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**Belarusian Studies at the 56th Annual Convention  
of the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian  
Studies (“Liberation”). Boston, Massachusetts,  
USA. 21–24 November 2024**

Belarusian studies has long struggled with visibility and recognition within Slavic studies, with the absence of Belarusian topics on major academic platforms like the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES) contributing to its marginalization. However, growing interest in scholarship on Belarus, particularly following the political upheavals of 2020, has sparked renewed efforts to establish a more prominent presence in the academy.

The creation of a dedicated Belarusian stream for ASEEES 2024, spearheaded by scholars Sasha Razor and Jenya Mironava, marks a significant step in increasing the visibility of Belarus in academic discourse. Mironava, in an interview, reflected on her own academic journey, recalling how the lack of Belarus-focused research options led to initial reluctance to pursue Belarusian topics earlier in her career. Yet, as political events unfolded and the need to counter the Russification of Slavic curricula of the American academy became urgent, the importance of Belarusian representation became clear. This led to Mironava’s collaboration with Razor, an active advocate for Belarusian studies.

Their efforts have resulted in a meaningful shift at ASEEES, with the introduction of the Belarusian stream offering a variety of scholars – both in the United States and abroad – a platform and fostering a sense of community. The success of this initiative is evident in the increased number of panels, roundtables, papers and presentations dedicated to Belarus, signaling growing momentum within the field.

This report is divided into four parts: Panels (on which papers on a shared theme are presented), Roundtables (where a shared theme is discussed),

Individual papers (Belarusian-themed papers presented at non-Belarusian-themed panels) and a report on the literary event “Voices from Belarus: Conversation, Readings and Discussion.”

## **Panels**

### **1. Belarus II: Belarusian Politics after 2020: From Repressions to Liberation**

Chair: David Roger Marples (University of Alberta)

1. Belarus-EU Relations: Challenges and Opportunities / Victoria Leukavets (Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies)
2. Belarusian Political System: The Effect of Mentality or Applied Geopolitics? / Andrzej Pieczewski and Kacper Maciej Szpotarski (University of Łódź)
3. Women in Belarusian Politics: Unseen Architects and Pivotal Change-Makers / Katsiaryna Shmatsina (Independent Scholar)

Discussant: David Roger Marples (University of Alberta)

The panel’s main focus is the Republic of Belarus in the period of independence. It covers the loss of democracy and the strengthening dictatorship under Lukashenka as well as the complex and variable relations of Belarus with the European Union. Particular attention is paid to the situation following the presidential elections of 2020, when the country came very close to a form of liberation, as thousands supported the opposition campaign of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, and tens of thousands massed in the streets to protest the fabricated election results. Though these protests did not succeed in bringing about a change of regime, they clearly affected the mindset of many Belarusians. Some chose to join the Kalinouski Regiment fighting on the side of Ukraine against the Russian invasion. Others fled abroad. The situation that emerged is that of a divided nation, subjected to daily state propaganda and a coordinated effort by Moscow and official Minsk to propagate a strong anti-Western and anti-NATO narrative, trying to regain the initiative that was taken away from the regime in August 2020. Thus while some Belarusians continue to support Lukashenka, however passively, others have taken to arms – for instance, arguing that a victory for Ukraine is the best way to bring change in Belarus. Others have attempted to assemble alternative structures such as the Transitional Cabinet, the Free Belarus movement, and others. The future remains uncertain and repressions have continued, but the situation may not be as bleak as it appears.

## **2. Belarus III: Partisans, Empire, Revolution: Building the Belarusian Nation through Literature, Music, and Teaching of History**

Chair: Jakob Wunderwald (University of Potsdam)

- a. *Between Belarusian Partisans and The Beatles: Brezhnev's Nationality Policy and Globalization of Soviet Pop in the Music of the VIA 'Pesniary' / Lizaveta Lysenka (University of Bonn)*
- b. *Beyond the 'Partisan Republic:' The Self-Portrait of Late Soviet Belarus in the Republic's Media / Natalya Chernysheva (Queen Mary University of London)*
- c. *Employing the Distant Past for Modern Nation-Building: Teaching the History of a Long-Defunct Empire in Secondary Education in Belarus / Yuliya Brel-Fournier (University of Delaware)*
- d. *Reconsidering Revolution: Uladzimir Karatkevich's Critique of Post-Stalinism via the 19th Century / Jakob Wunderwald (University of Potsdam)*

Discussant: Alexander Wöll (University of Potsdam)

