

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya (<https://tsikhanouskaya.org/be/>)

"Belarusian Culture in Exile and Prospects of Free Belarus". Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya addressing the Emigrating Culture event in Krakow, 2023

" Mister Arkady Rzegocki,

Your Excellency Ambassador Artur Michalski,

Deputy Director Joanna Wajda,

Director Dominika Kasprowicz,

Chairman Jan Pieklo,

Dear Belarusians,

Dear Polish and Ukrainian friends!

Let me begin by citing our common literary classic. Adam Mickiewicz wrote those lines when in exile. In Poland, Lithuania and Belarus, they are known to almost everyone:

O Lithuania, my country, thou

Art like good health; I never knew till now

How precious, till I lost thee. (*Translated by Kenneth R. Mackenzie*)

In 1829, Mickiewicz lost his Motherland, but the world literature got *Pan Tadeusz* as a result.

I am sure that all Belarusians are acquainted with the bereavement described by the poet, whether they emigrated long ago or had to flee the country after 2020. However, I believe that for us, Belarusians, nothing is over. Like Mickiewicz, while in exile, we have learned to value Belarus even more. And I have no doubt that Belarus will be free and democratic again and we are sure to be back there.

Historically, a significant part of Belarusian culture has been created outside the country. Some say that it is Francysk Skaryna himself who heads the list of prominent figures of art among Belarusian emigrants.

Apropos, the marvellous Villa Decius housing today's event is his contemporary and a witness to the Renaissance Era. Thirty years before the Villa was built, Skaryna had studied here, in Krakow, then in Padua, Italy, after which, in 1517 in Prague, he published the first printed cyrillic book, his translation of the Bible into Old Belarusian.

Although he never came back to his native Polatsk, he continued his enlightenment work in Vilna. And he travelled without restraint within our common civilization space – around the Central and Eastern Europe, throughout the lands of the Czech Kingdom, the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

Due to the tolerance of the then existing Polish and Lithuanian states, Skaryna was free to popularize our language and culture. The invention of the book printing press was only considered heretical in the East, in Moscow. That "European plague" contradicted the "staples" of the "Russian world" of those days.

What contradicts these staples today is the freedom of speech, so fundamental and basic for democratic countries. It becomes especially clear in the times of the wrongful war against Ukraine that lies and heartlessness dominate the Russian society, including the substantial part of the Russian people of art.

It goes without saying that no creative freedom is possible without freedom of speech.

For the moment, the Belarusian regime is making the country a Russian colony, whether in terms of politics, economics, provision of information or culture. In fact, any reference to the national identity is treated as extremism. A person is considered suspicious just for speaking Belarusian in the street, which may result in their ending up behind bars.

The Union of Belarusian Writers, the Belarusian Language Society, the Art Syadziba Culture Platform, and a range of publishing houses and other organizations have been liquidated. Our distinguished cultural and academic figures are being held in Lukashenko's prisons. Among them are the artist Ales Pushkin, the literary scholar Alyaksandr Fyaduta, the political analyst Valeryia Kastyugova, the philosopher Uladzimir Matskevich, the linguist Natallya Dulina, the poet Mikita Naydzionau, the musicians of the *Tor Band* group. The Belarusian PEN centre has recently reported at least 132 people of art and at least 31 literary figures to be behind bars.

The Belarusian literary critic who is arguably best-known today in the world is Ales Byalyatski, a political prisoner and a Nobel Prize winner, a human rights defender and a literature scholar who was a long-time director of the Maksim Bahdanovich Literary Museum. In one of his books *Asvechanyia Belaruschynai (Enlightened by Belarusianness)*, Ales Byalyatski says:

"Belarusian texts created in prisons, camps, in exile or afterwards, or based on that experience have a long and rich history. Here, I also mean forced emigration which for many authors is not less tragic than imprisonment.

The only poem by Kastus Kalinouski which reached us was written within the walls of the Vilna monastic prison. (...) The mighty foundation on which our literature is based, the *Novaya Zyamlya (The New Land)* poem by Yakub Kolas, was conceived and started in the Pischalauski Castle, which today houses the detention facility in Valadarskaga Street in Minsk. It was followed by the memoirs about the Solovki Prison Camp *U Kiptsurokh GPU (In the Claws of GPU)* by Frantsishak Alyakhnovich, sensational for those times, and the brilliant laconic prose by Maksim Garetski created in the hopeless exile, far away from Belarus. (...) In GULAG, Petr Bitel, an orthodox priest and a teacher who was imprisoned in the Stalin's times after the war, translated *Pan Tadeusz* by Adam Mickiewicz writing his work on wrapping paper..."

I should add that Ales Byalyatski himself created this brief review of the Belarusian prison literature in 2012, while serving his first sentence at the Babruisk prison...

Today, in 2023, the history, unfortunately, repeats itself. Like in the Stalin's times, the prison still remains a place where future Belarusian classics are tortured and toughened. Even those who, up till now, have not got any creative ambitions, are seeking behind bars to give vent to their feelings and thoughts through drawings or poems.

I am sure that their works will be published in schoolbooks bearing witness to the entire period and becoming a monument to the heroism of Belarusians. However, today, it is our mission to set free their authors, as well as all other political prisoners as soon as possible. To have them back to us alive and sound. There should be no more such tragic events behind bars as the death of Vitald Ashurak or Mikalay Klimovich.

