



Belarus  
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Policy

# ***The Beleaguered Muse: Belarusian Culture in the Grip of Repression and the Fight for a Free Voice***

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“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder...”  
Margaret Wolff Hungerford (1878)

*Abstract:*

This policy paper examines the evolving landscape of Belarusian culture under repressive state control since 2020, assessing its significance as a source of resilience and democratic potential. Through an analysis of cultural consumption, ideological suppression, and the emergence of new cultural dynamics within and beyond Belarusian borders, this study illustrates the dual role of Belarusian culture as a means of identity preservation and a catalyst for democratic transformation. Emphasis is placed on the cultural sector's division into official, unofficial, and emigrant spheres, highlighting challenges, risks, and potential futures for Belarusian cultural expression.

## Introduction

Belarus has a rich and complex cultural heritage, shaped by influences from Slavic, Baltic, and West European traditions. However, the country's political landscape has historically cast a long shadow on its cultural development. This paper focuses on the dramatic shift in Belarusian culture following the contested 2020 presidential election and the subsequent crackdown on pro-democracy movements.

## A Fractured Landscape: The Three Faces of Belarusian Culture

Belarusian culture has historically existed in a state of tension with the dominant power structures. Three distinct layers within contemporary Belarusian culture can be identified:

- **Official Culture:** This state-sanctioned sphere promotes narratives aligned with the government's agenda. It is characterized by the dominance of "russkiy mir" (Russian world) ideology, which emphasizes the shared cultural heritage of Russia and Belarus and seeks to diminish Belarusian national identity. This is evident in the proliferation of Russian language content, the glorification of the

Soviet past, and the promotion of a sanitized version of Belarusian history and folklore.

- **Unofficial Culture:** This vibrant yet marginalized sphere represents the artistic expression of independent voices. Prior to 2020, it encompassed a diverse range of artistic endeavors, from music and theater to literature and visual arts. However, the post-election crackdown has forced much of this activity underground. Independent artists now operate under the constant threat of censorship, arrest, or exile. Concerts and performances are often held in private homes or clandestine venues, relying on word-of-mouth communication to avoid detection.
- **Emigrant Culture:** The crackdown on dissent has led to a significant exodus of Belarusian cultural figures. Artists, writers, and musicians who have fled the country continue to create and promote Belarusian culture abroad. This includes the establishment of independent publishing houses, online platforms disseminating Belarusian art and literature, and the organization of cultural events in exile.

The landscape of Belarusian culture has been historically characterized by a sharp divide between official and independent spheres. Official culture, often aligned with the ruling elite, co-existed with a vibrant independent sphere (Zaprudski, 2004). Since 2020, this duality has become more pronounced. The regime has intensified its efforts to promote "russkiy mir" ideology, suppressing independent voices and replacing them with pro-government narratives (Astrouskaya, 2023), presenting Belarusian culture as an offshoot of the Russian tradition. This is evident in the dominance of Russian language programming and the marginalization of Belarusian artists (Belarusian PEN, 2024). This agenda aligns with the regime's efforts to strengthen ties with Russia and downplay Belarusian national identity. Official cultural production is dominated by state-controlled media, publishing houses, and theaters. These institutions offer a sanitized and ideologically charged version of Belarusian history and culture, glorifying the Soviet past and promoting Russification.

Independent culture, once a vibrant space for critical thought and free expression, has been severely repressed. Many prominent artists, writers, and musicians have been imprisoned, forced into exile, or blacklisted. Performances and festivals deemed politically sensitive are banned, and self-censorship has become a survival tactic for many cultural workers.

Since the 2020 events, Belarus has witnessed a growing divide between the state-sanctioned cultural sphere and a vibrant, yet increasingly underground, independent scene. The official cultural sphere is rife with "*agrotrash*" – low-quality mass culture productions that romanticize rural life and glorify the existing government. Theaters, museums, and media outlets are pressured to showcase performances, exhibitions, and content that adhere to the official ideology. This stifles artistic freedom and reduces cultural offerings to mere propaganda tools.

On the surface one will see "ruskiy mir", and all propaganda directs Belarusians to change their identity towards the Eurasian space. Official concerts, mostly ideologically, are filled with songs that glorify the existing government and low-quality Russian pop. A more educated public, however, will tend to look deeper for pearls. Even in state institutions, there are obsessed and devoted Belarusian cultural workers who strive to preserve the heritage, cultivate good taste, guide to the depths and roots, recreate the true identity. Sometimes it takes time, attention and some courage to find such an offer.

