

“Second-Hand” Coverage: Alexievich’s Nobel Prize in the Belarus’ Media

Summing up the results and achievements of 2015, Belarusian TV proudly mentioned the Nobel Prize in literature, awarded to a Belarusian author, Sviatlana Alexievich. Although several other Nobel laureates in the past had Belarusian roots, Alexievich's award was the first one for a Belarusian citizen.

The Nobel Prize for Alexievich [generated mixed responses](#) in the Belarusian society, yet at the same time it also boosted the feelings of national pride among the ordinary Belarusians. On a different level, it improved the international image of the country, suffering from the stereotype of the “last dictatorship in Europe.”

Surprisingly, the coverage of the Nobel Prize by the leading Belarusian media seemed very concise, neutral, and distanced. The personality of Alexievich and her opinionated positions are inconvenient for the current Belarusian political regime and the state-run newspapers and TV channels downplayed the significance of the award, yet they could not ignore it altogether.

Winners and Losers of October 2015

The announcement of the Nobel Prize winners in 2015 coincided with the presidential electoral campaign in Belarus. Given the low-profile of this year’s elections and a lack of a united opposition candidate, the current incumbent, Aliaksandr Lukashenka, anticipated an easy and sweeping victory.

While the previous elections in 2010 ended in the scenes of [violence on the streets of Minsk](#), in 2015 it was the Nobel Prize that shattered Lukashenka's expectations of another unchallenged triumph. Even though Alexievich does not belong to the official opposition, she openly stated [her criticism of Lukashenka and his rule](#) on several occasions. Her Nobel Prize drew more attention to the problematic character of the Belarusian regime, stealing the spotlight from the presidential show.



The leading state Belarusian media demonstrated a reserved approach to the Nobel Prize. The article on Alexievich's first press-conference in one of the largest official newspapers, *Belarus Segodnia*, pointed out the immense interest of domestic and foreign journalists to this event.

However, it failed to provide the full coverage of the press-conference itself, which took place in the tiny office spaces of the independent newspaper *Naša Niva*. Instead, *Belarus Segodnia* [was carefully avoiding any statements, which could appear too controversial.](#)

[Belarus Segodnia presented Alexievich](#) as a an “artist, who deals with the global issues of the human existence” and “is not afraid to express her thoughts,” often provoking conflict situations within the so-called “pseudoliterary cultural milieus.”

At the same time, the newspaper stressed her Belarusianness and historical meaning of the award, pointing out Alexievich's “territory of inner freedom” and alienation from the “pro-governmental establishment.”

Belarusian TV reported the news of the Nobel Prize in a more [concise](#) manner. Despite the fact that Alexievich lives in Minsk and seemed easily accessible for interviews and

commentaries, the state media did not attempt to offer her appearance on the TV screens. Instead, the First Belarusian TV channel simply used a quote of the president Lukashenka's official congratulation statement.

“The Word to the Laureate”

The main events of the Nobel Week in Stockholm included a lecture on 7 December and the award ceremony on 10 December. Neither were broadcast in full by the Belarusian official media that continued with a selective and limited coverage.

On 8 December, a short note entitled “The Word to the Laureate” appeared in *Belarus Segodnia*. Contrary to the title, Alexievich did not actually get to speak to the audience of the newspaper. Instead, the note contained basic [information](#) on the award ceremony and the financial value of the prize.

Belarus Segodnia also published some excerpts from Alexievich's Nobel lecture, acknowledging that the scale of her achievement would in the end benefit the global image of Belarus. An unsigned editorial commentary concluded that she [“was not willing to follow the lead of so-called pseudodemocrats,”](#) implying the lack of references to the opposition slogans in her lecture.



Belarusian TV channels did not plan to organise a live broadcast of the award ceremony on 10 December. Belteleradiocompany explained this decision by a vague reference to [“organizational, technical, financial, and legal aspects.”](#) Instead, the Nobel Prize events, general reports on all winners, and information on the protocol procedures [sporadically appeared in the news](#), yet failed to become the main theme.

Described as the winner of “one of the most grandiose and important awards in the world,” Alexievich on Belarusian TV received only a [brief praise](#) for depicting “the real price of a heroic deed” and the “other side of the war, which completely transforms human beings.” No further commentaries on her writing followed. Otherwise, they might have revealed that Alexievich's focus on the brutality and inhumanity of the war conflicting with the officially promoted glorified suffering and heroism.

