

How Cultural NGOs Struggle for the Right to Be Belarusian

Cultural Movements in 1980s and 1990s

As a result of the policy of forced homogenisation of cultural identity based on Russian culture applied by the Soviet rulers, anti-Communist movements arose in Soviet republics during *perestroika*. Belarus was not an exception: activists in BSSR fought for national revival and state independence, alongside their struggle for democratisation and economic reforms.

However, unlike its Baltic neighbours or Ukraine, Belarus entered *perestroika* as the most Russified and denationalised Soviet republic, and the idea of national revival had no backers among local Communist party elites.¹ Those factors prevented the formation of a nationwide national movement and fully-fledged development of non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Despite low levels of support from the Belarusian population and ruling elites, activists of the national revival movement succeeded in making the Belarusian language the only state language (1990) and replacing the Communist flag and coat of arms with the historical white-red-white flat and Pahonia ('Pursuer') national emblem (1991). Nationally-oriented political forces gained some influence in the spheres of education and culture where they had the biggest support base. That brought about a brief period of Belarusianisation in the above mentioned spheres in the first half of the 1990s. However, those initiatives never had solid public support. The dissatisfaction with Belarusianisation was especially strong among Russian-speaking intellectuals and officials. Pro-national forces did not have enough political resources and popular support to have their leader, Zianon Pazniak, elected as president at the first presidential election in 1994.

In 1994, the first elected Belarusian president Alyaksandar Lukashenka reversed the national and cultural policies. Those who supported national revival were labelled as opponents of the new rule. New state policy was based on the ideology of pan-Slavism and

¹ Yekadumau Andrei. *Razvitsio natsyyanalna-demokratychnaha rukhu i pazitsyi savietskay elity // The Development of National Democratic Movements and Soviet Elite's Attitude to Them*. Bialystok–Vilnius, 2011. P. 32–33.

Russo-centrism that imposed closed connection with Russia and denied the importance of national distinctiveness of Belarusians and even, in the early stages, the value of Belarus' state independence. The biggest step in that direction was the constitutional referendum in 1995 that resulted in the change to the state flag and national emblem, brought back Russian as the second official language and was followed by the state integration of Belarus and Russia combined with a heated confrontation with the West.

However, the majority of the population supported the idea of state independence, and therefore by the beginning of the 2000s, the government had to switch to protection of state independence of Belarus and leave aside the Russo-centric ideology for the sake of the so-called Belarusian state ideology. That new ideology was centred on the notion of state as a territory rather than a cultural and linguistic community and ignored the historical dimension. The goal of the new state ideology was to provide grounds for the zigzags of economic and political decisions taken by Alyaksandr Lukashenka and inspire loyalty to Lukashenka without the linguistic and cultural components.²

Current Situation

The state policy of the last twenty-five years in the sphere of the Belarusian language, culture and national identity has brought about the following situation.

Language. Curtailing Belarusianisation and the constitutional reinforcement of bilingualism caused the domination of the Russian language in all spheres of life. The Belarusian language dominates only in unique cases (for example, this is the language of road signs) and has retained some influence in the sphere of culture, sciences (for instance, philology and history) and state media (on TV channel, three radio stations and one daily national newspaper).

As a result of this language policy, the percentage of ethnic Belarusians who name Belarusian as their mother tongue has decreased from 85.6% in 1999 to 60.8% in 2009.³

The share of ethnic Belarusians who speak Belarusian at home fell from 41% to 26%. In this sphere, even ethnic Poles are ahead of ethnic Belarusians.⁴

In the 1990s, the Belarusian language was a vital political issue in the struggle of the opposition with the new regime. The radical statement of the question by those who demanded using only the Belarusian language in all spheres of public life was not approved

² Kazakevich Andrei. *Kulturny fon belaruskay palityki // Palitychnaya historya nezalezhnay Belarusi. // Cultural Background of the Belarusian Politics // Political History of the Independent Belarus.* Vilnius, 2011. P. 881–889.

³ Source: National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus. Population Census 2009. Ethnic composition of the population of the Republic of Belarus (Volume 3).

⁴ Source: National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus. Population Census 2009. Ethnic composition of the population of the Republic of Belarus (Volume 3).

by those members of civil society which supported the official bilingualism. Gradually, alongwith the stabilisation of the regime and exclusion of the Belarusian language from all spheres of life, the Russophile part of civil society started realising the importance of the Belarusian language for the formation of the nation. Belarussophiles, on the other hand, became more tolerant of the Russian language due to its strong support in society; they decided to focus on the positive image of the Belarusian language. Thus, nowadays, one can observe rapprochement among diverse groups in their attitude to the Belarusian language. Both determined opponents (such as intellectualists who regard Belarus a part of Western Russia) and determined Belarussophiles being marginalised.

Education and culture. This is the sphere where the de-Belarusianisation trends in the state policy are the most vivid. If in 1994/95 academic year 75% Belarusian schoolchildren were receiving their education in the Belarusian language (58% in Minsk),⁵ in 2013/14 this share dropped to 15% nationally and 2% in Minsk. In the 2013/14 academic year, only 0.9% students of colleges and universities and only 1% students of technical colleges studied in Belarusian.⁶

According to publicly available statistical data, in 2001, 8.5% of books and 27% of registered media in Belarus were in Belarusian. One should note that the majority of Belarusian-language newspapers in Belarus are local state-owned bilingual newspapers. There is only one Belarusian-language national state newspaper: *Zviazda*.