In spite of the challenges, the Belarusian spirit of creativity persists inside the country. Independent artists, writers, and musicians continue to find ways to express themselves, albeit under constant threat of censorship and persecution. Underground concerts, apartment exhibitions, and online platforms have become crucial spaces for free artistic expression. These spaces offer a glimpse of the vibrant and diverse cultural landscape that lies beneath the surface of official narratives.

The exodus of cultural figures has created a vibrant Belarusian cultural scene in exile as well. Numerous artistic projects, music festivals, and publishing houses in Europe and beyond showcase Belarusian talent to an international audience. This diaspora

culture acts as a vital archive for Belarusian identity, preserving and transmitting works that are deemed subversive by the regime.

Exile has become a significant space for independent cultural production. Belarusian artists and intellectuals who fled abroad have formed communities, organized festivals, and published books and music that would be impossible to create within Belarus.

These efforts contribute to the preservation of Belarusian cultural heritage and strengthen its presence in the international cultural sphere. However, it is crucial to recognize the challenges faced by exiled artists, including limited resources, difficulties in reaching audiences back home, and the emotional strain of displacement.

The fact that the culture in Belarus is thriving to survive in spite of the repressions has had a huge impact on the country as a whole, encouraging new ways of how an average citizen of Belarus currently consumes culture and searches for opportunities and creative ways of producing cultural and artistic products in the context of oppression.

### **The Resilience of Culture: Finding Creative Space in Adversity**

Despite the daunting challenges, Belarusian culture displays remarkable resilience. Four years have passed since the 2020 elections - during this time, a new generation of young people entered the field. They are not very visible yet – because excessive publicity, even on the Internet, can be dangerous. Therefore many processes are hidden from outside observers and we will be able to see their results only after some time passes.

Young artists who came of age during the protests are emerging with new voices and styles. Traditional cultural practices in rural areas are being preserved, albeit in a more clandestine way. These expressions defy the official narrative and showcase the enduring spirit of Belarusian identity. This process can be described as *cultural partisanship* and *self-censorship*. The creator cannot speak directly about important

topics, because it is dangerous for him or her. Free art takes place at closed events and underground festivals. Sometimes security forces raid such concerts too.

We see that new names are gradually appearing, or former activities are being revived, which can still be called culture. It is not possible to buy a ticket for performances performed in the Belarusian language due to the high demand, knight festivals, Kupalle (Midsummer) celebrations and other national holidays are regaining popularity. In 2024, the Night of Museums was sold out in many iconic locations.

At the same time, there are lists of banned authors who can continue their activities only through underground events: apartment concerts and performances, closed side events at large festivals, exhibitions and art exhibitions at private estates, activities in the media space.

Independent culture is almost completely destroyed, has gone into exile or lives underground. The framework within which cultural figures can do something publicly in Belarus is very narrow. A large number of people are in prisons, new political prisoners are constantly appearing (now there are almost 1,400 of them), among them are many cultural figures. There are black lists – that is, lists of those creators who are prohibited, while any public cultural activity in general must be previously agreed with the authorities. Culture has very few opportunities to develop, to interact with European cultures, even with the cultures of our neighbors (except for the official, authorized Russian culture). Many contacts are broken, collectives break up, the cultural sphere loses its professionals. There is also an unceasing creeping colonization of Belarusian culture by the Russian one. Monitoring shows that the Belarusian language is being pushed out of culture (at least from its public manifestations), Russian culture is increasingly present in Belarusian theaters and museums, which in some sense "replaces" the destroyed Belarusian. Russian actors play in theaters, Russian artists are exhibited in museums. In bookstores, Russian literature is dominant over the Belarusian literature. Belarusian books, which are now actively published by publishing houses that were forced to emigrate, can only make it to Belarus through unofficial channels. Using the terminology of Belarusian Council for

Culture, this leads to a combination of “*ruskiy mir + argatrash*” as a new formula of state-controlled culture inside Belarus,

Every summer, there is a big festival “Viva Braslav”, which had been quite Russian-centric until 2020, and now it is absolutely so, but it gathered thousands of visitors this year, because people long for a place to rest and unite. On these same days, historical “Our Grundwald” festival took place, which gathered hundreds of fans of reconstruction. This is a completely different side of culture.

Another festival, “LidBeer”, celebrating beer and kvass, has been held in the town of Lida for many years. This year it changed its name to “LidHarch”, which indicates that the authorities are trying to take everything under their control and sometimes turn a good idea into what can be called *agrotrash*.

