there. Hence, there is a very minor international cultural presence inside country. According to our respondents, the main foreign cultural offer available in Belarus is Russian, mostly in the form of literature and mass entertainment in the form of television and popular music. But, according to one respondent, since full identification of the Belarusian culture with that of Russia is no longer politically expedient for the regime (the project of state union has basically been shelved) there has been a decrease in the quantity and variety of Russian cultural products being imported into the country recently. The regime has chosen to invest quite heavily in supporting the production of “home grown” Russian language pop music.

International organisations of a variety of kinds are active in supporting the independent cultural sector through broader programmes of democracy assistance to Belarusian civil society and the political opposition from outside

²⁷ http://dramaturg.org/?lang=en&menu=expand_article&article_id=8886876472.

²⁸ <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2006-08-02-klinau-en.html>.

the country. Culture is recognised by the international community as a vehicle for change and has had an important role to play in regime change to democracy in other countries of the post-Soviet space. In particular, the international community has tended to focus on large scale free media and independent and objective information projects, but these are only marginally related to the sphere of independent culture as represented by the majority of our respondents. Such international media projects include the *European Radio for Belarus* (<http://www.belradio.fm/>), *Radio Ratsya* (<http://www.racja.pl/>), the Belarus programme on *Deutsche Welle* radio (<http://www.dw-world.de>) and the *BelSAT* satellite TV programme that will be launched in November 2007.

These internationally financed projects concerning Belarus and involving Belarusian cultural producers can only take place outside the country. This is hardly surprising, as for the most part even contact with international donors is punished and active cooperation for the establishment of a project is simply out of the question. Most non-governmental organisations that have managed to maintain any form of independence (in or outside the culture field) are no longer even able to legally register and cannot maintain a bank account. International organisations can rarely conduct grant-making in such environments. Their accountability procedures are simply too strict and inflexible. Some of our respondents question the effectiveness of this strategy if change is indeed the aim, pointing to the need to support the independent cultural sector inside the country, given that they are also a conduit to the broader Belarusian public.

Counter-cultural elements are often part of broader civil society efforts for change, such as the voter information, education and mobilisation that took place around the 2006 presidential elections and the youth and protest movements that continue to be active inside Belarus. Civic activists use cultural and educational approaches to sensitise the public to the importance of defending their civic and political rights, be it in the form of solidarity concerts such as the “Big Jeans Fest” in August 2006, in the form of documentary movies such as *“Plosbcha”* that gave a detailed account of the March 2006 protests or more broadly through imagery, slogans and campaign materials that clearly bear the counter-cultural mark. Importantly, these civil society efforts take place inside the country. This has only been made possible due to the very flexible approach to grant-making (small scale funding provided to projects in a non-bureaucratic and “fast” manner) of some donors supporting civic initiatives in Belarus. On the other hand, these projects are not “culture” projects per se and focus on the development of a democratic political culture among the Belarusian public rather than on cultural development and support to artistic production.

In this relation, some of our respondents complain that projects that are inherently cultural, rather than political (i.e. that do not have an explicit political message), do not receive enough support from foreign donors, because such donors are rather fixated on their common goal of removing Lukashenko. At the same time, they complain that many cultural actors are forced into the donor-driven logic of producing projects that meet donor-determined criteria rather than those that would further develop the capacity of the counter-culture to meet its own goals. One respondent points to the fact that this has a tendency to result in poor-quality cultural production and the sacrifice of artistic values to the needs of politics, something one might also accuse the regime of. While this is an important criticism and one that should be taken seriously, it is also a classical development dilemma, faced not only by the counter-culture in Belarus, but by the broader civic sector in Belarus, other former-Soviet countries and on other continents. It remains difficult to assess how criticisms of a lack of interest, a lack of flexibility and a donor driven logic vis a vis the financing of culture projects in Belarus is being dealt with by the international community. This author’s, admittedly somewhat limited, experience of interaction with such donors indicates, however, that such criticisms are rarely enough taken on board and constitute a critical weakness of the approach of the international donor community to change in Belarus.

