

# **HIDDEN TRUTHS**

**Music, Politics and Censorship in Lukashenko's Belarus**

**Lemez Lovas & Maya Medich**

**FREEMUSE**

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### **MUSIC, POLITICS AND CENSORSHIP IN LUKASHENKO'S BELARUS**

**By: Lemez Lovas & Maya Medich**

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## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Preface	4
Summary	
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>7</b>
Map & Facts	
Brief Historical Outline	
Presidential Powers	
Human Rights	
Religion	
Freedom of Expression/Legal	
Freedom of Expression/Media	
<b>CHAPTER ONE: CENSORSHIP AND IDEOLOGY – A SOVIET LEGACY</b>	<b>14</b>
Freedom to Speak	
Independence, Revolution and Post-Soviet Culture	
<b>CHAPTER TWO: MUSIC CENSORSHIP AND THE OPPOSITION</b>	<b>25</b>
Censorship in Practice – Mechanisms of Control	
Live Performance	
Legal Obstacles	
Rock Music & Activism on the Frontline	
The New Generation – Belarusian Hip Hop	
Performing Abroad – the Polish Connection	
<b>CHAPTER THREE: PROTECTING OFFICIAL MUSIC</b>	<b>43</b>
Rock Festivals & the Record Industry	
Copyright and Piracy	
Samizdat and Informal Networks	
The Internet & Free Download Culture	
<b>CHAPTER FOUR: THE STATE ELECTION CAMPAIGN</b>	<b>56</b>
Black PR	
Official Music and the Za Belarus Campaign	
<b>CHAPTER FIVE: THE EFFECTS OF CENSORSHIP</b>	<b>65</b>
Forced to be Political	
Case Study – DJ Shamanka	
Getting Around the Censors - Underground Parties	
Brain Drain?	
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>72</b>
<b>APPENDICES</b>	<b>75</b>
Index of selected bands and musicians	
Index of cultural, political and cultural organisations	
Glossary/Terminology	
Links	
Open letter from Belarusian musicians	
Photos	

## **PREFACE**

In 2004 Freemuse received an open letter (Appendix p. 81) from Belarusian musicians.

The letter described the difficulties of performing in Belarus and included a list of groups who were “blacklisted” and had consequently encountered obstacles related to their music recordings and stage performances.

In November 2005 Freemuse was approached by the authors who for several years had been observing musician’s problems in Belarus. On behalf of Freemuse, the authors travelled to Poland and Belarus to follow up and investigate the situation. In Poland they met with independent Belarusian music groups who face difficulties at home, but play without hindrances or obstructions in their neighbouring country. The authors additionally investigated Belarus during the Presidential elections in March 2006.

Belarus certainly recognises music, takes part in the Eurovision Song Contest and celebrates those musicians whose expressions are in line with popular politics. The Belarusian constitution and national law guarantees freedom of expression. Though censorship is not on everybody’s lips, independent musicians continue to complain about their situation.

A musician from Belarus told Freemuse that “every time the band is invited to a big festival we are asked to bring the lyrics to be scanned by the Committee for Ideology and Censorship, for offensive stuff. “Offensive stuff” refers to lyrics addressing the president, officials and the government. Further, our contact, who wishes to remain anonymous, said, “When I went to a radio station to be interviewed I was asked by the interviewer, ‘please don’t pronounce in the air words like politician, choice, to choose, to be free and all the stuff that makes people think over the political circumstances in the country.’”

In this report, Hidden Truths – Music, politics and censorship in Lukashenko’s Belarus, reporters Maya Medich and Lemez Lovas reveal the restrictions and problems independent musicians face in today’s Belarus.

One of their interviewees perceives the situation as follows: “If previously they didn’t care, now anything that doesn’t fall under their ideological remit is heavily pressured. Censorship, prohibition, cutting off the oxygen, so today culture is undoubtedly, if not a battlefield, a stage of confrontation. If we look at the steps the authorities have taken on particular the last two years... in music they’ve put practically the entire independent Belarusian rock scene outside the law.”

I would like to express my gratitude to Swedish Helsinki Committee; Esbjörn Esbjörnsson and Robert Hårdh for examining the report. Further thanks to Belarus Association of Journalists for cross-examining the legal chapter.

**Marie Korpe**

Executive Director

## **PREFACE BY THE AUTHORS**

Increased restrictions on musicians and music-making in Belarus, in particular since 2004, are part of the larger crackdown on freedom of expression, where the worrying trend of closing down independent media and harassment of opposition politicians is growing apace. As the government move closer towards their goal of complete ideological control over the information space, Lukashenko is turning his attention to culture. Ideology now plays a more important role in state policy than at any time since the Soviet era, with artists under increasing pressure to fall into line.

This report looks at the following areas: the Soviet legacy of censorship, national identity policy and freedom of expression; the growth of political opposition music and moves to suppress it; legislation and the music industry; 'official music' and state propaganda; and the effects of music censorship.

This report was based on a research period of six months and a fieldwork trip in Poland and Belarus around the time of the March 2006 Presidential Elections. It is based on the testimony of interviews conducted with musicians, industry figures, intellectuals and media representatives at the time of the 2006 elections, when the pervading atmosphere in Minsk was one of fear and insecurity. Some interviewees requested not to be quoted on the record, others were unwilling to be interviewed, even anonymously.

The report is not intended to be an exhaustive investigation of freedom of expression in Belarus, but rather it examines the increased politicization of music and music-making, particularly in relation to the March 2006 Presidential Elections, and the direct consequences of this both for musicians and for the country's musical landscape.

A note on orthography and transliteration: we have generally retained the Russian or Belarusian spelling of names of places and people as we encountered them. Names of public figures are spelt according to the most common transliteration in the international press. Most names of interviewees are given according to the Russian spelling, as the interviews were conducted mostly in Russian, except where the interviewee is a native Belarusian speaker and requested that Belarusian spelling be used.

We would like to thank the many artists, journalists and industry figures who agreed to be interviewed for this report; Ilya for his sofa bed, invaluable help and general kindness; Mirek Dembinski; everyone at the Belarusian Association of Journalists, Alla and Dmitry for showing us real Belarusian hospitality, Jacek and Karolina for theirs in Warsaw, Darek and Jacek from Wolna Bialorus, Jacek Marek, Helene Bach, Ingo Petz, Maksym Butkevych, Nastya Antyfashyk, Ivan Sukhy from PEN Russia, everyone at Article 19, SILBA and the Swedish Helsinki Committee, the staff at the Belarusian consulate for their helpfulness and Ole, Marie and all the team at Freemuse for their consistent advice, enthusiasm and support.

## SUMMARY

In its latest report on music and freedom of expression around the world, Freemuse turns its attention to Belarus, an authoritarian former Soviet country buffering the EU and Russia, where freedom of information and expression have become the unrelenting victims in an increasingly destructive battle for political control.

Examining the historical context of the political associations of music-making and sharing in the USSR, the report identifies two main and mutually reinforcing aspects of music censorship in Belarus today. One is the deliberate and systematic government pressure on 'unofficial' musicians – including 'banning' from official media and imposing severe restrictions on live performance. The other is use of the government's control of mass media and other resources in promoting 'official' music as a tool of government propaganda in furthering state ideology and loyalty to the leader. The potent combination of these two strategies, and the revival of the deeply engrained culture of compliance and fear reminiscent of Soviet times, means that independent music-making in Belarus today is an increasingly difficult and risky enterprise.

As in the Ukrainian 'Orange Revolution' in 2004, language and culture are key components in social and political opposition to President Lukashenko, dubbed 'the last dictator in Europe' by the US State Department. For the past two years, many Belarusian rock musicians have been unofficially banned from radio and TV, their applications for concert licenses denied and interviews with the state press shelved. The unofficial 'blacklist', which includes virtually the entire independent Belarusian rock scene, coincided with a controversial referendum allowing Lukashenko to remain in power, and marked the beginning of a concerted government crackdown against musicians, political opponents and the independent press.

It also marked the beginning of a more deliberate use of music as a political tool in the ideological battle between the authorities and the opposition, clearly dividing Belarusian musicians into pro-government 'official' and pro-democracy 'unofficial' camps. Now that rock and Belarusian language music in particular have come under fire, it has become a central rallying point for the beleaguered political opposition. The regime's fear of music as potential fuel for revolution and unrest, as in the Ukraine in 2004, has led to restrictive broadcasting legislation and the reinvigoration of a huge bureaucratic system of censorship that is pushing independent musicians back into the role of Soviet era dissidents.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Maya Medich** is an anthropologist from Bosnia and Herzegovina. She studied at Kingston University (UK) and School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Specialises in research on civil society and the state in post-communist countries. Partner in London-based production and distribution company of Central and Eastern European independent documentary film.

**Lemez Lovas** is a musician, composer, journalist, DJ. Studied at Oxford University, Gnessin Conservatory of Music, Moscow and University of London. Writes for various magazines and broadcasts regularly on BBC World Service English and Russian services on politics and culture in the former Soviet Union.



**AREA:**

207,595 sq km (80,153 sq miles)

**CAPITAL:**

Minsk

**POPULATION:**

9,800,000 (2005 estimate)

**ETHNIC GROUPS:**

Belarusian 81.2%, Russian 11.4%, Polish, Ukrainian and other 7.4%

**LIFE EXPECTANCY AT BIRTH:**

68.14 years (total population, 2001 estimate)

**EXPECTED YEARS OF SCHOOLING:**

14

**HEAD OF STATE:**

President Alexander Lukashenko

**GDP per CAPITA:**

US \$ 7,500 (Purchasing Power Parity, 2000 estimate)

**POPULATION LIVING BELOW POVERTY LINE:**

42% (1999-2005 estimate)

**GDP – COMPOSITION BY SECTOR:**

Agriculture: 9,5%, industry: 41,2%, services: 49,3% (2005)

*Sources: World Bank Development data, World Press Country Profiles, BBC Country Profiles*

## **BELARUS – RECENT HISTORY TIMELINE**

**August 1991.** Belarus becomes an independent state following the disintegration of the Soviet Union and changes its name from Byelorussia ('White Russia').

**December 1991.** Belarus becomes a founding member of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

**March 15<sup>th</sup> 1994.** Belarus adopts its first post-Soviet constitution, and changes from parliamentary to presidential democracy. President is to be elected through popular vote.

**July 20 1994.** Presidential elections. The populist, non-party Alexander Lukashenko (former collective farm manager) becomes the first president of Belarus with 80% of the votes.

**May 1995.** Parliamentary elections.

**November 24<sup>th</sup> 1996.** Lukashenko wins the right to radically revise the constitution through a national referendum which is condemned as unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court and neither fair nor free by the OSCE. The new constitution gives the president extensive powers relative to those of the judiciary and the parliament. Lukashenko's term in office is extended to 2001. The Central Electoral Committee, the Parliament and the Constitutional Court are forcibly dissolved and since 1996 Lukashenko has effectively ruled by decree.

**October 2000.** Parliamentary elections take place for the first time since the controversial referendum of 1996. The OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) also concludes that these elections failed to meet international standards for free, fair and transparent elections.

**September 2001.** Presidential elections. Lukashenko wins with 75% of the votes. The ODIHR report concludes that the presidential election process failed to meet OSCE commitments for democratic elections and was seriously flawed.

**October 17<sup>th</sup> 2004.** Presidential term limits are removed through a highly controversial and internationally condemned referendum, allowing Lukashenko to run for the third term in office. Parliamentary elections run concurrently – opposition parties fail to win a single seat.

**March 19<sup>th</sup> 2006.** Presidential elections. Lukashenko wins with 82.6% of the vote. Other candidates: Alexander Milinkevich, 6%, Alexander Kozulin 2.3%. The OSCE and the international community condemn the elections as 'seriously flawed'.

## BRIEF HISTORICAL OUTLINE

The Republic of Belarus is a landlocked country in Eastern Europe, with a population of around 10 million, which borders Russia, Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia. Its capital city is Minsk, and other important cities include Brest, Grodno, Gomel, Mogilev and Vitebsk.

Owing largely to its strategic position on the crossroads between East and West, the area of today's Belarus has been fiercely fought over throughout its history, at different times belonging to Lithuania, Poland and the Russian Empire. After a brief spell of independence in 1918, Belarus became part of the Soviet Union in 1922, under the name of Byelorussian Socialist Soviet Republic. Belarus declared its independence in 1991 following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Belarus had more than its share of devastation, bloodshed and forced migration. During the revolution of 1917 Bolshevism did not have many followers among the local population, but they were unable to resist the Bolsheviks, and the Belarusian SSR was established by force of arms in 1919. For the next two years, Byelorussia was a prize in the Polish-Soviet War, a conflict settled by the treaty of Riga in March 1921. Under the terms of the treaty, Byelorussia was divided into three parts: the Western portion, which was absorbed into Poland; Central Byelorussia, which formed the Byelorussian SSR; and the Eastern portion, which became part of Russia. In 1922 central Byelorussia was incorporated into the Soviet Union. The territory of the Byelorussian SSR was enlarged in both 1924 and 1926 by the addition of the Byelorussian regions that had become part of Russia under the Treaty of Riga.

After the destruction caused by the WW1, in which Belarus was site of a major battlefield between German and Russian forces, came Stalinist purges of the 1930s which brought about persecution, deportations to Siberia and deaths of 2 million people. Again, during the WW2 the country suffered horrendous damage and loss of more than 2 million lives, including most of its large Jewish population. The country was in ruins and its major cities, such as Minsk and Vitebsk were reduced to rubble. In order to curb any nationalistic tendencies and limit Western influence, Stalinist political persecution and deportations continued after the war. It took until 1971 to restore the population to its pre WW2 levels.

The 1980s Perestroika years saw increased alienation of the population from the Soviet regime in Moscow, particularly the government's mishandling of the Chernobyl disaster in 1986. Although the nuclear explosion happened in neighbouring Ukraine, around 70% of the radiation fell on Belarus contaminating between a quarter and a third of its territory, particularly the Gomel and Mogilev regions in the south and the southeast of the country. The government was slow to react in helping those affected and tried to cover up the real extent of the disaster for another two years. The country continues to suffer the effects of the nuclear fallout.

The republic officially declared its sovereignty on 27 July 1990, and following the collapse of the Soviet Union, declared independence as the Republic of Belarus on 25 August 1991, changing its name from the Russified Byelorussia or White Russia.

## PRESIDENTIAL POWERS

*'If one year ago President Lukashenko's regime appeared as an authoritarian regime but not yet a dictatorship, it is the general conclusion of the Special Rapporteur that Belarus is now turning rapidly into a real dictatorship, with clear totalitarian inclinations.'*<sup>1</sup>

Adrian Severin, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Belarus, 2005 report

Owing largely to his strong populist and anti-corruptionist stance following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Alexander Lukashenko became the first president of the independent Republic of Belarus in July 1994. Since then, his self-professed authoritarian style of ruling and systematic elimination of independent and oppositional voices has earned him a reputation as the most oppressive and tyrannical leader in Europe today.

Belarus, according to Article 1 of its Constitution, *'is a unitary, democratic, social state based on the rule of law'*. However, President Alexander Lukashenko has over the past 12 years systematically brought most aspects of running the country under his direct control. He has done so through largely illegal political manoeuvring, the most significant of which was the 1996 Referendum giving him the right to radically re-write the constitution. Since then Lukashenko can dissolve parliament, replace the prime minister, prosecutor general and members of the government, and appoint and dismiss judges and local councillors at will. He can abolish acts of government and issue decrees and orders which have the force of law. In addition to this, another controversial referendum in 2004 removed presidential term limits, allowing Lukashenko to run for president for the third time and effectively leaving open the possibility of his being president for life. Governing Belarus has therefore become, to all intents and purposes, a one-man show.

## HUMAN RIGHTS

Belarus' human rights record since President Alexander Lukashenko came to power in 1994 has been subject to heavy international criticism by the UN, EU and US governments, and a host of international human rights organizations including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. Despite continuing pressure and international condemnation of the heavy-handed practices aimed at quashing all opposition and independent voices, there seems to be no sign of improvement. In fact the situation appears to have been getting steadily worse in the last two years since the highly controversial 2004 referendum. In anticipation of the March 2006 presidential election, and facing pressure both from inside Belarus and abroad, Lukashenko's regime has been intensifying its assault on the political opposition, the independent media, human rights and other non-governmental organizations.

The 2005 report by the UN Special Rapporteur on Belarus, Adrian Severin, is highly critical of the current situation and highlights a number of violations of international human rights standards, including:

- the disappearance of four opponents of the regime in 1999/2000 and the continuing failure of the authorities to properly investigate them

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<sup>1</sup> For full report see <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/rsd/rsddocview.pdf?tbl=RSDCOI&id=441182040>

- failure to investigate murders of independent journalists
- excessive use of force by police services to repress demonstrations
- mistreatment of prisoners
- arbitrary detentions of political opponents and independent journalists
- continuing harassment and closures of NGOs, independent media, some religious and ethnic minority organizations, educational institutions and trade unions

The violent dispersal of peaceful demonstrations in Minsk on March 25<sup>th</sup> 2006, and the continuation of arbitrary arrests of political activists, journalists and youth organization leaders, including two of the presidential candidates Alexander Milinkevich and Alexander Kozulin and other leading oppositionists, and daily reports on harassment, mistreatment and beatings of protesters and political prisoners, testify to the continuation of serious human rights violations by the current regime in Belarus.

## RELIGION

*'I very much want the Orthodox Church to stay within the framework of our state. I want the Orthodox Church to be an institution of our state and one of its main supporters.'*

(President Alexander Lukashenko, quoted in U.S. Department of State Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 2005 - Belarus, November 2005)

Religious freedom and equality between different denominations are guaranteed by the Belarusian constitution. However, president Lukashenko is open in his support of the Belarusian Orthodox Church, as well as his dislike of certain other dominations, especially those that he considers 'non-traditional' and part of negative 'foreign' influence. The Orthodox Church, the majority religion in Belarus, has signed a Concordant of 2003 with the state, by which it has been given special status and privileges.

Like all aspects of public life in Belarus, religious activity is subject to state control and a number of restrictive regulations, most notably the 2002 Religious Law which requires that all religious activity should be officially registered and take place in state-approved, non-residential premises. In addition to this, the 2005 amendment to the Criminal Code makes participation in a religious organization that is unregistered or has been liquidated by a court punishable by a fine or imprisonment for up to two years. While official places of religious worship are tax exempt, conducting prayers and religious study in a residential setting is prohibited and organizers subjected to excessive fines. This is particularly unfavourable to smaller communities which find it difficult to obtain official places of worship. They are often caught up in a vicious circle – to obtain permission to set up an official place of worship a religious group has to be officially registered, which in turn requires a registered place of worship.

## FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION/LEGAL

*Everyone is guaranteed freedom of thoughts and beliefs and their free expression. No one shall be forced to express one's beliefs or to deny them. No monopolization of the mass media by the State, public associations or individual citizens and no censorship shall be permitted.*

Article 33 of the Belarusian Constitution

Whilst the right to freedom of expression is guaranteed and censorship explicitly forbidden by Article 33 of the Constitution, a number of articles of the Belarusian Criminal Code restrict this freedom and effectively criminalize any criticism of the government and the president in particular.

These laws include: articles 188 (defamation), 189 (insult), 367 (defamation of the President), 368 (insult to the President) and 369 (insult to a government official). Defamation and insult through the media are prosecuted under articles 188 and 189 with imprisonment up to two years. Defamation of the President is punishable with imprisonment of up to five years.

Since a January 2006 amendment to the Criminal Code and the Code of Criminal Procedure, a new law has come into power by which "discrediting the Republic of Belarus" or "presenting false information about political, social, military, or foreign policy in Belarus" (Article 369) can result in two year prison sentence. There is aggravation of the offence (with up to five years' imprisonment) if the information is "to the detriment of internal security, sovereignty or territorial integrity", or if distributed through mass media.

The 'open' nature of these laws leaves independent media extremely vulnerable to persecution, including intimidation, harassment and imprisonment. Violations of freedom of expression and journalists rights are well documented by international organizations such as UNHCR, Amnesty International, Reporters without Borders, Article19 and others, whose continuous appeals for change are ignored by the Belarusian government.

## FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION/MEDIA

In the current onslaught by Lukashenko's regime on all opposition voices in Belarus, independent journalists and media workers are right at the front of the firing line. The Committee for the Protection of Journalists has identified Belarus as one of the *'ten worst places in the world to be a journalist'* and Reporters without Borders names Lukashenko as one of the *'predators of press freedom'*. From those we spoke to both inside and outside Belarus, journalists were certainly the ones who were the most harassed, intimidated – and most scared of the authorities. Absolute information control appears to be one of Lukashenko's priorities, as well as one of the most powerful weapons in his arsenal: over the past decade, and more specifically in the run up to the March 2006 elections, he has increasingly tightened his grip on the state media whilst systematically imposing crippling restrictions on all media outlets not directly under his control.

In the last few years the number of independent newspapers has plummeted, and the remaining few struggle to survive under increasingly stifling conditions. Complicated bureaucracy and license system, increased tax pressures, politicized libel suits, and state monopoly of printing and distribution services, has forced most of them to close down, and remaining few are forced to print abroad in neighbouring Russia.

The state dominates virtually the whole of the TV network in Belarus – all TV channels with news content and national coverage are state owned or state controlled (with more than 50% ownership by state bodies). Television news is therefore heavily censored and used primarily for disseminating state propaganda. The state owns also 50 percent of the shares of the newly opened channels. Independent news programming is non-existent – the Belarusian Television and Radio Company (BT) is the only producer of broadcast news, and provides news and current affairs programs to all regional and satellite channels. The company also runs an entertainment network Lad and satellite station Belarus TV. The most popular channel is ONT, in which the major stakeholder is the Belarusian state in a joint venture with the Russian state TV Channel One. Privately owned regional and satellite TV channels require licenses by the Republican Commission on Television and Radio Broadcasting and are subject to controls by the Ministry of Information. They broadcast mainly programs produced by the state owned Belarusian and Russian TV networks and any independently produced programming is subject to state approval – any truly free and independent program-making is effectively prohibited.

Radio broadcasting is similarly controlled by the state – state-run Belarusian Radio (part of the National Belarusian Television and Radio Broadcasting Company which is subordinated directly to the President) dominates the airwaves with a number of national and regional stations offering news and factual programming, culture and music channels. Private radio stations are subject to restrictions similar to those imposed on independent newspapers, and many of them have been forced out of business through the familiar combination of harassment, economic pressure and revoking of licenses, often under fabricated and apparently apolitical pretexts.

The only sources of alternative information come from outside Belarus through a number of radio initiatives broadcasting mainly from neighbouring Poland and Lithuania, such as Radio Ratsiya, previously closed down by the Belarusian government, now based in Poland and Radio Baltic Waves broadcasting from Lithuania, as well as a number of foreign radio stations, such as Deutsche Welle, Radio Svaboda (Radio Free Europe//Radio Liberty), Radio Polonia, and Radio Sweden which also have programs aimed at Belarusian audiences.

Based in Poland and partially funded by the European Commission, European Radio for Belarus, which started broadcasting from Poland in February 2006, is comprised entirely of Belarusian journalists working both from outside and inside Belarus. It was set up, according to its founders, as an alternative source of information to counterbalance the state propaganda which dominates the media in Belarus, as well as providing listeners with opportunity to hear music that is 'banned' from the airwaves in their home country.

## CHAPTER ONE

### CENSORSHIP AND IDEOLOGY – A SOVIET LEGACY

*'We have already lived through a time when the media were considered to be absolutely free, and journalists – independent. I want good television in Belarus. Every enterprise has its khozyain (master). Your master is the government, and you express the government's point of view. There's no need to hide it.'*<sup>2</sup>

President Lukashenko addressing the heads of the National Television and Radio Company

*'If you take censorship at face value, how a normal person would understand the word, probably in Belarus there isn't any. In terms of crossing out this or that word. Our censorship is more general.'*

Alexander Kulinkovich, leader of rock band Neurodubel

Freedom of expression is not a concept particularly familiar to Belarusians. The image of Belarus as a buffer zone between Europe and Russia is not true just in terms of geography, but equally in the clash of ideas that has been continually played out on its streets: enlightenment and freedom of the individual on one hand versus homeland and collective responsibility on the other. In its severely restrictive attitude towards freedom of expression, Belarus is not just inheriting a Soviet era legacy. The Soviet Union may have been the harshest and most consistent censor of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but its policies were built on solid foundations of repressive tsarist measures against free speech going back to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

In the Soviet Union censorship became official as early as 1922 with the establishment of *Glavlit*, the body charged with purging society of all ideas that were 'destructive to the new order and contagious to the minds of people'. As late as the 1980s, *Glavlit* was still rumoured to employ some 70,000 people across its gargantuan network of regional, municipal and local organs to ensure that nothing was published or broadcasted without its approval, with an employee attached to every TV and radio station, press agencies and publishing houses.

