EUROZINE

The mood has changed

Ingo Petz
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From confrontation to subversion: rock bands, writers, artists and cultural organizations have been central to the evolution of the anti-regime protests in Belarus and the unique form of solidarity and resistance that defines them.

In a few short summer months, Belarus completely rewrote its role in world history.

Became a part of it.

This is about far more than who has formal sovereignty.

It’s about our own style and our own place.

Ihar Babkoŭ, 30.8.2020

In an unprecedented and historic act of collective politicization, the Belarusian population has overcome the fear and apathy on which the autocratic regime has depended for the last two decades. Belarusians want to throw off their autocratic shackles and become citizens, not subjects: citizens in control of their own destiny. This has surprised not only international observers but above all Belarusians themselves. ‘We have woken up, and we will not fall back asleep again,’ read a placard at the March of Unity in Minsk on 6 September 2020.

In contrast with the demonstrations in 2006 and 2010, the protests have been taking place not only in the capital but also in other cities and even provincial towns and villages, places previously thought to be Lukashenka’s heartlands. Here, unemployment, corruption and lack of prospects has led to a significant increase in discontent. The protestors are of all ages and from all social groups: students, IT-workers, artists and sportspeople have been joined by doctors, teachers, pensioners and workers from the powerful state-owned enterprises. Alongside women, it is young people who are the face of the protests. Well-educated but without a future, the ‘Lukashenka generation’ was long thought to have been acquiescent. But for anyone looking closer, the writing was on the wall.

The cultural roots of the 2020 protests

In 1994, the 39-year-old Aliaksander Lukashenka campaigned for election on the promise that he would lead the country out of its economic and political crisis. As president, he sought to achieve this by putting politics and the economy back onto a Soviet course and by establishing authoritarian rule. It was essentially a trade-off: the freedoms that the country had gained in 1991 for wages and food on the table. [1] This won him the support of the large section of the population that had gained little from the new freedoms. But by reintroducing symbols from the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic, reinstating Russian as the official language through a controversial referendum in 1995, and disempowering parliament in 1996, Lukashenka antagonized many for whom the freedoms obtained in 1991 carried positive associations. These people included journalists and media workers, artists and intellectuals, and above all members of the younger urban generation who had cultivated a new attitude to life during perestroika and glasnost. The rock band Ulis expressed this attitude in 1990 with their song 'Radio Svaboda' (Radio Liberty): 'We thirst for our hearts to burn. This is Radio Liberty. Where there is no darkness. Our element. With the white flag above us.'

In the late 1980s, many young people, including the founder of Ulis, Slava Koran, began to write rock music with Belarusian lyrics. This was a novelty. Young artists expressed not only their personal feelings of freedom but also their pride in Belarusian culture, which in the Soviet Union had been marginalized and suppressed. The heavy-rock band Mroja (Dream) even managed to bring out the first ever Belarusian-language album on the Soviet label Melodiya. The band was formed in 1981 by Lavon Volski, today an icon of Belarusian protest culture. In 1995, he joined the radio station FM 101.2, which quickly gained cult status amongst young Belarusians for its provocative and ironic shows and alternative playlists, featuring mostly Belarusian music. Although FM 101.2 was closed down by the regime in 1996, the creative minds that it moulded and the networks that it created went on to shape the Belarusian protest culture of the next two decades. Some of the key players later founded the Euroradio station in exile in Warsaw.

The band N.R.M. – an abbreviation of *Nezależnaja Rėspublika Mroja*: Independent Republic of Dreams – became the spearhead of nonconformist youth culture and the resistance to Lukashenka's authoritarian aspirations. The founder was again Volski, whose lyrical and caustic style expressed the longings of young people and reached a wide audience. N.R.M. succeeded in making the Belarusian language popular and gave its name to an entire generation. Concerts by N.R.M., Nejro Djubel, Deviation, Palac, Ulis, Zet, Krama and Novae Neba became meeting points for young people who refused to accept the re-Sovietization of the country. Belarusian became an alternative cultural code that inspired other forms of culture beyond rock music. [2]

These 'niches of liberty' were seen by the regime as a threat to its desire for power and control and from the late 1990s started being targeted. Concerts were banned, certain bands and musicians could not be played on state radio or shown on state television, clubs were closed down and concert organizers were pressurized. The student magazine *Studumka*, the creative mouthpiece of the scene, was banned in November 2005.