As for national TV channels, the percentage of Belarusian-language TV programmes in 2011 was the following: 4.7% on Belarus 1, 4.8% on Belarus 2, 0% on NTV-Belarus, ONT, STV and RTR-Belarus. Two channels of Belarusian state radio, are the only state media that broadcast in the Belarusian language (100% of programmes on Piershy Natsyyanalny/First National and 93% of programmes on Stalitsa).⁷

The rebroadcasting/redistribution of Russia's cultural products, first of all television, films, music, show business and literature, significantly influences the identity of Belarusians. The Belarusian authorities apparently do not regard it as a serious problem and do not take this factor into account in developing their policies. Moreover, the underdevelopment of the local show business market does not allow local Belarusian actors to compete with Russian ones. Cultural products from all over the worlds come to Belarus via Russia, since the Belarusian state does not provide funding for dubbing of

⁵ *Khto kak khatsits, toy tak i havaryts. Yak ulady mianiali staulennie da movy aposhniya 25 hadou. // They speak the way they want to. How authorities changed their attitude to the language in the last 25 years.* URL: <http://news.tut.by/society/435461.html>.

⁶ *Russifikatsyya narastaye: pa belaruskmu navuchaetsta kozhny simoy shkolknik i tolki 1 z 670 studentau // Russification increases: every seventh school student and only 1 in 670 university students study in Belarusian language.* URL: <http://nn.by/?c=ar&i=122637>.

⁷ *National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus. Culture of the Republic of Belarus. Statistical data.* Minsk, 2012.

films or translation of literature into the Belarusian language.⁸ This cultural colonialism continues to influence the Belarusian cultural identity negatively.

One should not regard the culture in Belarus as a purely colonial culture. Celebrating local ethnic holidays, as well as the reconstruction of castles and other architectural monuments of the pre-Russian period, demonstrate certain efforts of the Belarusian authorities in developing the Belarusian culture. However, the cultural policy is not a priority and does not attract attention at the higher decision-making level. Therefore, the cultural niche is filled with foreign, mostly Russian product.

Historical narrative. The teaching of the History of Belarus continues to be ideology-based and censored. This is related to the function of history as a means of justification of the current policies of the authorities. One can observe a certain evolution here. If in the beginning of Alyaksandar Lukashenka's rule history was re-written in a way to support the ideological unity with Russia as part of its Russian (or Slavic) civilisation, in more recent years the official and alternative (revivalist) projects of historic memory have moved closer to each other. The topics of rapprochement include the significance of, ancient duchies that existed on Belarusian lands and the Great Duchy of Lithuania, for the statehood and nation formation in Belarus. For instance, textbooks on history refer to the Medieval Age as the cradle of Belarusian statehood; at the same time, elements of Medieval culture are promoted in the media (festivals of knights etc.) and memorials.⁹ Also at the same time, the historical significance of the Russian Empire that presumably liberated Belarusians from the serfdom imposed by Polish or Lithuanian masters is not accepted.

Still, the history of the independent Belarus is presented in a biased way and is ideologically overloaded. The role of Alyaksandar Lukashenka in the nation and state-creation processes are exaggerated while other important figures and organisations are ignored. The following, significant for Belarusian independence, events or phenomena are either ignored or scarcely described in history textbooks: discovery of the Kurapaty burial site; national and cultural revival; activities of the Belarusian Popular Front and other political parties; the work of the first independent parliament.¹⁰ The Lukashenka's regime gets only positive assessments without any attempts at critical analysis.

⁸ Yekadumau Andrei. *Unutranaya kulturnaya palityka. Russifikatsyya u kantekstsie savetskay mifalogii // Palitychnaya historyya nezalezhnay Belarusi. // Internal cultural policy. Russification in the context of Soviet mythology. // Political History of the Independent Belarus.* Bialystok–Vilnius, 2011. P. 335–348.

⁹ For instance, on 27 June 2014 city authorities of Vitsebsk unveiled the monument to the Great Duke Alhierd.

¹⁰ Fomin V.M., Panov S.V. and Ganushchenko N.N. *Historyya Belarusi, 1945–2005. // History of Belarus, 1945–2005. Textbook for the 10th grade.* Minsk: BSU, 2006.

The Evolution of Cultural NGOs in the Period of Independence

The establishment of Alyaksandar Lukashenka's rule resulted in the politicisation of NGOs, including cultural ones. The new government deliberately destroyed even the smallest achievements of the brief national revival period, including achievements that were possible only due to the efforts of those NGOs. Often members of the opposition were also members of cultural NGOs. Political parties performed some cultural functions, such as commemorating anniversaries of significant events, taking care of grave sites, celebrating national holidays, organisation of cultural events, distribution of culture-related products. This multi-specialty of the NGO sector, where only a few organisations were 'purely' cultural, makes the analysis of cultural activities of that period complicated.