**Article 33.** *No one shall be forced to express one's beliefs or to deny them. No monopolization of the mass media by the State, public associations or individual citizens and no censorship shall be permitted.*

**Article 51.** *Everyone shall have the right to take part in cultural life. This right shall be safeguarded by universal accessibility to the treasures of domestic and world culture that are held in state and public collections and by the development of a network of cultural and educational establishments.*

Constitution of the Republic of Belarus

Of course, there is no successor to Glavlit, no Orwellian Ministry of Truth in Belarus, as censorship is illegal according to the Constitution! The Constitution of the Republic of Belarus conforms to many international standards on human rights, access to information and freedom of expression. Of course, legislation is one thing, but interpretation is something else entirely. Rather than serving as the legal basis for government, the Constitution is employed mostly to support the official propaganda machine.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> From Presidential Press Service: *The Head of the Government visits Beltele radiokompaniyu*, 21<sup>st</sup> September 2004. <http://www.president.gov.by/press14905.html#doc> (in Russian)

<sup>3</sup> State television coverage of election day 2006 was extremely enlightening in this respect. Showing a succession of polling stations where singers, dancers and refreshment tables were all crowded into the hall beside the voting booths, the impression was far more like a village fête than a serious contest. Against the background of the noisy entertainment put on for the voters, reporters repeatedly commented on the fact that election day is a national holiday, where each citizen has the opportunity to 'fulfil his obligation to the state under the Belarusian Constitution'.

Continuing a long held Soviet tradition, the Republic of Belarus takes its constitution seriously with a special annual celebration commemorating its signing on 15<sup>th</sup> March, 1994.

Acts of censorship, that other long held Soviet tradition, take place under various pretexts, and are almost always carried out orally, without any written evidence. This is the infamous Soviet-era method of control known as *telefonnoe pravo* (telephone law). *Telefonnoe pravo* is essential to a system of government that is so heavily centralized and it relies on an extensive network of informants. It is a part of a deeply ingrained culture of compliance and fear that, while nowhere as widespread as it was during the darkest days of terror in the USSR, is nonetheless a recurring theme in many reports from Belarus over the last five years. The experience below of a journalist now living in exile in Poland shows how little the methodology has changed:

*'I wrote an article about electoral fraud in 2001 while working as the editor-in-chief for Provintsiyalka, a local paper. The KGB came looking for me. I went into hiding for one day. Then I got a phone call from the state prosecutor, who told me I have two hours to leave the country or face a year and a half in prison. Within three hours I was across the border in Poland.'*

Alex Dzikavicki, Radio Svaboda

*Telefonnoe pravo* creates fear without leaving a physical paper trail, and as such is perfectly suited to a virtual democracy like Belarus. It is at the heart of a sophisticated, revamped Soviet-era bureaucratic system designed to facilitate control over all spheres of public life, including culture and music. While parts of the system fell into relative disuse during the liberal atmosphere of the last days of the Soviet Union and the first years of independence, both the pre-existing legal, economic and political framework and the old culture of fear and obedience were simple enough to revive. As Lukashenko has been refining his ideology over the last three years, censorship has once again become a key weapon in the 'hard battle for the minds and hearts of the people.'

**Article 4.** *Democracy in the Republic of Belarus shall be exercised on the basis of diversity of political institutions, ideologies and views. The ideology of political parties, religious or other public associations, social groups may not be made mandatory for citizens.*

Constitution of the Republic of Belarus

*'We have built an independent state of Belarus, we have ensured peace, stability and security. But one must defend these achievements just as one must defend our Motherland. And not only in military terms. But also in the field of ideology and information. There where a hard battle for the minds and hearts of the people is now going on. Patriotism, commitment to duty, conscience and honour are our strategic weapons in this battle.'*<sup>4</sup>

President Lukashenko

It is easier to find grandiose statements about the President's love for the ideology of the great nation than it is to find out what exactly it is. However, since a Presidential initiative in 2003, state ideology is now taught in every school and university, to students and teachers alike. What is beyond doubt is that while on paper it encourages pacifism and tolerance of difference, in reality it is employed as a means of enforcing loyalty to the state, its ideas and structures. To call it 'Soviet' would be wrong – Soviet ideo-

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<sup>4</sup> Press release, 24<sup>th</sup> February 2006. From the official website of the President of the Republic of Belarus: <http://www.president.gov.by/en/press10592.html>

logy was a far more developed, finely-tuned entity than this populist mishmash of social welfare and patriotic slogans. But it is entirely Soviet in one crucial dimension: the Marxist-Leninist concept of *partiy-nost* – party loyalty or partisanship – which continues to cast a heavy shadow over the cronyism and clan allegiance that passes for politics in much of the former Soviet Union. In Belarus, the division of society into ‘us’ and ‘them’ – into those who are ‘For Belarus’ on one side, and those who are *vragi naroda*, ‘enemies of the people’, on the other – has developed unabated under Lukashenko’s presidency.

Society, goes the thinking, in order to function and for those who live in it to know what’s what, must be separated into two antagonistic halves that live parallel to each other in a kind of begrudging interdependence. In culture, for example, artists, writers and musicians are *official* or *independent*; cultural decisions are made according to whether something has a proper or an improper *format*; official competitions are won by whoever is *required* that year (or not); artists or publications are not censored but on the contrary, they are *recommended* (or not); young people are divided into the law-abiding *molodezh* (youth) and the degenerate *neformal’naya molodezh* (informal youth).

*‘Youth and trade union associations... must play a key role in ideological work. A little bit more than half a year ago, a powerful youth organization was created — the Belarusian National Youth Union (BRSM). I was directly involved in that process. The BRSM received all possible kinds of support.’*<sup>5</sup>

President Lukashenko

This Soviet concept of the *molodezh* – the youth – is particularly important for understanding the relationship between the state and popular music. It is no coincidence that Lukashenko’s favoured nickname is *Bat’ka*, or Daddy. In the paternalistic state, young people are ‘the future potential of the nation’, to be cared for and nurtured. This paternalistic view asserts that important as the youth are, they are also naïve, and liable to make mistakes without a strong, positive role model to look up to. It is therefore the duty of the state to be this responsible guardian, and to place a firmhand of guidance on their fragile shoulders. This explains the high official status of the *Belorusskii Respublikanskii Soyuz Molodezhi*, the all-powerful and lavishly state funded Belarusian National Youth Union or BRSM, founded in 2002 as a direct successor to the Soviet era *Komsomol* (Communist Youth Union) – the official organisation in charge of ensuring that young people hold the correct views and indulge in the correct activities.

The overall importance of ideology as a crucial tool in justifying restrictive legislation and practice is as central in Belarusian state policy today as it was for much of the 20th century. Each state institution, company and educational establishment has regular ideology training and an official, generally subordinate to the Ministry of Information, who is in charge of propagating state ideology. In the ideology of the post-Soviet paternalistic state, elections are at best a cosmetic irritation staged for the benefit of external observers with the goal of legitimizing the status quo. That voters make the right choice is too important to be left to chance: it is the responsibility of the head of each establishment to ensure that they do. Terminology is illuminating: to quote Lukashenko’s tacky pre-election pop anthem:<sup>6</sup>

*Tol’ko glyanet – srazu vidno  
Kto u nas khozyain v dome.*

Just take a look – it’s obvious  
Who’s the boss in our house.

<sup>5</sup> Address by President of the Republic of Belarus at a seminar on matters of ideology participated by top-level officials of the central and local government bodies, *March 27, 2003*, from Presidential website.

<sup>6</sup> See Chapter Four, *Za Belarus* below.

As he made clear in his address to the State Television and Radio Company above, the role of the media is firstly to promote the views of the government, and secondly to remember at all times who they work for. In addition to *Bat'ka* (Daddy), another term that Lukashenko likes to use in reference to himself is *khozyain* (boss, owner, master, ruler) – notoriously difficult to translate, but with its associations of power, goodness, reliability, masculinity and superiority, it has been a time-honoured favourite of autocratic rulers throughout Russian history. Lukashenko, the former *khozyain* of a large collective farm, has developed a patriarchal, vertical power structure in Belarus where patriotism and loyalty are paramount. If the *khozyain* of a particular institution or enterprise does not deliver, he (rarely she) is personally responsible. It is for this reason that, to take an example, music students in both the Belarusian Academy of Music and the University of Culture were 'encouraged' to participate in early voting<sup>7</sup> - and their teachers 'encouraged' to accompany them.

*'Head of the State laid a special emphasis on the fact that mass media today are, above all else, an instrument of putting into effect the state ideology. Therefore, they should arrange their work with due account of this mission.'*<sup>8</sup>

Presidential Press Office

Ideology and loyalty are closely connected. The thinking behind President Lukashenko's direct appointment of professional 'ideologist' Uladzimir Matvyaychuk – formerly chief ideologist with the provincial Shklovalakno fibreglass factory (!) – as chief executive of the Belarusian State Radio and Television Company on 24th March 2004 is clear: the media is little more than an ideological tool in the reconstruction of society along neo-Soviet lines. Any imported notions of 'freedom of the press' will be judged solely in relation to how well any media organ fulfils its primary ideological function. This appointment is also seen as proof of institutionalised cronyism, as Matvyaychuk and Lukashenko go back a long way together – to the Mogilev Teacher Training Institute, where they both graduated with history degrees in 1975, to be exact.<sup>9</sup> The appointment serves as a perfect example to illustrate how this post-Soviet vertical power structure works, and how Lukashenko can guarantee the ongoing loyalty of those closest to him. Elevated overnight from relative obscurity at a countryside fibreglass factory to one of the nation's most powerful jobs, Lukashenko can be sure of one thing – Matvyaychuk will never forget who his *khozyain* is.

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<sup>7</sup> A five day pre-election day voting window provided in the Belarusian Electoral Code for anyone who is for various reasons unable to come to a polling station on election day. In practice anyone is allowed to vote early on presenting their passport, and employees and students in many state institutions are actively encouraged to do so. Early voting is extremely contentious in Belarus as it is typically open to fraud – see East European Constitutional Review, <http://www.law.nyu.edu/eecr/vol9num4/constitutionwatch/belarus.html>

<sup>8</sup> Meeting with the Heads of the State Radio and Television Company, press release, 10th September 2003, from Presidential website.

<sup>9</sup> Mikhail Vanyashkin, *Lukashenko Gives Ideological Screw Another Twist*, 29<sup>th</sup> March 2004, Transitions Online; available at [www.tol.cz](http://www.tol.cz)

## FREEDOM TO SPEAK

*'Everyone shall have the right to use one's native language and to choose their language of communication.'*

Article 50, Constitution of the Republic of Belarus

*'If you write 'khui' (dick in Russian) on a wall, they'll wipe it off a day later.*

*'If you write 'Zhive Belarus' (Long Live Belarus in Belarusian), they'll do it immediately.'*

Alexander Kulinkovich, musician

It is not immediately obvious to an outsider that the Belarusian language is repressed or disadvantaged in any way. State newspapers are generally bilingual, with Belarusian items behind Russian ones; there is some TV programming in Belarusian (although most programmes are in Russian); street signs in both languages. So when you hear Belarusians talking about language censorship – one pro-opposition party even talks about 'cultural genocide' – it is not immediately clear what the fuss is about. Despite the veneer of bilingualism, however, the fact is that Belarusian language has been fought over as much as the country itself, gaining brief periods of pre-eminence over Russian (1915-1918 and 1991-1995), but struggling in the face of active Russification policies for the rest of the time. Today, support for the Belarusian language is the central plank of national opposition to Lukashenko.

*'During Soviet times someone who spoke Belarusian in everyday life was a dissident. Formally the language existed in the official public sphere, but it was a decoration, because the newsreader who spoke in Belarusian always went home and spoke to his family in Russian.'*

Artur Klinau, editor, Partizan Belarusian Arts journal

Soviet policy on national and ethnic identity was all smoke and mirrors: making it look as though they fully supported the republics' languages and cultures, while in reality doing everything to suppress its practical usage on the ground. Special Soviet versions of national identity were dusted off at official ceremonies and holidays – cue endless speeches about brotherhood and diversity while the choreographed folkdance ensemble twirl in the background – but only one version of a republic's identity could be permitted. To support any other form of language or culture was to belong to a fifth column, a 'nationalist' intent on destroying the Union from within.

*'At the end of 1980s, the Belarusian language became the major means of communication for some Belarusian intellectuals, who expressed their political, social, and cultural claims in favour of Gorbachev's reforms. To speak Belarusian represented in itself a testimony of national culture. By establishing it as the spoken language, intellectuals wanted to promote language rights and to denounce the policy of discrimination toward Belarusian, and particularly the decline of its teaching.'*<sup>10</sup>

Despite the fact that Belarusian had been introduced as the sole official language at independence, for the overwhelmingly Russian speaking governing elite it was little more than a symbolic marking of the transfer of power from Moscow to Minsk. Nonetheless the decision to prioritize Belarusian over Russian was seen as an important step across the country in the transition from the Russian speaking, Soviet, authoritarian society to a democratic, European, Belarusian speaking one. With a controversial referendum in 1995, however, Lukashenko reintroduced the old Soviet symbols of Belarusian identity – the flag,

<sup>10</sup> Alexandra Goujon, *Language, nationalism, and populism in Belarus*. [http://www.pravapis.org/art\\_goujon1.asp](http://www.pravapis.org/art_goujon1.asp)

national crest and bi-lingual status of Russian – initiating a fierce campaign of Russification at the expense of the teaching and development of Belarusian.

*'Faced with a direct threat to its existence, the Belarusian language became, as was the case during the Soviet period, a language of opposition and of counter-power.'*<sup>11</sup>

Decades previously, the Kremlin had understood that language, like culture, can be a dangerous separatist rallying cry if it is not reformed and controlled. So in 1933 a new, Russian-influenced version of Belarusian – known as Narkamauka – was created to replace the version that had been taught in schools until then. This Soviet version of Belarusian, *Narkamauka*, is still the only officially permitted version of the language in Belarus to this day. Support for the pre-1933 version, known as *Tarashkievica*, is a highly divisive political issue<sup>12</sup>: it is seen to represent the authentic Belarus that existed before Soviet interference, and as such is considered to be the supreme symbol of nationalist opposition to Lukashenko's regime. Publications in Belarusian in general, and in *Tarashkievica* in particular, are regarded with extreme suspicion by the state – to quote one example, in late 2005 Belarusian language newspapers across the country constituted 10% of the total number of publications, but accounted for 70% of all banned publications.<sup>13</sup>

*'When you go into town and speak Belarusian, people look at you as if you're some kind of fascist, an enemy of the people. The police can even arrest you, because speaking Belarusian immediately associates you with the opposition. And here opposition is understood not as a normal political force like in any other normal country, but as the enemy of the people, like a fascist.'*

Max Rust, opposition youth activist

Although we heard of civil servants in the Presidential Administration speaking Belarusian on a daily basis with no problems, in general it has become a clear mark of opposition, and for many musicians, the choice to perform in Belarusian is a conscious civil action. There are many musicians who grew up in Russian speaking homes and started performing in Russian – and who now perform only in Belarusian:

*'I spoke Russian with my family. No-one taught me Belarusian when I was a child. My family is very mixed, but since I was born in Belarus, Belarussianness is imbedded in me.'*

Igor Varashkevich, Krama

*'I'm not Belarusian, but I live in and love this country and out of respect to Belarusian culture we started performing in Belarusian. As a friend of mine put it, a house needs to be built with its own bricks, you can build them with someone else's but sooner or later someone will come for them.'*

Alexander Kulinkovich, Neurodubel

With a few notable exceptions – for example Liavon Volski, leader of famous rock band NRM and son of a notable Belarusian language writer – the majority of the Belarusian language independent music scene is made up of singers whose native tongue is not Belarusian. Although they face various forms

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<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> For an idea of the controversy this subject arouses, see this debate on Wikipedia: [http://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Requests\\_for\\_new\\_languages/Denied#Present\\_Belarusian\\_.287\\_support.2C\\_14\\_oppose.29](http://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Requests_for_new_languages/Denied#Present_Belarusian_.287_support.2C_14_oppose.29)

<sup>13</sup> Jan Maksymiuk, *More Belarusian private newspapers removed from state subscription list*, RFE/RL; <http://www.rferl.org/newsline/2005/11/3-cee/cee-161105.asp>

of censorship in the press and on the radio, singing in Russian does not seem to be an option due to the political associations that the language has today. The Soviet rhetoric of 'us' and 'them' defines both sides of the language divide:

*'The main principle on our website is that all the songs should be in the Belarusian language. We consider that the only music that can consider itself Belarusian is the music that is performed in Belarusian.'*  
Alyaksei Minchonak, coordinator, Tuzin Hitou online music portal

Despite the fact that Russian is still more widespread not to use the language at all – seen as the language of 'occupiers' by some more radical opposition supporters – is increasingly commonplace. Many Belarusian language bands' websites are just in Belarusian and English.

The decision not to perform in Russian has considerable financial implications: for most bands the only way to make money – and in some cases big money – is to aim for the Russian market, and several top bands spend as much or more time in Moscow than they do in Minsk. Overall, though, performing in Belarusian is seen not as a political action in and of itself, but rather a social and civil position of principle borne out of a resurgent sense of national identity.

*'Under Lukashenko, people in Belarus have voluntarily distanced themselves from the thing that identifies them most clearly as a nation. For any nation, any tribe, the main national signifier is their language.'*  
Igor Varashkevich, Krama

*'Our group will be seventeen this year, God willing, and we started singing in Russian. We've only been singing in Belarusian for two years. It has added an oppositional slant which isn't necessarily there.'*  
Alexander Kulinkovich, Neurodubel

Lukashenko has made many famously derogatory public comments about Belarusian, and always uses Russian for important day to day business.<sup>14</sup> Presidential disdain for Belarusian as a 'serious language' can be seen on his official website <http://www.president.gov.by> – it is in Russian and English only. Nonetheless, as the former manager of a collective farm himself, the ability to speak Belarusian gives him a rootsy appeal that he also exploits on certain occasions:

*'Lukashenko does not hesitate to use Belarusian on solemn occasions such as Republic Day, while reserving the use of Russian for his highest official meetings. The use of different languages allows him to embody distinct social and political personalities according to circumstances and to display the appropriate self-image: to point out his rural roots, his social ascent, his intelligence, or his capacity to speak Belarusian.'*<sup>15</sup>

The linguistic divisions that were cultivated during Soviet times have been reinforced under Lukashenko: the sophisticated urban world is the right place for speaking Russian, and the simple, rural life where Belarusian belongs. And never the twain shall meet, except in highly controlled, official settings.

One young teacher at the Academy of Music said that she did not support the opposition for the simple reason that 'they would force us to teach in Belarusian – and it's not that I have anything against the language, but it just isn't rich enough... it just doesn't have the terminology.' Overcoming this ingrained

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<sup>14</sup> For example, at his televised press conference after the 2006 Presidential elections, Lukashenko spoke exclusively in Russian, even when answering a question from a Nasha Niva correspondent in Belarusian.

<sup>15</sup> See Alexandra Goujon, footnote 10

perception is a major goal for Belarusian language artists and activists:

*'The young have got it in their head that there is no sense in using Belarusian because it's the language of the countryside, the language of Soviet farmers. We have to do everything we can to persuade people that Belarusian is not better or worse than any other language, but equal.'*

Max Rust, opposition youth activist

Although performing or writing in Belarusian has increasingly political associations, it is not in itself a reason to be censored – but rather a suspicious sign that can attract official attention. Just as Lukashenko uses Belarusian in certain circumstances, 'official musicians' also perform in Belarusian at pop song festivals abroad where performers are seen to be representing their country:

*'Competition songs are totally separate [from the rest of my repertoire]: they are always in Belarusian. When I represent the Republic of Belarus abroad, I try to show Belarusian culture and Belarusian language.'*

Gunesh Abasova, pop singer

The trick, it seems, is knowing when and where to perform in which language. As one banned rock musician told us: *It's not what you sing, but where you sing it.* And that's what it's all about.

## INDEPENDENCE, REVOLUTION AND POST-SOVIET CULTURE

There is nothing Brussels and Washington would have liked more in Belarus than to see the opposition street protests that followed the March 2006 presidential elections turn into a full-blown 'denim revolution'. In the event, a mixture of fear, police brutality and genuine support for Lukashenko squashed the calls for a re-run, and since then the Western press have somewhat distanced themselves from their earlier predictions, saying that a 'revolution' was never on the cards as the conditions in Belarus were so very different to Ukraine in 2004. Certainly there were crucial differences – in Ukraine, the government candidate was not a long-standing incumbent with huge name recognition, and the media, while heavily biased, was not muzzled to quite the same extent as in its neighbour to the North. But in terms of culture – and the political motivations of artists to support an opposition – the similarities are striking.

*'The situation that contemporary Ukrainian culture finds itself in today comes down to the regime's outright negligence of Ukrainian culture, in the broadest sense of the word. Cinematography, painting, Ukrainian music, theatre – various types of culture and science – have all been in an awful depression. Thanks to the boorishness of the people who were in power and their disrespect towards Ukrainian traditions.'*

Folk rock singer Foma, campaigning with Ukrainian opposition leader Viktor Yushchenko in 2004

*'Independent Belarusian culture consists of a whole series of different phenomena – literature, rock culture, contemporary art, philosophy, performance art and photography. These are all phenomena that have sprung up in the last ten years and live completely outside official structures like the Ministry of Culture. In the best instances they exist parallel to official culture, in the worst, they're in direct confrontation and live under intense pressure from the authorities.'*

Artur Klinau, artist

Language and culture certainly have the potential to be the touchpaper issues that they were in the Ukraine. Lets not forget that until the 2004 street protests Kiev was essentially a Russian speaking city – Ukrainian was used in certain publications and visible outside official institutions but on Khreshchyatik, the main shopping thoroughfare in the centre of town, the signs were in Russian, not Ukrainian.

The media was similarly Russified: Russian language pop music being the pre-eminent sound on the city's radio stations. In terms of cultural policy, Russification must be understood not just as domination of Russian language and Russian music. Russian culture enjoys a very different reputation in the West than it does in the countries of the former Soviet Union. In the West, it is synonymous with greatness – Chekhov, Tchaikovsky, Kandinsky... the list is endless. But Russia is nothing if not a land of extremes, and its cultural life is no different. Remember the teenage lesbians TATU? They are just the tip of the iceberg looming in front of local musicians in former Soviet republics. Supported by a media network controlled by Russian (or Russia-friendly) business interests, these days Russian pop music is the ubiquitous sound at kiosks and on radio stations from Tashkent to Minsk. Today Moscow is synonymous in many people's minds with unspeakable wealth and countless get-rich-quick schemes, and the entertainment business one of its most obvious cash cows. In terms of culture, Russian pop music is considered the apex of musical artifice, product of the most nakedly cynical pop industry in the world.

*'There used to be lots of different stations with different musical identities in Belarus, now whichever one you turn on you get the same old rubbish – 'tits, tits, feel my tits!' The authorities are trying to do their own pop music but they're doing a bad job of it – it all sounds the same. Take any two songs written by their protégés – it all sounds the same, it's like building Lego from samples. It's not writing, just stealing from here and there, with absolutely no creativity.'*

Senior manager, Belarusian state radio station

In the Ukraine, it was above all the unquestioning adoption of Russian pop music by the national media that motivated independent musicians to get involved in the political process. Even the highest-profile Ukrainian artists could not get regular rotation on national radio and television, and this disproportionate exposure afforded to pop acts from Moscow was widely seen as symptomatic of Ukraine's economic, political and cultural domination by Russia. Along with the pro-Russian elite in many post Soviet Republics, Moscow's influence survived the transition from the USSR to independence intact, and Russification has gradually come to be seen by many as a malevolent force asphyxiating indigenous development in many walks of life.

*'We notice that many different musicians – including pop, folk and rock musicians – all took the side of the opposition. Why? Because these artists were in a state of maximal discomfort in Ukraine. They had huge sympathy of the people and huge popularity, but this popularity is completely disproportionate to the miserable number of appearances that they have on TV and radio. Basically, in 2004, the iron curtain still exists with regard to Ukrainian rock music. And let's not forget the absolute chauvinism, first of all with regard to estrada [pop music] – Russian estrada. That's it. We had something to fight against and this energy ignited the situation. Why did we fight so sincerely and why did people in Ukraine welcome us so much? Because they love this [real] music and they can't hear enough of it or get any information about these bands. All they can hear are these kinds of artists who they don't like, don't respect and above all who come from other countries.'*

Ukrainian rock singer Oleg Skripka, leading 'Orange Revolution' campaigner

Deference towards Russia and Russian influence is at the heart of this derogatory concept of *post-Soviet culture*. The idea that culture plays a huge role in determining social dynamics, and so must be controlled strictly, is another defining feature.

*'In post-Soviet Ukraine, Ukrainian culture was taboo... on the radio, on the television, there was nothing. This is the post-Soviet mentality of censorship that still exists in the minds of people who are in charge of the mass media.'*

Foma

*'The authorities don't need any quality product, such as a big festival, that is not under their control. Because every festival, every big event is in some way or another put on by people who are connected to the regime. It's a monopoly. In the Ukraine there is a monopolization of culture. It's not a democratic situation. The desire to close everything down, forbid this and that.... My festival, for example, lasts two days: 250 artists from 7 countries... and someone just rolls up half an hour before the opening and disconnects the electricity. That's classic. Some drunk fireman comes along... and even though we are supported by 5 embassies...'*

Oleg Skripka

The state in Belarus provides ample channels for cultural events – through its network of galleries and festivals, through the wealthy state youth organisation BRSM – so any event that seeks to take place outside these channels is automatically suspicious. The attitude to any situation where doubt arises could not be more simple – in the words of one Belarusian rock musician who has hardly been able to perform at all in Belarus over the last two years: *It is better to forbid than to permit.* (Slava Koran, leader of rock group Ulis)

Post-Soviet culture must also be static. It should not and cannot develop quickly because culture exists in order to fulfil a precise social function, and as such it can only develop in accordance with state ideology, as decreed by the president in his numerous directives.