Another key member of the protest scene was Sjarhei Michalok and his band Lapis Trubetskoy, which had become highly popular across the post-Soviet space for its mix of

absurdist pop and ironic punk/ska. The album *Manifest* (2006) marked Michalok's turn to agitpop, a genre it perfected in songs such as 'Graj', which became an anti-anthem for the protests following the 2010 Presidential elections. Michalok then founded the band Brutto, which became well-known during the Euromaidan in the Ukraine. Brutto's criticism of the repressive conditions in Belarus meant that for a time it was prevented from performing there.

Many of the bands and musicians that had been part of the protest movement since the 1990s performed at opposition events, for example the protests following the Presidential elections of March 2006, known then as the Jeans Revolution or the Cornflower Revolution. The predominantly young demonstrators erected a tent village on October Square, which after five days was cleared by the authorities. The filmmaker Jury Chaščavacki dealt with these events in his film *Kalinovski Square* (*Plošča*). The slogan, 'We believe! We can! We will win!' (*Verym! Možam! Peramožam!*), often heard at the current demonstrations, was already being chanting then.

Minsk, 27 September 2020. Photo: Homoatrox. Source: Wikimedia commons

The spontaneous demonstrations of solidarity that characterize the protests today could also be observed in 2006. Residents kept the demonstrators in the tent village supplied with food and hot drinks to ward off the icy cold. Political youth organizations such as the nationalists of Malady Front and Zubr (Bison) used flashmobs to demand freedom of speech. For many years, people gathered on the sixteenth day of each month on the central squares in Minsk, holding up images of the opposition politicians and journalists who disappeared in 1999/2000. They included the former head of the electoral commission, Viktar Hančar, and the businessman Anatol Krasoŭski, who both vanished without trace on 16 September 1999. It is almost certain that they were killed by a 'death squad'.

Conscious that the opposition could not win a direct confrontation with the heavily armed regime, the protests increasingly shifted to niches that had been left to non-conformists, artists, free spirits and activists – under the watch of the state, of course. The satirical collective Navinki brought a new tone to the protest culture with its self-published newspaper and film *Gydbaj Bac'ka!* The strategy of the protest culture was now to occupy and expand these spaces of self-expression. The internet played an important role in this. From the mid-2000s, online memes and illustrations lampooned the absurdity of the state ideology. Young organizations such as Tretij Put' tried out alternative social and political models and new media projects such as 34Mag.net strengthened the desire of a new generation for self-fulfilment. All this can be seen both as a strategy of conformism and of reinvention.

Lacking prospects, large numbers of young people left the country out of frustration, for the EU, the USA and Canada. But others began to channel their will to bring about change into projects – environmentalism, history, education and IT – that they could pursue relatively unchallenged. [3] Over the past fifteen years, stable networks have developed that are adaptable enough to survive in a hostile environment. The 2020 protests are subsisting on and benefiting from this.

In the 2000s, the extraordinarily lively artistic scene in Belarus became the driving force of the new protest culture. The Belarus Free Theatre, founded in 2005, earned worldwide fame with its radical and experimental productions dealing with taboos including domestic violence, the death penalty and psychological terror in an authoritarian system. But in Belarus itself the company was only able to perform underground, and many of the founders and actors had to leave the country.

Young authors such as Alhierd Bacharevič and Viktar Marcinovič wrote novels discussing the repressive, authoritarian system in which they found themselves. The Lohvinaŭ bookshop became the meeting point for the young literary scene. The publishing house of the same name was repeatedly harassed by the regime and finally had to move to Vilnius. Poets such as Valzhyna Mort and Volha Hapeeva created spaces for linguistic experimentation. Artur Klinaŭ, who initially found fame as an installation artist, launched the art and culture magazine pARTisan in 2002, creating a unique forum for new artistic trends and a holistic concept of protest culture, whose importance for the guerrilla tactics of the current protests cannot be underestimated.

From 2009 onwards, Galerie Ў provided a space for young artists to exhibit. They included Sergey Shabohin, whose work deals with the phenomenon of fear in Belarusian society, and Marina Naprushkina, whose work explores the power structures of Belaursian autocracy. Writing in 2013, the Belarusian philosopher Olga Shparaga observed that, ‘The upcoming generation of Belarusian artists is giving a new meaning to the feminist rallying cry of “the personal is political”. A new privacy is arising out of opposition to this petty, dehumanized apparatus, and a new politics is arising out of the multitude of ways that we can participate in society.’ [4]

In the 2000s, the provocative campaigns, installations and works of the artist Mikhail Gulin turned him into one of the key protagonists of this extraordinarily lively counterculture. On 9 October 2012, Gulin carried pink and yellow cubes through the centre of Minsk, built them into a variety of configurations and observed the reactions of passers-by. When Gulin put up his installation on October Square, the symbol of the new urban opposition since the 2006 demonstrations, he was promptly arrested. The performance was a subtle demonstration of the paranoia of the regime and remains highly relevant today. It illustrated how the decision as to what is political or not is made solely by the authoritarian establishment. One can stay out of the political sphere as much as one likes, but ultimately no-one can be certain that they will not end up being targeted. There are guarantees of safety. The shock waves caused by Gulin’s pink and yellow cubes can still be felt today.