Politicisation of NGOs made them look dangerous in the eyes of the authorities, who in turn decided to impose on them restrictions and repressions. The majority of organisations founded in the late 1980s – early 1990s had disappeared by the beginning of the 2000s. Only those that were purely cultural, and did not confront the authorities publicly, managed to retain their registration: The Society of the Belarusian Language, the Society of the Belarusian School, Youth Public Association "Historyka", the Student Ethnographic Society, the Voluntary Society for the Protection of Monuments of History and Culture (founded back in 1965), "Talaka" in Homel city and some others. All of them experienced some pressure but they were not liquidated. This is, for instance, how authorities treated the Society of the Belarusian Language (TBM): in 1991, the Council of Ministers obliged state institutions to assist TBM in creating new units, while in 1998 the organisation nearly lost its premises due to higher rental rates.

Starting from the mid-2000s, a new trend is observed: de-politicisation of cultural activities by separating them from the opposition's political activities. This trend manifested itself especially well during the liberalisation of the political regime in Belarus in 2007–2010. Despite the sad ending of that liberalisation (dispersal of peaceful protests on Kastychnitskaya square in Minsk and increased pressure on all civil society organisations) the cultural liberalisation continued.

Seemingly, from the late 2000s the authorities reviewed their policy related to organisations that did not aim at gaining political power and were not involved in related activities. However, that policy was not a strategic one; it was not a "top to bottom Belarusianisation". It can be described as "closing eyes" on some types of non-state cultural activities. This approach is combined with continued repressions against some cultural projects via pressure on their land-lords or other tools. For instance, the Art-Siadziba NGO had to change premises three times in 2011–2013 because the land-lords were not willing to prolong rental contracts.

Another peculiarity of recent years is the creation of a range of non-governmental centres for cultural activities, as a result of numerous problems that civic initiatives had with access to platforms for public speeches and actions in the big cities. The independent centres such as Y Gallery, Tsekh, Ard-Siadziba, DK La Mora and some others are among recently created platforms.

According to Maksim Zhbankou, this trend leads to the formation of a “third culture”, which is complementary to the “state” and “anti-state” culture and is more entertaining and mass audience-oriented.¹¹ By the middle of the 2010s, Belarusian culture that used to be the sphere for “fighters for Belarus” and intellectuals, has become more interesting for students and the “creative class” of society as well as other citizens. Belarusian language courses *Mova Ci Kava* and *Mova Nanova* attract hundreds of students;¹² the celebration of Belarusian national symbols “Vyshyvanka Day” was attended by thousands of Belarusians.¹³

Now, let’s analyse in more detail the main actors and trends among modern cultural NGOs.

Main Actors in the Cultural Sphere

To analyse the impact of civil society on the linguistic and cultural situation in Belarus, one should accept a broad definition of civil society. This means that it includes not only NGOs that have cultural activities as part of their Statute activities, but also any actors that may have or do have any influence on this situation: media, Internet communities, social media, societies that promote and protect architectural heritage; scientific and research centres; informal associations and ad-hoc civic campaigns.

Specialised Cultural NGOs and Initiatives

In this part, we analyse the two most significant types of initiatives with a specialisation in culture: TBM (which is registered as a public association, or an NGO) and “Budzma Belarusami” civic campaign. They represent two different types of initiatives and, therefore, perform their activities in different ways: TBM is rather traditional in its approach while Budzma is more modern.

¹¹ Zhbankov Maksim. *Prostye dvizheniya: belkult v poiskakh naroda / Simple movements: Belarusian culture is looking for Belarusian people* // Belorusskiy Ezhegodnik 2013. Minsk: Lohvinau, 2013.

¹² *Mova ci Kava vs Mova Nanova: na abiedzvyukh platsoukakh anshlag / Mova ci Kava vs Mova Nanova: both courses attract plenty of students* URL: <http://www.svaboda.org/content/article/25229337.html>.

¹³ *Yak prayshou Dzien Vyshyvanki: ahlyad SMI. / How did Vyshyvanka Day go? Media review* URL: <http://artsiadziba.by/news/2014/12/16/dzv2014-smi/>.

Founded in 1989, *TBM* is one of the oldest cultural NGOs in Belarus. The organisation declares that it has a record membership comparing to other Belarusian NGOs, around 7000¹⁴, and a record number of local offices: 450.¹⁵ (In 1991, the Council of Ministers obliged executive authorities in Belarus to assist *TBM* in creating local offices.) *TBM* also declares that it is financed exclusively through membership fees of its members and the donations of citizens.

The main activity of *TBM* is engagement with the state in the sphere of Belarussification of education, official paperwork, etc. This NGO files petitions to the state institutions, meets with state officials, collects signatures and organises lectures. In some spheres, it had one-off success stories. For example, it persuaded authorities to open a school class using the Belarusian language for teaching, in one of the Belarusian cities or agreed with the post office to issue products using the Belarusian language. However, under current conditions, the strategy of engagement with the state will be unlikely to bring a serious breakthrough. Belarusian bureaucracy is not favourable to local activism and does not support interaction with NGOs. As long as the political elite fail to have a positive attitude to Belarusianisation, attempts to impose it from the top will be unlikely to have any success. Therefore, the large number of formal members of the organisation and its offices, will not reflect on the successful implementation of its statutory goals.

Moreover, in its work with the media and society, *TBM* lacks modern methods and tools. As Aleh Trusau, the chairman of the organisation, said at the *TBM*'s 12th Congress in 2014, the newspaper *Nasha Slova* published by *TBM* has less than 1000 subscribers. Although, obviously, the printed media has become less attractive in the digital age, the content of the newspaper, most probably, is not too exciting for the population, either.

