

The actual situation in Belarus

Interview with the Belarus Author Hanna Komar
for the »Kulturpolitische Mitteilungen« by Ulrike Blumenreich



Hanna Komar is an award-winning Belarusian poet and translator based in Minsk, working at the Belarusian PEN Centre. Hanna has been a part of the alternative literary scene since 2015 and has been actively involved in civic and cultural resistance following the presidential election on 9 August 2020.

The interview for the »Kulturpolitische Mitteilungen« (Journal for Cultural Policy) was conducted by Ulrike Blumenreich. A shortened version is printed in the »Kulturpolitische Mitteilungen« in German. Please find here the original interview.

Role of arts and culture in Belarus

Could you please describe the role of arts and culture in Belarus before the presidential election in August 2020 and since then?

The independent arts and culture, for a long time being in underground, having no governmental support and often facing pressure and persecution on the side of the government, have

nonetheless not only preserved the genuine Belarusian culture and language, but made it recognized internationally. For a long time, independent Belarusian culture has existed not thanks to but in spite of, made by great artists, musicians, writers, performers, etc. for little or no money, presented at events organized by volunteers, with limited art spaces and almost no media coverage and no reach to the wide audience through the national television and media, education, etc. While the official culture has had much more resources, it remains out-dated, formal, disconnected from the needs of a real human in the modern world, navigated by the ideology. So I was surprised after the protest began in August to have found out that the values we've been promoting turned out to be the values of the many, and that was when we could finally show the culture we'd created in those underground conditions, and people were craving for it.

It's been around culture that people have united after the election 2020. Activities in the neighbourhoods have become a feature of our cities perhaps for the first time since the Soviet collective tradition disappeared. People have opened Belarusian music and poetry which gave voice to their pain, hopes and joys, their memories and dreams, their past and present; Belarusian philosophers and thinkers whose lectures previously of interest for narrow circles suddenly gathered hundreds of people; our historical symbols which the majority used to be indifferent about have become main symbols of the protest, and they are becoming more so the more severe repressions get. One can get administrative arrest or be fined for a white-red-white umbrella or white-red-white paper snowflakes in one's window, and so every such thing becomes an act of resistance in itself. Along with every song and film, every performance and online concert, every poem and street art piece.

Current situation in general

Can you give us a little insight into the concrete cultural work on the ground and the obstruction of the work by the political system, using a few examples?

A lot of arts and culture projects over the last few years had been realized largely due to crowdfunding: exhibitions and photo books, performances, festivals, poetry collections, musical albums, films. Another significant part of the projects was realized with the help of patrons. Viktor Babaryka, a philanthropist and former CEO of Belgazprombank, presidential challenger, and his son Eduard Babaryka – who headed the cultural crowdsourcing and fundraising platforms *Ulej* and *MolaMola*, became some of the first political prisoners during the presidential campaign 2020. The criminal case against Belgazprombank led to the seizure of paintings from Belgazprombank's corporate collection and paralyzed the work of the *Ulej* and *MolaMola* crowdfunding platforms. Thus a lot of cultural projects were frozen, but it didn't stop the arts and cultural workers who've been at the forefront of the resistance after the election.

The Belarusian Cultural Solidarity Foundation (<https://byculture.org/>) was created in autumn 2020 to support the creative sphere representatives suffering from repressions.

The Belarusian PEN Centre (<https://pen-centre.by/en>) and the Union of Belarusian Writers (<https://lit-bel.org/information-in-english>) have been working a lot and implemented dozens of projects aimed at defending Belarusian culture, defending freedom of expression and the rights of writers, fostering the development of Belarusian literary process, raising the status of the

Belarusian language and literature. They organize a wide range of activities, from public readings to creative writing workshops to international poetry festivals.

Lohvinau bookstore in Minsk for two decades had been a hub hosting and gathering people with the interest in books in the Belarusian language. Book launches, discussions, readings of local and international authors, festivals were held in this legendary bookshop.