2020: Peacefulness and solidarity

The 2020 protests in Belarus are characterized by an almost overwhelming peacefulness. This is doubtless a reaction to people’s experience of violence in the past. Many protesters no doubt have in mind the images of the Maidan in Kiev, where snipers shot over 100 people in late February 2014. As Lavon Volski put it: ‘Are we supposed to all get ourselves shot?’ [5]

Unconditional solidarity is the other foundation of the protests. Before the elections, people had formed kilometre-long human chains in protest at the arrest of Viktar

Babaryka, at that point the most popular potential opposition candidate. On 12 August 2020, 250 women holding white flowers gathered spontaneously in front of the Komarovsky Market in central Minsk to demonstrate against violence. These flashmobs have kept on appearing throughout the protests, for example following the abduction of Coordination Council member Maria Kalesnikava. This kind of solidarity was first seen in the centre of Minsk in the summer of 2011. Then, it was primarily young people who had begun to organize over social media. This marked the beginnings of creative civil disobedience, with protestors attempting to circumvent and subvert the strict rules on gatherings in public spaces – a central tactic of the current protests.

Another expression of solidarity has been the singing of folk songs such as *Pahonja*, or religious songs such as *Mahutny Bože.* The Minsk Philharmonic Choir has sung in a variety of locations. Over and over again, people have gathered impromptu in front of the Red Church on Independence Square in Minsk, or at the universities, where the KGB and OMON arrested students on 1 September 2020 and afterwards. Countless videos have circulated on social media showing people taking action when members of the KGB, OMON or the much-feared *Tichary* (plain-clothes police) have tried to arrest people in the street.

The most impressive demonstrations of solidarity have occurred at the Puškinskaja metro station in Minsk, where Aleksandr Taraikovsky was shot by the police on 10 August. Hundreds and sometimes thousands of people have gathered there, laying flowers and pictures; Lavon Volski and other musicians have also given free concerts. Drivers sounded their horns as they passed and – another feature of the protests – people held up their mobile phones. Many people placed candles in the windows of their flats in tower blocks after dark. These and other symbols of solidarity have been visible among the Belarusian diaspora, too.

What are the roots of this new feeling of togetherness, apart from people's outrage at the violence and deception of the regime? One answer is that significantly more people have been affected by the repressions, violence and torture than in previous years. Seven thousand people were arrested in the first week of the protests alone. By the end of September, the figure is thought to have been over 12,000 (it is now over 16500). The UN has reported 450 documented cases of torture and ill-treatment.

Apart from during the mass protests in 1995 and 1996, repressions had in the past mostly been aimed at people who had openly taken a stance: politicians, NGO workers, human rights activists and journalists. In 2020, Belarusian society as a whole has been overwhelmed by a wave of shock and rage. The government's response to the coronavirus crisis has poured further fuel onto the fire of the protests. Because Lukashenka refused from the start to identify the crisis as a crisis, the population used crowdfunding and grassroots initiatives to organize their own relief efforts and quarantine measures, and networked with ministries and agencies.

This capacity for decentralized self-help is an example of the survival strategies that the Belarusians have repeatedly deployed in times of war and crisis. People who have lived anonymously alongside each other for years in dormitory town tenements now organize block parties. They eat, sing, dance together and share ideas: 'With all the violence that we have been through on a daily basis since August, block parties are a kind of therapy,'

says historian Iryna Kastaljan. [6]

After the March of Unity in Minsk on 11 September, plainclothes police and OMON hunted down individuals, beat them up and arrested them. The scenes at the Café O'Petit, where a plain clothes policeman shattered a window with his baton, were particularly dramatic. The next day, people queued from morning till night to support the café. This kind of help is in line with *talaka*, which means something like 'offering'. The word has been used in Belarusian culture since the eighteenth century to denote collective assistance, provided for instance when a farmer's barn had burned down and the inhabitants of the village helped to repair the barn or erect a new one. The crowdfunding platform of the same name is the modern-day equivalent.

Some places have themselves become symbols of change. The *Plošča Peramen* (Transformation Square), set up by activists on 6 August in a courtyard in Minsk, is one example. White-red-white flags wave and the walls are painted with symbols of the protests. A transformer station has a large work of graffiti showing the two DJs who played the song 'Peremen' by cult band Kino at a Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya rally, rather than drowning out the event as they had been instructed to do by the authorities. The picture of them giving the victory sign became an icon of the protests. When the authorities painted over the graffiti, it was immediately repainted, sometimes even several times a day. These guerrilla tactics are also evident in other protest movement activities.

