

## Belarus Creative Opposition

**Text by Iryna Vidanava - Photography by Andrei Liankevich & Aliaksei Shlyk**

Belarus is often called Europe's black hole and is best known for its dictator Alexander Lukashenko and the 1986 Chernobyl Disaster. Indeed, with its statues of Lenin, KGB, socialist realist buildings and collective farms, time seems to have stopped in Belarus, where the Soviet Union is still alive. But behind the country's closed borders, an exciting and vibrant youth scene is alive and well, producing alternative culture underground in dorms, music clubs, informal groups, artistic communities and cyberspace.

Most experts on Belarus write about the country's political or civic opposition. Only a few articles have appeared on the cultural opposition. This is unfortunate, given the key role played by the creative opposition in many authoritarian countries. It is impossible, for example, to understand the revolutions of 1989 without studying the impact of independent elite culture, including Vaclav Havel's plays, Adam Michnik's essays, or Gaspar Miklos Tamas's philosophical tracts, or alternative popular culture, like the psychedelic rock of the Plastic People of the Universe in Czechoslovakia and the anarchist happenings of the Orange Alternative in Poland. The Soviet bloc was full of underground rockers, writers, artists, poets, religious believers, film-makers, environmentalists, hippies and punks. They were important because, in the 1980s, many Central Europeans were inspired by alternative culture to take up alternative politics, paving the way for political change.

The same thing is happening today in Belarus. One interesting difference is that the creative opposition in Belarus is largely made up of and driven by young people. This article is about a few young movers and shakers from the country's cultural scene. Each is a dynamic, unique individual who is not afraid to be different. Together they represent thousands of active and creative young Belarusians who, unlike the government, love their country and its unique culture.



Like kids everywhere else, young Belarusians are crazy about the internet, fashion, music and popular culture. But unlike in the West, where all of this is readily available, in Belarus access to anything independent is controlled by the authorities. Here, in the middle of Europe, youth activists are arrested, imprisoned, expelled from universities and fired from jobs. Independent schools have been closed down, youth NGOs dissolved, youth publications seized and alternative bands banned. The Lukashenko regime tries to control practically every aspect of youth life, because it fears any free ideas, whether home-grown or from the West. A state ideology course is taught during the early school years and is compulsory for all first year undergraduates (freshers). All state employees must take a special ideology exam as a part of the hiring procedures. A new regulation requires that all college applicants wanting to study journalism, international relations and law, must obtain letters of recommendation from their local authorities. The Ministry of Culture decides what kind of music private FM radio stations should play and the Ministry of Education sets the official guidelines for youth fashion. But, of course, the main decisions are made by the President, who a couple of years ago ordered that only Belarusian models should appear on advertising billboards.

The authorities can try to restrict, impose, threaten and repress, but they really cannot determine what young people wear, listen to, read or watch. As was the case with jazz in the 1950s and jeans in the 1960s during the Soviet era, what is forbidden today in Belarus becomes even more fashionable and desirable. Young Belarusians are no different than other youth who respond to restrictions and regulations with creative forms of dissent. Thanks to the regime, the youth counterculture is alive and well in Belarus. When peaceful meetings are broken up, young activists stage flash mobs and street performances that ridicule the absurdities of the government. When concerts are banned, youngsters go to underground night clubs, to outdoor festivals and to neighbouring countries to listen to their black-listed bands. When there is no officially approved venue to show their works, young artists, photographers and designers go to alternative art galleries and post their works online. Independent writers and journalists publish samizdat (underground) newspapers and magazines, create online communities, and spread information through blogs and home-made documentary films and videos. New media and street art are becoming more and more popular in a country that finds itself near the bottom of every ranking of freedom of expression.

Here are some sketches of a few of the most creative young people in Belarus. What is unique about them is how they are using culture to promote activism among Belarusian youth, who are generally apathetic about politics. Someday, they will be the leaders of a free and democratic Belarus in Europe. But today, they are making Europe's last dictatorship a much more colourful and interesting place.

## ***Rockin' in the Free World***



Vital Supranovich is a 28 year-old producer of Belarusian music. He has helped dozens of bands make it to the main stage, but prefers to remain backstage himself. As a teenager, he co-founded the Belarusian Music Alternative Group (BMA Group) in 1996 because he wanted to promote the Belarusian rock that he loved. Since then, BMA has released almost a hundred albums and organised hundreds of concerts.

