

Annabelle Chapman: Towards a ‘Parallel Polis’? Creating Freedom in Belarus

This essay was inspired by an exhibition held in Warsaw in summer 2011, suitably entitled “Opening the Door? Belarusian Art Today”¹. More than by the rather lukewarm art itself, I was struck by what the exhibition said about Belarusian society today. Firstly, all the exhibits were “political”, either overtly challenging Belarus’s authoritarianism, or rebelling more subtly against the greyness of the regime. Secondly, most of the featured artists live permanently outside Belarus. They have been unable to show their work in their home country. Finally, the exhibition was curated by a Lithuanian, and the exhibition was hosted first in Vilnius and then Warsaw. These themes are more widely explored in this essay.

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Today, Europe lives free from dictatorship. Until one reaches the Polish-Belarusian border, that is. Since he was elected as president of Belarus in 1994, Alyeksandr Lukashenka has consolidated his grip over the country. Before then, he was the manager of a Soviet-era collective farm; a political outsider. Under him, Belarus has come to be known as “the last dictatorship in the heart of Europe”, a phrase coined by U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in 2005. As descriptions go, there is definitely some truth in this. Lukashenka has established a repressive regime, supported by a system of state-led propaganda. Things got worse after the forged presidential election of 19 December 2010, which led to a crackdown against the opposition and, in a brutally arbitrary way, against the general population².

Belarus is something of a blind spot in the Western media. What coverage there is tends to downplay or altogether miss independent social activity in Belarus. To some extent, this is a general tendency in mainstream Western writing and journalism about the former Soviet Union. Too often, it presents the population of countries like Russia, Ukraine or Belarus as a homogenous, neo-Soviet lump. This is in part a practical problem. It is due to limited reporting and contact, not to mention serious formal barriers relating to visas and the harassment of journalists by the Belarusian authorities. But it is also part of a particular worldview, left over from the days of Soviet totalitarianism, when the Cold War divided

¹ Exhibition hosted by Zachęta Gallery, Warsaw. For more information (in English), see: <http://www.zacheta.art.pl/en/article/view/318/otwierajac-drzwi-sztuka-bialoruska-dzisiaj>

² On the crackdown, and the Belarusian population’s imaginative response, see: http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/30/world/europe/30belarus.html?_r=0

Europe in two. It was harder for foreign correspondents to see into the USSR. And anyway, it was the enemy.

This is a shame. The focus on Lukashenka and the regime itself means that any independent initiatives are swept aside, perpetuating a grey, stereotypical image of Belarusian society. Of course, the opposite tendency is also to be avoided: glorifying a united, pro-Western, anti-Lukashenka opposition. The actual opposition, insofar as it exists, may differ from this Western ideal. As such, the reports provided by certain NGOs working on Belarus, or by the oppositional candidates themselves, should be read with a pinch of salt. The reality is more nuanced³. Belarusian society is not a passive lump, mollified by Lukashenka's rhetoric and economic subsidies. But nor is it coherent and perfectly organised, at least not in the conventional sense.

This essay contributes to finding a middle way, between these two black-and-white snapshots of Belarus today. It is not an exhaustive chronicle of independent society in twenty-first century Belarus. That is a task for some NGO or other⁴ and is beyond the scope of this essay. Besides, chronicling can only tell us so much. Instead, I sketch out directions in which independent Belarusian society has developed under Lukashenka's regime. By adapting, it has found space for itself – albeit not in traditional forms. For this picture, I draw on the ideas of Václav Benda, a Czech intellectual and communist-era dissident. He was writing under another oppressive regime, communist Czechoslovakia, forty years earlier. His work looks at development of independent forms of social organisation, within the framework of what he termed the “Parallel Polis”.

Václav Benda and his “Parallel Polis”

Václav Benda (1946-1999) was one of the Czechoslovak intellectuals, including Václav Havel, Zdeněk Mlynář, and Jan Patočka, who signed the dissident Charter 77 in 1977. Benda himself was an academic mathematician and Catholic, who saw resistance to Communism as a moral stance. His personal contribution to the ongoing debate was his work *Parallel Polis*, published that same year in illegal, *samizdat* form⁵. Reading like a programmatic pamphlet or political tract, it presents his vision for the emergence of independent social channels in his native Czechoslovakia, living under the Communist

³ See, inter alia, Haiduk, 2009; Matskevich et al. 2008

⁴ See the report edited by Laufer, 2011. With chapters and commentary by a range of Belarusian artists, intellectuals and activists, it is one of the most interesting documents on independent society in Belarus.