Budzma Belarusami civic campaign is an organisation of a new type, which, it seems, has been created because of the inability of other actors to organise cultural campaigns effectively. Founded in 2008, it has become the biggest campaign for the popularisation of the Belarusian culture in recent years. The campaign has a small number of managers and activists and focuses on creativity, new technologies, cooperation with various projects and actors and creation of a special type of cultural communication network. Unlike *TBM*, its main target group is not the state but Belarusian society as such, including the culture-related community.

Budzma's work has many formats: it produces cultural media content, organises events with the participation of musicians, sportsmen and cultural actors, creates and popularises symbols related to the Belarusian culture. It also organises "AD.NAK!" festival of advertising in the Belarusian language; the partners of the festival are several

¹⁴ Report at the 12th Congress of *TBM* on Three Years of Activities of the organisation by its Chairman Aleh Trusau // *Nasha Slova*. Nr 43. 2014.

¹⁵ Official webpage of *TBM* URL: http://tbn-mova.by/about_us.html.

big companies such as phone operator Velcom or car dealer Atlant-M as well as media (TUT.BY, Naviny.by, KP.by, NN.by, citydog.by). An important aspect of Budzma's work is its work in the regions: since 2008, it has organised more than 4000 events across the country.

Independent Media and Internet Communities

The second group of actors, i.e. the independent media, are an important factor in the development of national identity, since they provide audiences with news and long format reporting in the Belarusian language, as well as distribute alternative cultural products and spread alternative historic narrative. Due to political pressure, these media outlets have limited access to traditional channels of distribution inside Belarus and, therefore, must heavily rely on the Internet.

One has to admit that the majority of non-state media choose the Russian language as their main language and only rarely provide some content in Belarusian. However, there are several media providing Belarusian-language content. Some of them, such as BelaPAN, Nasha Niva, European Radio for Belarus (Euroradio) and Belsat TV, have both Russian and Belarusian versions of their websites. The printed version of Nasha Niva is published exclusively in Belarusian. Radio Free Europe and Radio Racja produce only Belarusian-language content.

The above mentioned media are not leaders amongst all the independent media in Belarus. According to the December 2014 statistics provided by Akavita.by ranking website,¹⁶ Charter97 was the leader among online media, while Naviny.by were in third place, Belorusskiy Partisan in fifth place, Nasha Niva in 8th place, Euroradio in 11th place and BelaPAN – in 15th place. The average daily audience of these media outlets was around 30,000 people while the audience of the top-3 Russian-language media was 236,000. Interestingly, the daily audience of the three leading state Russian-language media sites (state news agency BelTA, daily newspaper *Sovetskaya Belorussia* and STV TV channel) was around 50,000 people, i.e. five times less than the audience of the leading independent Russian-language media.

Even if we extend the list of Belarusian-language media to include those media that are not listed by Akavita ranking, we can still see that daily audiences of these media outlets are not more than 50,000 people or 0.5% of Belarusians. This shows that Belarusian language media have not become widely popular, and the size of their audience is close to the size of the active users of the Belarusian language (or so-called “conscious Belarusians”).

¹⁶ The ranking lists only those websites that are based in the .BY domain zone and therefore does not rank Radio Racja, Radio Free Europe or Belsat TV.

Unlike media, the social networks (or social media) can boast a much higher popularity. While there is no national social network in Belarus that could be competitive with major global or Russian social media, Russian Vkontakte holds the leadership among Belarusian audiences. In this Russian social network, the number of communities dedicated to the Belarusian culture or actively using the Belarusian language is steadily growing. The Lit. bel community, or as it calls itself, the Buffer Zone of Belarusian Language and Culture, is one of the most popular in the Belarusian Vkontakte segment: in December 2014 it had 147,000 subscribers. The Community “Maja kraina Bielaruś” (My Country Is Belarus) listed 56,000 subscribers while a more politicised community “My za niezaliežnuju Bielaruś” (We Are for Independent Belarus) listed 68,000 subscribers.¹⁷

The Belarusian segment of Wikipedia grows on pure enthusiasm and without any state support. Since 2007, more than 75,000 articles have been posted there.¹⁸ This is more than in the Latvian or the Irish (Gaelic) versions of Wikipedia. However, the problem is that the Belarusian version of Wikipedia is not popular among Belarusians. Only 1.7% Belarusians in Belarus look up articles in Belarusian Wikipedia while 79.2% read Russian Wikipedia and 15.2% read English Wiki.

Protection of Architectural Heritage

The protection of architectural heritage was one of the main spheres of activities for the first Belarusian cultural organisations in the 1980s. Architecture was one of those identity factors that allowed us to keep memories about the pre-Soviet past of Belarus. Although the independent Belarusian state is committed to the preservation and protection of architectural heritage, it can still quite often break the rules of that protection or provide far from ideal control of those norms.¹⁹ Therefore, the activities of NGOs in this sphere are still relevant.

The problem of reconstruction of the historical centres of the cities is one of the most relevant for Belarus after it gained independence. Local city authorities, unfortunately, are most often ruled by economic reasoning and do not pay enough attention to the preservation of the architectural heritage. They may violate the law on protection of heritage sites or follow it partially or incorrectly. There were cases when institutions that were obliged to control that sphere, such as prosecutor’s office, the Ministry of Architecture, or the Ministry of Culture did not prevent or stop that from happening, sometimes for political reasons.