Independent music sung in Belarusian is a key political statement in this authoritarian and Russophile country. Over the last decade, musicians and fans have come and gone, but Vital says that a core group of independent rockers has remained. More importantly, crowds are still screaming at Long Live Belarusqat concerts, even though people can be arrested for openly displaying their desire to see a free and independent Belarus. Organising a concert in Belarus is difficult, expensive and risky. A dozen special permits must be obtained from various state agencies and even if all the papers are in order, the authorities still can shut down a concert at the last moment without any explanation, apology or compensation for expenses. According to Vital, this is one of the main reasons why there are only a few producers working with independent musicians. He explains his own successful career by making it clear that his job is his passion, and that for him, Belarusian music is not just a business, but a way of life.

It is very hard to make long-term plans in our country, where the rules of the game are always changing. I just try to do my best in any given situation, Vital says. His Belarusian Music Alternative Group released the albums and organised the concerts of a number of leading rock bands until three years ago when most of them were forbidden from performing in Belarus by the authorities. After the ban was imposed, Vital had to start from scratch in finding and promoting new names, as well as coming up with new forms of

activities for those on the black list. In 2006, BMA put together and released *Songs of Freedom* a compact disc of protest songs produced in cooperation with the *For Freedom* civic campaign, which became the best selling album of the year and it was followed by two more successful releases. In September 2007, together with the student initiative *StudFarmat*, Vital organised a Belarusian rock festival, *The Right to Be Free* in Lutsk, Ukraine. A concert which Vital put together in December to celebrate the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of one of the most famous Belarusian records ever, *Narodny Albom* (The People's Album), sold out and became the cultural event of 2007 (<http://www.democraticbelarus.eu/node/3149>).



Vital believes that neither ordinary citizens nor musicians can remain apart from the country's political issues. He works closely with a number of democratic initiatives and promotes civic activism through music. He is now trying to organise a *Songs of Freedom* fan club to unite and encourage the activism of the thousands of owners of these albums. Because of his belief in the importance of promoting Belarusian culture in all its forms, he organises folk music events, even though they are less profitable than his commercial rock concerts. As a musical expert, Vital thinks that some of the up and coming bands, especially those playing heavy metal and hard rock, such as *Tovarisch Mauser*, *B:N* and *Indiga*, also have a real chance of becoming popular in the West, if they can somehow reach foreign publics. It's crucial for musicians to feel that their music is wanted, but it's not always easy in Belarus. Vital says. This is why he dreams that one day he will launch his own FM radio station, which will play Belarusian-language alternative music, the kind of music he likes best.

### ***Green Gloves vs. Red Tape***



Jenia is a 23 year-old private entrepreneur, the owner of a youth fashion boutique in Babrujsk, a city of 220,000 in eastern Belarus. Jenia says she has always been an active student, just not politically active. Yet during her last year, she was expelled from the

State Economic University for missing a few classes. She had made the mistake of going on an international student exchange trip on EU expansion. *I* visited the parliaments of six European countries, but not that of Belarus, because it is closed to the general public, she says. Despite all her problems, Jenia completed her studies through distance learning, but instead of looking for a job in the state sector, she decided to start her own business.

Always fashionable with a unique sense of style. she was wearing fancy green gloves with plastic cuffs when I interviewed her. it wasn't hard for Jenia to figure out in which field she'd like to apply her entrepreneurial ambitions. It's very hard to find stylish and affordable clothes in Belarus, almost impossible, she says. I really love second-hand stores. Finding something nice is like searching for treasure. Like most young people who want to be *à la mode*, Jenia prefers to buy her clothes abroad and makes frequent shopping trips to Lithuania and Poland. She gets ideas for her own clothes from magazines, movies and designers' websites. So it was natural that she decided to open a boutique for young people. And since she carried back the first batch of clothes from Lithuania in a big bag, Jenia called her store *The Suitcase*.

Opened three months ago, *The Suitcase* is already a popular destination in Babrujsk, and not just for youth. The female-owned store is the exception in a country where business is dominated by males, and its bright and daring foreign fashions stand out. But Jenia is not sure how long it will survive. At the beginning of December 2007 her cosy little boutique was almost closed down by local authorities, because she was a day late in putting Christmas decorations in the windows, as required by municipal regulations. The legislation and attitude concerning small businesses is horrible. State officials treat us as though we are second class citizens. Commenting on a new restrictive law against small businesses, which sparked a nationwide strike paralyzing 80 percent of the open-air markets and malls last week, Jenia believes that the choice the authorities offer to small entrepreneurs is a quick death by guillotine or a slow death by hanging. She doesn't think that the regime can force people to buy Belarusian products by stopping private entrepreneurs from importing foreign goods. People will always find ways to buy what they like. You can't create a ghetto in the middle of Europe nowadays.