It is well known that people of spirit are unable to be above the sufferings of their nation. Today we are having here a striking case in point, Uladzimir Prakopavich Nyaklyaeu, a former political prisoner, former candidate for presidency, Jerzy Giedroyc Literary Award winner and the pride of our poetry. He could tell

us better than anybody else how poetry lives and survives in prison. By the way, he has already done it in his *Listy da Voli (Letters to the Free World)*:

"Through the bars, through the security wire
In the night you sent me a smile,
I fell asleep, and through the bars, through the wire
Your smile brought me home for a while".

We, wives of political prisoners separated from their beloved, are well acquainted with these feelings.

My husband Syargei Tsikhanouski had never written poems, but he started composing them in prison. I am happy to be able to share them with Belarusians from time to time. I believe that Syargei is heartened by the thought that, in such a way, his words can reach his fellow citizens. I am not a critic but for me, this is the most honest and true poetry from the depth of the heart.

"You are there, I am here, the clock is ticking,
You are there, I am here, years go quickly.
We are in prison, you and me.
We scream while dreaming, you and me.
We live no longer. Only dreams are alive.
Your dreams are there. My dreams are here.
I wish we knew, you and me,
How long we should wait, you and me.
Days are not waiting. You are there, I am here.
Years are floating away. You are there, I am here..."

It is heart-breaking to read these poignant lines. I don't know what is happening to Syargei right now. We have not heard from him for several months already. He is likely to have been kept in a punitive isolation cell. They don't let the letters and drawings my children and I are sending reach him. But I believe that Syargei is alive and that one day he is sure to be back. I believe that, upon being set free, he will write many poems and publish many books.

Speaking of our political prisoners, I would like to give special thanks to the Belarusian PEN centre and the Belarusian Association of Journalists which, together with *Viasna 96*, continue monitoring the situation of political prisoners and provide assistance to Belarusian people of art outside the country. Your activity is crucial, and we, the United Transitional Cabinet, will do our best for your work to go on.

I am thankful to all Belarusians in and outside the country who remember to support our political prisoners. A postcard sent to a prisoner is, in itself, a piece of art. The art of being human.

Dear friends,

As you know, in the times of the tsarist Russia, when the Belarusian language was banned, books and periodicals in Belarusian had to be published outside Belarus. For example, the iconic *Dudka Belaruskaya* (*Belarusian Pipe*) by Frantsishak Bahushevich was published in 1891 here, in Krakow, and three years later his *Smyk Belaruski* (*Belarusian Fiddlestick*) was published in Poznan.

Today, books in Belarus are banned again and declared "extremistic". Therefore, it is essential that they are continued to be published in the free world, including in Poland, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Germany, Great Britain, and other countries.

Apart from that, there are exhibitions of Belarusian artists and photographers held around the world. Performances staged by *Volnyia Kupalautsy*, *Volny Teatr*, *Kryly Khalopa* and other theatre companies draw large audiences. *Volny Khor* (*Free Choir*) keeps touring. Belarusian films get awarded at prestigious film festivals. The *Dom Tvorcau* (*House of Creators*) is active in Warsaw, and another one is going to be opened in Bialystok. We, Belarusians, feel that we are not alone. Among other things – due to arts.

It is my opinion that, regardless of all hardships, there is no threat that Belarusian culture will disappear in the free world. Instead, we should be most worried about the fate of Belarusian culture in the today's dependent Belarus.

The free and natural development of our national culture is only possible in an independent and democratic country. The independent and democratic Belarus is our common goal, both political and cultural. And I believe that every our step, every act of solidarity, every piece of art in which we tell the world about Belarus makes us a bit closer to our victory.

In the current circumstances, in the situation our people were dragged into by the dictator, we can't but feel grateful to our foreign friends for their solidarity and the comprehensive support they offer to our culture. They have welcomed our people of art in their countries and treat them on an equal footing, like their brothers and sisters, giving them an opportunity to further refine their talents.

Without the generous support of the EU countries, there would be no programmes providing grants from the Belarusian Rada of Culture. We, the United Transitional Cabinet, together with the Representative for National Revival Alina Koushyk, who is present here, are making every effort to remind to our European partners how crucial it is to continue promoting the Belarusian culture by offering scholarships, creative residences and other programmes for our authors and artists.

It is very important to keep the restless and varied cultural life of our diaspora going for us to remain Belarusians. The unhampered creative activities of our musicians, authors, actors, literary figures should be the best evidence that, though in exile, Belarus is and will stay alive. However hard might the dictator and his Russifying minions try to rip the Belarusian heart out of Belarus, they will fail.

At the end, I would also refer to a classic quoting the famous lines from the preface of Francysk Skaryna to the *Book of Judith* which were translated into the modern Belarusian language by Ales Ryazanau, may he rest in peace:

"For just as the beasts
prowling in the desert
are born
with a knowledge of their lairs,
birds
flying in the air

know
their nests,
fish
swimming in the sea and rivers
sense
their whirlpools,
and bees and their like
defend their hives,
so, in the same way, men
have a great love
for the place where,
by the will of God,
they were born and raised". (*translated by Arnold McMillin*)

I am sure that time will come when our people of art will be back to their nests. They will travel round the world to be met with respect everywhere as the children of a free and educated European people, Belarusians. But nobody will be able to ban them from coming back home, to speak out, live and create without restraint in their own country.

Thank you for your attention.

Zhyve Belarus! (Long Live Belarus!)"

4 June 2023, 8 p.m.