*'Independent Belarusian culture is relevant. The official mass culture is what we call post-Soviet culture – a continuation of Soviet tradition. It is absolutely antique, archaic. It's practically mould. But this mould is very useful to the government right now, because the mouldier the culture, the mouldier the people's brains become. So that's why they invest in care for and nurture of this mould. And culture that is contemporary, actual, relevant, developed – the government suppresses this. It is culture that is not profitable for the government today in any way, as the less that goes on in people's brains, the better it is for them.'*

Artur Klinau

Even though Lukashenko came to power in 1994, it is only recently that he has turned his attention to culture. In as much as this report focuses on censorship in the Belarusian music scene, it is important to note that direct censorship in independent Belarus is a recent phenomenon.

*'There's a growing confrontation going on, especially in the last two years when the government has been formulating its ideological doctrine. They've started to look at culture very closely. Previously they didn't care what was official or unofficial – things lived or died on their own merits. But over the last few years the government have realised that culture is a very important tool, and especially in terms of ideology it's an essential instrument. If previously they didn't care, now anything that doesn't fall under their ideological remit is heavily pressured. Censorship, prohibition, cutting off the oxygen, so today culture is undoubtedly, if not a battlefield, a stage of confrontation. If we look at the steps the authorities have*

*taken in particular in the last two years... in music they've put practically the entire independent Belarusian rock scene outside the law.'*

Artur Klinau

In this report we will look at the two sides of state music policy: the *official* artists who are actively supported on state television and radio and used in pro-governmental political actions, and the *unofficial* artists, some of whom are unofficially banned from the media and others who cannot perform in Belarus at all. First – the banned musicians.

## CHAPTER TWO

### MUSIC CENSORSHIP AND THE OPPOSITION

*'If we look at the steps the authorities have taken in particular in the last two years... in music they've put practically the entire independent Belarusian rock scene outside the law. It's a very dynamic part of contemporary Belarusian culture, very interactive in its relationship with the public. Rock culture is very dangerous for this government, because it is culture that can have a real influence on the youth. So it's being totally obstructed on all sides.'*

Artur Klinau, writer and artist

*'I work on a state radio station, where I'm one of the directors. It's best I don't say which one. It all started with the concert dedicated to the ten year anniversary of Luka's rule. Forty minutes before the end of the concert, the lights went out – the police cut the electricity. Neurodubel were on stage, so the crowd sang all their songs a capella.'*<sup>16</sup>

Alexander L.

July 21<sup>st</sup> 2004 marks the date when censorship became a direct issue in Belarusian music: a concert dedicated to the ten-year anniversary of Lukashenko's presidency took place on Bangalore Square, in a park outside the centre of Minsk. The concert was officially permitted, and the organisers had all the necessary licenses from the Minsk *gorispolkom* (city authorities): Nonetheless, the day after the concert, numerous sources agree that radio stations received strict instructions to remove all the bands who performed at the concert from their playlists: namely Palats, ZET, Pomidor/Off, Neurodubel, Drum Ecstasy and NRM.

*'This was the so-called black list, although there were no lists as such, rather the 'telephone law'. The bosses circulated a list of bands which should not be featured on any airwaves. And basically none of the bands who were on that list have been played since.'*<sup>17</sup>

As reported by the Belarusian Association of Journalists, this informal decree came into force on 4<sup>th</sup> August, and was directed towards all FM radio stations, both government run and private.<sup>18</sup> This directive was seemingly the turning point in official attitudes towards politically active musicians. The members of the group Palats were officially fired from their positions at the state organisation Belkontsert that same evening. The percussion ensemble Drum Ecstasy had several high profile concerts cancelled at the last minute for no reason.

*'Independent groups like us couldn't be punished immediately, but the next time we tried to put on a concert, we couldn't do it. This situation has been going on for two and a half years. Although even before that it also wasn't so good... just that since then it has got significantly worse.'*

Pete Pavlov, NRM

Dozens of cancelled shows and shelved interviews have been reported involving blacklisted bands since July 2004.<sup>19</sup> The oral nature of the blacklist has created certain confusion as to exactly which bands it applies to. Although the one radio DJ we spoke to told us that it numbers not more than ten

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with the author, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2006

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Viasna: August Part 1. <http://www.spring96.org/ru/vcont/6/842/>

<sup>19</sup> For a more detailed opposition bands 'censorship timeline', see <http://belarus.kulturaktiv.org>

bands, an ironic poll at the Muzykalnaya Gazeta website offering readers the chance to 'participate in the composition of your own black-list' suggests 42 possible bands and artists associated with the independent music scene. In practice we heard many reports of bands with no association to politics also finding it increasingly difficult to get official permits for live performances – in the absence of a concrete, agreed list of banned performers, the general atmosphere of suspicion created by the idea of a ban has affected the entire independent music sector.

There are several reasons why the more politically active bands might have attracted the ire of the authorities at this particular moment: certainly the Lukashenko administration were anxious to crack down on protests before the highly controversial October 2004 referendum on removing presidential term limits. It is interesting, though, that this telephone directive specifically targeting rock musicians was issued before the Orange Revolution in Kiev – it appears the influential participation of rock bands in the Ukrainian pro-democracy protests did not alert Lukashenko to their potential danger, but rather confirmed what he already knew. Likewise, the fact that these bands participated in this particular opposition concert dedicated to ten years of Lukashenko's presidency seems to have been – in a pattern that has become increasingly familiar over the last two years – a pretext rather than a specific motive in itself.

*'No totalitarian regime does everything in a single day – everything happens in stages. Maybe the authorities understood [the potential threat posed by rock music] a long time ago, but they can't ban everything in a single day. First they look at one thing then another, and another, everything in turn. So they close one newspaper, then another, then a school, then this, then that... Blockading freedom of speech is a gradual process.'*

Artur Klinau

Rock bands like NRM had been involved with political activism previously, but this ban seemed to mark a turning point in that it made the division between official and unofficial music concrete and undeniable. Whereas previously rock existed in a grey area – without state support but flourishing alongside subsidized music – now, it was officially identified with the movement for change, and as such it became a central rallying point for opposition supporters.

*'The concert on Bangalore was just an excuse. Our rock bands were very active in the previous election, playing agitation concerts, so the authorities knew about them already. Rock is a real force of social influence, and behind it stands a real auditorium. And the government suppresses all spheres of influence that are out of its control. Everything independent from them is potentially dangerous.'*

Artur Klinau

In the eyes of some onlookers, Lukashenko's ban in 2004 might even have been the revitalising force that the otherwise dull, imitative Belarusian rock scene really needed. In the Beatles era, rock in the Soviet Union had of course been the most glamorous and dangerous symbol of all: a long way from post independence situation in the 1990s, where greying prog-rock and metal monsters like Jethro Tull and Uriah Heep practically lived from their earnings touring the European countries of the former USSR, and wielded a considerable influence on local music.

*'Belarus is the best country in the world for rock 'n roll. After the breakdown of the Soviet Union the big rock bands from the West came and killed Belarusian rock music. But then Lukashenko took power and saved us. He gave new life to real rock music. He gave us something to play for.'*<sup>20</sup>

Liavon Volski and Pete Pavlov, NRM

Lukashenko's ban did not create a politicised Belarusian music scene – culture has always been associated with politics in independent Belarus. What it did do, though, is make an already divided music scene totally polarised: it identified any music that was not pop, classical or jazz – and especially if it was sung in Belarusian – as oppositional, and thereby politicised a great many musicians who had been previously totally unengaged. So while censorship in Belarusian music is connected to the issue of language, it is not as simple as some have suggested, that 'everything in Belarusian is banned.'

*'It is true that all but a couple of musicians and bands that are on the 'white list' of the Ministry of Culture sing in Russian, and that most individuals and groups on the 'black list' sing in Belarusian. But that's not the reason, that's one of the components. For example Neurodubel only sing some songs in Belarusian: they sing mostly in Russian and their fans are mostly Russian speakers. But they are on the black list. But groups like Pesnyary or Syabry, sing in Belarusian and they are on the white list.'*

Sieva Rahosia, Publisher

*'The group Drum Ecstasy were also banned at that time: they're a group of eight drummers who don't even have any lyrics at all. They were banned for playing in the wrong place. So the important thing is not what you sing but where you sing it.'*

Alexander Kulinkovich, Neurodubel

The musicians on this blacklist have a specific problem above and beyond the fact that large scale live performance is next to impossible. The fact that the list is not the result of a presidential decree, or any official legal decision, means that it is impossible to prove. And here lies their main problem in the fight to overturn this ban – it does not officially exist, and therefore all knowledge of it is repeatedly denied by the Ministries of Culture and Information, despite all the evidence to the contrary. As we will see, it is the complicated bureaucratic structures and legal pretexts employed to enforce censorship that are at the heart of the struggle for freedom of expression in the Belarusian music scene today.

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<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Marius Kløvggaard and Ole Nikolaj Toft, *Rock rebels saved by the dictator*, Euroviews 2004, Danish School of Journalism. <http://w2.djh.dk/international/2004f/euroviews/belarus3.html>

## CENSORSHIP IN PRACTICE – MECHANISMS OF CONTROL

*'We feel as if our hands have been tied, we have been stood on tiptoes, and a noose has been placed around our necks. Apparently we haven't been hanged yet, but you can't call it a life.'*<sup>21</sup>

Open Letter of 'blacklisted' musicians, 16<sup>th</sup> September 2004

## LIVE PERFORMANCE

Preventing musicians from large-scale live performance in Belarus since 2004 is one of the most damaging aspects of the government 'ban' on the 'blacklisted' bands. It hits where it really hurts – severely limiting their public exposure, earning potential and ability to express themselves creatively as artists. It is the economic consequences that are perhaps the hardest: concerts represent the main source of income for vast majority of Belarusian musicians, and by denying artists the ability to make a living from any music that is not officially state-sanctioned, the long term intention is clearly to squeeze the alternative music scene to the point where it becomes financially unviable, and therefore implodes.

There is no Belarusian department of censorship *per se* as censorship is illegal under Article 33 of the Belarusian Constitution. Rather it is the bureaucratic structures controlling the performance, broadcast and distribution of music that make censorship both possible and difficult to investigate. While the reasons behind the 'ban' on live performance of the opposition rockers are clearly political, the ways in which it is implemented purposely avoid any mention of the political dimension - it is implied but never publicly proclaimed. Instead, a sophisticated and highly effective variety of legal and economic mechanisms are employed to prevent rock and underground bands from performing.

## LEGAL OBSTACLES

*'You need an individual license to hold each concert. The venue needs to be registered. As a promoter I also have to be registered separately or have an agreement with a registered company. There are only two or three companies who are officially allowed to hold concerts, but to work with them I need to pay a lot of money for all the bureaucracy. To do everything officially would cost \$700-800 minimum. That's just for the licenses – before renting anything. And that's if I do it with one of my friends who already has official registration – otherwise it would cost even more.'*

Electronic music promoter, Minsk

Belarus' complicated bureaucracy allows for a number of legal pretexts to stop musicians from performing. In order for a concert to take place legally, the group or promoter concerned must apply for a performance permit (*gostryulnoe udostoverenie*) from the city authorities – in the case of Minsk, where most of our research took place, the body that issues licenses is Minsk City Executive Committee. Their officials have the right to refuse a license for any number of reasons or even to withdraw it once it has been issued. If officials are confident that the concert will be ideologically sound – presentation of a

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<sup>21</sup> See p. 81. Also available at [http://www.music.tut.by/st/r\\_opbm.shtml](http://www.music.tut.by/st/r_opbm.shtml) and in English on <http://www.freemuse.org/sw7277.asp>

membership card of Lukashenko's loyal student union the BRSM seems to do the trick – the license will be granted. For rock and Belarusian language bands in particular, consultation with the KGB, Ministry of Culture, or Ministry of Religious Affairs (particularly for goth and metal concerts) enables officials to refuse applications with the justification that they are simply observing orders from above.

A common mechanism used by the authorities to prevent live performances, according to our informants, is last minute revoking of licenses. This is done under a variety of fabricated pretexts using health and safety, housing or similar regulations. Some of the examples given to us by our interviewees verge on the absurd, as in the case of a punk concert which was cancelled '*because the location is mined*' or hypothetical scenarios such as: '*It is dangerous to have this concert because a lot of young people will come and they'll cut the chairs. We had an experience ten years ago that the kids cut the chairs with razors, so we don't want to risk it, sorry.*' or '*The fire brigade says its dangerous because people will smoke and drop cigarettes, so the whole place could burn down.*' Last minute cancellations, which can happen a few days or even just a few hours before the event, put considerable economic pressure on promoters and concert organisers. It is a very risky venture as even when everything is seemingly in order something unexpected can happen at any moment – and there is no way to argue the case. This way they stand to lose money from the license fee itself, equipment hire and lost ticket revenue. As one female artist, who recently tried to promote her new CD, told us: '*if you lose money a few times, eventually you give up. So from the point of law, everything is right, but as a business relationship it is unfair.*'

A recent piece of legislation complicates the situation even further. According to the revised 2004 regulations titled "On order of concert and tour activities in the Republic of Belarus", any concert is subject to prior scrutiny by a special committee of the Ministry of Culture which judges the 'artistic merit' of a proposed event and according to its own standards decides whether to issue permission or not. As Mikhail Kazlovich, head of the Arts department of the Ministry of Culture, told Komsomolskaya Pravda newspaper just before the new regulations came into power: '*We are responsible for the quality of performances, for guarding listeners against propaganda of violence, cruelty, indecent texts and other negative things. This commission is to consist of professionals in the sphere of culture, and, certainly, local officials. They will give recommendations whether to sanction a concert or not.*'<sup>22</sup>

What is considered artistic is anyone's guess. It is therefore very easy to refuse permission to those bands the government deems 'undesirable'. As Pete Pavlov, of the 'banned' group NRM told us: '*They can easily argue that it's not music, it's not culture, it's too loud, too unprofessional... Particularly as we don't have any regular music education, it's a way for them to say these people didn't even study, what kind of musicians are they?*' Liavon Volski, the leader of the same band, added: '*We just play rock. That's enough for them.*'

One of the biggest problems for the musicians is that virtually all large concert halls in Belarus, such as Palaces of Culture or of Sports, are state owned and all of their staff are employed directly by the state. The 'blacklisted' bands have virtually no chance of hiring such venues, as none of the directors and managers are prepared to risk losing their jobs for organising events that go against the directives of the authorities. As with officials that issue licenses, venue directors are subject to the now infamous 'telephone law' – there are no written orders, a phone call from the authorities is enough and the directives are followed without question.

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<sup>22</sup> Precensorship of Concerts Introduced in Belarus, Charter 97, 25<sup>th</sup> August 2004; <http://www.charter97.org/eng/news/2004/08/25/music>

*'One of the first bannings of a big concert was actually one of ours, they called the boss of the place and said: 'If this group comes then you go.' It was the 1st of April 2005. The owner of the hall on the sly changed the concert for some 'objective' reasons, because something or other didn't work out, but on the quiet we found out that there'd been a phone call from... not from the Ministry of Culture but from the Presidential Administration itself. And that was it for licenses.'*

Alexander Kulinkovich, Neurodubel

Most of the time, even a phone call is not necessary – fear is enough to keep venue managers and concert organisers from breaking the unwritten rules. In the state sector, self-censorship is deeply ingrained and very few people are prepared to divert from the official line as they and even their families face a very real prospect of losing their jobs. Most state jobs are subject to yearly renewable contracts and simply not extending the contract without obligation to state the reason is a common and widespread practice of exerting pressure on state employees.

Despite being some of the most popular Belarusian bands and would normally be able to attract large crowds, the 'blacklisted' bands are now reduced to performing in small private clubs to audiences of a couple of hundred, at best, instead of thousands.

*'In Belarus we can only perform in very small clubs, they're not even called concerts but 'artistic evenings'- they're not advertised, because if they were they'd be closed down. And the boss of that tiny little place could run into trouble. For the past 18 months we've been playing to crowds of 50-70 people, although with all modesty Neurodubel is one of the most popular bands in Belarus and we can easily get together 1500-2000 people. We can't do licensed concerts.'*

Alexander Kulinkovich, Neurodubel

However, even organising these small events is fraught with difficulties. Small private clubs are particularly vulnerable to state pressures, including intimidation, threats and closures, as well as an unfair economic position in comparison to state owned venues. Those that remain open and that are prepared to take a risk by supporting 'unofficial' bands are few and far between, and few clubs survive more than one to two years.

Most 'unofficial' concerts have thus been pushed even further underground. Many independent organisers and promoters no longer even bother applying for licenses – partly for economic reasons – given the size of the audience, paying all the necessary fees is not economically viable. But more importantly, once an event is registered and licensed, it can be monitored and sabotaged by the authorities. If you do not have a license in the first place – they can't take it away.

As exceptions to this rule, large scale concerts in Minsk, featuring the famous 'black-listed' bands such as the *Rok Koronatsiya* 2005 awards ceremony, at which opposition leader Alexander Milinkevich appeared to a standing ovation, still take place from time to time. Similarly, against the expectations of its organizers, the large scale opposition concert took place on March 18th, on the eve of the 2006 presidential elections, in Bangalore Square in the centre of Minsk, featuring a special address by Milinkevich himself (see below). That this event passed by without violence or provocations by the authorities, and even that it took place at all, may seem as an indication that the situation in Belarus may not be as bad as it seems. However, for those who are familiar with the tactics of the regime, allowing these events to happen is part of a cynical and deliberate government strategy of creating a semblance of normality and openness whilst blatantly doing the opposite in every other sphere. Needless to say that this concert

had no coverage in the official media and posed no meaningful threat to a government that had done its work quashing the opposition in the preceding months and years. On the other hand, the violence with which the government dispersed the peaceful post- election demonstrations in Minsk and the continuing crackdown on opposition activists confirms our informants' fears that the situation would worsen once the foreign observers and journalists left the country.

## ROCK MUSIC & ACTIVISM ON THE FRONTLINE

The Presidential elections of 2006 marked the high point so far in the relationship between the independent Belarusian music scene and political opposition, thanks in a large part to the work of independent record labels like Volia Music and the Belarusian Music Alternative (BMA), a small but important organisation that acts as record company, promoter and publicist for much of the national rock scene. Run by 26-year old Vital Supranovich, an executive member of the oppositional youth movement Malady Front (Young Front), the BMA has been at the forefront of a campaign to gain international support for the beleaguered domestic rock scene:

*'Servants of the dictator continue in our country the policy of Russian neo-soviet imperial revanchists destroying all that is Belarusian – street names, national symbols, educational institutions. And now Belarusian rock is under strike.*

*The hatred of dictatorship against Belarusian rock, Belarusian youth and all that is Belarusian becomes the hunt. Therefore MALADY FRONT and BMA Group has decided to begin an international campaign "The world rock for Belarus!" We appeal to all the rock fans and musicians all over the world:*

*Support BELARUS! Support FREEDOM! Support ROCK!*

*Every word of your support either said or printed is one more step to free and open Belarus!*

From the BMA campaign 'Rock 4 Belarus!'

The recruitment of the independent rock scene to opposition politics was only natural, given the gradual interference of the Ministries of Culture and Information in live performance.

The rock 'blacklist' of 2004 was not the first instance of direct musical censorship under Lukashenko, but the culmination of a policy first aired in 1999, when ten independent concerts were reportedly banned in cities around the country.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, small alternative music clubs like *Rezervatsiya* in central Minsk were reportedly closed down along with an independent radio station dedicated to independent news and Belarusian youth culture, 101.2 FM. This account of the station's fate by a senior member of its technical staff shows just how important controlling youth ideology has become in Bat'ka's (Daddy's) Belarus:

*'The only music we used to play was Belarusian and Western, there was a certain amount of Russophobia back then, we didn't play Russian music at all. It was an information based radio, in opposition to Lukashenko and he closed it on the pretext that the transmission was interfering with something.*

*The equipment was seized and given to the BRSM' [the pro-governmental Belarusian National Youth Union].*

Youth organisations like *Malady Front* and *Zubr* [which means 'Bison' in Belarusian] in particular have been on the blunt end of Lukashenko's affections since the uprisings in Ukraine and Georgia, where members of the pro-democracy youth groups *Pora* and *Khmara* played decisive organisational roles. Thanks to the initiative of the BMA, the independent rock and roll scene got involved on the oppositional front lines as early as 1998 in a concert in central Minsk in support of political prisoners in Belarus, and a concert series and subsequent compilation CD *Volniya Tantsy: Sluhai svayo* (Freedom Dances: Listen to Your Own), featuring Belarusian language bands marked an important step in the direct involvement of rock musicians in Belarusian cultural politics. As the title of the compilation suggests, the musicians'

<sup>23</sup> See the BMA website: <http://bma.home.by/eng/rock4bel.htm>

fight against Lukashenko starts not with issues of media freedoms or political pluralism but with the perceived cultural monopoly of Russian imports.

The BMA's role in the creation of a powerful independent musical identity has arguably been crucial to the popularity of Belarusian language politics amongst the country's youth – it is now cool to listen to the Belarusian rock rebels no matter what language you speak at home.

*'When you speak to openly pro-democratic young people, it always turns out that they listen to and have been listening to our CDs and tapes, that they know the artistry of our bands extremely well. And this is the most important point: they identify themselves as holders of real contemporary national culture, rather than pseudo-national, Russian-based culture. Although I can't say that this was such an obvious goal of ours from the outset, it has now become clear to us that everything we're doing has an influence, in some way or another, on the formulation of a new cultural landscape.'*<sup>24</sup>

Vital Supranovich, BMA

In addition to the work of the BMA, a new company called Volia Music, working together with the moderate nationalist Belarusian Popular Front, has been behind important recent political music compilations: the most recent being *Charnobylski Vetser* (Chernobyl Wind) dedicated to the twentieth anniversary of the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster, an event that continues to have sizeable political significance throughout the European countries of the former USSR. Despite the fact that the blast occurred across the border in the Ukraine, thanks to the direction of the prevailing winds Belarus suffered the vast majority of the radiation fallout. Chernobyl exploded the myth that glasnost would mean openness and honesty for the ordinary Soviet citizen – Moscow fiddled while Belarus burned, and the Kremlin's criminal mismanagement of the disaster's aftermath stoked the fires of independence that led directly to the collapse of the Soviet Union some five years later. As a symbol of corrupt power and official neglect for society as a whole, it is as potent as ever, and the annual *Charnobylski Shlyakh* (Chernobyl Path) demonstration that takes place in towns and villages across the country has long been an outlet for political dissent. Coming just three weeks after the violent police dispersal of the opposition-backed election protests, this year's marches were even more tense than usual, with several high profile arrests. Musicians have been using the Chernobyl metaphor for years – and the fate of one of the best known tracks on the *Charnobylski Vetser* compilation shows how jittery the authorities still were towards Chernobyl-related material even in the early years of Lukashenko's presidency:

*'We made a video clip of our song Homelski Vals<sup>25</sup> in 1996 for the ten year anniversary of Chernobyl: it was emotional, not even particularly about Chernobyl itself but about the fate of the Belarusian people, about Belarus one hundred, two hundred years ago. After the clip was shown a few times on ONT [state TV channel], the KGB found out about it and it was banned.'*

Igor Varashkevich, Krama

An interesting point of comparison between the official and unofficial music scenes in Belarus is the format on which the music is released: the rock and independent scene is still album based, whereas the pop scene is almost entirely compilation based. It is critical to *popsa's* social and commercial agenda that it is available in a constant stream of instant singles rather than via an album's longer, potentially complicated gestation period. With the release of their compilations supporting civil opposition, Volia Music are using the compilation format for an instant hit with a quite different effect. The success of their

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<sup>24</sup> Quote courtesy of Ingo Petz: [www.ingopetz.de](http://www.ingopetz.de)

<sup>25</sup> 'The Gmel Waltz': named after the region is South Eastern Belarus hardest hit by radiation fallout from the explosion.

compilation *Pesny Svobody* (Songs of Freedom), released just over a month before the March 2006 presidential elections, is an important footnote to the role of music in recent Belarusian politics. With a thousand CDs given away free by activists at pro-Milinkevich rallies and the compilation actively promoted for free download on the independent music site *Tuzin Hitou* (Dozen Hits), Volia Music successfully provided the pro-democratic movement with a consistent musical soundtrack that could be heard blasting out at every student gathering, opposition rally and protest around the time of the election.

With songs like *Maya Kraina* (My Country) by Kasia Kamotskaya and *Radzima, Svaboda* (Homeland, Freedom) by ZET, the compilation, voted for by readers of the independent music press (including the private *Muzykalnaya Gazeta* newspaper and *Tuzin Hitou* website) brought together the most openly political music in Belarusian over the past decade. The aesthetic is mainly hard rock and punk with some softer rock and hip-hop tracks. And despite the virulence of some of the sentiments against Lukashenko, none of the tracks included mention the president or his policies directly – even with the compilers' attempt at anonymity, they do not dare run the gauntlet of criminal legislation on defaming the president.