Despite all the problems, Jenia is sure that the experience she gained has been useful and will help her with future projects. Just making money is not so inspiring and interesting. I want to use my communications skills and knowledge to make the world a better place. She plans to help some promising Belarusian bands and artists, her friends, to take part in international festivals. There are so many talented young people around, with great ideas and projects, but, unfortunately, most of them don't speak English and can't network on their own. But they are very entrepreneurial, have a European outlook and challenge our grey reality with their creativity and positive action. They might not be ready for open political protest, but they want to change the situation in the country. They, too, need attention and some help.

## ***Making a Point***



Andrei is 21 years old and belongs to a new wave of activists who joined the democratic movement in March 2006. He was expelled from the Belarusian State University for participating in the peaceful spring protests, but chose to stay in Belarus and start his own organisation, known today as [Initiative](http://www.initiative.org/) (<http://www.initiative.org/>). Its activists were first united by a passion for flash mobs organised through the LiveJournal online community. In mid 2006, their flash mobs were a sensation in the democratic movement, mobilising hundreds of youngsters to protest against the regime's falsification of the election results and post-election repression. It took several months before the secret services were able to track down the organisers and start arresting those planning or participating in the actions, causing a crisis in the flash mob movement and forcing its leaders to come up with new tactics and devise new forms with which to organise their events. But the flash mobbers were able to redefine their goals, re-work their strategy, and find their niche in Belarus's democratic movement.

I talked to Andrei while we were marching down a street in Minsk under a giant Initiative flag during the Dziady (Forefathers' Eve) demonstration which happens every year on 28 October. The group's unusual logo (a red-white-red exclamation mark on a black background) on a huge flag (three meters tall) attracted a lot of attention and even caused some confusion among older marchers, due to its radical appearance. Andrei explained that Initiative is a Minsk-based group, open to anyone who wants to join, which unites males and females, mainly young professionals and students, aged 18-30 years. It carries out well-planned, carefully prepared, frequent peaceful street actions designed to overcome apathy and fear among young people.

Last year, Initiative organised more than 50 happenings, and only once did the police manage to detain some participants. Paradoxically, this occurred during an unplanned event when Initiative members, like many other youngsters around the world, showed up in Minsk's downtown wearing crazy costumes to celebrate Halloween. The group regularly manages to place the banned white-red-white historical flag on the tallest buildings around the city to protest the anti-Belarusian policy of the authorities. It took police more than four hours to tear down a flag put up on a downtown apartment building on 15 May 2007, the anniversary of the phoney 1995 referendum which returned old Soviet state symbols to Belarus. Last May, Initiative organised ~~Cheer Up with Flowers Day~~ and handed out 2,000 tulips to people on the streets, including police and soldiers. A month later, about 30 activists wearing T-shirts with the slogan ~~Protect Old Grodno~~ handed out more than 5,000 leaflets with information on how the authorities were destroying historical buildings in one of Belarus' oldest cities.

~~The most rewarding part is to see people's reaction when we talk to them on the streets,~~ Andrei said. ~~I was shocked to find out that most of them didn't know that we have political prisoners in our country,~~ he continued, referring to the organisation's best known action, in which Initiative activists ask people on the streets to sign postcards that are then sent as a sign of solidarity to political prisoners. The group's strategy of creativity, courage and activism seems to be a success. It was able to collect and mail more than 1,500 postcards to political prisoners for Christmas Eve. These energetic guys are definitely winning people over and gaining public attention. As I was interviewing Andrei, the flag his group was carrying broke. A bunch of old ladies, who at first were suspicious of the young radicals with the big black flag, ended up cheering them on as they tried to catch up with the marchers after fixing the flag pole. Like the exclamation mark on their flag, the group was also making a strong statement.