Celebrating Nobel Together: #nobelrazam

Belarusian civil society responded to the meagre coverage of the Nobel Prize in the official media with a spontaneous grass-roots initiative *Nobel Razam* (Nobel Together). Originating in the social networks, a flashmob [campaign](#) #nobelrazam encouraged people to organise public viewing of the Nobel Week events in Stockholm.

Social media users shared information and Youtube links for the Nobel lecture and the award ceremony online. Alexievich also received a warm welcome from her fans and readers at the Minsk International Airport, when she returned to Belarus on 15 December. None of the state officials showed up to greet the Nobel Prize winner on the Belarusian soil. Belarusian Ministry of Culture congratulated her only with a telegram.

The Nobel Prize made it impossible for the official Belarusian media to ignore Alexievich, providing her with a protection against scornful attacks. They proudly acknowledged her achievements, yet at the same time attempted to place the inconvenient prize winner into shadows. However, in this instance, Belarusian society proved to be worthy of its Nobel laureate, treating her with the appropriate recognition and respect.

Belarusian Writers and the Soviet Past

Last week two demonstrations in Minsk commemorated the victims of Stalinism. On 29 October, “The Chain of Remembrance” drew attention to the execution of more than 100 Belarusian cultural leaders on this same date in 1937.

On 1 November, the Conservative Christian Party of Belarus held a street rally in central Minsk to commemorate the dead, [Dziady](#), authorised by the Minsk city and regional governments.

The events focus on aspects of the Soviet past that the Belarusian leadership has largely ignored or concealed. Not only have Stalin’s crimes been glossed over, but so have recent tragedies in Belarus such as the [consequences](#) of the 1986 accident at the Chernobyl nuclear plant. Writers who have tried to draw attention to these events have faced profound difficulties.

This article cites the examples of three prominent Belarusian writers, one writing before the presidency of Aliaksandr Lukashenka and two during his tenure in office. They illustrate that the leaders of Belarus have failed manifestly to address the crimes of Stalin and other consequences of Soviet rule.

These three Belarusian writers demonstrate the dilemmas of probing into such controversial topics in current-day Belarus whereas its southern neighbour Ukraine is attempting to

eradicate all traces of its Communist past. All became alienated from the modern state.

Vasyl Bykau: “The Dead Feel No Pain”

Vasily Bykau (1924-2003) was Belarus' best known writer, largely as a result of his accounts of the war years, which he experienced in the ranks of the Red Army in the Second and Third Ukrainian Fronts as the Red Army advanced through Eastern Europe.

✘ Though recognised for his talents, his starkly realistic accounts contrasted with most Soviet writing on the 'Great Patriotic War'. He provided an antidote to the ritualistic pantheon of great victories and heroism, particularly his book “The Dead Feel No Pain” (1965). Bykau achieved fame in the USSR through Russian translations of his works, which he wrote in Belarusian.

Bykau and Lukashenka proved incompatible compatriots and in December 2002, the former Secretary of the Hrodna section of the Belarusian Union of Writers emigrated to the Czech Republic with the support of the Czech Chancellor and playwright Vaclav Havel, thereafter visiting his homeland only a few times. Shortly before his death he returned to Belarus where he died of stomach cancer in a Minsk hospital. Over 50,000 attended his funeral, which was notable for the absence of government officials, including the president.

Ales Adamovich: the Partisan

Writer

Adamovich, born in 1927, was too young to be called up to the Red Army but served in a partisan unit during the war. From the 1950s to the early 1990s he wrote several books about the war that brought him fame, most notably *Khatynskaya Povest'* (The Khatyn Story, 1972), about the massacre of residents of the village some 30 miles from Minsk, which now holds the well known heritage site.

Like Bykau his genius lay in capturing the true nature of  the war, portrayed with searing honesty in his screenplay written with *Elem Klimov Idi i Smotri* (Come and See, 1985), which was released on the eve of Glasnost, allowing for wide dissemination of the movie about a teenaged boy during the German occupation of Belarus.

Like Bykau, Adamovich, who held a doctorate in philology, emigrated from Belarus—this time to Moscow. In the declining years of the USSR, Adamovich supported the formation of the Belarusian Popular Front and tried to draw popular and official attention to the problems engendered by the 1986 Chernobyl accident.

