Belarussian PEN Centre

Cultural Resistance in Belarus

Issue 7 (20)
February 23, 2021

Do you hear the people sing?
Singing the song of angry men?
It is the music of the people
Who will not be slaves again!
When the beating of your heart
Echoes the beating of the drums
There is a life about to start
When tomorrow comes.

(From "Les Misérables")

1. ARRESTS, CONVICTIONS, PROSECUTION

2. PRESSURE, DISMISSAL, BAN

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1. ARRESTS, CONVICTIONS, PROSECUTION

Musicians from OK-band who were to perform at the gig in Smalavičy on February 13: Aleh Karpienka, Siarhiej Ivanoŭ and Dzianis Ptuška have been sentenced to 15 days of administrative arrest, along with the musicians of the band Raźbitaje Serca Pacana: Dzianis Tarasienka, Pavieł Haradnicki, Andrej Osipčyk and Alaksandr Kavaloŭ, and musicians Uładź Lepiašynski and Valeryja Suravickaja.

A total of 44 people detained during the concert are serving 15 days of administrative arrest, another 15 people were fined 870 BYN [278 EUR], a total of 660 days of arrest and 13,050 BYN [4167 EUR].

On February 17, police officers came to inspect the homes of the RSP band musicians, searching for protest symbols but found none.

Mass searches and detentions took place on February 16 among journalists and human rights activists around Belarus, the total number of those approached by security forces is almost two dozen. The Investigative Committee explained this by "the criminal investigation under Art. 342 (organization and preparation of actions that grossly violate public order, or active participation in them) of the Criminal Code of Belarus.

Ihnat Sidorčyk, poet, director and actor, political prisoner who had been in prison since August 10, charged under Part 1 of Art. 342 (organization of group actions that grossly violate public order, or active participation in them) was released from the courtroom! He was sentenced to 3 years of suspended imprisonment.

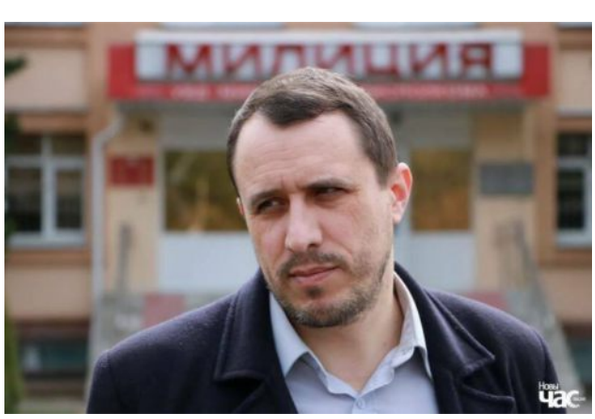
Photo: Гарадзенская Вясна

Kryścina Pałtaviec, an artist who painted storks and "Long live Belarus" at various sites in Skidziel and the district, and Andrej Apanasovič, who sometimes gave her a lift, were found guilty of "desecrating buildings and damaging property" and fined 150 [1390 EUR] and 100 [926 EUR] basic units respectively. Kryścina's bicycle was confiscated as "a means by which a crime was committed."

Ihar Bancar, leader of the Hrodna street-punk band Mister X, public and cultural activist, has been in prison since October 20 charged under Article 339 of the Criminal Code (Hooliganism). He has been in solitary confinement since February 5, and his family is worried about his health.

Mikoła Papieka, a poet and beekeeper, had his status changed from a suspect to a defendant in the "Karahod case" in Brest.

Pavieł Sieviaryniec, the writer, politician, prisoner of consciousness, has been remanded in custody for another 2 months.



2. PRESSURE, DISMISSAL, BAN

Hrodna-based bar and art space Third Place, which participated in the nationwide strike, were forced to close on February 16: the city authorities demanded that the owner terminate the contract with the tenants.

Photo: viciebskspring.org

In Polack, weekly guided tours for locals and visitors of the town, take place under police surveillance.

Anton Hryškievič, director and professor of the Viciebsk State College of Culture and Arts, who joined the nationwide strike on January 25, was fired.

Архіўнае фота

Tamara Viaršyckaja, founder of the Museum of the Jewish Resistance in Navahrudak and co-founder of the Navahrudak Museum of Local History, has her contract not extended. Also in early April, the contract of the museum's senior researcher Halina Kavalčuk is not extended. The women believe that the reason for the dismissal was the guided tours they organized on Sundays and which were visited by individuals convicted under Article 23.34.

Photo: Belsat

Volha Siemčanka, who worked at the Mahiloŭ Drama Theatre, was fired on 18 February. In the fall of 2020, Volha was tried several times for participating in protests.