It is for these reasons that musical opposition to Lukashenko is by and large expressed in terms of patriotism and love for the nation rather than direct criticism per se. The style is what we might call 'romantic nationalism' – the central theme being the performers' common identity as Belarusians, and the ideal of a Belarus after Lukashenko, 'the sun will shine on a new day' (*Atliantya*, Ultravozhyk) in a country 'under the white flag with a red sash' (*Maya Kraina*, Kasia Kamotskaya) where 'people will never be slaves' (*Dzie moi kraj* 'Where is my country', Todor). In short, classic romantic protest lyrics, where the call for 'freedom' is centre stage. It is interesting to note that for all the emphasis given to rock in press articles about the opposition and the problems they face, it was hip-hop that provided the real 'anthem of the revolution'. Perhaps this is because the main crop of Belarusian rockers is from an older generation – better established, and therefore arguably with more to lose:

*'We do not sing about specific problems in Belarus even though our fans would like us to do that. Instead we sing about general themes like intolerant people, who do not like foreign countries and about how nothing has changed in Belarus. We still live in a dictatorship and that is what we have been singing about all ten years we have existed.'*<sup>26</sup>

Liavon Volski, NRM

Like in the Ukrainian Orange Revolution in 2004, it is the voice of nationalism that rings the loudest, although it must be stressed that this is cultural nationalism rather than the more sinister ethnic nationalism that features so heavily in contemporary Russian music. Indeed with many leading exponents openly identifying themselves as being of Polish, Russian and Jewish ancestry, they do not want even this form of openly nationalist patriotism to be taken too seriously:

*'We also have a song called Belarus Uber Alles that I wrote as a kind of Dead Kennedys cover. It's a jokey song, but the authorities consider songs like this to be very harmful, oppositional.'*

Alexander Kulinkovich, Neurodubel

Another 'political' theme is the post-Soviet mentality, the ingrained tradition of prohibition that is affecting musicians' lives directly under the present system:

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<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Marius Kløvgaard and Ole Nikolaj Toft, *Rock rebels saved by the dictator*.

*'Our blues is politicised. But our lyrics are not concrete – let's do this or that. They're more artistic. For example we have one song Komandant (the Commander), a very ordinary story about a porter in a student hostel who won't let people in or out. The song is about how in totalitarian countries, small people, officials, they see themselves as little gods, and if they can stop you from doing something – they will, for the sake of their own feeling of power.'*

Igor Varashkevich, Krama

So much focus on the political attributes of Belarusian music-making, however, is not necessarily a good thing. Igor Varashkevich voices the complaint of several other musicians' frustration in what they see as an attempt by both the authorities and the media to pigeonhole them as political artists: We don't sing just about politics, it's not what I think about. Democracy is to sing about what you want to sing about. For many of the musicians on the banned list, though, it is better to deny any accusations of politicisation at all: although this slightly disingenuous tactic seems to be an automatic safeguard borne out of the insecurity of their situation rather than genuine naivety or desire to mislead. With the Ministries of Information and Culture increasingly scrutinising song lyrics, many lyricists, forced to walk the censor's tightrope, are quick to play down any outright political meaning in their texts:

*'For bureaucrats, not musicians, language is a political act. No-one has songs directly against the authorities. People think that a certain song is about Belarus: for me, it's about rock music.'*

Slava Koran, Ulis

AK (Alexander Kulinkovich): *In general, it's not what we write, but what people read between the lines. As a musician you must know what it's like, people say to you – Wow, you really put this and that so well. And you look at them and go – I put what well? I said no such thing!*

- *But surely you write these things consciously?*

AK: *Maybe I'm being a bit disingenuous.*

- *You know exactly what you're writing!*

AK: *Yeah, maybe.*

With the intense interest of the international press and the largest protest demonstration in the history of Lukashenko's presidency under their belt, it could be that the 2006 Presidential Election will be seen to have marked a turning point for Belarusian rock musicians in their level of political involvement. Although the scene's leaders, and most articulate spokesmen, NRM have yet to formally join an opposition campaign, they are making their political feelings felt more loudly than ever. Immediately after the clashes with the authorities in the aftermath of the elections, their new single went straight to the top of the *Tuzin Hitou* independent music charts. The song was called *Usyo Rouna My Peramozham!* – Belarusian for 'We'll Win in the End'.

## THE NEW GENERATION – BELARUSIAN HIP HOP

Although rock has grabbed most of the international headlines, the nascent independent Belarusian hip-hop scene, representing a younger generation than the thirty and forty something rockers, is also beginning to feature prominently in civil actions supporting the opposition.

Krou is the rapper behind *Chyrvonym Pa Belamu* (The Red and the White), considered one of the main figures in the local hip-hop scene and one of the first to perform entirely in Belarusian. He says he formed the band CPB as a reaction to the huge state repression of the independent media:

*'I rap for people who maybe don't have proper access to information, or to independent newspapers, which these days you can only find on the internet. Not everybody has access to this.'*

Reflecting the trend across the music scene, most Belarusian hip hop is performed in Russian. In common with many musicians performing in Belarusian from other genres, Krou sees language as the main tool to help the Belarusian music scene develop a distinct identity.

*'Everyone was rapping in Russian. Even my famous hip-hop friends from Russia advised us to do it in our own language. Why? Because if it's in Russian, we'll always be copying the Russian scene. The level of Russian hip-hop is much higher than in Belarus. So Belarusian rappers are mostly clones. When compilations come out of the so called best of Belarusian hip-hop you'd be forgiven for thinking it was all done by the same people as it all sounds the same.'*

Founded as a political project, the lyrics of most CPB songs are intelligent and intentionally provocative, full of emotional rhetoric about resistance and foreign domination, for example the song *Hrunwalsky Bit* (Grunwaldsky Beat), a punning play on the name of a famous 15<sup>th</sup> century Lithuanian-Polish battle against foreign invasion. The message in many of his lyrics could not be more direct, with titles like *My Belarusy* (We are Belarusians), *List da AGL* (A Letter to Aleksander Grigorievich Lukashenko) and *Akupanty* (Occupiers).

At the more radical end of the protest music scene, Krou's imagery is patriotic and vehemently pro-Belarusian but more controversial than most, often seeming to veer close to the virulent nationalism that infects much Russian contemporary punk rock.<sup>27</sup> Notably, the Belarusian opposition seems so far to have avoided the more unsavoury attitudes (Russophobia and anti-Semitism in particular) that dogged Viktor Yushchenko's decision to include the extreme right wing in his *Our Ukraine* opposition coalition in the Ukrainian presidential elections in 2004. In common with the many other times that the topic of culture and nationalism came up in our conversations with artists, Krou is eager to reassure us that his lyrics about *moskalizm* [from *moskal*, a derogatory word for Russian] should not be misunderstood as being Russophobic.

*'I just don't want my Russian friends to get offended but I hate these 'Moskals'. What do I mean by 'Moskal'? I don't mean just someone from Russia, or Moscow, but these communists, imperialists who still believe in Bolshevism, and so on... It's the Soviet ideology that I cannot stand. I'm a liberal, in terms of my life, the politics of this country, economics – so these are the people I fight against. Particularly my lyrics in 'Akupanty' – sometimes people think I'm against Russians in general. So I want*

<sup>27</sup> Unlike its Russian neighbour, home to bands like the widely popular *Grazhdanskaya Oborona* – authors of the delightful track *Ubei Zhida* (Kill the Yid) – Belarus does not seem to have spawned a neo-fascist punk scene. Yet.

*them to understand what I mean by the term Moskalizm. If rock is about what's in between the lines, rap is much more direct.'*

Rapper KROU from Chyrvonym Pa Belamu

More direct, perhaps, but also much more dangerous. His lyrics against Lukashenko go much further than those of rock groups who play with double meanings – but they also choose to cultivate a visible public profile, whereas Krou, wisely, chooses to perform in strict anonymity.

*'In terms of this law in the criminal code threatening a 5-year jail term for insulting the president, about 60% of my songs fall into this category – about 30 tracks in all. If they would catch me I would go straight to jail, no question. That's why I perform in a mask, I don't appear on adverts and posters, I don't show my face in newspapers or allow myself to be photographed.'*

Although his politics are unequivocal, he can only take part in direct civil actions supporting the opposition abroad, such as the pre-election concert in Warsaw. A far more active part of the opposition cultural movement inside Belarus is played by teachers, students and alumni from the Jakob Kolas Lyceum, performing under the name *Partyzanskaya Shkola* (Partisan School).

The only exclusively Belarusian language educational establishment in the country, its forced closure under a trivial pretext in June 2003 is widely seen as indicative of worsening official attitudes towards the Belarusian language and culture under Lukashenko. The former students and teachers of the school are extremely active in political and civil opposition movements. The *Partyzanskaya Shkola* album, released in February 2006 just before the presidential elections, is part of the well organised, professional campaign to change the state promoted image of Belarusian language and culture as inferior to Russian. Max Rust, a seventeen year old former student of the Lyceum is the manager of this extraordinary music project. I say extraordinary because, in Belarus, this open agitation in favour of the Belarusian language is extremely dangerous. The morning of our interview, his parents' apartment had been raided and two Belarusian friends from Poland staying with him arrested and jailed. The interview was interrupted several times by calls from the Polish consul trying to negotiate their release. Max himself only escaped arrest, he told me with a smile, because he is legally still too young.

Negative perceptions of Belarusian are widespread in the general population. One young teacher at the Academy of Music said that she did not support the opposition for the simple reason that 'they would force us to teach in Belarusian – and it's not that I have anything against the language, but it just isn't rich enough... it just doesn't have the terminology.' For Max and the members of the *Partyzanskaya Shkola* project, this is a familiar argument:

*'The young have got it in their head that there is no sense in using Belarusian because it's the language of the countryside, the language of Soviet farmers. We have to do everything we can to persuade people that Belarusian is not better or worse than any other language, but equal. The idea came to us a very long time ago to do a project in Belarusian for young people to see that show-business in Belarusian is possible. When we have concerts at actions and demonstrations, young people understand that Belarusian is cool – that you can sing in it, write interesting things in it... you can even speak in it. So our main aim is to show young people that our country's culture can and should develop in the language of the country that we live in.'*

The highest profile track on the album is the hip-hop track *Ne (No)*, explicitly written as an inspirational call to arms along the lines of the Ukrainian Orange Revolution street anthem, Greenjolly's '*Razom Nas Bohato – i Nas Ne Podolati.*' (Together We Are Many and We Will Not Be Defeated).

*We will walk out  
And defend against those  
Who smashed our language like rubbish?  
For our honour  
Why are we the worst in the world?  
So arise our nations, we cannot wait any more,  
Changes are needed  
We will raise our heads.*

*Chorus:  
Do we agree to what we see?  
No, no  
We will suffer oppression?  
No, no!  
Nobody will take our freedom away  
We are together and we will win.*  
(Translation courtesy of Mirek Dembinski)<sup>28</sup>

Unlike Krou from CPB, the young rapper who wrote the track does not perform anonymously – his name and face are proudly displayed on the project website and CD. But these young activists seem to know what they are doing – many of them come from families intimately associated with opposition politics, like the producer of the project Franek Vyachorka, whose father, Belarusian Popular Front leader Vintsuk Vyachorka, spent the election in jail along with the most of opposition leader Milinkevich's campaign team.

Vyachorka, a classmate of Maxim Rust from the prohibited Jakob Kolas Lyceum, is also a veteran political activist at just seventeen. He initiated the *Musicians for Freedom* campaign, an attempt to create an umbrella movement for rock and alternative musicians supporting the main opposition candidate Alexander Milikевич. The campaign, along with a planned series of concerts under the same name, were intended as an alternative to the ubiquitous series of heavily state subsidized, highly controversial pro-Lukashenko concerts, *Za Belarus*, discussed in Chapter Two. In addition to more famous opposition supporters like those on the 'blacklist', the campaign invited musicians from across the country to contribute songs to Milinkevich's official website, perhaps in anticipation of the possibility of a full-blown 'denim revolution' with a stage and concerts on Minsk's October Square.

In fact, the pro-opposition *Musicians for Freedom* campaign managed to pull off just one concert on March 18th 2006, the eve of the election, in the park on Bangalore Square – the site of the infamous ten year anniversary concert that marked the beginning of many of the bands' problems some two years earlier. After an appearance by Milinkevich, the bands appeared on the small stage in the bitter cold in front of some five to ten thousand supporters.

*There won't be any Ukrainian Maidan in Belarus. And if there were it would not end bloodlessly.*  
Opposition musician

<sup>28</sup> From the film *Music Partisans*, dir. Mirek Dembinski, Studio Everest, Poland, 2006

Compared to the huge rallies in Kiev in 2004 [collectively known as Maidan] whose example the *Musicians for Freedom* campaign was attempting to follow, this concert on Bangalore Square was a clear indication that there would be no 'denim revolution' in Belarus. First of all the prevailing atmosphere in the run-up to the election was one of fear, with the volume of violent threats emanating from the Presidential Administration and KGB increasingly with every passing day. The day of the concert, all subscribers to the MCS/Velcom mobile phone network had even been sent an anonymous SMS containing a scarcely veiled threat against participation in the scheduled protest rally on October Square the next day (the source was later traced to a number registered to the pro-Lukashenko youth union, the BRSM).<sup>29</sup>

However, the fact that this concert in open support of the opposition candidate Milinkevich was officially permitted by the Minsk city authorities should not be allowed to cast any doubt on the de facto ban against the politically engaged independent music sector. When the police decided to liquidate the peaceful post-election protest camp on March 26<sup>th</sup>, the very day of the departure of the international press corps, the role that the intense international scrutiny had played became clear. Despite frequent comments designed to show his disregard for international scorn of his authoritarian rule, Lukashenko was careful to create a semblance of democratic normality for the international television cameras during election week. As an example, protestors were being arrested not in the camp on October Square itself, in the presence of the world's press, but on the streets and underpasses approaching the square, well away from the cameras. Without such a large international presence, it is highly unlikely that *Musicians for Freedom* would have been permitted even this one concert. Instead, the campaign would most likely have been restricted to the place that is now practically home to the independent Belarusian rock scene – Poland.

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<sup>29</sup> See Charter 97 newswire: <http://www.charter97.org/bel/news/2006/03/18/brsm>

## PERFORMING ABROAD – THE POLISH CONNECTION

*‘Concerts are a very sore point, because our concerts basically take place abroad. That’s very painful for me, as to play in my homeland is what I really want.’*

Rapper Krou, Chyrvonym Pa Belamu

Home to more than quarter of a million ethnic Belarusians on its Eastern fringes, and concerned guardian for the 400,000 Poles in Western Belarus, Poland is the most active international opponent of Lukashenko. In addition to offering university places to pro-democracy students ejected from Belarusian universities and funding pro-opposition radio stations such as *Radio Ratsiya* (Radio Reason) and *Eurapeyskaye Radyo dlya Belarusi* (European Radio for Belarus), Poland and Polish audiences are providing a lifeline for independent Belarusian musicians as the difficulties they face performing at home continue to increase.

In addition to numerous pro-democracy concerts over the past year featuring rock bands like NRM, Poland is home to the biggest alternative Belarusian music festival, Basowiszczka, which takes places every summer in Grodek not far from the Belarusian border.

*‘I live in a small town between Bialystok and Belarus. I am Belarusian, but born in Poland. My family didn’t emigrate or move from Belarus... it was the borders and our passports that moved! The area where we live has 75% Belarusians, and we organized the first festival in 1989 to give young people there the chance to speak in their own voice. Before Lukashenko, under [former President] Shushkevich, there was an explosion of Belarusian culture. But now the renaissance is on hold, so to speak. The fact that the biggest festival of Belarusian music is in Poland is a grotesque joke.’*

Polish Belarusian artist and festival founder Leon Tarasewicz

Due to its support for the Belarusian opposition, the Polish authorities allow young Belarusian to travel into Poland with relative ease, and Basowiszczka has become the main launching pad for new Belarusian language rock bands. One such band who recently came to prominence at the festival is Tarpach from Minsk, a feisty young hard rock band whose lyrics are far more patriotic and uncompromising than the older generation of rockers:

*Our suffering is endless, it deserves boasting  
But enough of this, it’s time to wake up*

*They have sealed our eyes, blocked our ears,  
Nobody wants anything, we must have lost our souls  
There is no way to work, no way to learn  
Death is not allowed, birth is not allowed*

*Our mother tongue is disappearing,  
People are disappearing  
Outrage and disgust constricts our chests*

*What have you done to our Homeland? Halt, tormentor!*

Translation courtesy of Mirek Dembinski)

The fact that Poland is actively providing a supportive breeding ground for the Belarusian cultural scene comes as no surprise to many independent artists – while there is no love lost between central government in Warsaw and the Belarusian minority to the East, the internal Belarusian political struggle gives Poland a rare chance to lead EU policy on the international stage. And it is not Russia, but Poland – say many pro-democracy supporters – who has been historically closest to Belarus:

*'When my Polish friends come here they're always surprised how many people can speak Polish – it's very telling. Historically Minsk was Polish speaking for many years. Like a family, Belarusians and Poles have lived through many centuries of history together. When people say that Russia is our big brother, that's a lie – Russia has always been the enemy. Russia has attacked, destroyed, divided. Soviet propaganda turned everything on its head and made an enemy into a best friend and brother.'*

Artur Klinau

Aside from these lofty words about brotherhood that reveal a bubbling argument about history and its post-Soviet reappraisal, Polish society has taken up the pro-democratic cause in Belarus with rare gusto. Somewhat disillusioned both by life in the newly enlarged EU club and the recent election of one of Europe's most right wing governments, many Poles see in Belarus today a nostalgic reminder of their own heady freedom-fighting days of Solidarnosc and their battle against Communism over twenty five years ago, a time of national unity and hope that seems increasingly distant. By highlighting the plight of Belarusian musicians, Polish NGOs working with the Belarusian opposition are harnessing the support of young Poles in the fight against Lukashenko. Poland spawned its own genre of freedom songs in the 1980s, and in the week before the March 2006 Presidential Elections, Warsaw played host to a large Polish-Belarusian solidarity concert organised by local Polish pro-democracy student organisation *Wolna Bialorus* (Free Belarus) and broadcast live on national television.

*'One of the last standing bastions of the old regime is Belarus. Democratic countries supported us in communist times by helping us publish prohibited newspapers and books, supporting political prisoners. Now it's time for us to do the same for those who need it.'*<sup>30</sup>

Bronislaw Komorowski, vice-speaker of the Polish Parliament

In the falling snow, the several thousand strong crowd waved white-red Polish and white-red-white Belarusian flags and sang along at the top of their voices to Polish songs of freedom from the 1980s. Under the powerful concert lights, famous Polish rock bands invited various blacklisted Belarusian artists onstage to sing new translations of their songs in Belarusian. For grizzly old rockers like Grzegorz Markowski, leader of the legendary band Perfect, the Belarusian cause sounded like rejuvenating rock 'n roll shot in the arm:

*'I really wanted to do it. You know, you can wake up with a hangover after a party... you can be hungry or tired... but you have to be free.'*<sup>31</sup>

But for some of the Belarusian rockers present, many of who are in their forties, these joint performances of the classic Polish freedom songs represented more than just a welcome show of solidarity, but a direct inspiration in themselves:

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<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Belarus: *Why Is Poland So Interested In Belarus' Fate?*, RFE/RL, 19th March 2006, <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2006/03/38159EF7-549F-4886-9594-05B03A9FA602.html>

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*

*'The Polish Solidarity movement is a very important part of my life. I used to live near the border so I listened a lot of Polish music. And all the songs that we played today are part of my youth. And they are related to my identity as a musician who sings in Belarusian. And the concert action that took place today is a celebration, because I know and love all these songs. The new translations in Belarusian that we sang today, I didn't have time to learn them, but the original Polish versions I could sing by heart.'*

Igor Varashkevich, Krama

For the 'banned artists' who performed here (NRM, Krama, Neurodubel, Rusia, Kasia Kamotskaya, Chyrvonym Pa Belamu, Partizanskaya Shkola) just a week in advance of the Presidential elections, these kind of concerts are not without a certain risk. The day before they were due to leave for Warsaw, the regular driver of one of their tour buses was severely beaten up – *perhaps it was a coincidence*, says Igor Varashkevich, *but these days there are just too many.*

Bearing in mind the severe criminal defamation law regarding 'insulting Belarus abroad', the fact that banned artists are still free to travel abroad and perform offers a welcome respite to the pressures at home. Even this is no longer taken for granted. According to all the indicators, freedom of expression in Belarus continues to worsen: the free-thinking *Soyuz Pisatelei* (Union of Writers) and *Nasha Niva*, the oldest independent print newspaper, are two of the most recent victims of the deteriorating conditions. Despite the general optimism regarding the vitality of the new Belarusian arts scene, artists are uniformly pessimistic about developments in freedom of expression in Belarus in the immediate future.

For the time being, however, the ability to perform concerts in Poland is a crucial lifeline for many independent Belarusian musicians, who find themselves *persona non grata* in almost every concert hall in the country. With ever-tightening restrictions on music radio, and invasive internet regulation a distinct possibility, it seems that the 'grotesque joke' is far from over.

## CHAPTER THREE

### PROTECTING OFFICIAL MUSIC

*'If the Republic of Belarus allots frequencies to FM radio stations, they are expected to broadcast Belarusian products. Why should we show so little respect to our own culture by allowing the domination of another?'*<sup>32</sup>

Nina Rayeuskaya, Belarusian Ministry of Information

One would imagine that the independent Belarusian language arts scene could not have been happier to hear that the government was taking steps to protect them from 'the domination of another culture'. Neglect of Belarusian culture and language is after all a central motivating factor for the nationalist opposition. But rather than supporting independent Belarusian artists, musical protectionism is being used to consolidate the already Russified cultural landscape even further. Confused? It all comes down to the issue of what Belarusian culture actually is, a question that is at the heart of the battle for its air-waves and by extension the attention – and affections – of its youth.

A quota on foreign music on Belarusian radio was first suggested by the Administration in 2003, but largely ignored by the broadcast media. Reading deeper into the concept of 'foreign music', the political possibilities of this legislation becomes clearer: the criteria do not just apply to language or place of production, but crucially to the sort of music as well. Russian language *popsa*, with its relatively wholesome image and positive message is accepted as part of the indigenous cultural landscape – after all Russian, goes the argument, is a Belarusian language just as much as Belarusian, and the values promoted in *popsa* pose no threat to the conservative values of the Orthodox Church. 'Foreign' music like European-American derived rock, with its associations of individual freedom and rebellion, is of course something quite different. Add the 'harmful, separatist' language issue on top, and you have the thinking that motivates most censorship of music in Belarus today.

It was not until January 2005 that the now infamous legislation stipulating that 75% of all music broadcast must be by artists 'of Belarusian origin' came into force. Some commentators were quick to welcome it as a piece of positive policy-making in line with similar legislation in France and elsewhere, that would help elevate the domestic music industry to a European standard. Others, in particular the radio broadcasters and music programmers themselves, were less enthusiastic. The director of Radio Roks, previously the country's most popular non-commercial station, was particularly acerbic in his appraisal of the new law:

*'We have been forced to follow this line. We are expecting that our audience will not shrink in number but will change in quality.'*<sup>33</sup>

Dzmitry Ausyannikau, Director, Radio Roks

There are clear signs that, while the extent of official censorship may not yet be as extensive as it was under the Soviet censorship organization *Glavlit*, the State is involved in active monitoring of television and radio to ensure that these quotas are met. Three FM radio stations, Hit FM, Unistar Radio BDU, and Novoe Radio, received an official warning from the Ministry of Information for their failure to 'abide

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Alyaksandr Kudrytski, *Radio Hit*, Transitions Online, 12<sup>th</sup> January 2005, <http://www.tol.cz/look/TOL/article.tpl?IdLanguage=1&IdPublication=4&NrIssue=98&NrSection=1&NrArticle=13333#author>

<sup>33</sup> Jan Maksymiuk, *Lukashenko Regulates Foreign Music*, January 2005, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL). <http://www.rferl.org/reports/pbureport/2005/01/3-210105.asp>

by their commitments regarding the broadcasting of local artists in prime time.’ The warning continued to threaten that ‘the FM stations may have their licenses revoked by the National Commission for Television and Radio Broadcasting if they fail to take corrective measures within seven days after receiving the warning.’<sup>34</sup>

Combined with the ‘blacklists’ of groups that are ‘not recommended’ for broadcast, this new law has made the work of music programmers far more difficult. The time-consuming process of listening to each song and examining each song lyric one by one is a clear example of how radio programmers are effectively being forced to act as censors on the Ministry of Information’s behalf. One director at a state radio station told us how the monitoring process works on a daily basis:

*‘The rule is 75% per hour, both over the course of the whole day and per hour. At the beginning, DJs tried to put it all at night-time, but then they came along and said no that won’t work. So now the law is closely followed. At the beginning we got a lot of warnings because of it, but now people are afraid so they follow it.*

*They always check texts. The music editors check the lyrics cause they don’t want to get it in the neck from the bosses. They need to get approval from their bosses for a certain word or a certain phrase. Editors are constantly changing because the work has become kind of heavy.*

*When a new album is released, the music editor listens through all the songs, on some stations they look at the quality as well, because with this 75% law we don’t have enough material, people are bored of playing the same thing all the time, the same low quality product, so they listen to the songs and check there’s nothing anti-authority about it. Even if it has a double meaning or something in between the lines that’s already enough. People are afraid.*

*You need to have compulsory playlists to say what was played when, and this information goes straight to the Ministry of Information. No-one tells you what you should play – the banned groups are banned and for the rest you’re free to choose, as long as you have at least 75% (you can play 100% if you like). Playlists need to be kept for 3 months. Playlists need to be submitted up to a week in advance to the boss of the station and the daily report goes out to the Ministry of Information. You can’t even play something and then change the name on the playlist, because the shows are listened to – can you imagine how many people that requires to check all the radio stations all the time?’*

The immediate effect has been to create a uniform musical landscape on Belarusian radio. With few exceptions, DJs and programmers are not willing to take the risk to play anything that might attract attention, and therefore the ‘format’ – bubblegum Russian language *popsa* – has become the concrete standard.