Adamovich wrote in both Russian and Belarusian, and had a wide influence over Belarusian writers of the following generations, not least Sviatlana Aliakseevich, who emulates his model of conveying realities through literary fiction, often based on actual events or popular memories. Adamovich died on January 26, 1996, ironically the same day that Stanislav Shushkevich was ousted from power in Belarus as a result of charges brought by a parliamentary committee on corruption chaired by Lukashenka.

Sviatlana Aliakseevich: the “Cultural and Mental Backwardness of Our People”

Aliakseevich, born in May 1948 in Ivano-Frankivsk to Belarusian father and Ukrainian mother, was raised in Belarus and has written on the Second World War, the Soviet war in Afghanistan and Chernobyl. On the former, she wrote about the experiences of women and children, and like her mentors, she added provided realistic accounts.

Most of the works of Aliakseevich were published outside Belarus and she lamented Belarusian society under Lukashenka. In an interview Yulia Shymko and I held with her in April 1998, she stated: “Certainly it would be preferable to have Vaclav Havel as president, someone who permits society to progress without provoking its worst features. But, on the other hand, Lukashenka simply reflects the cultural and mental backwardness of our people.”

✘ In 2000 she moved abroad, living in France, Sweden, and Germany, but returned in 2011. On 8 October 2015 when she was [awarded the Nobel Prize](#) for Literature, the Belarusian president could hardly ignore her and offered grudging praise, but shortly afterward the two resumed hostilities: the president accused her (October 25) of throwing “a bucket of dirt” on Belarus. She retorted that her critiques targeted “the regime, not its people.”

These three writers represent the conscience of Belarus. They laboured under complex conditions that were not eased by the collapse of the Soviet state. The state tried to uphold many ideals of the USSR, not least its interpretation and memory of the war.

Lukashenka personally concealed the inquiry into the mass

shootings at Kurapaty, just as he did the effects of Chernobyl by declaring that the catastrophe had been overcome—symbolised by the construction of Belarus' first nuclear power station on the border with Lithuania.

Even these featured writers rarely highlighted the destruction of virtually the entire Belarusian cultural elite in 1937-38, which has sparked the recent demonstrations. Yet it is thanks to their writings that an alternative perspective of the Soviet past remains.

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Belarus, Ukraine, Russia React to Alexievich's Nobel Prize

When Svetlana Alexievich won the 2015 Nobel Prize in literature, three countries at once tried to claim her success. Headlines across the post-Soviet space called her a “representative of the Russian literature”, a “writer born in Ukraine”, and a “Belarusian writer.”

Yet not only congratulatory remarks, but also hatred, envy, and accusations followed. Reactions were unequivocally positive only in Ukraine. President Petro Poroshenko, the first politician to congratulate Alexievich, wrote: “Wherever

we are, whatever language we speak or write – we always remain Ukrainian.”

The award generated mixed opinions in Belarus, with some political activists and literary critics [questioning](#) Alexievich’s Belarusian identity because she writes in Russian. In Russia itself some disowned the writer for criticising Putin’s policies and called the decision political. Such divergent reactions to Alexievich’s work reflect deepening divisions in post-Soviet space and betray Belarusians’ insecurities about their national identity.

Inventing a New Literary Genre

Alexievich is the first Belarusian writer to receive the prize, which places her next to such world-renowned writers as Albert Camus, Gabriel García Márquez, Ernest Hemingway, and Boris Pasternak. She will receive the \$960,000 prize in an official ceremony on 10 December.

The Swedish Academy credited Alexievich for inventing “a new kind of literary genre” and praised “her polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time.”

Each of Alexievich’s books draws on conversations with 500 to 700 individuals, edited by the writer and presented as first-person monologues. “I chose a genre where human voices speak for themselves,” wrote Alexievich on her [web site](#). “Real people speak in my books about the main events of the age such as the war, the Chernobyl disaster, and the downfall of a  great empire.”

Her first two books focus on the memories of World War II. In *The War’s Unwomanly Face* (1985), Soviet women share their

experiences from the front lines. People who survived the war as children tell their stories in *The Last Witnesses: the Book of Unchildlike Stories* (1985).

In *Zinky Boys* (1989) readers hear from former soldiers as well as the mothers and widows of those who returned in zinc coffins from the 1979-1989 Soviet war in Afghanistan.