The website of the Cudoŭnaja krama selling products with national symbols and its owner Ihar Kamzierčak's social media were hacked on the night of 18 to 19 February. The logos of the pages have been replaced with red and green flags, offenses were published.

3. SYMBOLS

A fine for a national flag in one's own backyard,
10 days of arrest for a photo with a white-red-white flag,
a trial for a mural with Pahonia,
a fine of 580 BYN [188 EUR] for a white-red-white flag in a yard of your own house,
7 days of arrest for a "red wave" painted on the balcony,
15 days of arrest for white-red-white curtains,
12 days of arrest for the bas-relief with Pahonia on the wall of your own house,
and this is by far not the most complete list of the repressions for the national symbols in Belarus.

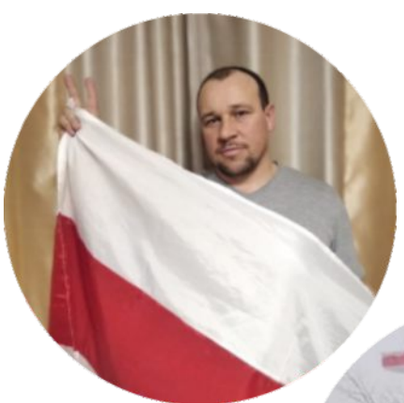
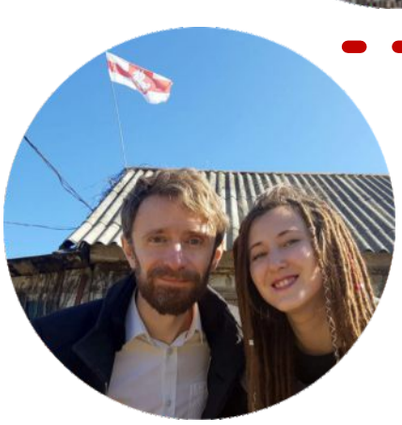
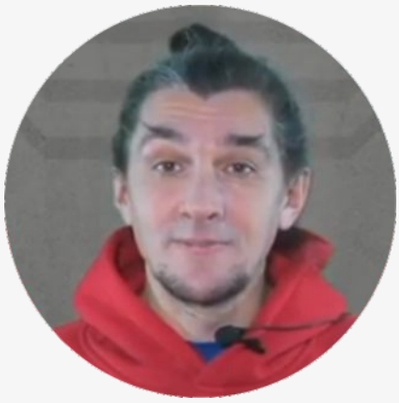


Photo: palesse.press



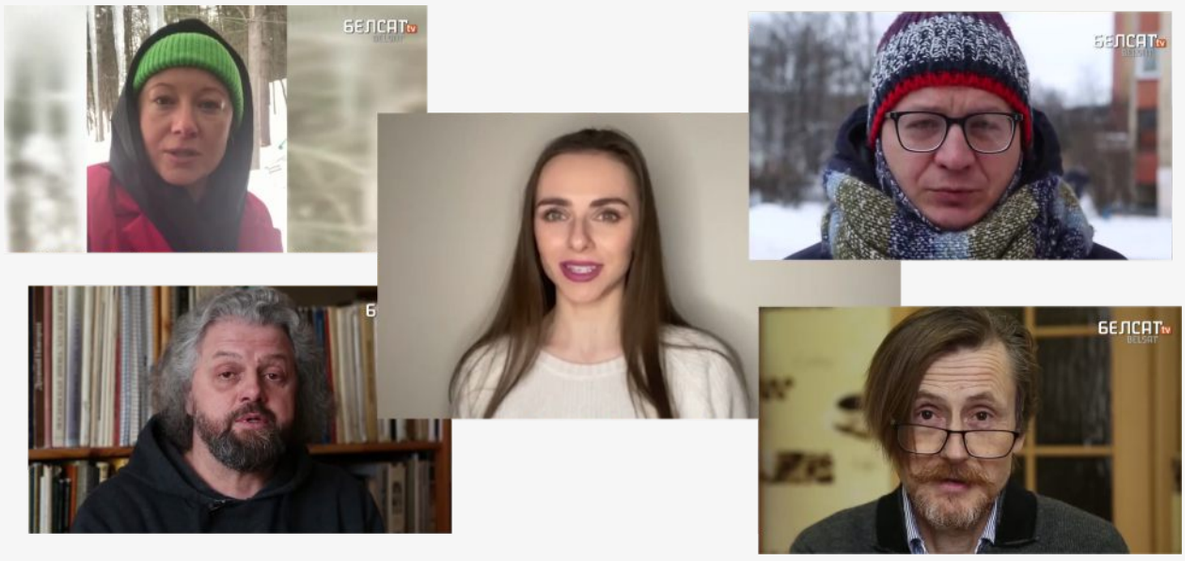
Ihar Słučak and Alina Nahornaja, activists known for fighting for a wider use of the Belarusian language in the public sphere have reported that police had been coming to their home for several months to photograph the flag in their backyard, and on February 21 the flags from their rooftop were stolen.