Before the building which was housing the bookshop was sold for the development of commercial residential area in its place, it had been neighbouring the *Ÿ Gallery* of contemporary art (<https://en.ygallery.by/>). The gallery had been hosting not only leading art exhibitions by Belarusian and international artists and collectives but also gave space to social events, ran art residencies, implemented educational programs. Its co-founder Aliaksandr Vasilevich, detained on August 28 by representatives of the Financial Investigation Department, is recognized as a political prisoner.

The »ART Belarus« project (<https://artbelarus.by/en/about.html>), which originated from the Belgazmporbank collection, has aimed at reconstruction of links between cultural and historic heritage and induced to develop contemporary Belarusian art. The corporate collection of Belgazmporbank (<https://artbelarus.by/en/collection.html>) contains about 150 works worth \$20 million by the artists born within the borders of the modern Republic of Belarus whose names gained wide public recognition; on June 14 it was seized by representatives of Belarusian authorities as part of the alleged tax evasion and money laundering by the bank board. Belarus Free Theatre (<https://www.belarusfreetheatre.com/>) is an independent theatrical company led by political refugees in the UK. In Belarus, it has performed in private apartments and underground spaces since its creation in 2005, and after it was banned by the Belarusian government after presidential election 2010 directors Nikalai Khalezin and Natalia Kaliada had to flee and received political asylum, they have been restlessly drawing international attention to the political repressions in Belarus.

Tuzin.fm is a private Belarusian web-portal which was created in 2003 to cover musical creativity in Belarus in order to promote music written in Belarus and motivate a wider audience to listen to Belarusian songs. It's by far the biggest and most prominent resource dedicated to Belarusian music and its contribution is immense, as it also organized a number of prominent music events, festivals and music contests, supported release of albums, arranged concerts.

Art space and a cultural hub OK16 was located on the territory of a former factory in Minsk. Within the space, creative initiatives were developed and supported: festivals, international conferences, exhibitions, etc. It was sponsored by Belgazprombank, and Maryja Kalesnikava was its director before the start of the election campaign 2020. It was closed in January 2021 following the instruction of the Ministry of Emergency Situations, in fact, being targeted by the government along with many other independent art and cultural spaces around Belarus.

Could you inform us about the current situation of artistic freedom and press freedom?

According to the monitoring conducted by the Belarusian PEN Centre (<https://pen-centre.by/en/2021/01/28/bez-prava-na-kulturu-belarus-2020.html>), there have been systemic

violations of the international documents related to culture ratified by the Republic of Belarus. The Code of Culture, the main statute for cultural life, creates conditions for systemic violations implemented in law enforcement practice.

Quoting the data from the report,

»Experts and cultural activists note several problems related to both the legislation regulating cultural activities and the particularities of law enforcement practice. Among them:

- The restrictive nature and selective application of certain norms. The confusion and vagueness of Belarusian legislation contribute to the selective application of the rules of law. It makes it possible to use the same rules of law for both prohibitions and permits in different cases.
- In law enforcement practice, state cultural institutions always have an advantage, while selectivity applies to non-state institutions. The government almost entirely excluded non-state organizations from the practice of public support, subsidies, and preferences, which apply (with few exceptions) only to state cultural institutions.
- Existing legislation leaves room for discrimination and ignores great cultural diversity. The principle of non-discrimination of various social groups and communities is not directly established by Belarusian legislation, although its basic principles guarantee it (ensuring the right of everyone to take part in cultural life, ensuring equal rights and opportunities for citizens, preventing the establishment of advantages and privileges, etc.). Some provisions of the Code of Culture, which provide for special conditions for access to culture for particular groups, speak only of people with disabilities, residents of rural areas, and youth. However, the Code does not mention other social groups: gender, national, subcultural, etc., although in law enforcement practice these groups often face unreasonable restrictions.
- Obstacles and very limited opportunities for gaining access to international funding. First, the authorities strictly regulate the receipt of foreign grant aid, including the list of purposes for which it can be aimed. Secondly, the receipt of such assistance for many non-governmental organizations is associated with problems of an ideological nature and problems of extreme subjectivity of state bodies when issuing permits and other bureaucratic formalities.
- Civil society organizations have limited capacity in decision-making and policy-making in the field of culture. NGOs have only an advisory voice and should be invited to the discussion by state bodies, although the Code of Culture fixes the forms and mechanisms of interaction between public and state structures.«