In the opinion of our respondents, international actors active in the cultural field could be doing more to support the counter-culture and, specifically, to support its constructive contribution to change. Processes that encourage individuals and collectives to believe in their power to change their own environment, to act more autonomously and to mutually support each other are essential to creating the conditions for change in Belarus. The counter-cultural community is an essential platform for such a process to be developed with the assistance of the international community. But, the initiative has to come from inside the country. Our respondents believe that the donor-driven logic apparent in some funding programmes could even be detrimental to the cause of change in Belarus. At the same time, it is clear that the amount of resources available from the international community for counter-cultural activity per se is insufficient and that the mechanisms for the distribution of what there is need to be improved.

Perspectives and Opportunities for Change through Culture in Belarus

Measures

Our respondents point to a variety of issues which limit their ability to “do better” as concerns change. These barriers can be grouped under two main categories, as follows:

Conditions

- the difficult circumstances for functioning: lack of financial and other resources, difficulty to find and afford premises for performances, issue of legality of performances, no opportunity to publish, harassment by the authorities, etc;
- the disillusionment of the public with “the political” and the association of the counter-culture with “the political”;
- the insufficiency of international support for pure culture projects inside the country;
- the generally unquestioning attitude of the broad population towards the regime and their socio-economic situation;
- the insufficiency of international attention to the situation of the Belarusian counter-culture.

Capacity

- overall lack of resources for functioning and lack of flexibility of international funding mechanisms vis a vis the specific conditions of the counter-culture in Belarus; difficulty of underground organisations to absorb significant resources in their difficult and precarious circumstances;
- limited outreach of the counter-culture to the broader Belarusian public;
- exclusiveness of certain elements of the political opposition concerning the democratisation project;
- differences of opinion between cultural and political actors – unformed consensus on key political issues beyond regime change;
- lack of clandestine partners inside the official culture;

In this relation, the consultation meeting identified four categories of specific measures that could be undertaken by a variety of international donor and support organisations, including those in the cultural field, interested in the promotion of change and transformation in Belarus. Our respondents called on the international community to reconsider its somewhat fragmented and overly politics focused approach to the transformation of Belarus. They believe that at the international level, a common strategy for Belarus should be worked out with the participation of all international structures and personalities interested in transformation processes in the country. This will ensure the effective use of the relatively limited resources available internationally for assistance to independent activity in Belarus. Any such strategy should take into account the multiplicity of needs of the opposition, in the broadest understanding of that category and should not only focus on the political actors of change working for democratisation in Belarus. Our respondents believe that the international community could be instrumental in encouraging the democratic opposition political parties to be more inclusive and cooperative with the independent culture sector. Their efforts to transform the political sphere will not be successful without the support of greater numbers of young, urban and educated Belarusians but their communication strategies are not able to capture the imagination of their natural constituency and to keep them active. The counter-culture is naturally positioned to provide capacity in this relation. To facilitate the emergence of better quality cooperation and partnership inside the independent sector in Belarus, the funding strategies of international donors should be corrected to include direct support for the expansion of the countercultural field, including the development of flexible context adapted funding mechanisms, such as “fast” small grant programmes that are not highly bureaucratised.

Resource development

- the development of new funding mechanisms for the explicit support of promising and relevant cultural projects inside Belarus as an additional aspect of the support for democratisation currently available;
- the provision of fast, small scale, non-bureaucratic grants to the widest spectrum of culture projects possible;
- the provision of financial and material support for inherently cultural projects, which do not necessarily have an explicitly political message;
- the provision of material support to Belarusian language and related projects.

Outreach inside Belarus

- the provision of material support to underpin and grow existing networking projects created by the counter-cultural community (existing internet platforms, art criticism magazines like *pARTisan*, etc);
- the development of culture promotion projects that involve the domestic free media;
- the provision of support to the emergence of an independent Belarusian pop and contemporary music offer;
- the provision of support to independent cultural projects for children and other audiences that are rarely reached by the independent culture, especially using the Belarusian language.

