

# Blacklisted Musicians Gather A Large Crowd of Belarusians Abroad

Last Saturday, the famous Belarusian band Lyapis Trubeckoy gathered over ten thousand fans, mostly young people who came from Belarus, at a concert in the Siemens Arena in Vilnius.

Today a number of prominent Belarusian musicians face serious difficulties when they want to perform for the Belarusian public. Playing concerts in neighbouring countries is one of their solutions.

Tickets for the concert of Lyapis were sold out almost immediately after sales began, as were tickets for buses and trains going to Vilnius. Lyapis Trubeckoj, which is the most famous of all Belarusian bands, has fans all over the former Soviet Union. Unknown Object

Their success stretches back to the late 1990s. Last weekend, they presented their first album fully in the Belarusian language.

Almost eleven thousand people, primarily fans from Belarus, attended the concert last Saturday. Already on Friday morning long queues formed on the Belarus-Lithuania border. Hundreds of fans were also waiting to cross the border on foot. Despite the long waiting hours, almost all fans managed to get to the concerts on time. The concert area was fully packed, and in the end, the concert felt like it was being held in Belarus rather than in Lithuania's capital.

The lead singer of the band, Siarhei Michalok, mentioned the current events in Ukraine throughout the show. While showing pictures of the crackdown of protests in Kiev, he referred to people in Belarus that, much like those protesting in Ukraine,

wanted to live in an independent country where nobody dictated to them how they should live.

Michalok compared the current situation in Belarus to gangrene that started there and was then spread all over the former Soviet Union. He condemned those who said that people with similar thoughts were supporters of the CIA or paid off by American money. Although he chose not to name any politicians, he made his point of view very clear.

### **Liavon Volski in Cologne**

For several Belarusian musicians, it is also easier to organise a concert abroad rather than at home. In October, the Belarusian singer Liavon Volski gave his first concert in Cologne. Liavon Volski is an icon of Belarusian music, the leader of two of the most famous Belarusian bands of all time. Both groups have been banned from giving concerts in Belarus for some time now. Nevertheless, Volski remains an influential artist and critic of the Belarusian regime.

Liavon Volski has been part of the Belarusian music scene for more than 30 years. He started in the 1980s with the band "Mroja" (or dream in English) which he renamed "NRM" (an abbreviation for Independent Republic of Dreams) in the 1990s. He is now also the head of the Belarusian Ska band "Krambambulya" that brings together elements of folk, ska and rock music.

Ingo Petz, freelance journalist and expert on Belarus, organised the concert. The day before Volski and Pavel Arakelian, who accompanied him on flute and saxophone, played in the German town Solingen at a festival of prosecuted arts 'Festival der verfolgten Künste'.

The musician, son of Belarusian writer Artur Volski, has moreover been successful with a series of solo projects like 'Sauka and Gryshka' for Radio Liberty in which a government

clerk and an opposition activist discuss political events like the 2006 gas crisis with a refined sense of humour in Belarusian. Volski takes up topics important to all Belarusians and that touch on their everyday lives.

Apart from the contents of his songs, Liavon Volski sings in Belarusian and therefore brings the Belarusian language to Belarusian households that usually only use Russian. Volski personifies a culture where many young Belarusians are readily protesting against the current political situation.

Moreover, Volski's songs appeared on the soundtrack for the film 'Zhyvie Belarus!' (Long live Belarus) made by the Polish director Krzysztof Lukaszewicz. This movie deals with the events surrounding the 2010 presidential elections from the perspective of young opposition activist Franak Viachorka. Volski and his bands are often associated with the opposition and critics of the regime.

### **Blacklists and pressure at home**

Giving concerts in Belarus has become more difficult for many artists. The Belarusian authorities consider them a threat to the regime. In their songs, some bands criticise the current political and economic system in Belarus. They often express the thoughts and feelings of a whole generation and put into words what remains unsaid in the controlled media. Concerts as a potential mass gathering may constitute herds of resistance against the current regime.

According to some sources, almost 60 Belarusian and international artists find themselves on an unofficial 'black list' that is regularly circulated to all state media. It includes actors like Kevin Spacey and Jude Law who have supported Belarus' democratisation movement and it also includes Belarusian singers, writers and painters. Those whose name are on this list cannot perform in public or appear in the media.

Hanna Volskaja, manager of the band Krambambulya and wife of Ljavon Volski, a famous Belarusian singer, calls this list absurd. It prevents Krambambulya from performing under their band name, but tolerates concerts of the same band under a different name.

The system of black lists started up back in 2006, when some Belarusian rock bands supported the opposition after the presidential elections. During the period of liberalisation from 2008 to 2010, in accordance with a gentleman's agreement reached between the authorities, the bands agreed they would refrain from performing at meetings of the opposition's meetings. As a consequence, bands like Krambambulya could once again give concerts in Belarus. The state media published articles about them, an official sign that those bands were no longer considered 'forbidden'.

With the economic crisis that arose in 2011, a new, more absurd version of the black list became public. This list was given to media outlets without a signature or any sign of official ownership. However, the blacklisted artists may no longer appear in public in Belarus, as they usually they simply cannot find a place to give a concert.

State institutions refuse and private venues are also worried to anger authorities by hosting undesirable musicians. For example, in January 2013, the vocalist of the group Dziecuki was warned by the authorities that the musicians should not go near the Jolly Roger café where a concert was planned or they would be arrested.

At that point of time, the Belarusian authorities had two choices: either host concerts of bands that have already shown their readiness not to mingle in politics – or let thousands of fans travel abroad where they will gather to hear the music.

By gathering thousands abroad, the bands will achieve an ever

greater status of heroes and the Belarusians will have the possibility to sincerely compare the lives of those in Kiev, Warsaw or Vilnius to that of Belarus. Internet broadcasts of their concerts will attract even more attention. That may serve a goal runs against what the Belarusian authorities are hoping to achieve.

This coming Saturday Lyapis will play a concert in Kiev.