In *Voices from Chernobyl* (1997), we hear stories of the people scarred by the worst nuclear power plant disaster in the world, which contaminated one fifth of Belarusian territory and killed or sickened nearly half a million Belarusians, Russians, and Ukrainians.

Alexievich's most recent book, *Second-Hand Time* (2013), presents individual narratives about the Soviet past, recorded by the writer throughout the 1990s and 2000s.

Alexievich's Admirers and Detractors

Alexievich has been a favourite to win the Nobel Prize for several years now, generating mixed reactions in Belarus. This time, even President Alyaksandr Lukashenka congratulated the writer, albeit after some delay. He tried claiming credit for Alexievich's success at a meeting of construction workers in Astravets, Hrodna region, on 10 October: "This means that whatever your political views are, you can ... express your opinion in Belarus."

Yet not all Belarusians celebrate Alexievich's victory. Some criticise her for writing in Russian and for covering Soviet rather than Belarusian history. Zmitser Dashkevich, a leader of the Young Front opposition movement, reacted on Facebook by asking: "Will Nobel Prize finish off Belarusian culture?" He claimed that "while Nobel laureates bark, the language

continues to live!” Belarusian writer Sviatlana Kurs in a Belsat interview said that, as a “fully Belarusian person as far as the language and culture are concerned”, she would have been happier if a Belarusian-language writer had won the prize. 

Paradoxically, Alexievich incurred even more criticism from the Russian side, although she did receive congratulations from Vladimir Grigoriev, Russia's deputy minister of the press. Alexievich's attitudes toward the Russian government and support for the Ukrainian side in the conflict angered some Russian critics.

Dmitry Smirnov, a reporter with the Kremlin Presidential press pool, tweeted that Alexievich won the prize for “hating Russia.” Vladimir Sungonkin, the editor in chief of the Russian tabloid “Komsomolskaya Pravda”, claimed in a 9 October interview with Echo Moskvyy that anti-Russian attitudes helped Alexievich win the award.

Why Alexievich Writes in Russian

Alexievich's biography speaks to the fluid borders and complex identities in post-WWII Eastern Europe. The writer was born in 1948 to a Belarusian father and Ukrainian mother in what is now the city of Ivano-Frankivsk in Ukraine. Alexievich's family then moved to Belarus, where the writer grew up, studied, and worked.

When asked about her choice to write in Russian at a press conference with Nasha Niva on 9 October, Alexievich explained, “I am writing about a man-utopia, a red person. This utopia lasted for 70 years; another 20 years are spent on getting away from this utopia. And this utopia spoke Russian.” Indeed, heroes of Alexievich's books are Belarusians, but also

Ukrainians, Russians, and Tatars. They all are products of the Soviet system and their shared Soviet past obscures their ethnic identities.

At the same time, Alexievich expressed gratitude to her teachers, Ales Adamovich and Vasil Bykau, both of whom wrote in Belarusian. She also said that while she loved the world of great Russian literature and ballet, “the world of Putin, Stalin” was not her world.

The world of Putin and Stalin is not my world. ~Svetlana Alexievich

In some sense Alexievich’s work is much more representative of Belarus than the work of many Belarusian-language writers. In the 2009 Census, 70% of Belarusians declared Russian “the language spoken at home.” Alexievich’s use of Russian reflects this reality of today's Belarus.

In an interview on 8 October, before the Swedish Academy announced the Prize winner, writer and politician Uladzimir Niakliaeu praised Alexievich for spearheading the breakthrough of Belarusian literature into European literature. He offered a pithy rejoinder to Alexievich’s detractors: “Envy is translated into all languages of the world.”

Major Independent Publisher under Attack in Belarus

On 9 January the Economic Court of Minsk charged the Lohvinaŭ book store with unauthorised book sales and ordered the confiscation of its whole year’s profit. This is perhaps the

largest fine ever received by civil society in Belarus.

Until 2013 Lohvanaŭ was also the largest independent publisher in Belarus and one of the chief supporters of Belarusian language authors. However, the authorities withdrew its license after the store published a photo album, which the siloviki considered as extremist. In reality, it only contained photos of large protests.

Ironically, the persecution of the publisher happens at a time when the regime is evidently implementing a new national identity policy. Fearing the “Russian world” on Belarusian borders, the elites have demonstrated support for the Belarusian language and culture in their latest speeches. The regime has always seen civil society as the enemy, but now it should realise that it is undermining its potential partner in the building of national identity.