¹⁷ As of December 2014.

¹⁸ *List of Wikipedias*, http://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/List_of_Wikipedias.

¹⁹ Гл. напрыклад: Вантух Іван. *Чаму ні ў кога «няма часу на рэстаўрацыю»? і іншыя артыкулы* // ARCHE. № 4. 2014.

Private business is interested, first of all, in income and profitability. It is more profitable for private companies to destroy, rather than restore the old architecture and build in its place new objects based on modern technologies. Authorities do not counteract this since they are interested in investments and are not worried about the preservation of heritage; probably, they are also involved in corruption schemes. The role of society in the process of reconstruction of cities and towns, as recent history has demonstrated, stays minimal. Public discussions are formalised and do not bring real impact; authorities prevent activists from engagement with the reconstruction processes and do not agree to take into account opinions of independent experts: architects, historians and archaeologists.

Vivid examples of the above mentioned practices are the reconstruction projects for Brest and Hrodna that took place in the second half of the 2000s. Civic activists attempted to prevent the wrongful reconstruction but their actions were too spontaneous, as there were no professional organisations in those cities that could deal with this sphere of, the protection of architectural heritage. As a rule, civic activists attempted to preserve the heritage by filing protests to the executive branches of authorities, by informing citizens and international structures as well as by working with the media. In Hrodna, activists were brave enough to organise non-allowed protest actions and to disturb the work of construction site builders. Therefore the situation there was better covered by the media. However, in both cases, the authorities continued with their plans, even if with seemingly greater attention to the problem of the preservation of the architecture.²⁰

The architectural heritage that is located outside the borders of the big cities received different treatment. Here we mean, first of all, castles, palaces and other pre-Soviet objects. The state ideology and the government as such do not consider the pre-Soviet period as an extremely important part of the national history (unlike in Lithuania, where the state builds the whole national identity on the heritage of the Great Duchy of Lithuania). Therefore, there is no complex approach to the protection of the old architecture. Some more significant objects, such as Mir and Niasviž castles, are included into the state programmes of national development and, therefore, are regularly restored while other architectural monuments remain neglected.

In such cases, as the practice shows, civic activity has a huge potential. An example is the charity foundation “Lubčanski zamak” (Lubča Castle), established in 2003 by a local enthusiast Ivan Piachynski. The Foundation cooperates with a wide circle of actors, including youth organisations, private companies, research institutes that joined forces in research and restoration of this castle’s complex. Overall, in cases where the authorities do not have significant interest in the situation (like architectural monuments outside big

²⁰ Сямён Шапіра: *Я бачу, як гродзенцы перажываюць за гістарычныя каштоўнасці* // Наша Ніва. 24.06.2010. URL: <http://nn.by/?c=ar&i=40198>.

cities that are not included in the national development programmes) there's a huge space for the development of the civic activeness potential.

The oldest and the best-known organisation in this sphere is the Belarusian Volunteer Society for Protection of the Historical and Cultural Monuments. According to the chairman of the Society, Anton Astapovich, his organisation cooperates first of all with the state institutions and officials, the decision-makers and those who can influence state policies. The Society became renowned for its activities both within the society and among state officials, especially on the issue of historic buildings in the centre of Minsk and restoration of buildings that are of cultural and historical heritage. Such an approach has its advantages but can effectively work only in the capital city, where there is a much bigger potential for civic activeness and public articulation of problems, than in the regions. Nearly all cultural organisations declare that the protection of the heritage of their regions (see: Cultural NGOs in the Regions) is one of their statutory activities, but the possibilities in this sphere are severely limited.

Independent Publishers

One more group of actors are the independent publishers that participate in the development of culture via publishing Belarusian-language fiction, scientific and research literature, including books on history, thus assisting the spread of alternative cultural narratives and models of historic memory. The situation in this sphere is complicated, since the majority of publishers are not interested in publishing literature in the Belarusian language: it is not popular among mass audiences (according to the NOVAK laboratory survey conducted in 2014, only five percent of adult Belarusians read books in Belarusian language²¹). Moreover, the government does not support the publishing of Belarusian language books by private publishing houses. Belarus is one of the very few countries in the world where the state licences, not only the publishing, but the selling of books, as well. Moreover, the tax on book publishing is much higher than in the neighbouring countries. Thus, Russian book publishing is in better condition, has bigger taxes and better quality and comes to the Belarusian market in huge quantities. If a publishing house touches upon civic and political issues, the state exerts a direct pressure onto it.

The most renowned publisher of Belarusian language literature is the publishing house and book trader Lohvinaŭ that has been on the market for the last 15 years. Lohvinaŭ is a popular cultural platform that not only publishes independent books but also serves as a place of cultural activities. It publishes different genres of literature, from fiction to science, but mostly popularises books of the great Belarusian writers. The publishing

²¹ *Belarusian language literature loses its reader*. URL: http://naviny.by/rubrics/culture/2014/11/06/ic_articles_117_187483/.

house used to publish books that were later labelled by the government as “extremist”. This led to repression: in 2013, the publishing house’s license was revoked under a contrived pretext; in 2015, the court decided to give the publisher a fine amounting to almost 1 billion Belarusian rubles (around 65 thousand dollars) for selling books without a license. The story behind that was that Lohvinaŭ applied for such a licence to the Ministry of Information several times and was refused. Due to the civic campaign, the money has been collected: this demonstrated a high level of civic solidarity with that publishing house.