On one of the many demos, two young men could be seen playing badminton in front of the headquarters of the Minsk KGB – the incarnation of repression and terror. Comments on social media criticized the players for their lightheartedness and naivety. But that was precisely what was so successful about the gesture: the unmasking of violence, the overcoming of terror and fear by the harmless, the peaceful and seemingly mundane. The hugging that was in evidence in the initial weeks after the escalation of violence works in the same way.

These manifestations of protest culture are ideally suited to social media, so much so that they seem to have been designed by marketing experts. The prime example was the pre-election photo in which Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Veranika Zepkala und Maria Kalesnikava hold up their hands in the victory salute, a heart and a fist, a symbolism reproduced in countless selfies. This can be said for the giant projections depicting Kalesnikava in the style of the 'Rodina-Mat'zovet' propaganda poster of 1941, or the image of Yuri Korzun, the miner who handcuffed himself to drilling equipment at a depth of 300 metres. These projections were photographed, filmed and circulated as memes and videos on the internet.

Here, too, the aim is to prevent the regime from using the public sphere as a platform for power. YouTube videos show sportspeople, workers, doctors, actors and university lecturers demonstrating solidarity with the protests. Ironic and humorous memes serve to ridicule the Lukashenka regime and expose the deceitful mechanisms it uses to cling to power. The authorities understand the power of the image, which is why they disabled the internet for several days after 9 August. Parts of the country's young IT scene, such as Cyber-Partizany, respond with attacks on ministry websites. There is little the regime can do to counter the protest scene's hip imagery and design language, and the speed

with which the movement can act.

The importance of culture in the protest movement is illustrated by the Coordination Council, whose representatives include writer Svjatlana Aleksievič, dramatist Andrej Kureičyk, musician Vladimir Poŭgač and designer Vladimir Cesler. Artists, poets and musicians – such as Nadežda Sajapina, Uladzimir Liankevič and Jurij Styl'skij – have been detained. With its innate capacity for emotionality, subversion and transformation, culture is at the heart of the protest scene. After Babaryka was arrested, Chaim Soutine's painting 'Eva' became a powerful expression of the power of art. The picture was part of Babaryka's collection, which was confiscated. A raised middle finger was added to the portrait and the image was printed onto T-shirts, which were then sold over the internet. There are now dozens of new songs by pop, rock and punk bands, balladeers, electro groups and rappers. They voice grievances, sing about the protests and fuel the longing for freedom.

Artists who had long been marginalized have now taken up the place that they deserve in politicized times: at the centre of society. Whether the protests will ultimately lead to transformation is unclear. But Belarusian protest culture is more vibrant and defiant than ever before. For a country of almost 9.5 million, in which non-conformism has only been able to develop in niches, the sheer vitality and diversity of this scene is overwhelming. Equipped with a new self-confidence, fresh and energetic ideas and partisan tactics, protest culture will play an major role in the future of the country, blazing the trail towards freedom.

Footnotes

1. Ingo Petz wrote about Lukashenka's repressive social contract in Eurozine here: https://www.eurozine.com/out-of-the-unknown/

2. Ingo Petz wrote on the Belarusian cultural revival here: https://www.eurozine.com/between-a-rock-and-a-hard-place/ See also: idem, 'Aufbruch durch Musik. Kulturelle Gegenelite in Belarus' [A new start through music. Cultural counter-elites in Belarus], *Osteuropa* 1/2007, 49–56.

3. See: Ingo Petz, 'Ohnmacht und Anpassung. Die belarussische Jugend am Scheideweg' [Powerlessness and conformism: Belarusian youth at the crossroads], *Osteuropa* 11–12/2013, 121–136.

4. Olga Shparaga, 'Von Partisanen-Nomaden zum Aktionskünstler. Die belarussische Gegenwartskunst' [From partisan nomads to artistic activists. Contemporary Belarusian art], in: Belarus-Analysen, 12/2013, p. 7–10, here p. 10.

5. '"Ich erkenne mein Land nicht wieder." Wird jetzt alles anders in Belarus? Ein Gespräch mit dem Minsker Rockmusiker Ljavon Volski.' ['I no longer recognize my country.' Is everything changing in Belarus? A conversation with Minsk rock musician Lavon Volski] Neues Deutschland, 24.8.2020.

6. Discussion between the author and Iryna Kaštaljan, 14 September 2020.

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