A Major Supporter of Belarusian Literature

In December 2014 the Ministry of Information ordered the Minsk Tax Inspection to check on the Lohvinaŭ bookstore. The inspection service stated that Lohvinaŭ was breaking the law by selling books without registration. According to Belarusian law, all booksellers are required to be registered with the Ministry of Information. The Economic Court of Minsk supported the charges and on 9 January the bookstore was fined \$350 and its entire \$56,000 income for 2014 was confiscated.



The Lohvinaŭ publishing house, a non-profit cultural organization, has been one of the chief supporters of Belarusian language authors. The firm brought in little profit and worked more like a self-financed cultural organisation.

In recent years, Lohvinau has become a central independent literary and intellectual platform in Minsk. Book launching

events and book readings took place almost every day. The publishing house also attracted many tourists, who could find there rare Belarusian books, banned from official bookstores.

At a press conference on 20 January Ihar Lohvinaŭ, the director of the store, complained that Belarus has the most absurd legislation with regards to book publishing and trade. Around the world book publishing is usually subsidised by the government, while in Belarus a private entity has to use its own funds and on top faces constant repression. Lohvinaŭ said he had applied for registration six times over the course of the year, but each time received rejections on trivial grounds, such as indicating the wrong zip code.

Lohvinaŭ urged the public to help him to pay off the drastic fine. If the publisher fails to collect the necessary sum, the firm will go bankrupt and Lohvinau may face criminal charges for his inability to pay. Activists have [launched a web site](#) where anyone can donate to save the bookstore.

“Extremist” Literature Threatens the Regime

Belarusian authorities thoroughly control book publishing as a potential source of anti-government literature. Books which negatively portray the regime risk being considered extremist and banned from public distribution. Editions which show alternative historical view or discuss symbols regarded as oppositional also face censorship.

In 2013 the authorities used one of such cases to withdraw the publishing licence from Lohvinaŭ. The court charged the publisher with extremism for printing album [Press Photo 2011](#). The album contained photos of the 2010 post-election as well as the 2011 [“silent protests”](#).

A year earlier, in 2012 the authorities targeted another bookseller, Alieś Jaŭdacha, who sold books by post. The persecution started after he initiated distribution of a book about the Youth Front – a famous opposition youth

organisation. Accused of conducting illegal enterprise, Alieś Jaŭdacha was charged with a year of incarceration and awarded a large fine.

Similarly, in 2012 the authorities confiscated over 5,000 books from independent publisher and bookseller Valier Bulhakaŭ. According to the authorities, the books projected extremist ideas. In reality, they presented an alternative view of World War II, inconsistent with that of the government.

Several people [were sacked](#) from Hrodna University for publishing a textbook supported by a Polish grant. The textbook contained [Belarusian symbols](#) that are not officially recognised by the government.

A New National Identity Strategy

The prosecution of Lohvinaŭ clearly diverges from the new policy on supporting Belarusian identity [initiated in 2014](#). On 20 January at the 42th Congress of the pro-government youth organisation BRSM Lukashenka stated that only Belarusian (as opposed to Russian) culture, language and history can help forge national identity.

In concordance with Lukashenka's statement, the Minister of Information Lilija Ananič encouraged parents and schools to teach children both official languages. As an effect of the previous policies of hampering the Belarusian language, many children don't speak the language on daily basis and view it as foreign.

✘ On 21 January the recently appointed Minister of Education Michail Žuraŭkoŭ expressed the Ministry's intention to foster the use of the Belarusian language in education. Žuraŭkoŭ promised that in future half of all subjects in Belarusian schools would be taught in Belarusian. According to the most recent policy, geography and history in schools will be taught only in Belarusian.

The events in Ukraine, where the military conflict has sharpened the divide between the Russian and Ukrainian identities, alerted the Belarusian authorities to the need for a new national identity strategy. Years of suppression of Belarusian language and culture have formed a society with a weak national consciousness and strong pro-Russian sentiments, vulnerable to Russian TV propaganda.

To eliminate the Russian threat, the authorities have evidently decided to launch a new strategy of for consolidating the Belarusian nation. Even Lukashenka himself has publicly acknowledged that his previous attempts based on Slavic ideology have failed.