It does not seem to be the existence of the directive that is resented so much as its interpretation and political context. The timing of the directive, which came into force on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2005, was seen by many as a knee-jerk reaction to the role of pro-democracy music in the Orange Revolution in Ukraine: democracy activists had forced the fraudulent election to be rerun just five days earlier.

*‘Now the music on the radio is not Russian pop, but Belarusian pop, which was set up a year ago by a special decree. It all happened after [the protests on] the Ukrainian Maidan (Independence Square). They saw that music played some kind of role there, so they were inspired to start some kind of a*

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<sup>34</sup> Reported by RFE/RL, *ibid.*

*process to create an institute for our own pop music, to institutionalize Belarusian pop music. It was an economic directive to support pop music, to promote it to the molodezh' [youth].*

Pete Pavlov, NRM

In collaboration with state television stations, in particular ONT and the Minsk City Government operated channel STV, a number of initiatives were launched to promote homegrown *popsa*, including highly successful TV talent shows and a production centre involving local producer and pop guru Maksym Aleinikov. Nonetheless, a major complaint of radio programmers and music editors is that the domestic scene is not developed enough to be able to cope with the prescriptive 75% quota based on national origin and the directive banning independent Belarusian music at the same time.

With the gap in programming schedules filled by and large by *popsa* – generally Russian language *popsa* made in Belarus – the pop singers themselves are unsurprisingly supportive.

*'I'm not sure what the listeners think, but for me it's the right thing. Now I can show my music, people know me. No-one knew anything about what I was doing before: we were all swamped by these Russian artists, from Moscow, and no-one noticed Belarusian artists. Now I have a huge amount of fans, and people even say 'We don't need these Russian stars any more – we have our own Belarusian ones.'*

*So for us it's a big plus.*

Pop singer Gunesh Abasova

*'This policy of cultural protectionism has supported a lot of young artists, helping them to get precious airtime. A lot of new, talented names have broken through. That's great!'*<sup>35</sup>

Belarusian Eurovision 2006 contestant Polina Smolova

What is particularly concerning about the legislation is that the hardening of the homogenised *popsa* 'format' has given station directors an excuse to fire some of the last remaining DJs playing alternative, independent local music. Very few radio programmes remain: with the exception of Avto Radio, whose transmitters are located outside Belarus, Alexander Litvinsky's metal show *Massa Bruta* and Pavel Kanesh's electro-pop show on Minsk station Radio Stolitsa are the sole survivors. High profile recent casualties include *Tuzin Hitou*, a top rated weekly Belarusian rock programme run by 'banned' musician Oleg Khamenko on Radio Minsk that continued to play blacklisted music, and the influential show *Zateryany Mir* (Lost World) on Radio Mir, the only weekly programme on Belarusian radio that gave much-needed exposure to small punk, metal and electronica labels from around the country.

*'The programme was closed down during autumn 2005 – there were official and unofficial pretexts. The official pretext was: 'We are changing the format of the station, from now on we're just going to play retro music, so your music doesn't fit in.' But unofficially, the elections were not far away, and the bosses were afraid to have programmes with all this strange and incomprehensible music. I still get on really well with the director of the station I worked on. He said to me: 'You understand the situation, don't blame us, everything is coming from above. People are just afraid to lose their jobs.' The programme was live and I always interviewed bands on air. What they had to say often did not coincide at all with the official point of view, so maybe it's just that they decided to insure themselves against any unpleasantness that could arise in the future.'*

Vladislav Buben, radio presenter, *Lost World*

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<sup>35</sup> Anna Shchadrina, Belarus Segodnya, <http://sb.by/article.php?articleID=50360> (in Russian)

Ironically, this piece of legislation looks on the surface to be exactly what the independent Belarusian music scene had been calling for in compilations like the BMA's *Freedom Dances: Listen to Your Own*. But the devil, as always, is in the detail, and with the Ministry of Information holding the final say over what music of Belarusian origin actually is, it looks as though the FM radio waves will continue to be filled with Russian language pop for some time to come. With this piece of musical protectionism, therefore, Lukashenko has pulled off a classic sleight of hand – bringing in politically motivated legislation (as that is clearly what this is) that is widely seen as defending the national interest, while effectively smothering yet another potential channel of critical thinking.

## ROCK FESTIVALS & THE RECORD INDUSTRY

*'The Belarusian entertainment industry is oriented around the appearance of new pop projects, which are immediately taken on by the 'format' radio stations and concert venues. Annual competitions like Rok-Kola and Basowiszczka represent, for up and coming alternative musicians, practically the only opportunity to get onto a big stage.'*<sup>36</sup>

Just as huge TV sponsored pop competitions like *Slavyanksy Bazar* in Vitebsk in the North of the country – won last year by Eurovision entrant Polina Smolova – are the key to launching a successful pop career, rock festivals have traditionally been the launching pad for alternative bands of all kinds. After Basowiszczka in Poland, the second most important festival for alternative music is Rok Kola in Novopolatsk, also close to the Lithuanian border.

While performance licenses for individual alternative concerts become increasingly hard to get, the situation for rock festivals is a little different. There is a long tradition of rock and alternative music festivals in Belarus going back to the early 1990s, and despite the worsening political atmosphere, rock festivals continue to provide young bands with a rare opportunity to make a name for themselves in front of large student crowds, where entrance is often free or at very low prices. With the 'informal youth' audience in mind, certain conditions now do seem to be in force: for example the banning of all oppositional flags and symbols at Rok Kola 2005.

On the other hand, NRM did manage to perform both here and at Rok Koronatsiya 2005, which would seem to suggest that performances of 'banned' rock bands still can take place under certain controlled circumstances. The fact that the two largest annual domestic rock festivals – Rok Kola in December and Rok Koronatsiya in February – were both allowed to take place at all so close to the date of the March 2006 elections, might seem to suggest that although rock music is '*not recommended*' (Pete Pavlov, NRM), it is not yet subject to a blanket ban as such.

The fact that the local authorities continue to support a rock festival – the most famous cultural event in this provincial city – is testament not only to festivals' importance for youth culture in Belarus, but also the dire lack of support for alternative music in the rest of the Belarusian music industry.

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<sup>36</sup> *Rock Festivals: Dead and Alive*, Dva Goroda Regional Internet Portal, <http://www.2goroda.by/main.aspx?form=article&artId=1881&parentContext=6461919905> (in Russian)

*'Let's be clear: as of today, there are no record companies in our country in the normal sense of the word. Record labels in Belarus limit their work to two simple functions: pressing the disks and selling them through their own network of dealers.'*<sup>37</sup>

Belarusian business newspaper BDG Delovaya Gazeta

*'We don't have any record labels at all. They are private initiatives such as the BMA (Belarusian Music Alternative). They publish discs but they're not a record company, they just take finished products and publish them. But nobody looks after the overall infrastructure.'*

Pete Pavlov, NRM

With a couple of exceptions like the Russian company Misteriya Zvuka, who manages somehow to license both bands on the infamous blacklist and international major label artists in Belarus, alternative music has little representation in the commercial music industry, and is more or less restricted to tiny grassroots labels across the country operating independently.

Again terminology can shed some light: the Russian language has no equivalent term for a broad concept like 'the music industry' – the best it can do is *showbiznes*. As glitzy and professional sounding as the word might be to Belarusian ears, however the reality is a business dominated by the state on one side and the pirates on the other, where artists' rights are protected by a system that seems reluctant to show its teeth. With piracy responsible for an estimated 90-95% of all CD sales in Belarus<sup>38</sup> (see below), the Belarusian record industry is in extremely bad shape.

*'Distribution in Belarus is simple – private initiatives or individual people from small towns come to Minsk and buy wholesale stock of records or CDs which they take back to sell. There is no official distribution network. The big company 'Misteriya Zvuka' used to have some affiliates in several towns but they were closed. That was the only network full stop that sold a wide variety of music. They had something like three shops in Minsk and some in the provinces, but now the shops in Minsk are the only ones left.'*

Pete Pavlov, NRM

The majority of CDs are not sold through licensed shops, but through kiosks and pirate electronic goods markets, and with the exception of one or two larger companies, CDs are distributed on an individual shop by shop basis. Without reliable distribution, it therefore becomes much harder for independent record labels – a precarious business in any country – to make any profit at all. This is particularly outside the capital, where licensed (legal) independent music is often completely unavailable.

As the independent print media know only too well, legal registration brings with it a serious risk of a visit by the tax police, the choice organ of politically motivated harassment across the former Soviet Union. With alternative music under growing scrutiny, many independent labels and musicians feel safer operating independently of the system.

*'I also run a label Lost World Records for independent Belarusian electronica. Other countries have legal shops that labels can sell their music to, but to sell things officially here there's a lot of paperwork, which can also bring about problems. You need to have a contract with the seller, and then the question*

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<sup>37</sup> Tonya Ivanova, *Belorusskie leibly na record ne pretenduyut?*, BDG Delovaya Gazeta, 26<sup>th</sup> October 2005. [http://www.naviny.by/ru/content/rubriki/1-ya\\_gruppa/kultura/26-10-05-1/](http://www.naviny.by/ru/content/rubriki/1-ya_gruppa/kultura/26-10-05-1/) (in Russian)

<sup>38</sup> Alexander Losev, managing director of Vigma Records quoted in *Audiopirates against the audiomagnates*, Interfax; [http://www.interfax.by/?id=13\\_7\\_4\\_1](http://www.interfax.by/?id=13_7_4_1)

*of the content of the music can come up. Our music is generally without texts, so sometimes things are a bit easier for us.'*

Vladislav Buben

The biggest record label for rock music is West Records, which releases many of the bands on the blacklist as well as being the exclusive licensee of big Russian labels like Universal. A licensed CD in the capital costs between \$4 and \$6, which is cheap by Western standards but still beyond the reach of most students, who make up the rock scene's primary audience. Despite their huge popularity, the effective ban on concerts seems to be taking a significant financial toll on many of the artists we spoke to, some of whom have recently resorted to the survival tactics of their student days – bootlegging their own CDs and selling them at underground clubs.

As the cost of living increases, it is not just alternative musicians, banned from the airwaves and state concert halls, who are finding it hard to get by. State musicians, too, are feeling the pinch. But until the government seriously tackles the two main sources of hardship for musicians – piracy and non-payment of royalties – life for musicians is likely to deteriorate before it can possibly get better.

## COPYRIGHT AND PIRACY

*'Questions about the protection of copyright are extremely painful for us. After our concerts people come and ask 'Why are your albums such bad quality?' And we can only tell them we have absolutely no idea who puts these albums out.'*<sup>39</sup>

State ensemble Pesnyary

Founded in 1970 Pesnyary is a veritable popular folk music institution, whose status as an 'official' ensemble, employed directly by the State, has changed little since Soviet times. Their importance as official ambassadors of Belarusian culture can be seen in the personal interest the State takes in their recordings: *'The President has given us the task to collect everything that could go on our anthology,'*<sup>40</sup> they reported in an interview. As state employees, they do not earn much directly from record sales: *'We are a State ensemble. All rights [to our recordings] are owned by the State'.* This is a natural consequence of the Soviet concept of culture as public service, of course: in this sense musicians are middle-ranking civil servants with as much autonomy as any other cog in the ideological machine. But as state salaries fail to keep up with the basic cost of living, state musicians – who feature almost exclusively on radio and TV – are increasingly looking to the government to protect the one source of income that sustains most professional recording musicians in the Western world: *avtorskie prava*, or authorial publishing rights.<sup>41</sup>

*'Now [in 2003] we survive on our salary of just more than ten dollars a month and live concerts. But the President is looking at the issue of publishing rights.'*<sup>42</sup>

Pesnyary

<sup>39</sup> Online interview in BDG Delovaya Gazeta, 18<sup>th</sup> February 2003; <http://www.bdg.by/news/topic.htm?97,1>

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Roughly speaking, the rights of an author of a piece of music to receive money every time a track is performed, broadcast on radio or television, or used in advertising or promotion by a third party.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

A major justification for the introduction of broadcast quotas for 'music of Belarusian origin' is that it would help the struggling commercial Belarusian music industry support itself better financially through increased exposure for artists and royalty payments. The commercial benefits to Belarusian artists from the first quotas established in 2003 were not great:

*'The introduction of the 50 percent quota did mean larger royalty payments for domestic musicians, but it hardly turned the local music industry into a profitable business. Even with the existing quota, few Belarusian musicians earn as much as \$100 a month from royalties, and local stars can expect to earn just \$2,000 to \$3,000 in sales from a new album, according to the Belorusskaya Gazeta newspaper, making it almost impossible to compete with Russian pop stars, let alone Western ones.'*<sup>43</sup>

The figures quoted above are on the extreme end of the scale, applying to just a few of the top stars. For much of the music industry, even those completely outside rock and other 'problematic' genres, the Belarusian royalty collecting organization RUPIS does little – despite the existence of an admirable law on copyright protection and official cooperation with various international industry bodies like the IFPI (International Federation for the Phonogram Industry), composers employed by the state media are by no means guaranteed to receive the royalties they are legally entitled to.

*'I wrote the music for the weather forecast on [state national broadcaster] ONT. Royalties? I got a small sum on delivery and that's all.'*

Igor Satskevich, jazz band Apple Tea

By all accounts, as in many parts of the world, this type of rights 'buy-out' is the norm rather than the exception. The apparent failure of state radio and television to respect authorial rights indicates that there is little will at the highest levels to help Belarusian musicians improve their financial situation, despite all the official agreements and formal statements of earnest intent.

Since the 2005 enlargement of the EU, Belarus has increasingly come onto the international radar as a transit point for pirated music and film, leading to Belarus being designated one of Europe's piracy 'hotspots' along with Russia, Ukraine and Bulgaria in a 2005 global industry report.<sup>44</sup>

*'According to the IFPI, pirate CDs produced in Russia are increasingly turning up on the American, European, Latin American and Middle Eastern markets. There is a simple explanation. Officially [as of early 2003] there are 16 factories in Russia producing 'optical carriers' with a projected output of more than 183 million CDs and 5 million DVDs a year. Russian factories increased their output just last year by 40 million units, whereas the legal market grew by just 1.6 million units. The question is – what happens to the rest?'*<sup>45</sup>

With a friendly supplier like this just across the border, it is hardly surprising that piracy inside Belarus completely dwarfs the legal industry, accounting for some 71% of sales according to recent industry estimates.<sup>46</sup> If not a reason in itself, the gargantuan Russian pirate industry is nonetheless an important factor in the debate about the Russification of the Belarusian cultural landscape: the pirates and national media interacting in a steady cycle of supply and demand that leaves little room in the commercial

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<sup>43</sup> Alyaksandr Kudrytski, *Radio Hit*, Transitions Online, 12<sup>th</sup> January 2005

<sup>44</sup> *The Recording Industry 2005: Commercial Piracy Report*, IFPI. <http://www.ifpi.org/site-content/library/piracy2005.pdf>

<sup>45</sup> Vladimir Pugach, *Audiopiratsvo v rekordingovom biznese*, 16<sup>th</sup> January 2003. <http://jmors.of.by/avtors.php> (in Russian)

<sup>46</sup> *Special 301 Report on CIS countries*, 2005, International Intellectual Property Alliance: <http://www.iipa.com/rbc/2005/2005SPEC301CIS.pdf>

marketplace for more expensive, locally produced Belarusian language products. And while the issue is receiving some attention in official circles, the success rate of the police in confiscating illegal goods reveals something about local attitudes to pirates as being something between businessmen and public servants: while the Belarusian market is reportedly worth between six and seven million units a year, the Ministry of Internal Affairs seized only 100,000 counterfeit CDs in 2004, less than 1.5% of the overall market.<sup>47</sup>

## SAMIZDAT AND INFORMAL NETWORKS

Low incomes are, of course, partly responsible for the dire state of the music economy, and most musicians' earnings from record sales and publishing royalties are negligible. As in Russia, where the most popular artists can earn six figure sums playing at private events for the wealthy few, concert fees represent the main source of income for the vast majority of musicians across the former Soviet Union. The recent *de facto* restrictions on live concerts for the independent Belarusian rock sector are, therefore, particularly damaging. But there is a deeper reason behind the endemic disregard for musicians' rights, and looking at this can help us to understand both the strength of the underground music networks that exist completely independently of the State and the natural association between the independent music scene and civil opposition which continues to grow with each new piece of restrictive legislation.

A key issue, at the heart of the difficulties faced by member states of the former Soviet Union in their transition from a communist to a capitalist system, is property rights. Moves by Russia to renationalize the raw materials industry or restrict foreign ownership of companies have brought commercial property rights to international attention in recent years, but one aspect that remains relatively unexplored is the domain of intellectual property rights, the concept at the heart of the global music economy. The main problem facing the defence of intellectual property rights and the whole commercial understanding of music as a 'product' goes back to people's experience of culture in the Soviet Union, when state censorship gave birth to the phenomenon of *samizdat*.

Generally associated in the West with dissident or subversive literature, *samizdat* (from the Russian 'self-published') actually refers to the method of distribution, applying to anything copied unofficially and passed from one person to another:

*'As soon as the first person made a copy of any work, on a typewriter or the workplace photocopier, and passed it along – it became another samizdat item. Samizdat, however, was not necessarily political: despite the different meanings this word acquired, it is not a synonym for "illegal" or "oppositional" literature, but the mode of reproduction. A similar model was adopted by those who liked the sort of music which was not promoted (but not necessarily prohibited) by the authorities.'*<sup>48</sup>

This form of unofficial music distribution was known as *magnitizdat* (from *magnitofon*, tape-recorder) and copies of illicit recordings, in particular Western or Soviet rock music, were distributed for free via informal networks of music fans, or exchanged for other recordings. In this way, Soviet *samizdat* subculture created a powerful alternative music distribution network where music was seen not as a 'product' for commercial exploitation, but as a social device, existing completely outside the confines of the

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Maksym Butkevych, *The concept of "intellectual property rights" in contemporary Ukraine: official implementation and grassroots defiance*, MA thesis, School of Social and Cultural Studies, University of Sussex, 2005.

official State cultural system. And here we have the heart of the culture clash: Western property rights are by definition 'exclusive', whereas samizdat defined creative works as fundamentally inclusive. For a population educated in the importance of culture but denied access to much of it, copying music was not seen a crime, but rather the opposite: it was not sharing that was socially unacceptable.

*Samizdat* and *magnitizdat* gave value to creative works and information which would have otherwise been inaccessible; copying, sharing and exchange were vital for access to such information, and the social networks built upon these practices would not have existed under an approach of 'exclusive' property of creative works.<sup>49</sup>

In the internet age, of course, there is an obvious successor: file-sharing. Webmasters in Russia run some of the world's most popular audio and video file-sharing sites, effectively protected by a Soviet-bred government mentality that considers the violation of largely American copyright a crime of negligible importance, if at all (Russia may, however, consider it economically advantageous to sacrifice one website under pressure from the US government.)<sup>50</sup>

But while the internet remains the last relatively unregulated sphere of information in both Russia and Belarus, it looks unlikely to remain that way for long. Of course, it is not musicians who are the primary target – the Belarusian government has been gradually removing independent print newspapers from circulation for some years now, and regulation of the internet is the logical next step. But the effect this may have on independent music and its ability to survive has many musicians very worried indeed.

## THE INTERNET & FREE DOWNLOAD CULTURE

*'The internet is kind of raw in our country, but if they close even this channel, I don't know what I'm going to do. We'll probably all go hang ourselves. It's absolutely the last source to distribute information... But what will happen if the authorities try to control this too? It will be the end.'*

DJ Shamanka, underground music entrepreneur

*'The Committee for State Security – KGB – made only one mistake: when it permitted the sale of double-headed tape-recorders (with one for recording and one for reproducing) in the USSR. With this, the law enforcement agencies basically disabled all their future activity, because it became impossible to trace the dissemination of [musical] information.'*<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> At the time of writing the US is threatening to block Russia's application for entry into the World Trade Organization over violation of copyright on the cheap Russian file-sharing website [www.allofmp3.com](http://www.allofmp3.com). The website, which offers albums for just over \$1 each, is illegal under US law but perfectly legal according to Russian copyright law, and the powerful US music industry wants the impotence of the Russian courts to be a matter of the highest diplomatic importance: "We want Russia in the WTO, but they must first abide by the rules and obligations." (Eric Schwartz, vice-president of the International Intellectual Property Alliance, an umbrella organization representing the US entertainment industry).

See - Tony Smith, *Moscow prosecutor lets low-cost MP3 site off the hook*, 7<sup>th</sup> March 2005, The Register. [http://www.theregister.co.uk/2005/03/07/allofmp3-com\\_let\\_off/](http://www.theregister.co.uk/2005/03/07/allofmp3-com_let_off/);

- Doug Palmer (Reuters), *U.S. Lobby Groups Urge Tough WTO Line*, May 4<sup>th</sup> 2006, The Moscow Times. <http://www.themoscow-times.com/stories/2006/05/04/048.html>

<sup>51</sup> Soviet bass guitarist Mikhail Vasilyev cited in Kushnir, *Vkus magnitnogo khleba* [The taste of magnetized bread], <http://www.rockanet.ru/100/1.phtml>; quote courtesy of Maksym Butkevych

Swap the words *sale of double-headed tape-recorders* with *access to the internet* and you have a realization that the Belarusian Ministry of Information seem anxious not to repeat today. If the government's efforts to muzzle all outlets of free expression have been largely focused on the traditional media – newspapers, TV and radio, there are indications that their attentions are turning increasingly to the internet. In the annual Worldwide Press Freedom Report by Paris-based watchdog Reporters Without Borders, Belarus comes 152<sup>nd</sup> out of 167 countries – one place above Zimbabwe – and Belarus is mentioned in particular as one of the thirteen so-called 'internet black holes', or countries where the internet faces the harshest restrictions. Currently, rumours are circulating to the effect that a new version of the media law is being drafted whereby the internet will be treated like any other form of mass media, with compulsory registration for all websites. Compulsory registration – in the experience of print media at least – brings with it a whole host of legal hurdles and a variety of convenient legal pretexts for closing down dissenting voices.

*'People have been talking about compulsory registration of internet media for about four years already. The mechanisms to facilitate this are not yet worked out as far as I know. The proposed legislation is for all internet media to be registered, and for online newspapers to have official identification numbers and daily issue numbers. But the internet just isn't a medium that works like this.'*

Alyaksei Minchonak, coordinator Tuzin Hitou, independent music portal

For the most part, the internet has so far been relatively free and undisturbed, despite the fact that the state can, in theory, block any site they choose as all internet providers are channelled through the state telecommunications monopoly Beltelekam. Except for sporadic efforts by the authorities to block certain sites, especially around election times when some oppositional sites seem to experience sudden access problems inside Belarus, on the whole 'regime-directed tampering' has thus far been 'subtle', rather than 'systematic and comprehensive'.<sup>52</sup> In terms of the proposed changes, the administration is so far being coy:

*'It's enough to input a certain password in the Internet to stop the distribution of certain information in Belarus. This is easy to do. However, a question arises whether one should do that at all. We are a European country and should better think how to regulate rather than prohibit these processes.'*<sup>53</sup>

Mikhail Podgayniy, former Minister of Information

What the difference between 'regulation' and 'prohibition' turns out to be is another matter. One thing, though, is certain: any tightening of internet regulation has the potential to cause major problems to the independent music scene. With just one poorly distributed printed newspaper, *Muzykalnaya Gazeta*, devoted to the independent rock and pop scene, virtually the whole indie sector is now completely reliant on cyberspace for the promotion and advertising of concerts, new releases, festivals and so on. One of the main portals for Belarusian language music is *Tuzin Hitou* (Dozen Hits), which provides news and information about music that is otherwise unavailable in the national media, and compiles a weekly chart of Belarusian songs voted for by general public. The site serves an invaluable purpose as a discussion forum for independent music journalists, promoters and artists, and designs banners and even entire websites for Belarusian language bands – all free of charge. It is effectively the node in the

<sup>52</sup> *The Internet and Elections: the 2006 Presidential Election in Belarus (and its implications)*, Internet Watch, April 2006, Open Net Initiative: <http://www.opennetinitiative.net/blog/?p=97>

<sup>53</sup> From an interview given to *Obozrevatel'*, 13th June 2003, <http://www.charter97.org/rus/news/2003/06/13/internet>. For more details on freedom of expression and the internet in Belarus see *Free Internet Project*, Charter 97, <http://www.charter97.org/freenet/eng.html>

informal cyberspace rock music network and the cultural homepage of the pro-democracy student movement, heavily promoting oppositional music projects like the Pesny Svabody compilation. Understandably they are careful to play down any political angle:

*'It's not exactly a civil action – music is music. We express our civil position out on the square [protesting against the election results] – on our site we express our love for Belarusian music and culture, and in this way we hope to be able to help the development of Belarusian musical culture and Belarusian show business.'*  
Alyaksei Minchonak, coordinator Tuzin Hitou, independent music portal

In addition to providing all these services for the independent music sector for free, the site also offers a large catalogue of free downloads of new releases, reflecting the Soviet-era *samizdat* approach to the social, rather than commercial, role of music. In denying Belarusian language music access to the commercial music industry, therefore, the government's increasing restrictions have had the inadvertent effect of bringing *unofficial* music and civil society closer together. This pattern is reflected throughout the Belarusian language music scene. Mirroring events in the Ukraine, where Greenjolly's hip-hop protest anthem *Razom Nas Bohato* was available free on the internet and downloaded over 100,000 times during the 2004 Presidential Election campaign, the internet was a key factor in bringing Belarusian political music to the forefront of the recent election protests:

*'In today's climate, what better way is there to spread your music than letting people download it for free on the net? Free download is the best way to get your music out there – fast. We became famous through people sending it to each other: The [fiercely anti-Lukashenko] youth organisation ZUBR copied it onto CD and distributed it in Minsk, and Tretii Put (Third Way)<sup>54</sup> put some of our songs on their [satirical Lukashenko] caricatures and cartoons and distributed them on CD too. Hip-hop in Belarusian, especially with such sharp lyrics, was something new and previously inconceivable. That's why it all sparked so quickly.'*

Krou, Chyrvonym Pa Belamu

In wealthier countries, the internet fills the gaps left by traditional distribution networks – for underground music in Belarus, the internet is the only distribution network there is.