4. CULTURAL RESISTANCE

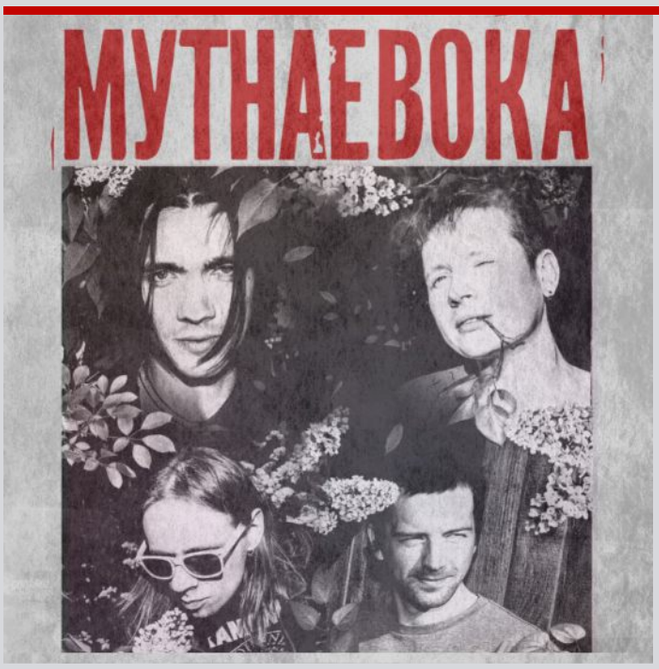


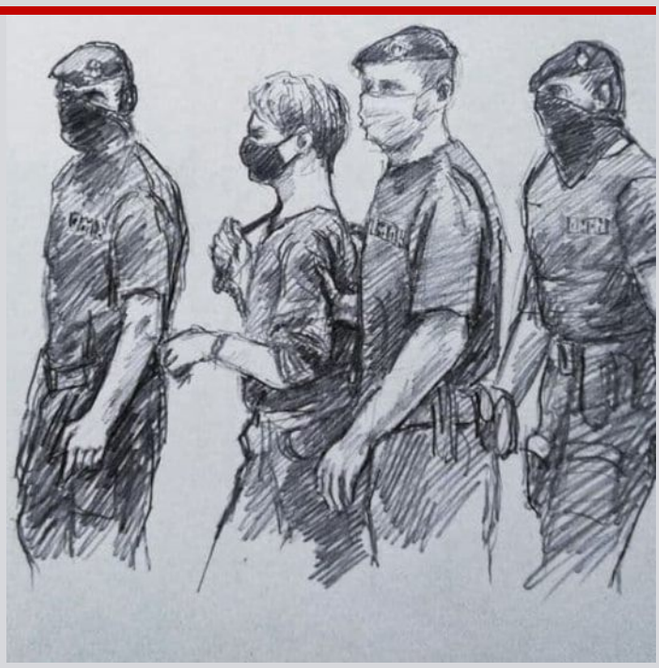
New episode of the video project "Words are more powerful": musician Leanid Paŭlonak reads a poem by Uładzimir Žyłka "Palimpsest".

The Belarusian Culture Solidarity Foundation is working to develop a strategy of cultural reforms for the new Belarus. Nicolai Khalezin, art director of the Belarusian Free Theater and program director of the Creative Politics Hub, will lead the strategic direction of the fund.



Дзеячы і дзяячкі культуры запісалі відэазварот у падтрымку Кацярыны Андрэевай і Дар'і Чульцовай.