All in all, over 2020 PEN Belarus collected 593 cases of violations of cultural rights. The numbers increased rapidly beginning from August, with the largest proportion of violations concerning theatre workers, musicians and writers.

Some organizations, such as Press Club Belarus and Belarusian Association of Journalists, face direct repressions – arrest of its managers and employees, searches of their offices and equipment confiscated, while others are affected in different ways, for example, they can't find

space for running their events; first of all, a lot of Belarusian culture-friendly spaces have closed, others have to deal with the pressure and inspections of the financial police, others are afraid of being closed for hosting this or that event held by a non-governmental organization whose civic and political statement is clearly pronounced.

Repressions of media and press continue as well (<https://baj.by/en/analytics/figures-year-repression-media-and-journalists-belarus-2020>.) Journalists are facing administrative and criminal charges, independent newspapers, among them quite a few regional ones, can't be printed as banned by the government, others had to close for financial reasons, but considering that the authorities don't allow them selling copies and exclude them from Belarusian postal subscription, that is also political. People distributing independent press are also detained and sentenced to administrative arrests or fines.

Your personal current situation

What is driving you? What is inspiring you?

The biggest and only inspiration for me as an author now is the ongoing fight of Belarusians for justice. Our revolution. It's also my biggest concern as a citizen. What I want to do is write about my personal experience as of someone who's been participating in the events beginning from June 2020, but also I want to record other people's stories. I know a lot about the women's revolution in Belarus but I'm curious about the experience of men too, I want to explore the experience from the perspective of how this revolution has acquired a womanly face and how it's changed our strongly patriarchal society.

What is the current situation for you personally?

I currently feel pretty exhausted from this everyday terror in my country. You can't turn it off, news is coming in all the time: detentions, convictions, tortures, persecution of activists, cultural spaces and culture-friendly businesses closing down, friends immigrating, the picture is getting more and more frightening. They say the darkest hour is before the dawn, well then feels like we're only at the beginning of that dark night and the darkness is growing deeper. But if I focus on action, it feels better.

I myself only feel good at the time when I do something for the revolution, even the tiniest thing. I'd like to write more, but spend the precious time on reading news or feeling anxious, or on protesting together with the others.

Do you fear personal repressive measures?

After being released from 9 days of administrative arrest back in September 2020, police tried to reach me again to notify about another administrative case against me. They called me so I had to change my phone number (and still feel paranoid to pick up when an unknown number is calling) and even my parents' neighbors, inquiring if I was living in that apartment. I refused paying for the 9 days in jail (when you're released, you are obliged to pay for each day of your imprisonment because you had food, water and electricity) of my illegal arrest, but they kept sending notifications to my parents' address and in the end threatened to detain me for non-payment, so I gave in. After that they let me be. But it doesn't mean that I feel safe, no one here

can feel safe. I'm worried about the changes in the Code of Administrative Offenses which came into force on 1 March. According to them, the fines, already significantly high, doubled, and the minimum administrative term doubled to 30 days if you've had one before. The crackdown on the journalist and human rights defenders has been immense over February and March, so every day you expect them to come for you, take you, your savings and belongings, accuse you of a criminal offense for organizing mass riots or financing them, and no one will be able to help. And every time you go out to protest, sometimes just going out to a grocery's, you risk being detained.

Coordination Council

With Svetlana Alexievich, Maryja Kalesnikava and Paval Latushka 3 of the 7 people are stakeholders of the cultural field. How could you explain the high proportion of those?