⁵ For the full text in English, see Benda, 1991

regime. His intention was that, with these structures in place and consolidated, they would “supplement” the official ones and, where possible, “humanise them”. They would put pressure on the official structures, forcing them to collapse or to regenerate themselves. All in all, it was the well-known dilemma of reform or revolution.

In Communist Czechoslovakia, Benda could already see the living foundations of this parallel polis. On the one hand, underground literature and culture. On the other, the underground economy, involving corruption and the extensive black market. He hoped to extend the independent cultural sphere to education, information networks, and the economy (which would provide an alternative to the regime’s economic leverage over the population). It would also create a parallel political arena; a forum for independent discussion. Finally, it would fashion an (parallel) foreign policy, including links and support from abroad – including within the Eastern Bloc itself.

With Communism swept off the map of Europe, Benda’s pamphlet is remembered at best as a historical document, a reminder of those taxing yet remarkable years leading up to the events of 1989. And yet, his ideas remain relevant to this day. There are still countries, like Belarus, where official state structures control many aspects of life; not just restricted to the economy, but reaching out into the creative and cultural sphere. Of course, there are important differences between Communist Czechoslovakia in the 1970s, and today’s Belarus – most obviously, Czechoslovakia’s (variant of) Communist ideology. Rather, I borrow from Benda’s ideas, applying them to this new context, bearing in mind that the form of control and the arenas for the development of this “parallel polis” are different.

In Search of the Belarusian Parallel Polis

Many of the practical and organisational aspects of Benda’s tract are now outdated. But his ideas remain fresh. In what follows, I show how the “Parallel Polis” can be transposed to today’s Belarus – first in a general sense, and then in two concrete domains, specific to the time and place of 21st Century Belarus.

There is a certain duality in today’s Belarus. It is the duality between government and non-government forces (not all of which are overt opposition). It is also, as Belarusian scholar Nelly Bekus argues, the coexistence of two discourses – both of which claim to be the

only genuinely Belarusian voice⁶. Though national identity in Belarus is considered weak (compared to that in parts of Ukraine, for example), the situation is quite complex. Lukashenka's rhetoric cannot be reduced to merely "Russian"; in fact, he has appealed to a particular, official, type of Belarusian national identity. From the 2004 parliamentary elections onwards, the authorities led an official campaign based around the slogan "For Belarus", accompanied by various patriotic images. Meanwhile, separate from that, there exists a "peculiar parallel world" composed of non-state actors: oppositional parties, trade unions, independent media, and NGOs. These, in turn, have their own, alternative conception of what it means to be Belarusian. This split is visible in everyday, organised life. For example, the independent Belarusian Association of Journalists exists alongside the official organisation. Surprisingly, the former has remained legal – to a great extent due the gaze of journalists abroad, says its head, Zhanna Litvina. The two exist in parallel, and those journalists who write for the official media suffer from a "split consciousness", she adds⁷.

This duality has filtered down into Belarusian popular culture. Popular rock band N.R.M. has a song *Minsk i Mensk* (2006), featuring the two names of Belarus's capital city. They refer respectively to the city in its official form, and in its well-loved, popular core. "We live simultaneously in two cities", they sing⁸. "In our capital we live as if in two families [...] Mensk and Minsk are like two halves of the capital's soul". Artur Klinau, a Belarusian writer and architect, uses a similar metaphor of duality in his book *Minsk: City of the Sun*⁹. This poetic journey through Minsk of the 1960s, 70s and 80s juxtaposes the neo-classical, official city landscape with more intimate landscapes from the Minsk of the author's childhood.

Yet hope is placed in this independent sphere. According to Valiantsin Akudovich, a philosopher and literary critic, in Belarus since 1991, "*independent* culture has rehabilitated the *whole* Belarusian culture". When the regime changes, it will become the basis for "a new national culture"; until then, it needs to be supported.¹⁰ This is precisely Benda's thought.