Andrei was arrested on 21 January 2008 during a peaceful demonstration of small businessmen in Minsk and is now in prison. He faces six years of jail for his alleged ~~violent~~ actions against a policeman. He was first sentenced to ten days in prison, after which, instead of being released, he was taken to the prosecutor's office, where new charges were brought against him. For more information see: <http://en.salidarnasc.org/node/511>

## ***Art from Anger***



Sasha, a 18 year-old photographer, journalist and environmental activist, is already well known in Minsk artistic circles. Although still only a fresher at the Visual and Cultural Studies Department of the exiled European Humanities University, she takes photos for the online art project *The City of Minsk* (<http://horad.exe.by/>), shoots video clips for the unique multimedia youth compact disc publication CDMAG and publishes the fun-zine TRYZNAS\*KEFIRAS. With so much to do Sasha still does not consider herself a super busy person.

Changing the colour of her hair depending on her mood, Sasha is one of the most creative and talented people that I've ever met. She describes creativity as a buzz-word which isn't really understood by many young people. To be creative means not being afraid to do things in an unusual way, even when you don't know what you will end up with, she says. And if you care about something, then you shouldn't be lazy and only talk about your cause, she continues, now describing her views on activism. Sasha is a firm believer in the strong, direct connection between creativity and activism. Even traditional opposition demonstrations, in her opinion, become much more effective when something unusual happens during them, like when anarchists began playing their drums during the Chernobyl Day and Social marches, catching everyone's attention!

Sasha does things her own way. During a recent march against the regime's cancellation of benefits for students and people in other vulnerable sectors of society, she was part of a small group of young people who refused to follow the planned route and instead marched down one of Minsk's main streets. Unlike most students, Sasha also lives her life according to environmentally friendly principles. She is inspired by many things, but one of her chief motivations is what a friend once called positive anger. a feeling of despair that pushes one to do something new. She also has a few favourite creative blogging communities, such as <http://community.livejournal.com/4asapopi3> and [http://community.livejournal.com/design\\_books](http://community.livejournal.com/design_books), but says that her main community is the company of her friends. Recalling a recent conversation with the owner of Lithuania's largest photo studio, Sasha says that she often finds her inspiration in just talking to people.

Sasha is one of hundreds of Belarusians studying at the European Humanities University, a leading private institution which was shut down by the Belarusian authorities in 2004 and now operates in exile in Vilnius, Lithuania. For Sasha, who graduated from an elite high school in 2007, studying at EHU was a conscious choice. After hearing terrible stories from my friends about the Journalism Department at the Belarusian State University and the Cultural Management course at the University of Culture, I had no desire to apply there. So, I found a syllabus from EHU online and decided that it was the best place for me. After a semester of commuting between Minsk and Vilnius, she still thinks it was the right choice. First of all, something is always happening here and you don't feel like you live in a tin can anymore. Sasha explains. Secondly, I'm gaining precious experience from studying and living abroad. Even being just three hours from Minsk, I've begun looking at things from a different perspective.

Sasha hasn't planned her future yet. She says that she is often unable to make plans even for the next week. She is excited about her artistic projects and open to new ideas. She hopes someday to be publishing samizdat magazines and marketing the environmentally friendly soap she now makes for herself at home.

### ***Forever Young***



Only 18 years old, Vital is already one of the veterans of the youth movement in Belarus. He became active in 2000 when, together with his teenage cousin, he began distributing an opposition newspaper. It didn't seem like hard work because they were able to hand out several thousand copies in just a few hours by choosing the busiest metro stations and yelling that the paper contained a television programme. As a reward for their good work, their employer gave them a CD with Belarusian rock music and more papers to distribute. This time, however, things turned out differently. The boys were attacked by fascist thugs, who are tolerated by the regime. Vital escaped and was hidden by some people in an apartment building. His cousin was brutally beaten, but survived. "This is when I started to realise that something was wrong in my country," he says.

Vital made the decision to join the democratic movement on his own. During the 2001 presidential election campaign, he found an information leaflet about the "Vybirať" ("Vote/Choose") get-out-the-vote civic initiative and dialled the contact number. This is how I met him, when he showed up at the "Vybirať" office to pick up stickers, election campaign pins and other information material. Five years later, 17 year-old Vital was one of the leaders of the tent-city erected in Minsk's main square during the demonstrations after the rigged presidential elections of March 2006.

Back in 2001, Vital believed that victory was close. The election results came as a shock. Vital and his school mates decorated a nearby bus stop with dozens of black ribbons, unable to believe that Lukashenko was still president. Between 2001-2003, Vital tried practically all major youth organisations, but did not fit into any of them. So in December 2004, he founded his own organisation . Vokaq(Eye).