Another interesting phenomenon is the “Drozd” band. This is a band that has always had a fairly low level of quality in their work, sometimes comical. But they created several songs that speak of their parent's home, the Belarusian language, and sing about Belarusian nature. They have tours in all cities and even small towns in Belarus, where the people know and sing their songs. This shows that those remaining Belarusians who live in small towns, for the most part, do not long for high art and elite culture, but long for a clear, simple song (to cry or rejoice), soulfulness and something very close to them.

Furthermore, Belarusian cultural figures in exile have become crucial torchbearers. They organize festivals, publish books, and create music that keeps the flame of Belarusian culture alive on a global stage. These efforts promote international awareness of the situation in Belarus while also fostering cultural exchange and collaboration.

### **The Cost of Dissent: Lost Voices and Broken Dreams**

The crackdown has had a devastating impact on independent culture. Many prominent creators have been forced into exile or imprisoned. Self-censorship has become a defining feature of artistic production within Belarus. The remaining independent spaces operate under constant pressure and threat of closure (Freedom House, 2024).

The Lukashenko regime has unleashed a brutal crackdown on dissent, with cultural figures being particularly targeted. According to the Belarusian PEN center, over 220 cultural NGOs have been liquidated since 2020, and around 2,000 cultural figures have faced repression (Create Culture Group, 2023). The list includes prominent artists, musicians, and writers who have been imprisoned, forced into exile, or blacklisted from official events (PEN Belarus, 2024).

The fear of repression leads to self-censorship, where artists deliberately avoid themes and topics deemed sensitive by the regime. This stifles creativity and hinders the development of a critical and questioning artistic discourse. Additionally, the exodus of artists and intellectuals deprives Belarus of valuable talents and weakens the cultural fabric of the nation.

The crackdown on independent culture has inflicted significant losses. Hundreds of cultural workers face exile or imprisonment. Artists like Ales Pushkin, who died in prison due to ill-treatment, represent the tragic cost of repression. The quality and diversity of cultural offerings have significantly declined. Belarusians struggle to access high-quality, contemporary art, and their freedom of expression is stifled. Educational institutions have been targeted as well, with private schools and universities promoting Belarusian language and culture facing closure. This deliberate erasure of Belarusian identity from educational spaces poses a threat to the future of the nation's cultural heritage.

### **The Cost of Repression: The Perilous Path of Cultural Workers**

Cultural workers in Belarus face a multitude of challenges under the current regime. These include:

- **Censorship:** All forms of artistic expression are subject to strict government control. The authorities frequently censor content deemed politically or socially unacceptable.
- **Self-censorship:** To avoid persecution, many artists resort to self-censorship, shying away from topics or themes deemed sensitive by the government. This



act of self-silencing stifles creativity and undermines the integrity of artistic expression.

- **Repression:** Artists deemed critical of the government face a range of repressive measures, including arrest, imprisonment, and exile. This chilling effect creates a climate of fear and discouragement, hindering artistic production.
- **Limited opportunities:** The government prioritizes the promotion of official culture, limiting access to resources and venues for independent artists.
- **Brain Drain:** The exodus of cultural figures weakens the overall fabric of Belarusian culture and deprives the country of its creative talent. Blacklists lead to the fact that cultural workers cannot find any work in Belarus, sometimes they are not even hired as watchmen because of an undesirable last name. There are also difficulties in finding employment in emigration, many creators have to completely leave the profession.

Cultural workers operate in a climate of fear and uncertainty. The Belarusian PEN (2024) reports over 220 cultural NGOs were liquidated and 2,000 cultural figures facing repression between 2020 and 2023. Censorship, dismissals, arrest, and exile are constant threats (CreateCulture Group, 2023). The case of Ales Pushkin, a prominent artist who died in prison under suspicious circumstances, exemplifies the brutality of the regime towards dissenters (Belarusian PEN, 2024).

According to the study by CreateCulture Group, between 2020 and 2023, over 220 cultural NGOs of various organizational and legal forms were liquidated, and around 2000 Belarusian cultural figures faced repression or experienced violations of their cultural, socio-economic and civil rights.

The creative process is regulated down to the smallest detail, in order to make a concert, you need to go through a whole list of approvals; to show your picture, you have to go through the humiliation of censorship; to put on a play, you need to get into a narrow ideological framework.