Independent Culture and Society in Belarus

⁶ Bekus 2010

⁷ Talk by Zhanna Litvina opening 2012-2013 season at Press Club Belarus, held at the Press Club Poland headquarters in Warsaw, Poland. 26 September 2012.

⁸ Listen to the song online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xKxIHqaS-3Q>

⁹ Klinau, 2008

¹⁰ Quoted in Niadbay, 2011, p.30

We use the language of non-free societies”, comments Mikalai Khalezin, director of the Belarus Free Theatre¹¹. Hence the concept of independent society in Belarus needs to be put in context. As Khalezin points out “dependent” and “independent” (when applied to, say, the theatre) have different meanings in Belarus and in democratic countries like Sweden. Remaining independent in Belarus carries with it all the more implications.

Despite almost two decades of Lukashenka, a smattering of independent organisations persists. They come and go. Some spring up, glitter for a bit, and then either fade out or get stamped out by the authorities, whereas others have shown more endurance (or more careful manoeuvring, as well as good contacts at home and abroad). A prominent example is the Belarus Free Theatre, which has received acclaim outside Belarus and is now working in exile. Apart from its energetic and occasionally provocative style, it has broached serious themes relating to contemporary Belarus. Its recent play *Minsk 2011*, which was shown across the United Kingdom, dealt with questions of freedom of expression and minority rights¹².

A handful of independent print media continue to battle on against the regime, or just to print timely articles that appeal to the forward-looking part of the population. These include the newspaper *Nasha Niva* edited by Siarhei Dubavets, *Novy Chas*, *34Mag*, and *pARTizan* magazine. The “Y” Gallery in Minsk (which used to be known as Padzemka – underground) is a meeting place for artists and freethinkers of various colours¹³. In the absence of open cultural structures, artists have had to take on a lot of the organisational responsibility themselves. They have to be “a DIY-gallery: an exhibition space, curator, manager, loader and seller at the same time”, in the words of writer Artur Klinau¹⁴

Yet the authorities have been loath to tolerate this independent sphere of action. During his second presidential term, Lukashenka further consolidated his hold over society. This included the persecution of NGOs, especially between 2003 and 2005, which led to their decrease in number. He replaced them with so-called GONGOs – Government-Organized Nongovernmental Organizations, if that makes any sense¹⁵. In other words, they are also called “state civic organisations”. It is an irony worthy of Benda’s days. For this reason, the traditional sphere for independent society in Belarus has been reduced. In response, it has sought refuge in two alternative structures: the Internet, and abroad.

¹¹ Quoted in Niabay, 2011, p.32

¹² See review by Chapman, 2011

¹³ See Economist 2011b

¹⁴ See 2011, p.47

¹⁵ Wilson 2011, p.202

The Internet

In today's Belarus, the Internet provides an unbridled arena for independent society. It is an example of how technology can be harnessed by non-governmental forces. Benda placed hope in new technologies too. He wanted to replace dependence on the typewriter with new technology like the photocopier, which would allow oppositional materials (pamphlets, *samizdat*¹⁶ books) to be published in greater number.

Belarus continues to use a sort of *samizdat*, this time with the help of the Internet. Online, entire books are being made available in PDF format¹⁷. Yet, since not everyone has Internet access, people are combining this resource with traditional distribution methods, to ensure that the publications reach an even wider audience. They download the materials, print and bind them at home, then share them with friends and family. It is "samizdat for the Internet age", says Alexander Lukashuk, the director of Radio Svaboda's (Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe's branch in Belarus)¹⁸.

Unlike in China, the Internet has fared pretty well in Belarus. Every now and then, the authorities wake up, remember the Internet's organisational potential, and try and do something about it. For instance, just before this year's parliamentary elections, in September 2012¹⁹. At the same time, the actual reach of the Internet is limited. Only a small fraction of the Belarusian population get their news online. Most of the population, in particular the elderly and those living in rural areas continues to rely on traditional media such as television or radio. These, in Belarus, are largely controlled by the regime (compare to the situation in neighbouring Ukraine, where the ruling Party of Regions tightened its grip over television in autumn 2012. Nevertheless, Ukrainian society is much freer than that in Belarus). The result is a deepening split between those who rely on state-controlled media for information, and those who go online in search of independent coverage.