Vokaq's mission is to promote Belarusian language and culture. During one of their first campaigns, its activists barraged Minsk's FM stations with phone calls, spoke to DJs in Belarusian and asked them to play Belarusian rock music instead of Russian pop. Reactions varied, but the result was that more Belarusian songs began appearing on the air. Every year on 1 September, the first day of the school year, Vokaq organises different performances as a part of its campaign 'Want to Study in Belarusian'. This year they brought a mourning poster draped in black with the picture of a Belarusian language textbook to the Ministry of Education to raise public awareness about the disappearance of the Belarusian language from the state education system.

Vital claims that his organisation is more cultural than political. Yet, Vokaq activists have participated in all of the major political and civic campaigns in recent years, including the 2006 presidential elections. Like many other young people, Vital was very disappointed with both the results of the elections and the reaction of the opposition leadership. But he isn't giving up and is busy these days promoting Vokaq youth website ([www.moladz.org](http://www.moladz.org)), organising the activities of a new Belarusian music fan club and preparing a concert tour of young Belarusian bands, which will take place in March 2008 and is dedicated to the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the repressed Belarusian National Republic. He believes that, if we want to change what happened in Belarus, we must focus on working with the new generation of young people who are smart, educated, and in love with Belarus.

## ***Bringing People Together***



Now 25 years old, Vola is the former head of the Belarusian StudentsqAssociation, an artist, and a founder of the most popular Belarusian studentsqweb portal: [Studenty.by](#). In May 2007, the portal was transformed into the online community: [Generation.by](#) ([www.generation.by](http://www.generation.by)). Its target group is Belarusq Generation Yq that is to say, young people born in the 1980s and 1990s who today are university and graduate students, young professionals, teachers, journalists, artists, designers and bloggers. Like their peers around the world, Belarusian Ysq have a sharp sense of their own personal freedom, are keen on new technologies, tend to be well-educated and have a practical attitude towards life. The only difference, Vola says, is that Belarusq Generation Yq was born at a time of political and social turmoil. These young people are used to living in and adjusting to a constantly changing environment. These people want to be successful and are positive and optimistic. They set concrete goals and achieve them.q

Generation.by was created as a communications platform to connect creative and curious young Belarusians who want to learn more and have something to say to the world. Updated daily, the website contains original news, articles, interviews, photo blogs, cartoons, flash animation, and music. While popular among youth, Generation.by also serves as an important source of information about what is happening in the life of young

people for other traditional and online media. Its materials are often reprinted and some of its products, such as a 2007 Christmas flash postcard (<http://newyear.studenty.by/>), have become popular even in Russia and Ukraine. On 19 September 2007, the Belarusian internet joined the rest of the cyber world in celebrating the birthday of the smiley face ☺. On that same day in 1991, Belarus's historic national symbols- the white-red-white flag and the emblem of a knight on a horse- were adopted after the fall of the Soviet Union (these symbols were later banned by the current regime). While our old print media was writing articles about the history of the symbols and bloggers were congratulating each other on the Day of the Smiley, we merged both celebrations into one. We created a collection of 15 funny Belarusian emoticons with white-red-white flags (<http://generation.by/news1827.html>), which became a big hit on the Belarusian internet this past autumn. We honestly did not expect such a success,q. Vola says.



What makes Generation.by really unique is the way it bridges online and traditional activism. The project is famous for its #Tuesday Meetings of Good Peopleq every second Tuesday, those who meet on the site in cyberspace physically come together. #This tradition is already three years old, . Vola explains. #It's a chance for very different people to meet in an informal atmosphere, discuss the latest news and share interesting ideas. Often the discussions develop into new projects.qSome Tuesday meetings are based on themes. Participants are, for example, asked to wear trainers or clothes of a certain colour. #Then it becomes a kind of a flash mob, symbolising a gathering of people who are very diverse but have something in common,q. Vola continues. The most recent #Tuesday Meetingqtook place simultaneously in Belarus, Austria, Italy and the Netherlands.

The creators of Generation.by believe that there is a direct link between virtual and real life activism. The team takes part in many non-virtual artistic and civic projects and works

closely with colleagues from the traditional media to expose it to online journalism, blogging, internet promotion and information security. Recently, Generation.by launched an English-language version, so foreign audiences could learn more about the life of young people, culture and events in Belarus (<http://logbook.generation.by/>). It is no wonder that, ~~A~~ good connection even offline has become the informal slogan of the team.

*The author of this article is 30 year old Iryna Vidanava, a Belarusian activist who has been working with independent youth groups and publications for more than a decade.*