Performing their work, cultural workers face great risks. First, they can be arrested for expressing their position – because creativity is primarily an expression of one's position, it is often very political. Arrest in Belarus means not only the loss of freedom, but also the encounter with violence and ill-treatment. People are often beaten, the conditions in Belarusian prisons are equated to torture, because prisoners (especially political ones, because they are treated in a special way in prisons) do not receive basic hygiene products, and lawyers are not allowed to visit them. They do not receive proper medical care, often live in overcrowded cells, cold in winter and suffocating in summer, have no contact with the outside world (some of them have not been known for more than a year, such as Marya Kalesnikava or Maksim Znak), cannot even receive messages and letters from their loved ones, sometimes even needing medicine. Also, creators can lose their job without the possibility of getting another one (and this often applies not only to work in a specialty, but also to any official job) – in fact, this is a ban on the profession and a ban on work in general. In such conditions, as well as under the pressure of danger, many cultural figures, even if they did not intend to leave, end up leaving Belarus. Even if some of the creators do not waste work, they face censorship and the need for self-censorship and must conform to the rules set by the authorities.

### The Struggle to Preserve Identity: The Significance of Culture

Despite the challenges, Belarusian culture continues to serve as a vital space for expressing national identity and fostering a sense of community:

- **Preservation of Language:** The Belarusian language remains a central marker of national identity. Independent initiatives, such as clandestine language courses, are working to preserve and promote its use.
- **Alternative Narratives:** Independent culture provides alternative narratives to the government's official line, offering a space for critical reflection and social commentary.
- **Expression of Dissent:** Even in a climate of fear, artists continue to use their work to express dissent and challenge the status quo. This act of defiance serves to keep alive the spirit of resistance.

- **Community Building:** Underground cultural events provide a vital space for Belarusians to connect, share experiences, and find solace in a time of oppression.

### Emerging Opportunities in a Stifled Landscape

Despite the daunting challenges, new opportunities are emerging. Young artists who came of age during the protests are finding creative ways to express themselves. Traditional practices like folk art and music are experiencing a resurgence, particularly in rural areas. Additionally, the international community can play a crucial role by providing support to exiled cultural workers, facilitating cross-cultural collaborations, and promoting Belarusian culture abroad.

The current state of Belarusian culture presents a stark paradox. While the official sphere is suffocated by state control, a vibrant, albeit underground, independent scene thrives. This situation cannot be sustained indefinitely. The silencing of artists hinders the development of a strong national identity and stifles social discourse.

The end of repression is essential for the flourishing of Belarusian culture. A truly democratic Belarus would allow for independent and critical voices to be heard. It would create a space for open dialogue about national identity, history, and the future. Only when the fear of retribution is gone can Belarusian culture reach its full potential and contribute to a vibrant and democratic society.

### The Future of Belarusian Culture: A Beacon of Democracy?

The future of Belarusian culture is inextricably linked to the country's political trajectory. Starting from the expansionist wars of Ivan the Terrible and Catherine the Great through the Russification politics of Nikita Khrushchev, the existence of distinct Belarusian identity and culture was perceived as a threat to Russian and Soviet imperialism (Astrouskaya, 2023). It would be thus fair to say that the end of the last empire in Europe starts with releasing Belarus from the Russian cultural expansion by including it into the European cultural space.

If democratic freedoms prevail, Belarusian culture can flourish, drawing strength from its diverse roots and vibrant underground scene. Cultural exchange and collaboration with European partners could play a vital role in this process.

However, the current regime's policies pose a significant threat to Belarusian cultural identity. The ongoing Russification efforts aim to erase the Belarusian language and cultural heritage, potentially leading to cultural homogenization within the region.

Belarusian culture has the potential to be a powerful force for democratic change. It fosters a sense of national identity and critical thinking, both essential ingredients for a democratic society. By reclaiming their cultural space and expressing dissent through art, Belarusians can challenge the regime's narrative and build a foundation for a more open and inclusive future.

## Conclusion

The struggle for Belarusian culture mirrors a broader fight for freedom of expression and national identity. Belarus's cultural revival hinges on democratic reforms that create a safe space for artistic expression and dialogue. As the Belarus Network for Research on Neighborhood Policy advocates for closer ties with the European Union, fostering cultural exchange and supporting exiled artists holds the potential to strengthen Belarusian identity and empower Belarusians on their journey towards a brighter cultural future.

The current state of Belarusian culture presents a complex picture. While government repression has inflicted devastating losses, the spirit of resistance remains strong. Independent voices, though silenced within the country, find resonance in the global cultural sphere. Supporting Belarusian culture, both within the country and in exile, becomes crucial for fostering democratic aspirations and ensuring the survival of a unique cultural heritage.

## ENDNOTES

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