In 2012, the secret service confiscated nearly 6,000 copies of books and magazines issued by the ARCHE magazine’s special publishing project. This is one more example of the pressure on independent publishers that engage in publishing alternative cultural and socio-political texts. Authorities treat such publishing houses differently from the above mentioned cultural NGOs since publishing “undesired” literature means for them political animosity. However, this does not apply to the whole sphere of independent publishing. Those publishing houses that do not issue anything about Belarusian politics are usually relieved from this pressure. Here is a brief description of these publishers.

International public association Knihasbor, founded in 1996, aims at publishing all the best works of Belarusian literature, as well as books written by people whose origin is Belarusian. By now, the association has published more than 50 volumes of literary classics and dozens of other books.

Publishing house Tekhnalohiya has existed for more than 20 years and has published several hundred books. It specialises in books about Belarus in foreign languages as well as on translations of academic and scientific literature on social science and humanities. It publishes books in Russian, as well, but its contribution to the production of the Belarusian-language scientific literature is significant.

Haliyafy publishing house had formed from the literary and art movement Boom Bam Lit back in 2007. It publishes prose, poetry, essays, critical reviews, experimental research of the underground subculture and texts by young Belarusian writers.

Nasha Niva newspaper and Radio Free Europe also have their publishing projects. The Radio Free Europe’s Library publishes books with journalistic essays, as well as books on recent history, literature, collection of scripts of radio programmes, etc. Kniharnia *Nasha Niva* series publishes books on political sciences, history, journalism, literature and philosophy, i.e. those spheres of knowledge where the alternative understanding of the path of the development of the Belarusian society is being developed.

In addition to the publishers mentioned above, some smaller publishing houses exist that deal with the Belarusian language: publishing house of Zmitser Kolas, Limaryus, the publishing house of Viktor Khursik and others.

Educational and Research Projects

As mentioned before, there are no higher educational establishments in Belarus that would fully incorporate the Belarusian language as their language of teaching. To fill that gap, and also to create an environment for free thinking and creativity, several educational projects were set up for students and graduates of Belarusian universities. The oldest institution of this type is the Bielaruski Kalehijum (Belarusian Collegium). Founded in 1997, it specialises in the humanities. Leading experts who are teaching at Kalehijum brought up a new generation of cultural and scientific elite in Belarus.

Another similar project is Liatučy Universitet (Flying University) that claims to be creating a full-fledged university for Belarus and about Belarus. According to its founders, Flying University should become “the place for the formation and strengthening of the Belarusian nation and Belarus, a place where people *think Belarus*”.

Both projects organise study courses, public discussions, conferences and public lectures. Both are not trying to reach the masses: they are raising up a new elite for social sciences in humanities who would speak (mostly) Belarusian.

As a rule, non-state research institutions do not deal with linguistic and cultural issues. However, there are several exceptions such as the Palitychnaya Sfera (Political Sphere) Institute of Political Studies that publishes a journal under the same title (*Palitychnaya Sfera*) with mostly Belarusian-language texts about politics. The Institute’s publishing projects include translations of works of many well-known Western policy researchers as well as the history of political sciences in the region. Since 2011, the Institute has been organising the International Congress of Belarusian Studies in Kaunas, Lithuania. The Congress gathers hundreds of Belarusian scientists specialising in different spheres of social and humanitarian sciences who can discuss their research issues free of censorship. One of the goals of the Congress is to form an autonomous national academic community that is focused on the issue of Belarus as an independent state. The Congress is a unique discussion platform for scientists whose research is usually underfunded: historians, philologists, culture analysts and linguists.

The European Humanities University (EHU) takes a special place in educational and research projects. Before its licence in Belarus was reworked, EHU was a liberal but not a national-orientated university. After the university had moved to Vilnius, there were hopes for its transformation into a “source of manpower” for the national elite. In its first years in Lithuania, the EHU indeed hired many Belarusian scientists who were able to contribute to strengthening of the national-orientated elites. However, the administration of the university never shared the vision of a nation-orientated university and, therefore, the role of the EHU in the formation of the cultural identity of Belarusians has never become significant.

Informal Associations and Civic Campaigns

In addition to organisations that specialise in culture or have regular culture-related activities, there are other initiatives where the Belarusian national identity manifests itself quite unexpectedly. For instance, the movement of football fans actively use the Belarusian language, and Belarusian historic figures in their branded production and events. In this case being Belarusian means pride and being different from “others”. Such “herdlike” nationalism is common to many football fans around the world, but it is still quite a recent phenomenon for Belarus. This trend has strengthened after Russia’s aggression against Ukraine: many Belarusian football fans support Ukraine’s territorial integrity, and, therefore, their hatred towards the Russian government has transformed into hatred towards Russian culture.