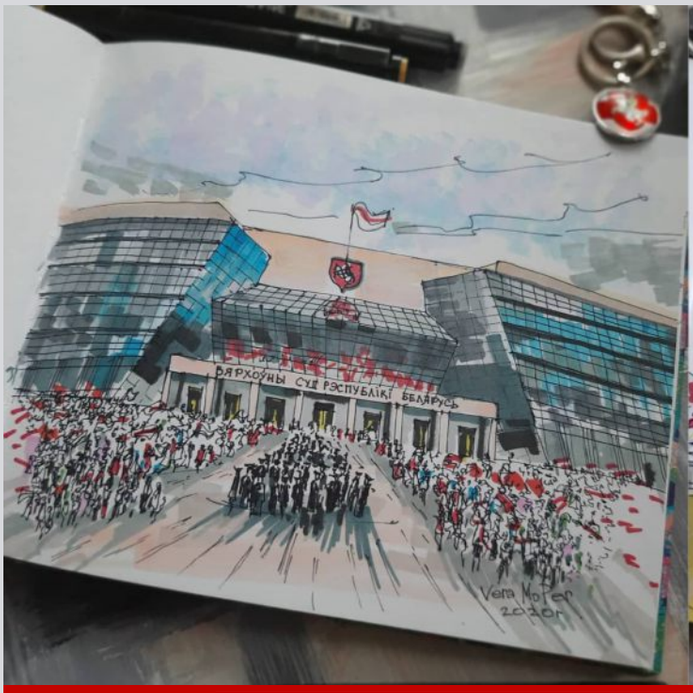


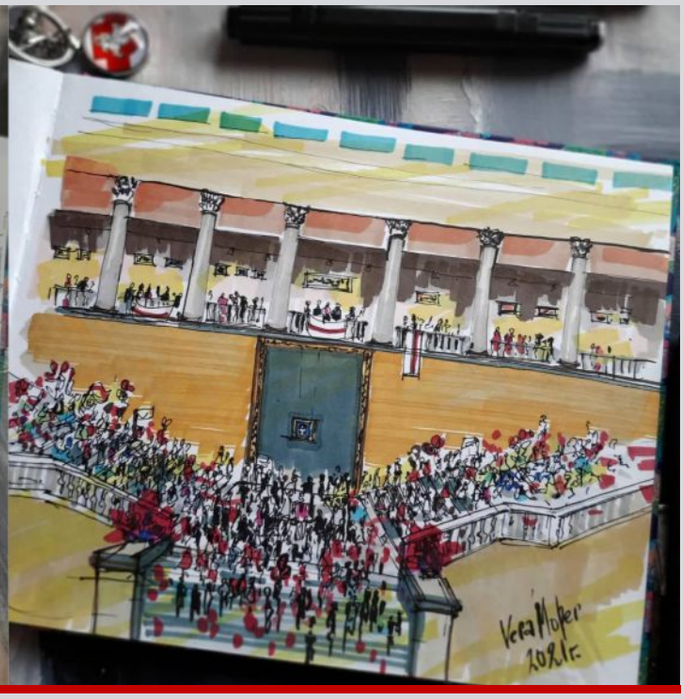


An online concertof the band Mutnajevoka, whose participants have been through prison terms in 2020-2021, took place on February 20 as part of the series "Victory Artists".
See the link to support artists.

Cichan Klukač, political prisoner, s ends his drawings from prison.

Inspirational images by Vera MoPer from the series When We Win.

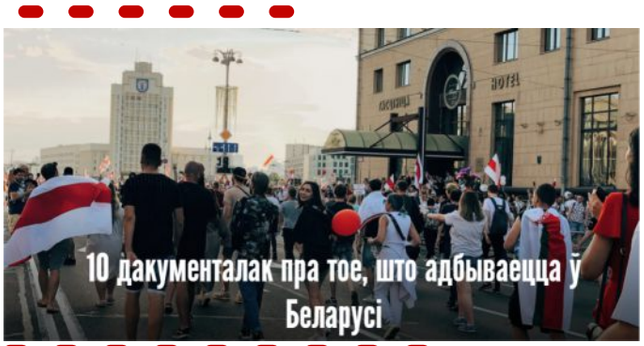




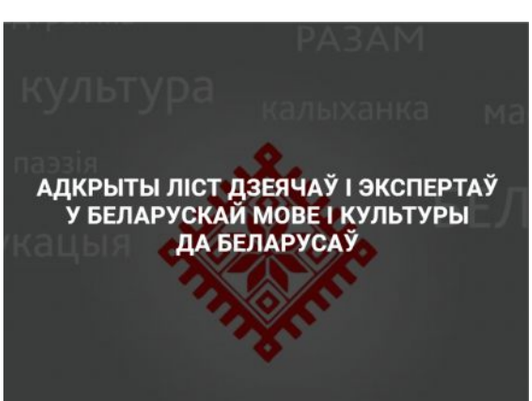
Rufina Bazłova, an artist from Hrodna living in Prague, creates embroideries based on Belarusian protests.

Photo: racyja.com

There is an independent theatrical movement "Asoby" (Persons) operating in Hrodna, which appeared after the dismissal of actors from the drama theater last year and was joined by actors of the puppet theater and other representatives of the free Hrodna theatrical stage.