Education and capacity building

- the organisation of foreign language courses for artists with the aim of facilitating international communication;
- the organisation of project development and management workshops for cultural actors to improve capacity for accessing sustainable funding and devising sustainable cultural development strategies;
- the provision of opportunities for young, progressive cultural actors and managers to receive relevant education and to develop their managerial capacities;
- the creation of training and education projects for the current and future staffers of the cultural field in Belarus.

Networking and international exchange / solidarity

- the creation of a broad based exchange and mobility program for culture actors from Belarus towards Europe and the United States (short study visits, common creative activities abroad, promotion of contacts between art schools and artistic groups on a formal and informal basis);
- the promotion of high visibility joint projects between foreign and Belarusian artists;
- the launching of artistic competitions to support and promote Belarusian artists;
- the creation of new communication channels and opportunities between Belarusian and international institutions and cultural actors;
- the encouragement of internationally known cultural actors to “take up the Belarusian cause” in the international media;
- the encouragement of international media to keep the Belarus situation of the counter-culture and Belarus in the news;
- the encouragement of internationally renowned artists and political personalities of Belarusian origin to take up the cause of change to democracy in Belarus on the international public sphere and media.

Perspectives and Opportunities

Whether outside commentators and supporters of the democratisation efforts of the civic opposition like it or not, it has to be admitted that the ability of the counter-culture in Belarus to be an effective force for change is intimately bound up with how long the Lukashenko regime can hold out and the extent to which its resources for repression have reached the limits of their effectiveness. The very survival of the counter-culture is determined by how far the regime will go to stop it from getting its message across to the wider public as much as by its own determination to survive and continue its work for change. In this sense, the metaphor of guerrilla warfare is rather appropriate, with the exception that it is the regime that tends towards violence rather than the counter-culture. As the opening quote heading this report intimates, there is little point in referring to modernisation and Europeanisation in the context of Lukashenko’s Belarus. One might say that democratisation in this context is the requirement for the other processes to even begin. Life, it seems, begins after Lukashenko. In this relation, the attitude of the international community is crucial, as it will remain next to impossible to access material support for democratisation from sources inside the country. First, the overall preponderance of the international community to favour support to political rather than cultural actors is a factor. Second, the availability of support that is adapted to the conditions of the counter-culture is limited. The counter-culture will not be able to do its job in the short or even medium term without access to basic survival resources. It is, after all, made up of real people in really precarious situations.

In addition, if the unity of the political opposition is seen by commentators of the political situation as one of the key factors determining the effective communication of democratic messages to the Belarusian public and the pre-requisite for any increase in support for the opposition, it might be assumed that a united front between the counter-culture and political opposition could provide impetus to the democratisation project. Contact and cooperation do exist, of course, as demonstrated by the experience of the March 2006 pre-election campaigns to raise awareness among Belarusian citizens about their right to free and fair elections. However, the consensus

among the political opposition and its counter-cultural supporters that is required for the democratisation project to succeed is still fledgling. Our respondents openly refer to their support of the democratic opposition as required by the current situation. They would, it seems, be less inclined to support such political leaders or parties in other circumstances and even admit that they do not feel particularly represented by the leaders of the democratic opposition. Continued in-fighting between politicians of the opposition, the recent replacement of the single candidate Alexander Milinkevich by a council of political party leaders, difficult relationships between opposition parties and civil society and the arrogant attitude of some political leaders to the position and function of the civic actors supporting democratisation efforts demonstrate the continued need to maintain an open debate about this consensus and that it is necessary to reconsider it on a regular basis, something that political leaders are not particularly inclined to engage with.