Sometimes, the Belarusian spirit manifests spontaneously as a reaction to anti-Belarusian measures taken by authorities. For instance, when Minsk city authorities decided to introduce Russian-language public transportation tickets in 2012, citizens wrote numerous appeals and protests demanding a return to the use of the Belarusian language. Their demands were met. This case shows that when citizens are ready to stand for markers that are important for their identity the government is ready to listen to their opinion. However, such campaigns happen only as a reaction to the open Russification. Citizens do not collectively promote Belarusian national values as something unique and positive.

Cultural NGOs in the Belarusian Regions

Most of Belarusian cultural NGOs and other actors work in Minsk, which is the capital and biggest city in Belarus. This trend reflects the same trend in the political and economic life in Belarus. Regions are treated as periphery: they either passively accept some form of the activities that started in the capital or do not participate in the process, i.e. continue being cultural “black holes”.

Indeed, the level of activity of civil society in the region is very small. We can observe some isles of activities in the bigger regional centres but in smaller towns and villages cultural NGOs and other civic initiatives are almost nonexistent. Only the Society of the Belarusian Language (TBM) and the Society of Belarusian School have offices in numerous smaller towns in Belarus.

Still, there are some regional organisations that declare that culture is one of their statutory priorities. Homel-based Talaka²² is one of the oldest Belarusian NGOs; it was founded in the late Soviet period in 1986. Talaka protects historic, cultural and

²² <http://nashkraj.info/>.

ethnographic heritage of the Homel region, organising cultural events that include concerts of Belarusian musicians. Brest-based Dzedzich²³ is not a purely cultural organisation but it deals with culture when it organises meetings with cultural activists, educational events that popularise the Belarusian language and culture and when it advocates for the preservation of the historic and cultural heritage. An NGO from Hrodna, Treci Sektor (The Third Sector)²⁴, like Dzedzich, has a separate culture-related statutory activity called “Culture and Heritage”. This activity aims at the preservation of historic and cultural heritage of the Hrodna region and the Belarusian-Polish-Lithuanian border region. Treci Sektor conducts publishing and international cultural projects as well as projects aimed at popularisation and preservation of the historic and cultural heritage in the region. One more Hrodna-based organisation is Haradzienskaja Biblijateka (Hrodna Library) the publishing initiative that publishes books by independent historians, writers, journalists and essayists and aims at forming a local self-consciousness that would be democracy-oriented and consider Hrodna part of the European civilisation.

The most active cultural initiative in Mahilou is the local office of TBM that organises trips and tours, meetings with cultural actors and scientists and supervises the Belarusian language study circle. In Viciebsk, the informal association “Vitebsk4me”²⁵ is active in the sphere of Belarusian culture. Even though this initiative does not call itself a “Belarusianisation” project, it has a lot of thematic events that popularise the history of Viciebsk and region, gather representatives of arts and culture, etc.

All cities mentioned above have several hundred thousand inhabitants and yet only one or two small communities dealing with culture. This is a very small ratio comparing to the capital with its dozens of projects and initiatives. However, on the level of smaller district centres the situation is even worse: usually, the alternative cultural life there is represented by a few individuals and very rarely – by associations. Local authorities maintain the monopoly on cultural activities while non-state events happen only if someone from Minsk or a regional centre brings guests to a local town. As we already wrote, the Budzma Belarusami campaign has conducted numerous events in the regions. Mova Nanova language courses and Flying Universities also organise their meetings in the regions.

²³ <http://dzedzich.org/wp/about/bel/>.

²⁴ <http://3sektar.by/dzeynasts>.

²⁵ <http://vitebsk4.me/>.

Russian Aggression in Ukraine as a Challenge to Civil Society in Belarus

Ukrainian events of 2014 have put the issue of the national and cultural identity in Eastern Europe high on the agenda. Therefore, it is important to analyse some effects and challenges of those events for Belarusian civil society.

Both the government and civil society in Belarus perceive the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, where the ethnicity and the language were used as a pretext for the military invasion, as a threat. Several top officials, including president Alyaksandar Lukashenka, publicly admitted the importance of the Belarusian language for the existence of the Belarusian state – something that had never happened before. However, there are now systematic actions that demonstrate that the state would want to take measures that would support the Belarusian language. It seems that the authorities are confused: they finally realised the danger of suffocating Belarusian culture, i.e. of the policy that they have led all this time. Meanwhile, Russian-speaking Belarusians who do not have a firm national basis, become easy victims of the Russian media propaganda and can be used by Russia to interfere in the internal affairs of Belarus.²⁶

Belarusian civil society treats Russia's behaviour as a threat. It has not yet come up with a joint counteraction strategy; however, such attempts are being made. On 18 September 2014, the round table "How can civil society defend the civilizational and cultural identity of Belarus: from 'Let's Do Better' to 'Protect Yours'" took place in Minsk.²⁷ Participants came to the joint conclusion that to neutralise the Russian threat more effort should be placed on developing the Belarusian national identity, culture and language. The society should exert pressure on the government via legal mechanisms: the Constitution, legislature, collection of signatures, and so on.

The collective appeal signed by participants states that:

Nowadays, Belarus and the Belarusian society are facing the most dangerous challenge of all since independence began. The geopolitical situation that is caused by the revival of the aggressive imperial ambitions of its Eastern neighbour, threatens the future of Belarus as an independent state and questions the civilizational choice and the very existence of the Belarusian people.