10 documentaries about what is happening in Belarus.



On the occasion of the Mother Language Day, more than 70 experts in the field of Belarusian language and culture, scientists, writers and other famous cultural figures signed an Open Letter which describes the situation in our language and national culture and outlines the conditions for existence, revival, and flourishing of the Belarusian language and culture in modern Belarus.

5. VOICES OF BELARUSIAN CULTURE

Vincuk Viačorka, linguist and politician,
about the Belarusian language:
"The real catastrophe of the presence of the Belarusian language in the minds of Belarusians came from the rule of Łukašenka and his regime. While in 1999 74% of all Belarusians called Belarusian their mother tongue, 10 years later only 53%, 20% less. This is an absolutely unheard of, unprecedented perhaps for the whole world, decline, a radical change in consciousness not even over a generation, but half a generation or a third of a generation. So it's unusual for people to change their language consciousness and language behavior. This means that they have adapted to the new language policy of the state."

Photo: Euroradio

Photo: svaboda.org

Hanna Sieviaryniec, writer, literary critic, and teacher,
about the strategy of victory.
"In the summer it seemed that anyone could become the last snowflake which would make the avalanche of our victory speed down, now as a result of fierce resistance of the system and the fact that we miscalculated somewhere, this snowflake can fall either this way or that. We now have nothing either outside or inside, we are all on these scales. And each of us can add a snowflake to our side, to the side of goodness and light, or to the other side. And now that cat will win who will not take his eyes off, and the person who will withstand the gaze will win this battle."

Alaksiej Strelnikaŭ, a theater critic and director
fired from the Academy of Arts for participating in a strike,
for which he filed a lawsuit against the university but lost.
"I feel the truth is on my side and I'm glad to know who stood up against me and who supported me. Loads of people have shown support (thank you for it!). This is my victory.
We all need these trials, we all need to exercise our right for truth and justice. Because these are moral categories that we feel with our hearts that are not overturned by court decisions."

Photo: citydog.by

Photo: nn.by

Last plead of Kaciaryna Andrejeva, journalist, author (together with Ihar Iljaš) of the book "Belarusian Donbass" about the role of Belarus in the Ukrainian-Russian war, who was detained on November 15 (along with the camerawoman Darjaj Čulcova) while streaming the brutal dispersal of the rally in memory of killed Raman Bandarenka and sentenced to 2 year in prison on February 18.

"I am young, I have a favourite profession, success, fame, and what is the most important – my conscience is clear. And I want to focus my efforts exclusively on creating in Belarus, on serving the country, a Belarus where there will be no place for political repressions, where there will be no persecution for honest journalism, for the truth."

Ihar Babkoŭ, philosopher, writer.

"Belarus today is a laboratory of the future which seeks answers to the most important questions of modern life. As it turned out, these answers are needed not only by us, but by the whole world."

Photo: reform.by

Courtesy photo

Sviatłana Vocinava, ex-editor-in-chief of the literary magazine Maładość.

"Yes, I lost the team of like-minded people, but I realized that I was relieved of the burden that had accompanied this work, of this moral oppression, of all these unsolvable problems…"

6. INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY

Human rights and cultural organizations world-wide call for an end to the abuse of fundamental rights of those who speak out against repression.

PEN International statement

Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders statement

Amnesty International statement

International Media Support statement

PEN Norway statement

Article 19 statement

PEN America statement

PEN Moscow and the Free Word Association statement

An art exhibition "Country for Life" is organized by Belarusians in St. Petersburg from February 20 to March 12. It shows how "the promised state of social justice has become what it's become."

MEP Karin Karlsbro (Swedish Liberal Party) supported the initiative of the Belarusian Cultural Solidarity Fund to exclude Belteleradiocompany from covering Eurovision-2021.

The song "Mury" (Walls), one of the most popular protest songs of 2020, has been performed in Czech in support of Belarusians.

An exhibition of Belarusian women's protest photographers is being held in Vilnius.

For the Mother Language Day Belarusianshave recorded video poems, and diplomats from the EU, Great Britain, Switzerland, the USA and Japan have chosen Belarusian words that resonate with them the mose these days.

7. MISSELANEOUS

Poet Julij Iljuščanka told about the terrible conditions in the remand prison in Žodzina where he was detained for 25 days.

"I have a confirmed Covid, so everyone who was with me in Žodzina must have it too. We were actually forcibly infected. For the first 3-4 days the window in the cell wasn't opened, we just breathed and sweated like herring".

Amnesty International writes about how the state repressions following the protests against the highly controversial re-election of Alaksandr Łukašenka as President, have been affecting cultural life in Belarus.

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