It's true that the board of the Coordination Council, the representative body of the Belarusian people, has been largely made up from the people engaged in art and culture to smaller or bigger extent. Maryja Kalesnikava (musician and art manager), Paval Latushka (former minister of culture and head of the Yanka Kupala National Theatre whose 58 employees resigned in protest with the election fraud and the post-election police brutality), Svetlana Alexievich (writer, Nobel Laureate), Maksim Znak (along with being a lawyer, he is a poet and musician).

Among the 5531 members of the Council, there are other representatives of the arts and culture sphere, for example, Anzhalika Krasheuskaya, Director of the Centre for Visual and performative arts ART Corporation, Andrej Kureichyk, screenwriter, playwright, director and publicist, Volha Shparaha, philosopher, professor and writer, to name a few.

It makes total sense to me that the proportion of people from cultural field in the Coordination Council is so high. In my opinion, people engaged with culture are more progressive and open-minded, they are less inclined to fit in the system and tend to be proactive, see the processes in the society and drive the change. They themselves are driven by the humanistic values, for them human's life, dignity and respect, love and truth, rule of law and justice for all the people are as important as their personal wellbeing. They strive to learn and grow, they travel the world and see how people in other countries live and how systems work, thus bringing progressive ideas to the communities in their countries.

Which role does have the coordinating council at the current situation, since members are imprisoned and out of Belarus?

Despite the fact that out of seven members of the Board, two are in prison and another three are out of Belarus, it continues being the body which represents the Belarusian people. It consists of nine working groups focusing on various fields, they initiate and carry out projects essential for the development and support of the democratic civil society in Belarus.

Support from abroad

What is your perception of the reaction from abroad in general and specific from the cultural field?

From what I can see, Belarus and its people fighting for justice have received a lot of support from abroad. Belarusian diasporas overseas have been working a lot in order to draw attention and show solidarity with the Belarusian people. The same is done by artists, musicians, actors, writers, etc. around the world. With the support from their communities and authorities of the countries they live in they organize exhibitions, theatre shows, book publications, solidarity concerts, and so on and so forth. Some of those raise awareness, others call for action from their governments or raise funds for those in Belarus who need them.

Which kind of measures of support and solidarity – if you could make a wish – what would it be?

If you ask me personally I would probably go for more direct pressure on our governmental bodies. Open letters and petitions sent to Belarusian Ministries and representatives and not just published online, meetings of foreign officials with them. It's hard to tell what else one could do because the illegitimate Belarusian government brushes off any claims and calls towards them by the international community, but I believe it's important to remember that the system is not Lukashenka alone, it's all those people following the orders, and we need to do our best to reach them and change their perspective.

So I can say that the support is immense, and without it it'd be much harder for us to keep up the fight for our rights.

Between Belarus and German special connection are existing – not only that Maryia Kalesnikava came back to Minsk from Stuttgart (being imprisoned since the 7 of September 2020) but also that Svetlana Alexievich left Belarus and came to Germany (at the 28 of September). In what way the stakeholders from cultural policy, artists and cultural institutions from Germany can support your work and that of your colleagues?

I personally as an author and on behalf of our big cultural community want to express how much we appreciate the support we receive from Germany! I know that in Germany residencies are provided for artists and writers, performances about the events in Belarus are staged, publications of Belarusian authors and texts about Belarus are supported, Belarusian authors are translated, places are offered at universities to the expelled Belarusian students and dismissed professors, music festivals and art exhibitions are organized, I can go on and on and consider these all truly helpful and valuable, and it would be great if this work can be continued. Also, collaborating with individuals, collectives and organizations, not only cultural ones but also those dealing with human rights from Belarus would help, as well as affecting decision makers on the German side that could influence the decision makers in Belarus.

PEN Belarus produces weekly digest covering the situation in the sphere of Belarusian culture during the social and political crisis (<https://pen-centre.by/en/tag/culture-resistance>), it can give both a view of what is going on and perhaps some ideas on what to do.