Civil Society: Enemy or Partner?

Belarusian writer Uladzimir Arloŭ called governmental moves against Lohvinaŭ ridiculous since most senior Belarusian officials claim the importance of national values, language and culture. "Maybe the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing?" Arloŭ said. "If the authorities indeed want to support Belarusian language and culture, they should take Lohvinaŭ's side. Otherwise their claims are meaningless."

Nevertheless, the reasoning of the authorities appears quite understandable. The government simply wants to eliminate any areas of public life that it cannot control directly, regardless of their nature and implications. Over the course of Lukashenka's regime total control has been installed in all spheres of public life. Whatever their focus, civil society groups were dismissed as hostile and restricted. Searching for enemies at home has become an established practise for Belarusian bureaucrats.

Now, the enemy clearly lies outside, not inside, and the authorities have to accept the civil society as its best partner in strengthening Belarusians' national identity.

Prisoners of Authoritarianism: Alexievich and her Critics

Observers named Belarusian writer Svetlana Alexievich among favorites for the Nobel Prize again this year. Alexievich's books come out in 35 languages. Her trophies include German, American, Polish, Swedish, Austrian and international awards, but not a single distinction from Belarus.

Instead of cheering for their acclaimed compatriot, the Belarusian blogosphere bristled with indignation upon hearing the Nobel nomination news. But far from lacking national pride, Alexievich's critics denounce Alexievich for writing in Russian and covering Soviet rather than Belarusian history. More than 60% of participants in an [online poll](#) by the Belarusian Writers Union believe Alexievich will not get the award.

This surprising lack of patriotism for Alexievich's work results from the two decades of authoritarianism and suppression of Belarusian culture in independent Belarus. Alexievich's critics are driven by political reasons, rather than for the quality of her writing. In an unfree country, every decision becomes political. The politicization of Belarusian literature risks undermining the quality of the national literary heritage for decades to come.

What is wrong with Alexievich

Most condemn Alexievich for writing in Russian. For example, Gleb Labadzenka's [writes](#) for Naviny.by, "What can be simpler?

If it's written in Belarusian – it is Belarusian literature. If the work is in Russian – it is Russian literature." Similar views are expressed by civic campaign [Budzma](#) and [Belarusian Solidarity Platform](#). The livejournal by_mova even conducted a [poll](#) on whether Alexievich is a Belarusian writer.

Many critics reference Alexievich's interview with Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung from this past summer, in which [she calls Belarusian "rural and literarily unripe"](#).[□] Although Alexievich later denied this statement, the uproar continues to reverberate in Belarusian independent media, with the Belarusian independent newspaper Narodnaya Volya even referring to the existence of an online petition against Alexievich's candidacy.

The same detractors fault Alexievich for focusing on the Soviet past of Belarus rather than addressing Belarus' independent history. Indeed, Alexievich's work has focused on issues such as the Chernobyl tragedy ("Chernobyl prayer"), the war in Afghanistan ("Zinky boys"), women soldiers in WWII ("War's Unwomanly Face"), or the syndrome of *homo sovieticus* ("Time Second Hand").

The critics have a different view of these historical narratives and blame Alexievich for uncovering the ugly side of Belarusian history instead of glorifying Belarus as a nation. Sevyaryn Kviatkouski writes on Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty blog, "Alexievich is not only physically absent from Belarus... [but] to this day mentally lives in the USSR". Perhaps the strongest denouncement of Alexievich came from Zianon Pazniak, leader of the Christian Conservative party. Already in 2009, Pazniak called Alexievich a liar and a belarusophobe in a blogpost evocatively titled "About moral depravity".

The Belarusian regime also disapproves of Alexievich, which may actually be a plus – at least in the eyes of the foreign observers. Her books do not come out in Belarus or appear

in school curricula.

What is wrong with Belarus

□□Language choice and the interpretation of history grow increasingly politicized in Belarus. Just as the Belarusian opposition failed to unite in the presence of a common opponent, so the Belarusian cultural elite does not rally around a common goal of advancing Belarusian culture. Arguably, the West helps feed this conflict by rewarding political martyrdom. The very existence of numerous Western freedom and courage awards fosters a competition for victimhood and mutual accusations in Belarus.