National liberation in the Soviet space has generally been treated within the framework of dissident movements with a distinctly anti-Soviet program. In the case of Belarus, the political failure of such movements has led to the retrospective assessment of a “weak nationalism” or an “unformed nation”. To problematize this notion, the interdisciplinary panel aims to discuss specific modes of nation-building in Belarus during Soviet and post-Soviet times. Literary works, films, and popular music from the late socialist era embody the intertwining of Soviet nationality policies and the critical assertion of a romantic version of national history and culture. Several, sometimes contradictory historical narratives of the Belarusian nation are being constructed during that era, bringing together WWII partisans, 19th-century revolutionaries, and medieval empires. Their fluidity overcomes the imposed strict division between “Soviet colonial” and “liberated national” Belarusian identity. Where do those narratives stem from? How do they intersect? How does this historical legacy still inform any thinking on the Belarusian nation?

## **3. Belarus IV: Dispossession and Disruption: Belarusian Professional, Religious, and Vulnerable Communities in Exile**

Chair: Sofie Bedford (Uppsala University)

- a. *Solidarity Preempted: Teacher Professional Identity and Resistance in Belarus / Kate Antanovich (Pennsylvania State University)*
- b. *Exodus: The Impact of Migration from Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine after 2020 on Christian Communities in Poland / Ksenia Medvedeva (Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences)*

- c. Property as a Problem: Responses to Dispossession among Repressed Belarusians / Andrei Vazyanau (European Humanities University)
  - d. Resistance and Care: Belarusian Disability and Pensioners' Communities in Exile / Volha Verbilovich (University of Massachusetts Amherst)
- Discussant: Sofie Bedford (Uppsala University)

The panel "Dispossession and Disruption: Belarusian Professional, Religious and Vulnerable Communities in Exile" was chaired by Sofie Bedford, Uppsala University and featured four presentations. All of the papers, in different ways and from varying perspectives, successfully managed to highlight the resilience and agency of Belarusians, with a special focus on those currently living in exile. The panel also brought much needed attention to specific vulnerabilities of parts of Belarusian society caused by the authoritarian context and the repressive regime. Based on their ongoing research, the panelists suggested the need to reconceptualize resistance in authoritarian contexts like Belarus. They illustrated how focus on less examined spaces such as schools or religious institutions and frequently invisible practices like care and personal artefact preservation enhances our understanding of how ordinary citizens challenge the authoritarian state and resist its logic. While political exile is traditionally conceptualized as a spatially fixed community, the presented research projects show how Belarusian exiles constantly move and stay connected across borders and diverse social groups relying on the mediated networks of support formed from below as well as by various informal agreements, duties, and promises.

#### 4. Belarusian Culture II: Literature

Chair: Roman Koropecyk (University of California, Los Angeles)

- a. The Emergence of Belarusian-Language Folk Drama: The *Codex of Orsha* and Structural Analysis of Academic Drama *Intermezzi* / Alesia Mankouskaya (University College London)
- b. On Belarusian Russophone Literature After 2020 / Jenya Mironava (Harvard University)
- c. The Discord and the Horror: Tony Lashden Decolonizing Belarusian Political Trauma in 'Chorny Les' / Yuliya Charnyshova (Yale University)

Discussant: Jenya Mironava (Harvard University).

Alesia Mankouskaya presented on Early Modern drama in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and focused on the vernacular (Belarusian, Ukrainian) *intermezzi* that punctuated otherwise Latin productions. Turning to contemporary literature (namely, Russophone literature produced by Belarusians),

Jenya Mironova highlighted in her talk a number of Belarusian poets who, following the August 2020 protests, problematized the linguistic and cultural boundaries between Russian and Belarusian in what Mironava argues to be an anti-colonial Russophone poetics; Yuliya Charnyshova picked up on similar threads but focused on the postcolonial implications of violence against the environment and migrants in her discussion of Tony Lashden's recent collection of eco-critical prose *Čorny Les*. No discussant comments were read, but a lively discussion followed the three presentations. Topics of discussion included theoretical models of the de- or anti-colonial as relevant to Belarusian literature; the relevance of postcolonial approaches from Ukrainian Studies and African literatures was introduced, as were examples—in Belarusian and the broader literatures of Central East Europe—of using a language associated with a history of violence to form an aesthetic critique of those very colonial practices.