*'I run a portal of independent Belarusian electronic music, where people can download free mp3s of Belarusian musicians, where musicians can spread their name. With the help of this policy of free download we can help to popularise Belarusian music. Even when I release music on Western labels, I always ask them to set up something parallel for people in our country who can't afford CDs from abroad. Because to make payments abroad is very complicated, you have to send cash by post. There's only one legal system of payments via internet... So I try and make everything accessible – the main thing is that people get to hear it.'*

Vladislav Buben

Free downloads are not just about money – indeed, due to the slow connection speeds, free downloads can be paradoxically a more expensive option:

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<sup>54</sup> (Or *Tretsi Shlyakh* in Belarusian). Tretii Put's satirical animated films of Lukashenko are a cult sensation in Belarus – so much so that the site's administrators were subjected to an investigation by the Minsk City Prosecutor's Office starting in August 2005 for alleged criminal defamation of the President. See <http://mult.3dway.org> or the mirror site: <http://mult.batke.net>

*'A lot of people ask where they can buy our music. Over the internet we've had 20,000 downloads, which for Belarus is an enormous amount, especially seeing as internet is developing very slowly here, and most people have modems. So it's not just that it would take a whole day to download an album, but it would also end up costing more than buying it in a shop!'*

Krou

There are many websites catering for different music scenes, most with substantial catalogues for free download. Despite a mutual status as 'not recommended' in the mainstream media, though, there seems to be little coordination between the politicized Belarusian language rock and pop scene on one hand and other alternative music networks, such as the electronic, metal and performance art scenes on the other. One of the reasons may be a disagreement over cultural politics, namely the definition of what qualifies as 'Belarusian music':

*'I wouldn't make a division between Belarusian and Russian language music, because all the music that's made in Belarus by Belarusian musicians comes from the same society. Russian language music is only different if it comes from Russia itself.'*

Vladislav Buben

For most of the rock scene, performing in Belarusian is a matter of conscience. Russian language protest music against Lukashenko does exist, but the exclusive language policy of the nationalist youth movements – the segment of the opposition most involved with music – means that these artists have next to no exposure:

*'I have always tried to support Belarusian language musicians because they face more problems. The most important thing is the text. On the punk scene there are totally unknown bands who sing in Russian, but the texts are such that if the authorities knew about them they would have problems 100%. If it wasn't for the fact that my radio programme went out late at night, when there was less scrutiny, maybe some Russian language bands would have just as many problems.'*

Vladislav Buben

Unsurprisingly, it was mainly opposition supporting websites that suffered 'access issues' during the March 2006 Presidential elections. But the complete list of partially blocked sites put together during this period by the Open Net Initiative's Internet Watch project reveals some unexpected targets – for example the religious portal <http://islam.by> and Russian gay sites like <http://www.gay.ru>. While the high profile rock/protest Belarusian language music scene's problems are reasonably well documented in the international press, the informal networking of the internet is even more important for minorities and musical subcultures. Internet censorship, it seems, is driven not just by political ideology but also by a pervading atmosphere of social conservatism, driven largely by the Orthodox Church.

Bes Trifoil is the leader of Medievil and Barracuda Band, two Minsk based death metal/industrial bands. Used to the accusations of Satanism and social perversion that are frequently levelled at the metal and goth scenes, he is not unduly worried by state controlled internet filtering:

*'My internet site is hosted by a Belarusian company, but our servers are located in Canada and the US. Now we have internet censorship and you cannot reach some sites from Belarus. One way to get around site blocking is to use portals that anonymize you: on these sites you just enter the address you want, and you can view the closed content through this site.'*

It is not surprising that Belarusian webmasters are prepared for unforeseen 'access issues'. Many independent news sites targeted during the 2006 Presidential elections had contingency plans in place and managed to operate successfully despite attempts to block them.

When and whether at all the state does decide to formalise internet regulation and filtering depends more on strategy than legal requirements or technical capability, much of which is already in place. The state's success in dispersing opposition rallies and protests like the post-election tent camp on October Square would seem to indicate that, for the time being at least, intelligence gathering takes priority over the drive for total control of the information spectrum. As internet access is mostly confined to urban centres, the internet – even if left totally unregulated – is still far from having an influence on the majority of the population. Television, on the other hand, was brought under full state control long ago, and during the 2006 election campaign, state television was used to reinforce the division between 'official' government employed musicians and opposition-supporting 'banned' musicians in a number of less than subtle ways.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE STATE ELECTION CAMPAIGN

*'We stand up for consolidating the efforts by the state and artistic intelligentsia in the upbringing of people in the spirit of social, moral, and esthetic ideals of the Belarusian nation. We oppose division of the masters of culture into courtiers, opposition, right wing or left wing. We do not need pocket sweet songsters, smoothers, turncoats, lovers of bargaining for loyalty who demand all kinds of privileges in exchange.'*<sup>55</sup>

President Lukashenko at a meeting with representatives of the artistic intelligentsia

There are two sides to any sophisticated post-Soviet PR campaign, and the run-up to the 2006 presidential election marked a huge intensification in the PR battle between the Lukashenko administration and the democratic opposition movement. On one side is the massive abuse to state resources in favour of the incumbent – the partnership between state television and top music stars in the *Za Belarus* concerts (see below) is just one small example of the media's incessant championing of Lukashenko's candidacy. On the other side is a particular legacy of Soviet propaganda that has been revived and intensified in the region over recent years: the art of spin doctoring – known in Russian as the more sinister phrase 'political technology'. The Belarusian administration of course has many weapons at its disposal: thugs from the OMON (the notoriously brutal Special Forces police division), a corrupt judiciary, and the feared tax police to name but a few. But in order to avoid having to resort to crude and relatively risky tactics such as doctoring voter lists and stuffing ballot boxes, it is the job of the *polittekholog* to confuse fact and fiction to the extent that the voter will be unable to tick the 'wrong' box on election day.<sup>56</sup>

#### BLACK PR

At the murkiest end of political technology is 'black PR' – essentially the practice of using dubious practices to create 'a virtual version of the opponent's image that then becomes accepted reality.'<sup>57</sup> What is known by the relatively quaint name of 'mudslinging' in the West is known here as *kompromat* – general compromising material, exposing lurid personal or financial details, or outright slander.

Rock musicians, with their liberal outlook and defiant behaviour, are easy targets for any propaganda machine, and during the run-up to the March 2006 Presidential elections, the state black PR campaign didn't miss the opportunity to mock them and their so-called 'democratic' views:

*'A week ago all of us here [at the Polish solidarity concert for banned musicians] were shown on TV: that we are bad, lazy good for nothings, in the pay of people abroad. There were basically two threads in this film. Firstly the positive Russian / Soviet story – i.e. against us: Peter the Great, Communists and the Orthodox Church. And then on our side: the Fascists, us, Bush and Clinton.'*

Igor Varashkevich, Krama

<sup>55</sup> <http://www.president.gov.by/eng/president/news/archive/december2003/15-21/>

<sup>56</sup> For an excellent overview of the dark arts of post-Soviet politics in Russia, Belarus and Ukraine see *Virtual Politics: Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World*, Andrew Wilson, Yale University Press, 2005.

<sup>57</sup> Andrew Wilson, p.70

State media in Belarus routinely paints Europe in a uniquely negative light, both in order to pre-empt the effect of sanctions or any harsh criticism from the EU or OSCE, and to weaken the opposition who actively campaign for future EU membership. In particular, the popular revolutions in Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan are regular targets of aggressive state propaganda, accusing the young participants of alcoholism, drug abuse and hooliganism.

A common tactic across the region is to smear opponents – particularly ones who object to Russian dominance in their country – as American stooges in the pay of the West. In Ukraine, opposition leader Viktor Yushchenko was dubbed 'Bushenko' by pro-Russian black PR, and when Belarusian bands NRM and Neurodubel went to Kiev to support the Orange Revolution, rumours about their motives surfaced back home in Belarusian state media immediately.

*'When we went to Maidan [site of the protests in Kiev] we paid for our own bus and for the whole trip – it was our humanitarian aid to Ukrainian people for their revolution. And then people said we got paid for it... Not one kopek! We paid for it ourselves.'*

Pete Pavlov, NRM

*'About this gig in Poland: I wouldn't be surprised if they do a montage to show people drinking and so on; saying they [the bands] came to see their American bosses who paid them a lot of money...'*

Igor Varashkevich, Krama

Associations with hooliganism and drunkenness are a common element of these smear campaigns. The Belarusian musicians who performed in Kiev were quick to refute the accusation:

*'But the main thing that struck me was the relation to alcohol. I've never seen in my life 100.000 people standing there completely sober. That was very important... Everyone knows that any good idea can fall to pieces with a single glass of vodka.'*

Alexander Kulinkovich, Neurodubel

Travelling abroad to anti-Lukashenko concerts, like the pre-election show in Warsaw on 12<sup>th</sup> March 2006, makes the musicians easy targets for the government propaganda mill back home. Even coming back to Belarus can bring with it certain dangers – the performers told us they would be watching their bags very carefully at the border to make sure nothing would get planted on them.

Black PR, though, was just one small component in Lukashenko's successful re-election propaganda campaign. A far more important factor was the subservience of state television, and in the carefully orchestrated pre-election PR campaign, 'official musicians' were enrolled to play a vocal, and controversial, leading role.

## OFFICIAL MUSIC AND THE ZA BELARUS CAMPAIGN

*'The Lukashenko team [for the elections] is essentially the government of Belarus team, and it has adopted a clear strategy that might be summarized in four points: project an image of stability and contentment among the citizens of the republic; maintain tight control over all aspects of the campaign; deploy harsh repressions against opposition structures; and provide almost blanket coverage of the presidential campaign on television, radio, and the official media.'*<sup>58</sup>

Although Lukashenko is not affiliated to any party, 'Za Belarus!' ('For Belarus' in Russian) is the slogan he has used in every election campaign since 2001, and just around the time of the election campaign, a huge poster campaign appeared on billboards, in public institutions and subway stations across the country, with Soviet style nostalgic photographs of soldiers, workers, children, and sports stars above the slogan 'Za Belarus'. The only musician featured in this propaganda campaign was the ten year-old Junior Eurovision 2005 winner Kseniya Sitnik. 'Za Belarus' is always written in green and red, the colours of the national flag. Variations of the phrase, as featured in the poster campaign, e.g. 'My za schastlivuyu Belarus' (We're for a Happy Belarus), and 'My za protsvetayushchuyu Belarus' (We're for a productive Belarus) are a key part of pro-presidential rhetoric.<sup>59</sup>

Large scale pro-Lukashenko music concerts are also organised from time to time under the title 'Za Belarus', the most recent being a spectacular series of concerts around the country organised and broadcast by the Second National TV Company ONT. Gunesh Abasova, a young pop singer who took part in the tour, explained the conditions:

*'ONT just called me and invited me to take part, no-one forced me. I take part in all Belarusian projects, and why shouldn't I do this one? We had to say that we are 'Za svetluyu i protsvetayuschuyu Belarus' (for a bright and flourishing Belarus) but probably all of the artists were just there for their own PR, to get themselves on TV for free. We didn't get anything for it except the airtime. They [ONT] signed an agreement with us and I thought we would get something, but at the end of the day we were fed and looked after so we're happy. The tour lasted for a couple of months with a three hour concert once a week. And every week it was broadcast on ONT, not live, but a week after the show. All the concerts were sell-outs, always in the biggest venue in town, the Palace of Sport. The last concert, the gala evening in Minsk, was the biggest – a five-hour concert with all the stars of Russian and Belarusian pop music. I don't know how many people were there – I guess between three and five thousand at each show.'*

These concerts have been the subject of intense interest in the online independent press. Again like in Ukraine in 2004, the pro-governmental tour included some famous (and famously expensive) Russian stars. Bearing in mind that the concerts were all free of charge to the public, independent journalists estimated the cost of each show to be not less than \$100,000, including the best quality sound and light equipment, and national advertising.

As in Ukraine in 2004, if these concerts were indeed part of the campaign, they would seem to be in clear breach of the Electoral Code, whereby each candidate is entitled to equal amounts of media

<sup>58</sup> International League for Human Rights - Belarus Update, Vol. 10, No. 7, Feb 2006, <http://www.charter97.org/eng/news/2006/02/24/update>

<sup>59</sup> For example, guests on state television's election night special were asked a simple question: 'Who did you vote for?', and as if by magic, they all answered from the same, safely rehearsed, pro-presidential script: 'Ya golosoval za svetluyu i protsvetayuschuyu Belarus.' (I voted for a bright and flourishing Belarus).

exposure in the campaign and a limited, pre-defined campaign budget – which would have struggled to cover the cost of these concerts alone. Despite the fact that the banners around the venue were allegedly changed to read ‘*Za Batku*’ (For Daddy – one of Lukashenko’s favourite folksy nicknames) in more than one of the concerts, the Central Election Committee refused to accept all claims that the concerts in some way violated electoral law. Without the least hint of irony, the Secretary of the Central Election Committee Mikalay Lazovick claimed the concerts do not constitute political agitation as they do not contain the name of any candidate directly. Rather, “For Belarus!” is aimed at “raising political awareness of citizens and their interest to the election campaign taking place in the country.”<sup>60</sup> But, as countless outraged articles in the online press and pro-opposition circles noted, any talk of whether Lukashenko’s named is directly referred to is entirely superfluous:

*‘Let’s not forget that Lukashenko’s election campaign slogan in 2001 was ‘For a strong and flourishing Belarus!’ And the phrase Za Belarus was actively used by the authorities in the period preceding the referendum to allow a single person to run for president an unlimited amount of times. To personify the slogan Za Belarus is entirely unnecessary – it is already, thanks to the experience of previous election campaigns, associated with Lukashenko’s candidacy.’*<sup>61</sup>

With free entry for the audience, the concerts were one of the biggest entertainment spectacles in Belarus for years, with a line-up like a who’s who of Russian and Belarusian light entertainment, including the cast of many hit ONT television projects such as Miss Belarus. The headline attraction was Russian soft rock star Oleg Gazmanov, performing songs like his recent single *Novaya Zarya* (New Dawn), which is a crude piece of nationalist propaganda even by Lukashenko’s standards – in the admittedly stylish animated video, Gazmanov is a medieval Russian superhero, saving the nation from oligarchs and Western imperialist agitators as he swoons: ‘*Shiroka zhe rodina nasha mat, vysoko zhe president nash otets*’ [The vast homeland is our mother, the mighty president our father].

Belarus has its own soft rock uber-patriot: Anatoly Yarmolenko, leader of the band Siabry. The personal affection Lukashenko holds for the band was made clear in a personal letter of congratulations he sent to mark their inclusion into a Moscow Hall of Fame:

*‘The Siabry Ensemble has rightfully become Belarus’ visiting card, and its beautiful songs have conquered the hearts of several generations of listeners. Patriotism, loyalty to the best traditions of the variety arts, performing excellence has brought you great success and well-merited recognition,’ said the Head of State in his message of felicitation.’*<sup>62</sup>

Yarmolenko did not forget the compliment, and as the leading Belarusian star at the Za Belarus concerts, he was clearly keen not to be outshone in the patriotism stakes. He needn’t have worried – his performance of *Slushay Bat’ku* (Listen to Daddy) on the 8th March at the Palace of the Republic in Minsk, has subsequently gone down in Belarusian history as the funniest moment of the entire 2006 election campaign:

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<sup>60</sup> From Charter 97: CEC Not Against Agitation For Dictator By Russian Pop Musicians, <http://charter97.org/eng/news/2006/02/06/popsa>

<sup>61</sup> Pavel Kirillov, *Spoet li Oranzhevaya Ruslana pod lozungom ‘Za Belarus’* (Will the Orange singer Ruslana sing under the slogan ‘For Belarus?’), 7th February 2006, Belorusskie Novosti online, [www.naviny.by](http://www.naviny.by) (in Russian)

<sup>62</sup> *Alexander Lukashenko Congratulates the Popular Music Group “Siabry”*, Presidential press service, 19<sup>th</sup> January 2006, <http://www.president.gov.by/en/press10740.html#doc>

*Well composed and powerfully built  
Acting as a good example  
Daddy can do anything  
Daddy's better than anyone*

*Never quick to get offended  
He is calm and strong  
Just take a look – it's obvious  
Who the master is in our home.*

*Chorus:  
Na-na-na-na  
Listen to daddy!  
Morning, noon and night  
Listen to daddy!  
When you're feeling down  
Listen to daddy!  
When you're feeling good  
Listen to daddy!  
(Translation by the author)*

In an interview with an incredulous journalist the next day, Yarmolenko wryly denied that the song was about Lukashenko at all:

*'This song has been ready for a long time, and it was just a coincidence that we performed it at this concert. Lots of people are called 'Daddy' – there's one in every family. If someone wants to make an association with the President – well that's up to them.'*<sup>63</sup>

Just in case there was any shadow of doubt, Lukashenko even included a direct quote from the song – and stamped his patriarchal mark on the elections – in his opening remarks at the victorious post-election press conference, the day after official results had given him a sweeping mandate with 82.6% of the vote:

*'The Presidential Election has been held in strict conformity with our Constitution, honestly, in a democratic manner. Our people has made its choice independently and demonstrated convincingly who the master is in our home today.'*<sup>64</sup>

Yarmolenko's reward for his unswerving loyalty came quickly after re-election, when along with several other leading Belarusian and Russian 'Za Belarus' cheerleaders he was awarded a prestigious state award in recognition of his 'considerable personal contribution to the development of national culture, preservation and popularization of the best musical traditions.'<sup>65</sup>

Some aggravated supporters of 2006 presidential candidate Alexander Milinkevich are determined to bring an end to this tradition of privilege and political manoeuvring on the Belarusian music stage.

<sup>63</sup> Aleksander Shurochkin, *Slushay Batku!* Utrom, Noch I Den, Belorusskie Novosti, 9<sup>th</sup> March 2006; [http://www.naviny.by/ru/content/rubriki/0-ya\\_gruppa/tema/09-03-06-2](http://www.naviny.by/ru/content/rubriki/0-ya_gruppa/tema/09-03-06-2) (in Russian)

<sup>64</sup> Introductory Remarks, Press Conference for Belarusian and Foreign Mass Media, Palace of the Republic, Minsk, March 20<sup>th</sup> 2006; <http://www.president.gov.by/en/press27790.html#doc>

<sup>65</sup> *Workers of Culture and Arts Honoured With State Awards*, Presidential Press Service, <http://www.president.gov.by/en/press27927.html#doc> and <http://www.president.gov.by/en/press27954.html#doc>

Following the European Parliament's decision to ban thirty top Belarusian government officials from entering Europe, there are several initiatives to extend the ban to include the names of some of the famous Russian and Belarusian popular musicians who took part in the 'Za Belarus' concerts. Included in the proposed extension are orchestra leader and close ally of Lukashenko Mikhail Finberg, Anatoly Yarmolenko, official cheerleader from soft rock dinosaurs Siabry, and Belarusian representative at the Athens 2006 Eurovision Song Contest, Polina Smolova.<sup>66</sup>

This move is unfortunate to say the least. It is undeniable that the concert series 'Za Belarus' took place in violation of advertising and financial provisions of the Belarusian Electoral Code, but nonetheless to punish artists for taking part in a concert seems, even to other pro-democracy activists in Belarus, a ridiculous case of double standards. Liavon Volski, leading pro-democracy musician from NRM, is scathing in his criticism of this selective approach to freedom of expression:<sup>67</sup>

*'Ok, so they sang at campaign concerts. And what were they meant to do? These people work for the government. They work in variety theatres, state orchestras and other organizations. To refuse to take part is to sign a death warrant for your own career here in Belarus. Where else could they work? In what country? Our variety pop singers had no choice.'*<sup>68</sup>

The fate of the one band that did refuse to take part in 'Za Belarus' shows how quickly the authorities react to rejection. J-Mors, a Russian language alternative pop group, were the biggest selling Belarusian artists of 2005 and on constant rotation on national FM stations. The day after they rebuffed an offer to perform on the 'Za Belarus' tour, a national radio DJ told us, they were simply removed from radio station playlists across the country.

For pop artists like Smolova, the chance to appear in front of huge audiences, both live and on TV was too good to miss. Like much of the *popsa* industry, a one or two song live personal appearance is the extent of live performance, as the pop industry bypasses the need for an album's worth of material or a live band to perform with. Subsequently the dream of performing her own concert in a large venue under normal commercial circumstances is nigh on impossible:

*'Everything you saw on TV – the full houses, the festival atmosphere – was nothing in comparison to the feeling out on stage. The emotions I received from the crowd in Gomel and Grodno were like nothing else I have experienced. It was a complete synthesis of artists and audience. At that moment, you understand that we are Belarus – strong, beautiful, united by common ideas. That clear, simple slogan 'For Belarus' expresses everything that normal people desire. To live a life that brings happiness to yourself and to others.'*<sup>69</sup>

Bearing in mind the utterly non-partisan, apolitical nature of the concerts, Smolova was understandably shocked by the plan to add her name to the travel blacklist. In an angry interview she insisted on her democratic right to sing in support of whichever candidate she chooses:

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<sup>66</sup> [http://en.milinkevich.org/data/ic\\_1/90437/](http://en.milinkevich.org/data/ic_1/90437/)

<http://www.belgazeta.by/20060417.15/480284471/> (in Russian)

<sup>67</sup> [http://www.naviny.by/ru/content/rubriki/1-ya\\_gruppa/kultura/22-04-06-01/](http://www.naviny.by/ru/content/rubriki/1-ya_gruppa/kultura/22-04-06-01/)

<sup>68</sup> Liavon Volski, quoted in Tatyana Doroshchenok, *Ne Trogajte Tovarishchei Smolovu I Yarmolenko* (Don't touch comrades Smolova and Yarmolenko), <http://www.belgazeta.by/20060206.5/480154471> (in Russian)

<sup>69</sup> Anna Shchadrina, *Slova i Muzyka – Nashi!* (The Words and Music are Ours), Belarus Segodnya, 15th March 2006, <http://sb.by/article.php?articleID=50360> (in Russian)

*'I read so much rubbish about me... what am I meant to have done? I just sing! They said I shouted all kinds of slogans from the stage – I did no such thing. And even if it had been part of our President's election campaign, why wouldn't I have the right to be there?'*<sup>70</sup>

Polina Smolova, Belarusian pop star

Two small observations at this point indicate that had an extended travel ban been in force by 10<sup>th</sup> May (when Smolova flew to Athens), then to be denied the chance to participate at Eurovision would have – if not actually hurt – then at least caused some discomfort to the official structures.

Firstly, the newest symbol of national progress and achievement is ten year old Kseniya Sitnik, winner of Junior Eurovision Song Contest 2005, held in Belgium on November 26<sup>th</sup>. During the presidential election campaign, alongside pictures of handsome workers and young girls in folk costume holding ears of wheat was Kseniya, beaming atop the pro-presidential green and red slogan: Za Belarus! In the eyes of the government PR machine, this victory over European – European! – countries (where according to the opposition everything is supposed to be so much better) is a perfect propaganda symbol: youth, culture, international glamour and the triumph of the Belarusian nation.

Any positive association with Europe, no matter how trivial it may seem to outsiders, is seen as proof that – despite what the snobs in Brussels might say – cultured, civilised Europe is where Belarus belongs. Despite his disdain for the politics of the EU, Lukashenko often talks with pride about being the leader of a 'European state' in meetings with foreign dignitaries. During the 2004 Presidential election in Ukraine, the Eurovision Song Contest victory that year for the Ukrainian entry, Ruslana, was a source of pride for Ukrainians of all political colours: even though she initially performed in support of the pro-government candidate Viktor Yanukovich (before switching sides to back the winning horse later), her folk-based competition winning song was played intensively during the opposition protests as a symbol of independent Ukrainian cultural pride.