It is also clear that sustained, local, people-to-people work to develop the critical thinking, attitudes of reflexivity and the political culture of a larger number of people is needed. To this end, civic education using cultural methods is an attractive mechanism, one that has been espoused by the civic democracy and protest movements for communicating with citizens. At the same time, pure culture projects (i.e. those projects without an explicit political message) have their role to play, especially if they are of an experimental nature and espouse free expression in a variety of forms, having the potential as they do to profoundly affect the individual's emotions and psychology. Hence, opening up this counter-culture to a larger and more diversified audience will be an essential contribution to the democratisation of Belarus. Unfortunately, this is easier said than done and to date, the required scale of financial and moral support for such work to be carried out effectively inside the country has not been available. The capacity of the counter-culture to absorb such support, given its underground nature, is also an issue. The extent to which the counter-culture, given its current structural circumstances, could use inordinately larger sums of money, is an open question. But, in the opinion of this author low-level technical assistance and capacity building, as well as more flexible work practices on the part of donors, would probably go the majority of the way to addressing that.

International support of a higher order, a more concerted and coordinated nature and a more reflected kind than that which has been available so far is certainly necessary. A broad based dialogue between the counter-culture in Belarus and its erstwhile supporters abroad with the aim of understanding their specific needs in terms of support is yet to take place. While the motivation of international donors "to do something on Belarus" seems to be high, their capacity and knowledge for doing so in practise tends to be another issue. The kind of needs analysis that donors tend to require of their grantees as part of project funding proposals is rarely undertaken in the development of new funding programmes in the experience of this author and that is a major weakness, especially vis a vis a situation as sensitive and delicate as that of Belarus. Overall, the major problem for the counter-culture in Belarus is that its projects do not even qualify as eligible to apply for grants. If a donor is not able to provide small-scale fast cash grants to essentially underground organisations that have no legal registration and that cannot receive funds to a bank account it will be difficult to make a significant impact at the grass roots level in Belarus.

It is hard to predict if the political situation in Belarus will undergo significant change anytime soon. Obvious as this statement may seem, this means the counter-culture and the international donor community needs to be prepared first, for the long haul and second, for the operating conditions of the independent civic sector including the counter-culture to worsen before they get better. More obvious is that democratic change will have a better chance of succeeding if the counter-culture is empowered beyond its current capacity. Disillusionment with political parties and with politicians is widespread in Belarus, and this plays into the hands of the Lukashenko regime. The counter-culture, and the underground civil society more broadly, may not be a substitute for a viable opposition that could push for change in Belarus, but both together can contribute to change by influencing the attitudes of citizens, and by encouraging individuals to think and act critically, and maybe this kind of communication with the ordinary Belarusian is something that is better suited to actors of the counter-culture given their "authenticity". There is mileage in the case for "biding one's time" and actively preparing oneself for that "window of opportunity" for democratic change that will, without doubt, open up one day.

This report has been compiled on the basis of information collected by questionnaire, secondary source research and a consultation meeting with leading figures from the independent culture sector conducted in Kiev, Ukraine in June 2007. The Rapporteur Generale prepared a draft report using the information contained in the questionnaires received from a limited number of respondents working actively in different branches of the culture sector as well as publicly available material written in English and Russian. The ECF/GMF EE RG team travelled to Kiev, Ukraine to meet a cross-section of relevant actors from Belarus to build a more in-

depth picture of the situation of the culture sector and its potential as an agent of change. Based on the consultation meeting, the draft report was expanded and refined.

The present document is the final result of the situation assessment undertaken. Its preparation forms part of a wider process to document the situation and potential of the culture sectors in Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine with a view of understanding how an international partnership such as that between ECF and GMF can contribute to supporting the contribution of the cultural sphere to transformation processes, in particular processes of Europeanisation, modernisation and democratisation, in those countries and the region of Eastern Europe more broadly. This country report will be included in a synthesis report outlining the common trends in the situations of the culture sector in the three countries and strategic approaches for the international community to underpin the efforts of cultural actors of change in the region.

The ECF/GMF team would like to thank all those who have contributed to the development of the Eastern European Reflection Group process and the preparation of this reports, not least those cultural actors of change who have contributed with their motivation, time and commitment to the Europeanisation, modernisation and democratisation of their respective countries.

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