Belarusian society abroad

¹⁶ Literally, self-published – from the Russian *sam* and *izdat*. In the USSR and Communist bloc, the term referred to banned publications printed and distributed by the authors themselves, rather than (state-run) publishing houses.

¹⁷ Including the "Liberty Library" created by Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe's branch in Belarus

¹⁸ For the story, see http://www.rferl.org/content/in_belarus_a_new_kind_of_samizdat/24391696.html

¹⁹ See <http://belarusdigest.com/story/internet-activism-under-siege-belarus-11112>

The second sphere for independent Belarusian society is abroad. Above all, this refers to neighbouring democracies Poland and Lithuania, which have both been members of the European Union since 2004. It is a question of proximity, but also of a favourable environment – though these two countries, and the EU as a whole, have faced dilemmas on how to behave towards Lukashenka’s Belarus²⁰.

As the regime clamped down on independent society, many organisations (not to mention individuals) moved abroad. This includes important intellectual and cultural bodies. For example, when the Belarusian Humanities University in Minsk was shut down by the authorities it went into exile. Now it has its base in Vilnius. Most of its students continue to live in Belarus; it is enough that they come to Minsk for to sit exams²¹. Similarly, the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS)²², a leading think tank on Belarus, also has its headquarters in the Lithuanian capital. The same goes for NGOs. Today, Warsaw is home to several major NGOs focused on Belarus, including Solidarity with Belarus and, more recently, human rights organisation Charter 97. (Note the parallel to the Czechoslovakian Charter 77 signed by Benda and his peers). The organisation’s office in Minsk was attacked on the night of the 2010 presidential election and its director Natalia Radzina arrested²³. Eventually, she left the country and claimed asylum in Lithuania. Now the organisation has two offices: one in Vilnius, and one in Warsaw²⁴.

There, away from home, Belarusian activists and artists have established themselves in closely-connected societies. These are not ordinary immigrants or diasporas; at least part of the Belarusian community is political. There, in Vilnius, Warsaw or beyond, they form small but audible parallel communities, engaged in the situation at home from afar.

New directions

²⁰ See, for example, Marin 2011

²¹ Economist 2011a

²² Website: <http://www.belinstitute.eu/>

²³ Read her own account at <http://www.indexoncensorship.org/2011/08/fleeing-belarus/>

²⁴ Source: <http://euroradio.fm/en/report/charter-97-opens-office-warsaw-117896>

When Benda was writing, no one knew when Communism would fall – or even whether it would fall. When the indestructible Leonid Brezhnev died, he was replaced with Yuri Andropov, then Konstantin Chernenko, then Mikhail Gorbachev. Meanwhile, in Belarus, Lukashenka – though still at the sprightly age of fifty-eight – won't live forever, either. There is no evident succession strategy, though his eight year-old son Kolya has purposely been shown accompanying his father on a number of official occasions. In the back of their minds, at least, Belarusians must be able to conceive of a future without Lukashenka.

At the same time, Lukashenka is only the tip of the iceberg. Even without him as president, Belarus's future as a democratic, European country is not assured. This is where the value of parallel societal structures, developed gradually even under the authoritarian regime, becomes acutely relevant. When the change in leader or regime finally comes, there will be structures in place, and an experienced civil society, to assure a peaceful transfer of power and, hopefully, the beginning of a democratic age.

This essay has looked at some of the challenges that artists, intellectuals, and curious “ordinary” Belarusians face under President Lukashenka. Importantly, it has looked at the other side too: how they have adapted. I have sketched some specific features of the so-called “Parallel Polis” in Belarus, but they are neither exhaustive nor static. As Benda recognised: “A citizens' initiative [...] will inevitably overflow into related initiatives and, because it is a free association, it has no means authoritatively to establish its own limits”²⁵. Through loopholes and corners, they have created a space for free organisation and expression in Belarus. In time, this may serve as the foundation for a Lukashenka-free and, at best, democratic future.

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²⁵ Benda, 1991, p.41

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