We will see in the next couple of years if Belarusian civil society can achieve progress in this sphere.

²⁶ See results of the September 2014 survey by IISEPS "Ukrainian compass for the geopolitical poles of Belarus", URL: <http://www.iiseps.org/analitica/808>.

²⁷ See more here: <http://belngo.info/2014.yak-baranits-svayo.html>.

Conclusions

Long years of totalitarian rule that were mostly unfavourable for nation-building, followed by the pro-Russian political course of Alyaksandar Lukashenka and his confrontation with the opposition on the issues of language and culture, have brought about this situation, in which only the minority of Belarusians have a mature national identity. Many cultural NGOs were treated by the authorities as oppositional organisations and, therefore, their activities were limited or stopped. However, the formation of the Belarusian state, as well as the geopolitical clashes in the post-Soviet region forced the Belarusian ruling elite to review their cultural policies and extend the boundaries of allowed activities for cultural NGOs.

Since late 2000s, the government has been reviewing its policy towards organisations that do not aim at coming to power and do not engage in political activities. However, this new policy is not a “top to bottom Belarusianisation”. It can be described rather as a “closing of eyes” on some non-official cultural activities. By leaving aside the political struggle and re-orienting themselves to the mass audience and entertainment, NGOs have achieved some success in the popularisation of Belarusian culture in the society. However, these are very recent trends and one should not make premature conclusions regarding their success.

At the same time, the authorities continue applying a differentiated approach to the cultural projects conducted by civil society. More “safe” projects that visibly deny any attempts to change the political regime and do not criticise internal or external policies of the authorities, including their attitude to democracy and human rights, or state ideology, can work quite freely. At the same time, the actors that pay attention to these problems get the attention of the authorities and institutions that handle political control and repression. Different types of actors that influence Belarusian culture have, specific to them, problems and achievements.

As the case studies of the two biggest specialised cultural NGOs show, attempts of Belarusianisation via engagement with the state hardly ever bring significant outcomes. Belarusian officials do not support local initiatives and do not encourage cooperation between state institutions and civil society organisations. Influencing the ruling elite will bring success only if they engage in Belarusianisation on a new level. The Budzma Belarusami campaign demonstrates that success under current conditions can be achieved if organisations focus on Belarusian society and build the capacity of its cultural community via applying the newest management approaches, new technologies and cooperating with many projects and personalities. In this way, the network of cultural communication is created.

Independent Belarusian-language media have not become hugely popular in Belarus and have a rather small reach compared to the reach of their Russian-language

counterparts. Their audience usually consists of people who already support national values. The growth in membership of social media communities dedicated to Belarusian language and culture demonstrated the increased interest of young people to national values and symbols. However, it is yet to be seen how this trend will influence the identity-building of the new generation.

In the sphere of the protection of architectural heritage, the success of civil society depends on the level of engagement of authorities on the issue of preservation of a specific monument or object. Civil society has little to no chances to influence the reconstruction of historical centres of towns and cities since it cannot compete with businesses and lobbyists who block alternative plans of reconstruction. On the other hand, in cases where authorities do not have a huge vested interest (such as architectural objects outside big cities that are not included in the national development programmes), the potential for civic activeness is high and it can bring success.

The situation in publishing is complicated since the majority of publishers are not interested in the Belarusian language literature as it is unpopular with mass audiences. Moreover, the tax policies applied by the state place Belarusian publishers at an unfair and unequal economic disadvantage compared to Russian publishers. When publishing houses publish texts about politics, the state exerts pressure on them. This can take various forms. At the same time, this pressure is not exerted on the whole spectrum of independent publishers. Those who avoid issues related to politics can work relatively freely. Both types of publishers are not fully commercial enterprises: they operate rather as cultural organisations that are supported by enthusiasts.

Informal educational projects, as well as research organisations, attempt to compensate for the lack of free thought in the higher educational establishments in Belarus by organising courses in social sciences and humanities. However, despite moderate success in that sphere, there is no broad interest among young people for informal education or even to these sciences as a whole (the latter can be described as a global trend). Attempts to create a national university on the basis of the European Humanities University in Lithuania failed, and that can be considered as a defeat for the nation-oriented civil society in Belarus.

Most of the activities of Belarusian cultural NGOs and other cultural actors, happens in Minsk. Regional cultural centres with their identity formed only on the level of the big regional centres. In this situation, smaller regional towns and villages are treated as a periphery that either receives some cultural events coming from Minsk or ignores cultural activities, being a cultural “black hole”. Regional centres with several hundred thousand inhabitants, as a rule, have only one small community each that is active in the sphere of culture. On a district level, the alternative cultural life there is represented by some individuals and very rarely – by associations. The continued state policy that limits NGO activities has led to the shrinkage of regional activities; restoring these activities will be an uneasy task for Belarusian civil society.

How Cultural NGOs Struggle for the Right to Be Belarusian

Overall, the conditions for cultural actors in Belarus are difficult and their achievements are rather modest. Taking into account the state policy towards the civil society and cultural policy, in general, it would be unattainable to achieve much more. Despite these policies, many important projects took place in Belarus that assisted the formation of the national culture. Recent trends demonstrate that the situation can gradually change for the better. One can observe the growth of activity in cultural NGOs and the growth of popularity of national values in society; this can also be seen in the new rhetoric of the government.

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