Official attitudes to the Eurovision Song Contest can perhaps be summed up by the questions of a poll on the website of the First National State Television Company:<sup>71</sup>

**For Belarus, participation in the Junior Eurovision Song Contest means:**

- prestige
- opportunity to show our worth and our culture to the world
- entering the European community
- possibility to evaluate the professional level of our performers
- do not know

Music competitions are a deeply ingrained Soviet cultural legacy, and these days the most prestigious is not the International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow, but the bubblegum godfather to all TV talent shows, Eurovision. In Belarus, the annual competition to select the national entry for Eurovision is the most important cultural appointment of all. Across the country there is a pyramid of pop singing competitions, starting on a regional level (*oblastnoy konkurs*), moving up to national competitions (*respublikanskiy konkurs*) and international ones such as the Slavyansky Bazar, held annually in Vitebsk, or the 'New Wave' festival in Yurmala on the Latvian coast. Success in these competitions is the key to a

<sup>70</sup> Kirill Zhivolovich, *Polina Smolova, "Nu esli ya voobshche gavno, chego vy smotrite na menya?"* (If I'm so shit, then why are you looking at me?), BelGazeta, 17th April 2006. <http://www.belgazeta.by/20060417.15/480284471> (in Russian)

<sup>71</sup><http://www.tvr.by/eng/junior2005.asp?pr=win> (in Russian)

successful pop career, and they receive significant coverage in the press and TV. In this sense to seek to become a pop star in Belarus is already a political choice – the pop music infrastructure, with its state competitions, state media and state financial support is entirely dependent on the state, and the pop stars it supports cannot pick and choose the state mechanisms they will and will not work with.

Even young Kseniya Sitnik, for example, now has a tremendous incentive to steer clear of politics: her schooling is paid for by the President's Special Fund for Talented Youth.<sup>72</sup>

To dissent from this unwritten agreement, even by associating with the suspicious 'informal youth' (*neformal'naya molodezh*), is to risk a swift termination of your career and a rapid descent into anonymity.

Pop singer Gunesh Abasova is a Belarusian singer of Azeri descent, winner of numerous pop competitions, television awards and a regular finalist in the annual contest to select the national entry for Eurovision. Parallel to her official pop career, she used to sing with the Belarusian language band Krambambulya alongside musicians from 'blacklisted' bands, Liavon Volski from NRM and Alexander Kulinkovich from Neurodubel. She decided to leave the band when a concert at the Youth Estrada Theatre, where she works, attracted negative attention in official circles, and it became clear that future success in official contests would be jeopardized:

*'And as for her reasons about why she stopped performing with Krambambulya, Gunesh is still tight-lipped: What is there to discuss? Everyone knows full well what went on. Liavon Volski is a banned musician. And I had to go to Eurovision!'*<sup>73</sup>

*'It turned out the concert hadn't been to the liking of the men in suits. So [the boss of the theatre] Mr Rainchik<sup>74</sup> did a sudden about turn and declared that the musicians were all on various drugs and that basically, it was some kind of orgy. Following an appointment with the men in suits, he 'advised' Gunesh (perhaps 'firmly advised' is more like it) not to associate with the likes of Krambambulya any longer – at least during the run-up to "the festival of all nations and all seasons" Slavyansky Bazar and, no matter what, not to perform with them in the Ukraine. Gunesh thought about it, weighed up her chances and decided to throw everything behind Slavyansky Bazar.'*<sup>75</sup>

Krambambulya official statement to their fanclub

In retrospect, Gunesh no doubt understands that this association with 'undesirable' musicians may have affected her chances at Eurovision 2006. As another singer who performed at the 'Za Belarus' concerts told us, if Gunesh steers clear of controversy then her time will come: *'Maybe it is just that she wasn't required this year, but will be next year.'* Like some 80% of the national workforce, Gunesh is a state employee – on the payroll of a youth variety theatre like many other pop singers, including Eurovision entrant Polina Smolova. Typically, state employees are on one-year renewable contracts – and typically, fear of these contracts not being renewed is the main cause of self-censorship.

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<sup>72</sup> See the official site of Junior Eurovision: <http://www.junioreurovision.tv/english/962.htm>

<sup>73</sup> Kirill Zhivolovich, *Gunesh Abasova – Za spinoi Lazhaut, No v Litso Umilyayutsya* (Gunesh Abasova: 'They lie behind your back but smile sweetly to your face', BelGazeta, 6th February 2006; <http://www.belgazeta.by/20060206.5/480154471> (in Russian)

<sup>74</sup> For the record, Mr Rainchik's loyalty was rewarded soon after the election too, when he was honoured with a coveted 'Francysk Skaryna' State award.

<sup>75</sup> Reposted on the concert.by music forum: <http://concert.by/forum/viewtopic.php?p=744&PHPSESSID=05822c9b61548bb8186a555a61e322b9> (in Russian)

Bearing this in mind, a particularly interesting footnote to this discussion comes thanks to Belarus' dismal performance in Athens at Eurovision 2006 – singer Polina Smolova, singing the song *Mama*, was knocked out in a preliminary round in Athens two days before the final and she did not even make in into the televised contest proper. In a scathing interview in *Komsomolskaya Pravda* newspaper on her return she levelled a remarkable series of criticisms at the Belarusian pop industry, its bureaucrats and 'village' mentality, in an unprecedented outburst from a pro-government pop singer enjoying so much official support:

*'The whole system of preparation was a hindrance, everyone deferring responsibility to everyone else, everyone scared to do anything, to make a concrete decision. Because God forbid if the decision turns out to be wrong, then they would be responsible. What the hell can we expect from a system like that?'*

She even went as far as to suggest that she understands why artists emigrate:

*'Now I understand Podolskaya<sup>76</sup> perfectly, when people ask her: Don't you want to come back? What to? To people, to your own people, who spit in your face? Whereas once you go to another country...'*<sup>77</sup>

It is unlikely that this outburst in itself will be enough to jeopardize her position at the National Youth Variety Theatre, but the interview provoked a storm on music messageboards, with dozens of opposition-supporting rock fans revelling in the unlikelihood of dissent from such an unexpected quarter. Belarus, it seems, has let itself down, on its one annual opportunity to enhance its image internationally (short of holding free and fair, democratic elections, that is, but let's be reasonable). Smolova even seems to be in agreement with Liavon Volski from NRM, who ironically complained that the authorities may have created a Belarusian pop industry in order to provide a wholesome alternative for the youth, *'but they couldn't even do a good job of that'* – a sentiment that pop princess Smolova now seems to agree with. As many top pop singers continue to immigrate to Moscow, it seems that the domestic pop scene is not quite growing into the force that had been hoped for. And when the country's most infamous 'banned' musician is in agreement with the 'official' national representative about the state of the industry, it may be a sign that the plan to bring the nation's musicians to heel is not going exactly according to plan.

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<sup>76</sup> Natalya Podolskaya, a Belarusian pop star who moved to Russia and even represented her adopted homeland at Eurovision 2004.

<sup>77</sup> Raisa Murashkina, *Polina Smolova: My priekhali na «Evrovidenie», kak iz derevni»* (Polina Smolova: We came to Eurovision straight from the countryside), *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 26th May 2006; <http://www.kp.belkp.by/2006/05/26/doc117363/> (in Russian)

## CHAPTER FIVE THE EFFECTS OF CENSORSHIP

### FORCED TO BE POLITICAL

*'The concerts that we've been putting on recently don't have any political aspect, but then the authorities force a political dimension on them. If what you do is different from the opinion of the authorities and the opinion of the majority, then that's already political. So it turns out that we've become political, not through our own choice, but the authorities.'*

Vladislav Buben, underground DJ and promoter

In a country where language and culture are so highly politicised, to remain outside of politics is simply not an option, as the recent case of the top selling pop/rock band J-Mors illustrates. Their refusal to appear at either of the high profile pre-election music events – the pro-opposition Rock Coronation and pro-Lukashenko 'Za Belarus' concerts – was a public statement of their belief that music should steer clear of politics. However, this attempt at neutrality didn't win J-Mors any friends on either side of the political divide – instead, they received scathing criticism from the pro-democracy camp whilst being added to the radio blacklist by the Ministry of Information.

Whilst a full scale ideological battle is being fought on the high profile pop and rock music scene, the effects of the increasing politicisation of music are equally deeply felt by those belonging to the underground alternative music scene (experimental, electronica, gothic/industrial, black metal etc – or to put it in post Soviet terms, the music of the 'informal youth'). While the reasons behind censorship of Belarusian rock are much more political in a narrow sense, social conservatism and a Soviet-era suspicion of the avant-garde mean that organising live concerts is no less difficult for the apolitical underground scene. As official representatives of the nations' youth, only the pro-government youth union the BRSM are entitled to hold cultural events aimed at students or young adults, and any independent promotion not under their aegis is regarded extremely suspiciously. For managers of concert halls and clubs, a party membership card of the BRSM is the only guarantee of an ideologically sound – and therefore trouble-free – event. Operating in an atmosphere that is becoming increasingly hostile, musicians and promoters in the alternative music scene are struggling to keep themselves in business, and out of politics.

### CASE STUDY – DJ SHAMANKA

*'Concert halls and performance spaces don't look favourably on this type of youth, on this type of music. They think it's terrifying, incomprehensible. In our country what we do is not welcome.'*

DJ Shamanka

Away from the media spotlight and big opposition rallies, the 'godmother' of the Belarusian 'dark scene', DJ Shamanka, works quietly at a number of art and music projects: she is one of the founders of the experimental music project Dromos, curator of an arts collective Somord Productions and the main organiser of the Dark Way music festival. The musicians she works with do not take part in big opposition concerts or feel involved in politics at all, yet they are beginning to experience difficulties similar to those of the 'banned' Belarusian rockers. As the system becomes increasingly less tolerant of those

who function outside it, underground musicians like Shamanka are being pushed into the confrontation with the authorities – and by extension into political involvement – largely against their will:

*'I've never been a member of any party but I've always been interested in politics and when politics hits you in the face, you really start to feel as though you're in the role of a dissident. So you are sitting there in a concert, shaking, worrying someone will come and attack you, or throw everyone out... You feel responsible in some way for the event you're putting on. The last thing you want is for people to be seized and dragged off to the police station or god knows where.'*

If previously Shamanka had been able to function on an underground, semi-legal basis largely undisturbed, the increased political attention given to music making over the last two years has given her a rude awakening:

*'In terms of direct censorship, I personally experienced it last year, and if previously I'd had the luxury of thinking that these bans were invented perhaps as part of some musicians' PR campaign, now my whole festival was put into question.'*

Shamanka's initial encounter with direct censorship is as follows: in November 2004, a few months after the infamous Lukashenko ten year anniversary concert, the manager of the venue booked for her Dark Way festival of electronic music suddenly cancelled the booking two weeks before it was due to start. The manager told her bluntly that he had 'the right not to explain the reasons', and that was that. Shamanka herself is in no doubt as to what had happened:

*'This happened at the end of November 2004, exactly at the time as the Ukrainian events, and we had invited a Ukrainian band Holodnoe Solntse to perform. We found out later through our own channels that the phone call had come from a department of the KGB, who hypothesized that they'd come to agitate for an Orange Revolution here... though of course that's completely absurd.'*

This event in November 2004 marked the beginning of her difficulties. In the current, highly polarised political climate, musicians are being forced to declare their allegiances, and such pre-emptive government measures against anyone even remotely suspected of oppositional sentiments are becoming increasingly commonplace.

*'So at that point we were added to certain lists, and [our events] started to be observed. It's connected to the idea that all the 'informal youth' lean towards the opposition and therefore need to be controlled and prevented, as far as it is possible, from conducting any mass actions.'*

Alternative musicians are thus being added to official 'blacklists' without any direct involvement in political issues at all. A particular role in the targeting of alternative musicians is played by the Belarusian Orthodox Church: whilst legal practice continues the Soviet tradition of restricting overall freedom of worship, and Lukashenko himself is a professed atheist, the government's 'special relationship' with the Orthodox Church provides a popular ideological basis for the suppression of alternative artists. Musicians playing gothic or metal music face frequent accusations of Satanism, and complain of regular problems with the Committee for Religious Affairs, a state body whose responsibilities include monitoring cultural events along with the local authorities to ensure the nation's spiritual and moral well-being. In the end, it appears that the only way for alternative musicians to avoid harassment by the authorities is to align themselves clearly and unquestionably with the official line, and in the case of youth culture, with those guardians of youth morality, the BRSM.

*'I guess in some ways our events are political because they are not organised through the BRSM, no one is agitating 'Za Belarus', our audiences generally speaking are independent minded type, a fact that the official structures are do not like.'*

These unrelenting pressures seem to be having an inadvertent, if predictable, effect: a combination of intimidation, self-censorship, lack of access to official media channels and negative propaganda is pushing the alternative music scene into a role as cultural dissidents. In their determination to keep on, they are being forced to come up with increasingly inventive and elaborate ways to avoid detection and stay one step ahead of the authorities.

## **GETTING AROUND THE CENSORS – UNDERGROUND PARTIES**

*'I have a feeling now that the situation will get worse, that we'll have more and more problems. But nonetheless I'll keep putting on my events, and think of new ways to make sure that they happen. We haven't exhausted all avenues yet. With imagination you can always think up something new.'*

Vladislav Buben

Despite the increasingly difficult conditions under which they are forced to operate, young 'underground' promoters are showing no signs of giving up on their creative work, devising ever more innovative ways to put on concerts. These unlicensed shows take place illegally, in secret and completely outside the official structures. Providing that they find a club that is willing to take the risk, the organizers use covert advertising methods, advertise concerts on the internet, not revealing the name of the venue until the very last moment, or switching venues in order to cover their tracks. They also use 'fake' names for the performers themselves, which are not known to the authorities, but are known to the audiences through the word of mouth. Quick to react to the banning of her 'Dark Way' festival, and with just two weeks left before the event was scheduled, DJ Shamanka was determined to find a way to make it happen:

*'We had to observe some kind of conspiracy, people only find out at the last minute where it would take place, we moved from one club to another club, we closed the door and the bouncers didn't let anyone in, we were ready for anything, that special services would turn up and that the event could 'explode', that we could be accused of something or other, anything at all could have happened. I'm learning from bitter experience, from last year as well, the end of 2005 when once again holding the Dark Way festival came into question, and I decided that the conspiracy should be maximal. We only advertised through internet and by word of mouth. We never mentioned the name of the place. They would only find out the place from me telling them when they looked into my eyes, when I personally gave them the ticket. When the musicians phoned me up and said: 'Shamanka, listen, where the hell are we playing?!' The name of the club wasn't on any ad or even on the ticket. In light of these measures that we took, everything was relatively successful, no one unexpected turned up.'*

In Belarus today, censorship and its avoidance is becoming an increasingly sophisticated game of cat and mouse between the regime and the musicians – the authorities are learning about these strategies and try to intercept them, pushing artists and promoters to come up with new and ever more innovative and complex ideas in order to keep ahead of the game.

*'At our Neformat festival we had some very strange people asking to buy tickets, asking lots of questions, but we were ready for it, so we just said: it's a birthday party, we have a guest list and we can't*

*allow anyone else in'. So now we try and do it in a way that will avoid any problems from the offset. We always sit down and work out all the possible options before we start, to work out the least problematic route; we try to read the situation.'*

Vladislav Buben

There are few independent clubs in Minsk, and many 'alternative' ones have been forced to close down. To find a club willing to take a risk by supporting 'informal' musicians is not so easy:

*'The place that we used in 2004 has since been closed – Club 28. And there are a lot of clubs like it which have met the same fate. There was one club, many years ago, it was an alternative place with a student café, it changed its name many times. The people who ran it really did it out of love, they organised a whole series of alternative non-commercial concerts, it was a hang out for the 'informal youth'. This annoyed certain circles – they were unhappy with the fact that there were all these young people doing this or that incomprehensible thing. At the end of the day the club was closed down. They tried to reopen in different places, but with the same result. If a club lasts for one or two years in our country, that's good.'*

Dj Shamanka

For this reason, underground parties take place in ordinary bars or restaurants, sometimes even without the knowledge of the venue owners.

*'Last year we put on 'Neformat', a festival of alternative performance, poetry, electronica and avant-garde music. We did it in a restaurant with tables and tablecloths, just a regular place where some people didn't even understand that there was a concert going on. They just paid some money and were told we were having a birthday party. So the boss of the place is sitting there thinking – 'What's going on?' We always try to have electronic music together with performance or poetry, so for performances people are dressed up in various costumes. Sometimes the owners of the place are extremely surprised by all these strange people doing something incomprehensible.'*

Vladislav Buben

While this tactic is at an extreme, almost comical end of the scale, another method is to try to exploit the legal ambiguity between 'concerts' – which require registration and permits – and discotheques, which do not. Electronic music concerts in particular, with their DJ or computer based performances, are usually billed as discotheques in order to be able to operate freely in this grey area.

It is only by using elaborate methods like these that the underground music scene in Belarus continues to survive. Although the alternative scene is severely marginalized, the musicians who perform in their concerts come from all genres. The fact that some well-known pop musicians also regularly take part in Buben's electronica festivals with alternative projects shows that the division between 'official' and 'unofficial' music is more fluid than the authorities would like to believe:

*'There are some musicians who vacillate, who are neither one thing nor the other. On the one hand you can see their videos on official channels, on the other hand they might take part in alternative concerts. It is like the days of the Soviet underground, there are people who do arrangements for official musicians during the day, and by night they do unofficial music that they themselves are into. The official is for the pocket, and the unofficial is for the soul. There are quite a lot of people who are like this, both on one side and the other.'*

Vladislav Buben

Like anywhere in the world, it is the credible underground music scene that feeds new ideas into the commercial pop market. Belarusian pop artists frequently collaborate with the underground electronic scene when they are trying to appeal to the more sophisticated Russian market.

*'Official musicians come to us for help with arrangements. They're very interested in the Western market: what they produce is not right for Moscow or the West but like any musician they want to expand their market. On one hand they play for and support Lukashenko, but on the other they want to live in a civilised world. I know dozens of musicians who take part in these pro-Lukashenko events, but also want to be integrated in the global scene.'*

Vladislav Buben

The music scene in Belarus is diverse, and despite the numerous complications, a vibrant underground scene does exist. It could well be stronger, but for one simple consequence of the authorities' crack-down on independent cultural life – emigration.

## **BRAIN DRAIN?**

*'In general there's very serious emigration from Belarus, unfortunately. If I think about people whom I personally knew who left in the last 10 years, it could be hundreds. The kind of people who today could be [out protesting] on the square, driving some kind of intellectual process... normal, active, dynamic people. So many have gone. The saddest thing is not the quantity of emigration, but the quality. We're not talking about a million people – more like tens of thousands. But brains, all good minds. Exactly those people who could have helped to create a new Belarus.'*

Artur Klinau, editor, Partizan journal of independent culture

*'It's a point of principle for me to live here and stay here, I'm a citizen of Belarus and I think that our listeners deserve to be able to listen to music. And play music. I've started this, so I have to finish it, to bring it to whatever logical conclusion it may have. Perhaps we'll be banned completely, and it will be completely impossible to do anything. That's just my nature – I have to see this through to the end.'*

Vladislav Buben

With Belarus' steady descent over the last ten years into what increasingly resembles a full-blown totalitarian system, even the most optimistic voices, both inside and outside the country see any changes for the better as a distant prospect. The question naturally arises, especially for an outside observer supplied with a steady stream of horror stories about oppression of independent artists, to what extent government policies are effectively forcing artists to consider leaving the country altogether. Whilst there is some evidence that a number of young, well-educated people are emigrating, both for financial and political reasons, opinions are divided over how numerous – and serious – the exodus is. With some exceptions like the folk band Kriwi, based in Germany, and several pop musicians who live in Moscow, many musicians are adamant that they are sticking with Belarus for better or for worse, and they expressed in no uncertain terms what they thought of those who preferred to leave:

*'There are bands that say they don't want to do anything in Belarus and only want to play abroad, I don't want to tell you their names, because I don't want anyone to get offended... I'm publicly calling them sell-outs, they behave as if they've already given up on the Belarusian market. In order to do any-*

*thing here you need to spend ten times more energy than just crossing the border and doing it abroad. I guess they just don't want to waste the time. It's a question of money too. Musicians here don't always get anything. Abroad it's much more simple.'*

Vladislav Buben

*'A lot of people are leaving. Many people who do something with their head, talented people like computer programmers – educated people. Here they have no financial or moral support. A lot of people say – if things change, I'll come back. Personally I don't have much time for this. In my opinion you have to stay at home to tidy up your house. To go away and come back when everything is fine to me is not the best position.'*

Alexander Kulinkovich, Neurodubel

One of the effects of the current regime's restrictive cultural policies has undoubtedly been to unite musicians against a common cause and given them a renewed sense of solidarity and purpose.

*'As for us musicians, no one talks about leaving. In terms of being a Belarusian music scene, all together, I feel that. We are colleagues on stage, and off stage we support each other. We respect each other and try to stick together. I'm a fatalist, I've never been depressed thinking that it's all in vain, that nothing will change. Hope will be the last thing to die.'*

Alexander Kulinkovich

It is the nature of the international media, of course, to write dramatic, oversimplified stories on Belarus and while this may be necessary to interest an apathetic world in the increasingly repressive climate, the uniformly negative picture makes some opposition supporters uncomfortable. Even musicians who are amongst the most outspoken opponents of the regime are frustrated by the media portrayals of Belarus abroad.

*'I don't like it when for example I did an interview with a German radio journalist and the first thing he said to me is: 'So then, tell me everything that's bad.' It's shameful for me to say I live in such a bad country. If everything is shit, and I live here, then what does that make me?*

*No – this country is good and I'm proud of it. Yes it has problems, but I'm fighting them along with my colleagues.*

*What people say about Belarus, about the 'dictator', in fact there's a lot of spin – it's not quite like that. Lukashenko is not Pinochet, thank god. It's not North Korea. I'm not excusing him or the government, but it's not as if people can't speak over the phone.*

*Belarus is despite everything a European state, maybe with its own quirks, but its quite comfortable – although in my opinion there are more minuses than pluses. But there are pluses if you compare it with Russia, there is social security, there are even pluses in comparison with Europe. But after the dissolution of USSR, millions of people were left on their knees, and Belarus was the only country who genuinely looked out for these people. That's a big plus of our state.'*

Alexander Kulinkovich

If one is cynical, perhaps we can see in such statements a filtering down and internalization of state propaganda even by those most obviously opposed to it. However, the fact that there is a lot of spin on both sides is undeniable. Certainly in our experience there was some discrepancy between what we expected to find, and the reality on the ground, and Western journalists such as us must acknowledge the propaganda role we play. Patriotism is a key feature of political opposition to Lukashenko, and this negative international image is both a cause of shame and an artistic and intellectual source of motivation:

*'Today in the world Belarus is seen as a country of losers and misery, etc... No-one in the world is interested in losers. One of the things I'm trying to do is to battle this stereotype of a loser, and the only realistic way to do achieve this is through culture. People won't be seen as losers if they have serious, interesting, intellectual culture. If we get there it will change the relationship with Belarus – if the country is seen as being interesting, it will change many things for the good. On a diplomatic level, people will see that we're not a country of losers, but rather a country of people who have fallen on tough times. Culture can break the stereotype of how others see us, and the complex that we have in relation to others. For example, when the war in the Balkans started and you saw all those poor Bosnians and Croats everywhere, people's stereotypes were only broken by artists like Emir Kusturica and Goran Bregovic. Culture can do much more than government declarations, especially in terms of relationships between people.'*

Artur Klinau, editor, Partizan journal of independent culture

## CONCLUSION

*‘Circus dogs jump when the trainer cracks his whip, but the really well-trained dog is the one that turns his somersault when there is no whip.’*

George Orwell

The assault on independent music in Belarus, therefore, takes many forms: media blacklists, legislative pretexts, protectionism, black PR, denial of concert licenses for live performance and a lumbering record industry that is utterly dominated by pirates and Russian language pop music. With the 2006 Presidential elections over, and Lukashenko safely sworn in for another term at the helm, one might have expected the attacks on freedom of expression and independent culture to have relented a little. Unfortunately, as of the time of writing, this does not appear to be the case: democratic opposition leader Alexander Milinkevich was arrested and briefly imprisoned, the one hundred year old Belarusian language newspaper *Nasha Niva* effectively shut down and the highly-rated Belarusian language rock show *Tuzin Hitou* on Radio Minsk discontinued.

Self-censorship is perhaps the most formidable obstacle facing Belarusian musicians, and remains a crucial part of the government’s efforts to maintain a façade of legitimate democracy. The clear goal of the raft of legislative and economic obstacles in the path of independent musicians is to make the whole scene inaccessible to the general public, and therefore financially unviable. State policy towards the arts is of the carrot and stick variety: the carrot being the ability to work and earn a relatively stable income. There is increasingly little need for the stick – the combination of a revitalised, vertical Soviet-era state bureaucracy, and renewable one year employment contracts has created an ingrained culture of self-censorship where the slightest whiff of doubt is enough to result in a shelved interview, revoked concert license or terminated job.