Most nominations are contested in Belarus as they pit opposition and civil society leaders against one another. Oppression by the Lukashenka regime has become a sort of the rite of passage, and many celebrated works see Belarus through the eyes of the West, often exaggerating its problems. The recent film "Viva Belarus", celebrated in the international media, exemplifies catering to Western tastes by [exaggerating the dark side of Belarusian realities](#).

The Belarusian government benefits from the status quo, and even encourages internal discord among the cultural elite by supporting, for example, a second, ideologically "correct" Writers' Union. In short, living under authoritarianism and competing for Western attention forces many promising artists to dabble into politics and breeds unhealthy competition and envy.

Learning from history

The tragic history of Belarus – centuries of wars and imperial domination – partly explains propensity for mixing politics and art. The first known "language wars" among the Belarusian cultural elite date back to the 19th century. Back then, in order to prove the language's viability, playwright and poet Dunin-Marcinkiewicz had his peasant characters speak

Belarusian – an important innovation at the time.

The next generation of writers, while sharing the same goal of promoting the Belarusian language, criticized Marcinkieicz's decision as depicting Belarusian language as rural and immature.

Uneasy compromises lie at the very foundation of Belarusian independent state. For example, during World War II, one group of Belarusians sought to establish an independent Belarus under German tutelage. They succeeded in founding Belarusian People's Republic (BNR) in 1918 Vilnius, but were later confronted by another group on the Soviet side of the border as German collaborators.

The fine line between art and propaganda

Fast-forwarding to contemporary Belarus, Lukashenka himself tries playing the nationalism card by emphasizing that he stands up to Russia. For better or for worse, neither ethnic nationalism of the political forces such as the Belarusian National Front nor Lukashenka's populist variety seem to find much support among the Belarusian masses. According to the [poll](#) by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) in January 2013, over 40% of respondents support neither Lukashenka nor the opposition.

In an interview with Russian magazine Ogoniok last month, Alexievich explained the “red man”, homo sovieticus, as follows: “You cannot listen, when you are in an argument you are ready to destroy the opponent. You have a very flat view of the world. Your world is black and white.”

This is a good description of Belarus's contentious and dogmatic cultural atmosphere, in which both the regime's opponents and supporters alike practice the denunciation of writers who do not follow the political script. At the end of the day, both Alexievich and her critics remain prisoners to Belarus' Soviet past and authoritarian present, and would

achieve better outcomes by realizing their common goals.

With Lukashenka having [won the IgNoble prize](#) this year for “making public applause illegal and having arrested a one-armed man for the offence” Belarus badly needs positive publicity. The two nominations of Belarusians for the Nobel prizes – political activist Ales Bialacki, affiliated with Viasna Human Rights center, and Sviatlana Alexievich – should have evoked more solidarity from fellow Belarusians.

Arnold McMillin: Belarusian Literature from the 1970s to the Present Day

A new monograph, *Writing in a Cold Climate: Belarusian Literature from the 1970s to the Present Day*, by Prof Arnold McMillin, a distinguished researcher of Belarusian literature, has been published in the UK.

This is a pioneering work of such kind in English, up-to-date and reflecting on Belarusian literature through the eyes of the western scholarship. The book launch will take place in London on 25 February, 5.30 pm (Masaryk Room, floor 4, SSEES, 16 Taverton St, WC1H 0BW).

In the publisher's words:

Belarusian literature, which survives and, indeed, flourishes in the face of unfavourable domestic political conditions, deserves to be far better known in the West. It continues to flourish as an important aspect of national consciousness in a semi-denationalized state, and at its best can compare with

the literature of its Slav neighbours including Russia.

The present monograph, the first of its kind, attempts to describe and assess the work of nearly two hundred writers and literary groups, ranging over poetry, prose and drama. The coverage includes provincial as well as metropolitan literature and groupings, and pays particular attention to seven outstanding authors of the period, to historical writing which is particularly important in a country where history has been suppressed and denied, and to the youngest generation of talented poets and prose writers born in the early 1980s at the very end of the Soviet Union's existence.

The book is extensively illustrated with examples of poetry in Belarusian with English translation, and of prose and drama translated into English. There is a comprehensive Bibliography of some seventeen hundred primary and secondary sources, and an extensive Index of Names to aid access to individual writers covered.

The book is available on order from [Amazon](#).
ISBN: 978 1906540 68 5 Hardback 1136 pages.

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