Attacks on independent music have a variety of consequences. Firstly, it must be noted that to some degree, the increased pressures on independent musicians have had some paradoxically positive side-effects. The Belarusian music scene is receiving more international attention than ever before, and the banning of the top rock bands has mobilized Belarusian youth and provided a high profile focus for political protest. Where the networks of youth movements, civil society organizations and Belarusian language musicians used to cooperate only occasionally, the authorities’ open identification of rock music with political opposition has resulted in ever closer collaboration. As an example, the *Pesny Svobody* (Songs of Freedom) compilation of Belarusian language protest songs proved so successful that a second volume is planned to coincide with Independence Day on 27<sup>th</sup> July alongside further anti-government demonstrations.<sup>78</sup>

What is less clear, however, is the effect that specific restrictions for Belarusian language bands are having on the development of music in Belarusian, and on the future of the Belarusian language in the wider cultural battle. Although the restrictions on musicians have helped to popularise their music amongst young people and there are dozens of rock bands across the country performing in Belarusian, some more established musicians are pessimistic about the short term effects:

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<sup>78</sup> In an interview featured on the music portal <http://ultra-music.com>, the director of Volia Music said that *Pesny Svobody* had been downloaded 50,000 times to date, far exceeding anyone’s expectations. <http://ultra-music.com/Belarus/635> (in Russian)

*'Fewer and fewer bands are singing in Belarusian – it's only the older generation. New musicians go straight for English or Russian now.'*

Slava Koran, Ulis

*'People here tend to prefer Russian, but I don't like that – we are in Belarus and Belarusian is very beautiful. But Russian is also a Belarusian language. I don't think that many bands will switch to Belarusian in the near future because the listeners prefer Russian.'*

Gunesh Abasova

Statements like this are widespread, and this idea that 'listeners prefer Russian' is both a triumph of Lukashenko's concerted policy of Russification and an oft-repeated justification for its continuation, and even acceleration.

With radio stations virtually purged of alternative music, and concert licenses effectively unobtainable, the government's drive to destroy the domestic independent music scene is approaching a critical juncture. Several key factors might have an influence on freedom of expression in the immediate future: the increased role of the Church in pushing a conservative social agenda, regulation of the internet, 'coloured revolutions' in the former Soviet Union, and perhaps most of all, Lukashenko's relationship with Russia. While Russian President Vladimir Putin certainly wants a reliable ally in Belarus, there are signs that Lukashenko's nakedly authoritarian style is becoming something of an embarrassment to the Kremlin.

The sudden date change of the Belarusian Presidential elections, brought forward unexpectedly from July to March 2006 late last year, was widely rumoured to be at Putin's insistence that he didn't want it to distract from July's G8 summit in Russia. And if Russian energy giant Gazprom does indeed raise the price for gas sales to Belarus from their current subsidized levels to European market rates, the political fallout for Lukashenko and his carefully honed image as the fatherly guarantor of economic stability could be disastrous.

The European Union also has a role to play, but it will have to show greater political will and adopt a more cohesive policy than it has to date. There is a curious symmetry between the EU's reaction to the Belarusian elections – a travel ban on thirty senior Belarusian officials – and the domestic blacklists favoured by the Belarusian Administration. By publishing its travel blacklist – immediately reciprocated in a tit-for-tat blacklist of European and American *personae non grata* in Belarus – the European Union is adopting the same post-Soviet mentality of barring and banning that its policies are intended to oppose. The blacklist mentality is being played out amongst divided Belarusian musicians themselves too: a 'naming and shaming' list, published by one 'banned' singer, of artists who took part in the pro-Lukashenko 'Za Belarus' concerts gave the state press a similar opportunity to denounce what it called the fraudulent double standards of the 'so-called democratic opposition.' Putting more musicians on blacklists will not be in anyone's interests.

As a final remark, it must be noted that although difficulties are increasing for independent musicians, they are still not under the same threat as independent journalists and political activists, who face regular harassment, arrest and worse. Although they are effectively banned from most concert venues except for small underground clubs, some recent concerts have been able to take place in larger venues, and musicians are as yet still free to travel outside Belarus to perform. Other positive developments, like

the establishment of a seemingly autonomous Belarusian affiliate of the music television channel MTV, indicate that the situation is not yet black and white. Music making in Belarus remains a precarious occupation, however, and while official moves to restrict freedom of expression show no sign of slowing down, independent artists, like the painter and writer Artur Klinau, expect the situation to continue to worsen before it gets better:

*‘There are still some spheres which are relatively free – don’t worry, in a month, six months, a year, their turn will come. For example, the independent press has been removed from official distribution, forbidden from printing at state printers, but it’s still not a full ban. I imagine this will be the next step.’*

## APPENDICES

### INDEX OF SELECTED BANDS AND MUSICIANS

**Original 'blacklist' of bands performing at the concert protesting the ten year anniversary of Lukashenko's presidency. Bangalore Square, Minsk, 21st July 2004:**

NRM (Pete Pavlov, Liavon Volski) *rock*  
Neurodubel (Alexander Kulinkovich) *punk/rock*  
ZET *punk/rock*  
Drum Ecstasy *instrumental*  
Krywi *folk/rock*  
Palats *folk/rock*  
Pomidor/Off *alternative/pop*  
Zmitser Vaitsyushkevich *singer/songwriter*

#### **Status unclear**

Krama (Igor Varashkevich) *blues/rock*  
Novaya Nieba (Kasia Kamochkaya) *rock*  
Ulis (Slava Koran) *rock*  
Czyrvonym Pa Belamu (Krou) *hip-hop*  
Tarpacz *punk/rock*  
Partyzanskaya Shkola (music project in support of the Jakob Kolas Lyceum) *rock/hip-hop/pop*  
Sasha & Sirozha *pop/comedy*  
J-Mors *rock/pop*

#### **'Official' musicians/ensembles**

Gunesh Abasova *pop*  
Polina Smolova (Eurovision entrant 2005) *pop*  
Kseniya Sitnik (winner of Junior Eurovision 2005) *pop*  
Natalya Podolskaya (Russian Eurovision entrant 2004) *pop*  
Pesnyary *folk*  
Syabry (Anatoly Yarmolenko) *variety/folk*

#### **Others**

Lapis Trubyackoi *rock/pop*  
Krambambulya *rock/pop*  
Indiga (Russia) *indie rock*  
Apple Tea (Igor Satskevich) *jazz*  
Oleg Gazmanov *patriotic rock* (Russia)

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## INDEX OF CULTURAL, POLITICAL AND MEDIA ORGANISATIONS

BAJ – *Belarusian Association of Journalists*  
Basowiszczca – *annual alternative Belarusian music festival held in Poland*  
BDG (Belaruskaya Delovaya Gazeta) – *Belarusian business newspaper*  
Beltelekam – *Belarusian state telecommunications monopoly*  
Belkontsert – *Belarusian state-run concert booking agency*  
BMA – *Belarusian Music Alternative, independent record label and rock promoter*  
BRSM (Belorusskii Respublikanskii Soyuz Molodezhi) – *pro-regime Belarusian National Youth Union*  
BT – *first Belarusian state television channel*  
Charnobylski Shlyakh (Chernobyl Path) – *annual demonstration across Belarus commemorating the Chernobyl disaster*  
Charter 97 – *independent Belarusian news portal and human rights NGO*  
CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) – *alliance of former Soviet states*  
Europejskaje Radio dlja Belarusi (European Radio for Belarus) – *Belarusian independent radio station based in Warsaw, Poland*  
Glavlit – *the official censorship and state protection organ in the Soviet Union*  
Gorispolkom – *City Executive Committee (“gorod” (city) + “ispolkom”*  
HRW – *Human Rights Watch*  
IFPI – *International Federation for the Phonogram Industry*  
Ispolkom (Ispolnitelnyy komitet) – *Executive Committee*  
Jakub Kolas Lyceum – *private Belarusian language high school closed by the state in 2003*  
KGB (Komitet Gosudarstvennoj Bezopasnosti) – *State Security Committee*  
Komsomol (Kommunisticheskiy Soyuz Molodezhi) – *Communist Youth Union*  
Malady Front (Young Front) – *oppositional youth movement*  
Muzykalnaya Gazeta (Musical Newspaper) – *Independent Belarusian music weekly newspaper and online portal*  
Nasha Niva – *the oldest Belarusian newspaper prohibited by the authorities in April 2006*  
NRM (Nezalezhnaya Respublika Mroya /The Independent Republic of Dreams) – *leading Belarusian rock group*  
ODIHR – *Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (attached to the OSCE, see below)*  
OMON (Otryad Militsii Osobogo Naznacheniya/Special Purpose Detachment of Police) – *the notoriously brutal Special Forces police unit*  
ONT – *second Belarusian state television channel*  
OSCE – *Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe*  
Partyzanskaya Shkola (Partisan School) – *music project by students of the Jakob Kolas Lyceum*  
Pesny Svobody (Songs of Freedom) – *2006 compilation of oppositional, political Belarusian language music*  
Radio Ratsiya (Radio Reason) – *oppositional radio station banned in Belarus and currently operating from Poland*  
Radio Svoboda – *Belarusian language service of RFE/RL*  
RFE/RL – *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*  
Rok Kola – *alternative Belarusian music festival in Novopolatsk, close to the Lithuanian border*  
Rok Koronatsiya (Rock Coronation) – *Annual Belarusian rock awards, Minsk*  
RUPIS – *national royalty collecting organization*  
Slavyansky Bazar – *Belarusian state-sponsored music festival held annually in Vitebsk*  
Solidarnosc (Solidarity) – *1980’s Polish anti-communist social movement*  
Soyuz Pisatelei – *Union of Writers*  
Tretii Put (Third Way) – *oppositional youth movement*  
Tuzin Hitou (Dozen Hits) – *online music portal*  
UNHCR – *UN High Commissioner for Refugees*  
Wolna Bialorus (Free Belarus) – *Polish pro-democracy student organisation*  
WTO – *World Trade Organisation*  
Zubr (Bison) – *oppositional youth organisation*

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## **GLOSSARY: TERMINOLOGY**

**R – Russian, B – Belarusian, P – Polish, U – Ukrainian**

Avtorskie prava (R) – *‘authorial rights’ – artistic copyright.*

Bat’ka (R) – *‘Daddy’ – supporters’ nickname for Lukashenka.*

Bangalore – *a park in downtown Minsk used for oppositional concerts.*

Black PR – *the stock in trade of the polittekhnolog (see below).*

Estrada (R) – *‘variety’ – pop music.*

Glasnost (R) – *‘openness’ – Controversial policy in the 1980s Soviet Union that lifted many restrictions on freedom of speech.*

Gostryulnoe udostoverenie (R) – *performance permit issued by the city authorities that is legally required for all concerts.*

Khozyain (R) – *‘boss, owner, master, ruler’.*

Kompromat (R) – *a form of black PR, ‘mudslinging’.*

Magnitizdat (R) – *‘tape published’ – unofficial taping and distribution of music in the Soviet Union: the musical equivalent of samizdat*

Maidan (U) – *short for Maidan Nezalezhnosti, Independence Square in Kiev, site of the famous 2004 mass street protests and concerts in Ukraine that led to the ‘Orange Revolution’.*

Moskal (R) – *a derogatory word for a Russian, used in the countries of the former Soviet Union.*

Narkamauka (B) or ‘Soviet Belarusian’ – *the Soviet era orthography of the Belarusian language, used in all state media, education and all official circles since 1933. As opposed to Tarashkievica Belarusian*

Neformal’naya molodezh (R) – *‘informal youth’, derogatory term for young people.*

Oblastnoy konkurs (R) – *regional pop-singing competition.*

Oktyabrskaya Ploshchad (R) – *‘October Square’ – scene of opposition protests in central Minsk against the results of the 2006 Presidential Election.*

Partiynost (R) – *party loyalty or partisanship.*

Polittekhnolog (R) – *‘spin doctor’.*

Popsa (R) – *derogatory term for Russian language pop music.*

Respublikanskiy konkurs (R) – *national pop-singing competition.*

Russification – *general term used to describe the policy of strengthening Russian linguistic and cultural dominance in the countries of the former Soviet Union.*

Samizdat (R) – *‘self-published’ – the unofficial copying and distribution of literature, a primary means of bypassing censorship in the Soviet era.*

Slushay Bat’ku (R) – *‘Listen to Daddy’ – pro-Lukashenka pre-election pop anthem.*

Tak (U) – *‘Yes’ – campaign slogan of opposition leader Viktor Yushchenko in the 2004 Presidential elections in Ukraine.*

Tarashkievica (B) – *the classical Belarusian language, named after the author of the first Belarusian grammar in 1918, Branislau Tarashkievic. Outlawed in the language reforms of 1933 in favour of*

*Narkamauka (see above). Support for the reintroduction of Tarashkievica constitutes a central plank of nationalist opposition to Lukashenka.*

Telefonnoe pravo (R) – *‘telephone law’ – Common Soviet-era method of control via threats and intimidation over the telephone.*

Vragi naroda (R) – *‘enemies of the people’ – Soviet-era term for political opponents and dissidents.*

Za Belarus (R) – *‘For Belarus’ – an election campaign slogan of Lukashenka since 2002, and the name given to a series of pro-Lukashenka concerts during the 2006 Presidential Election campaign.*

Zhivie Belarus (B) – *‘Long Live Belarus’ – Common oppositional slogan.*

\* Belarus Links (all in English unless otherwise stated):

**OFFICIAL BELARUS GOVERNMENT AND MEDIA**

<a href="http://www.pravo.by">http://www.pravo.by</a> (R)	The National Legal Internet Portal of the Republic of Belarus
<a href="http://www.president.gov.by">http://www.president.gov.by</a>	Official Belarus presidential website
<a href="http://www.mfa.gov.by/eng">http://www.mfa.gov.by/eng</a>	The Ministry of Foreign Affairs
<a href="http://www.belta.by/en">http://www.belta.by/en</a>	Government-controlled news agency
<a href="http://www.sb.by">http://www.sb.by</a> (R)	Belarus Segodnya, official newspaper
<a href="http://belarus-magazine.by">http://belarus-magazine.by</a>	State-run magazine for foreigners - 100% feel-good news from Belarus

**GENERAL (NEWS, HUMAN RIGHTS REPORTS ETC)**

<a href="http://www.abyznewslinks.com/belar.htm">http://www.abyznewslinks.com/belar.htm</a>	Good list of Belarusian News and Media
<a href="http://www.belreview.cz">http://www.belreview.cz</a>	Belarusian Review – Émigré website covering news and culture
<a href="http://www.naviny.by">http://www.naviny.by</a> (R)	Belapan News Agency
<a href="http://www.belaruspartizan.org">http://www.belaruspartizan.org</a> (R)	Independent news source
<a href="http://belarus.indymedia.org/">http://belarus.indymedia.org/</a> (B)	Indymedia Belarus
<a href="http://www.baj.ru/indexe.htm">http://www.baj.ru/indexe.htm</a>	Belarusian Association of Journalists
<a href="http://www.silba.dk">www.silba.dk</a>	Support Initiative for Liberty and Democracy, Denmark
<a href="http://www.wolnabialorus.pl">http://www.wolnabialorus.pl</a>	Free Belarus Initiative, Poland
<a href="http://www.article19.org/publications/regions/europe/publications/untitled.html">http://www.article19.org/publications/regions/europe/publications/untitled.html</a>	Global Campaign for Free Expression
<a href="http://www.spring96.org/en">http://www.spring96.org/en</a>	Human Rights Centre 'Viasna'
<a href="http://www.charter97.org/eng/news/">http://www.charter97.org/eng/news/</a>	Important news source and Human Rights NGO
<a href="http://www.rferl.org">http://www.rferl.org</a>	Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty

<a href="http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/rsd/rsddocview.pdf?tbl=RSDCOI&amp;id=441182040">http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/rsd/rsddocview.pdf?tbl=RSDCOI&amp;id=441182040</a>	UN special report on Belarus
<a href="http://www.osce.org/item/18437.html">http://www.osce.org/item/18437.html</a>	OSCE 2006 report on the Belarusian election
<a href="http://www.belarus-actions.org/en/index.php">www.belarus-actions.org/en/index.php</a>	Solidarity campaign by Amnesty International
<a href="http://www.ilhr.org/ilhr/regional/belarus/updates">www.ilhr.org/ilhr/regional/belarus/updates</a>	International League of Human Rights
<a href="http://www.tolblogs.org/belarus/en/">http://www.tolblogs.org/belarus/en/</a>	Excellent index of Belarus related blogs

## MUSIC/CULTURE

<a href="http://www.belarusguide.com/culture1/music/index.html">http://www.belarusguide.com/culture1/music/index.html</a>	
<a href="http://www.reference.com/browse/wiki/Music_of_Belarus">http://www.reference.com/browse/wiki/Music_of_Belarus</a>	Good general introductions to the Belarusian music scene
<a href="http://www.nestor.minsk.by/mg/">http://www.nestor.minsk.by/mg/</a> (R)	Muzykalnaya Gazeta
<a href="http://bma.home.by/eng">http://bma.home.by/eng</a>	Belarusian Music Alternative
<a href="http://music.fromby.net">http://music.fromby.net</a> (B)	Tuzin Hitou - excellent source of MP3s of independent music
<a href="http://www.music.tut.by">http://www.music.tut.by</a> (R)	Good music news site
<a href="http://www.kulturaktiv.org">www.kulturaktiv.org</a>	German organization supporting independent music and democracy in Belarus
<a href="http://luka.rocks.it/">http://luka.rocks.it/</a> (B)	Website of political project UltraVozhyk: Good downloads of satirical songs about Lukashenka
<a href="http://mult.3dway.org/index_eng.php">http://mult.3dway.org/index_eng.php</a>	Satirical animated cartoons from Tretyi Put

## **OPEN LETTER**

**from Belarusian musicians** 16. 09. 2004

We, musicians of Belarus, feel it necessary to express our concern about the pressure we have already been experiencing for almost two months since July 21, 2004. On that day, we (the bands Palac, Drum Ecstasy, Neuro Dubel, N.R.M., ZET, Pomidor/OFF and Zmicier Vajciuskievic) performed at a concert to coincide with Aleksandr Lukashenko's 10 years in power. We wish particularly to emphasise that this rally and concert at Minsk's Bangalore Square was officially permitted by the authorities. The next day, however, we had already begun to suffer the consequences of our participation.

Our concerts are being cancelled at the last moment on various far-fetched pretexts, or are banned altogether. Television and radio station personnel have told us repeatedly of the existence of a ban on mentioning the musicians involved in the Bangalore Square concert in the state press, or playing their songs on state electronic media (TV channels First National, LAD, STV and ONT, plus National Radio 1 and 2, Radius FM, Pilot FM, Radio Minsk and Novoe Radio). The management of commercial radio and the country's only private First Musical TV Channel have also been pressurised. It is not difficult to find this out for yourself; it's enough just to call any of the FM stations listed and ask them to play a track by one of the "disgraced" bands - they will refuse.

We feel as if our hands have been tied, we have been stood on tiptoes, and a noose has been placed around our necks. Apparently we haven't been hanged yet, but you can't call it a life. Therefore we wish to make the following statement:

1. We are not the opposition, but maintain a civic position - we wish to live and work freely in our own country.
2. We are law-abiding citizens who obey the law even when it is directed against us. However, we have now come up against the "telephone law" of Soviet times, and wish to know on what grounds we are being banned, and what exactly we have contravened.
3. We are concerned by steps the Belarusian authorities are taking against contemporary music. We know that the Ministry of Culture is currently drafting a new regulation according to which all concert participants will have to be approved (or "vetted", as it was known under the Soviet system) before any performance. It is only a question of time before the Belarusian Council of Ministers passes this regulation. Some sort of jury will then be authorised to ban concerts by Belarusian artists. We feel these measures to be illegal and contradictory to the principles of freedom of speech.
4. We are appealing to people who care about the current situation to send e-mails in support of the musicians to [bum210704@tut.by](mailto:bum210704@tut.by), and write to state officials at the following addresses to ask "Why are the bands being banned?"

Minister Leonid Pavlovich Gulyako  
Belarusian Ministry of Culture 220004 Minsk prospekt Masherova 11  
Fax: (+375-17) 2239045.

Minister Vladimir Vasilyevich Rusakevich  
Belarusian Ministry of Information 220004 Minsk prospekt Masherova 11

5. We request media workers to carry out a journalistic investigation to find answers to the questions: who contacted Belarusian radio stations and gave the order not to allow musicians involved in the July 21 rally onto the air; who is now banning these bands from holding concerts, and on what grounds? If no such ban exists, then we wish to be told so officially. We would then kindly ask you to publish your findings.

6. We plan to set up a Belarusian Musicians' Union to unite us in our common fight and support young bands who are facing problems organising concerts. We are calling on everyone who stands with us in our desire to live and work in Belarus to join in our initiative.

Minsk, Belarus  
16.09.2004

In addition to the letter, please find below a timeline of events which give us grounds to believe that a ban on the aforementioned bands is already in force:

## **TIMELINE**

July 21, 2004 - the bands Palac, Drum Ecstasy, Neuro Dubel, N.R.M., ZET, Pomidor/OFF and Zmicier Vajciuskievic perform at an officially-authorized Belarusian opposition event dedicated to Aleksandr Lukashenko's 10th anniversary of rule.

July 22 - the day after the rally, all members of the folk band Palac are fired from the Belkontsert organisation, where they had been working for the past four years. The official reason for their dismissal is that the band's concerts only attract small audiences. However, members of Palac have declared this statement to be untrue.

July 26 - the newspaper Respublika withholds an interview with the band Drum Ecstasy dating from July 10. Respublika's editor-in-chief personally vetoes the material, telling the journalist that "...to work for a paper like this, one must be politically correct and know who to interview".

July 30 - an interview with Drum Ecstasy filmed on July 26 is not broadcast on STV. The journalists mention a ban on showing or mentioning Drum Ecstasy, Neuro Dubel, N.R.M., Palac, Pomidor/OFF and Zmicier Vajciuskievic on the air.

July 30 - an ONT film crew is refused its request to film a piece about Drum Ecstasy recording music for the film "The Night Patrol" ("Nochnoy Dozor").

August 3 - an article about the radio ban on music by Belarusian bands is published by the newspaper Byelorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta.

According to DJs, a paper appeared at all radio stations and TV channels in mid-August, recommending that music and news about the aforementioned bands should not be used.

August 20 - a representative from the concert department at one radio station informs Drum Ecstasy

that they can no longer work together or invite them to advertising events or concerts due to persistent demands from state bodies in charge of organising mass events.

August 21 - during a private conversation, an ONT representative confirms the existence of such a document.

August 23 - broadcasting of music by the aforementioned bands is stopped. According to DJs, their music has been deleted from the stations' servers.

August 23 - during a private conversation, an STV representative confirms that the channel's editors are in possession of lists of bands and artists now banned from broadcast by state TV and radio channels.

August 26 - Drum Ecstasy is informed by the organisers of events for September 11, 2004 (Minsk City Day) that Ministry of Culture officials have removed them from all lists of pre-planned concerts.

In late August, concerts by the band Krama are banned in the cities of Grodno and Brest, as well as around the Brest region.

August 27 - Drum Ecstasy is informed that their appearance at an LG advertising event will not take place because city council representatives have insisted that the group be removed from the festival billing.

August 27 - a concert at Blindage Club by Pomidor/OFF, ZET and Garadzkija is cancelled following a call from the Ministry of Culture, just a few hours before it is due to begin.

September 1 - Aleksandr Pomidorov is dismissed as presenter of STV's "Tekhnologiya" programme, and has still not been given any official reasons for it.

September 3 - the editor of the 5?5 programme is banned from inviting Drum Ecstasy onto a programme about the film "The Night Patrol". Around the same time, 5?5's programme editors are recommended to stop filming a piece on Aleksandr Pomidorov.

September 10 - a Lad TV journalist is not allowed to invite Drum Ecstasy onto a programme about the film "The Night Patrol".

September 15 - Drum Ecstasy's performance at the opening of a charity exhibition "Vodka and Fishtails" does not take place due to insistent requests from Minsk city council.

Using his own funds, Zmicier Vajciuskievic has been attempting to record his new album at the state television studios, but is still unable to do so. When asked questions, Belarusian TV workers lower their eyes shamefully and do not answer yes or no.

September 17 - Minsk city council's cultural and internal affairs departments bans Palac, Krama, Neuro Dubel, N.R.M. and Zmicier Vajciuskievic from participating in the "Musicians in support of Musicians" event, which also features Vyacheslav Butusov (leader of the famous Russian band Nautilus Pompilius).





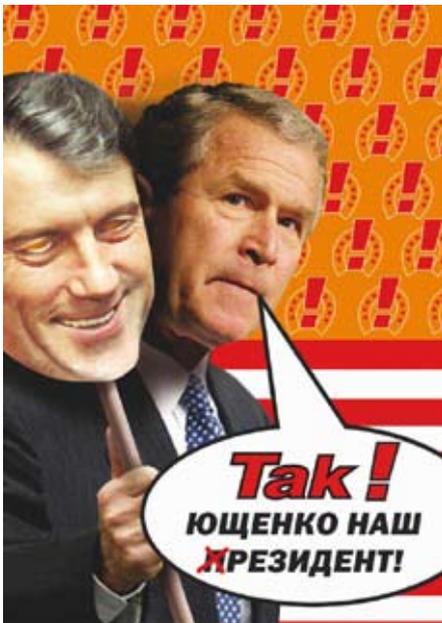
Current Belarusian Crest and Flag



and the opposition pre-Lukashenko (and pre-Soviet) versions



Promo poster for the 2003 Basowiszczka Festival, featuring the banned white-red-white Belarusian flag



Black PR poster from the 2004 Presidential Election in Ukraine. Opposition leader Viktor Yushchenko's campaign slogan 'Tak! Yushchenko Nash Prezident', instead reads 'Yes! Yushchenko is our Resident!'



*'The most successful ad campaign of the decade': the Za Belarus poster campaign*



*'Funnier than any piece of Lukashenko satire': Anatoly Yarmolenko at the Za Belarus concerts, singing his heart out for 'Daddy'*



Rapper Krou from Chyrvonym Pa Belamu  
Photo by the authors



Poster and rapper from Partyzanskaya Shkola, Musicians for Freedom Concert, Minsk 18<sup>th</sup> March 2006  
Photo by the authors