### **5. Belarusian Diaspora and Exiled Civil Society: Re-establishment, Old and New Divides**

Chair: Jenya Mironava, (Harvard University)

a. "Exiled Belarusian Civil Society in the Context of War in Ukraine." / Tatsiana Chulitskaya (Vilnius University)

Discussant: Natallia Hardziyenka (Belarusian Institute of Arts and Sciences, New York)

The panel opens space for discussion about the moments of empowerment, (re)establishment and (re)invention, as well as the deep struggles Belarusian diaspora communities and civil society in exile are experiencing after the 2020 uprising and with the beginning of the Russian full-scale war in Ukraine.

Until the presidential election of 2020 and the mass protests after, Belarusian society was mainly characterized as apolitical, while organized civil society in Belarus was primarily seen as weak and marginalized. However, the political crisis of 2020 caused unexpected protest and mass mobilization that resulted in the appearance of diverse new social movements and grassroots initiatives, and the activation of the previously existing institutionalized civil society. After the Belarusian protests were heavily suppressed by authorities and mass repression started in the country, the civil activists and initiatives had no choice but to adapt themselves to the worsening environment. Some left the country and continued their activities abroad; some decided to stay and perform smaller-scale underground activities on the ground. Nevertheless, Belarusian political and civic activists in exile were able to create physical and virtual platforms and spaces for the newly emerged pro-democratic Belarusian diaspora. However, the war has changed previously

mostly positive public attitudes to Belarusians in democratic countries. Now, Belarusian opposition and civil society have to deal with the consequences of these changes, first and foremost, in the countries where most Belarusian organizations and activists are based: Poland, Lithuania and Georgia.

Based on thirty-seven semi-structured interviews conducted from February to July 2023, this paper explored the current state of Belarusian civil society in exile within the changing regional environment and the problems they face. Chulitskaya began with a description of the process of relocation and (re-)establishment of Belarusian civil society abroad and proceeded with analyzing their activities and the challenges they faced. Then, she discussed their reactions and actions regarding Russia's military aggression, and finally, summarized her findings related to the transborder/transnational experience of Belarusian civil society.

In her comments on Chulitskaya's paper, Natallia Hardziyenka offered a brief historical overview of emigration from Belarus and, in particular, highlighted parallels between the current wave of Belarusian emigration and the diaspora that emerged during World War II, noting that both groups fled due to fear of repression and, struggling both to maintain their cultural identity and advocate for democracy in Belarus, faced challenges in being understood and recognized in Western countries.

The discussion centered around the questions of whether history can provide insight into the challenges and opportunities faced by the current generation of Belarusian emigres; the similarities and differences between different "centers" of Belarusians abroad, e.g. London, Vilnius; the historical and contemporary role of the Church and different religious communities, including Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Greek Catholic groups in Belarus.

## **6. Identity, Resistance, and Solidarity: Decolonizing Narratives in Belarusian Cinema**

Chair: Sasha Razor (University of California, Santa Barbara)

- a. Belarusian Horror Cinema through Postcolonial Lens / Volha Isakava (Central Washington University)
- b. Cinema at the Crossroads: Belarusian Uprising of 2020 in Documentary Films / Sasha Razor (University of California, Santa Barbara)
- c. Resisting Patriarchy in Contemporary Belarusian Cinema: Establishing the Female Gaze and Voice in the Films by Female Directors / Olga Klimova (University of Pittsburgh)
- d. The Art of Survival: Practices of Independent Belarusian Film Production and Distribution in an Authoritarian State in the 2000s / Andrei Kureichyk (Yale University)

Discussant: Sasha Razor (University of California, Santa Barbara)

This panel offers an exploration of Belarusian cinema, focusing on its unique contributions to the ongoing decolonization efforts in the region and centering themes of identity and resistance. The papers provide a comprehensive look into contemporary Belarusian cinema ranging from mainstream genre productions to documentary and feature films, including women's cinema and underground cinema. The panel addresses the following important questions: (1) how cinema bears witness and documents Belarusian resistance as a decolonial movement; (2) what insights cinema can offer on colonial legacies and complex structures of national identity and belonging, including engaging "feminist optics" and women's "horizontal solidarity"; (3) how independent and underground cinema in Belarus can find an audience while defying the totalitarian state.

These papers collectively examine the role of Belarusian cinema in challenging colonial narratives and authoritarian control: from exploring identity and belonging through horror genre, to documenting political resistance and engaging women's voices in arts and civil society, to highlighting the resilience of independent filmmaking in totalitarian conditions. These questions are particularly salient today, when Belarusian arts have to contend with the oppressive political climate, Russian imperialism and complicity of Lukashenka's regime in the war in Ukraine, in addition to the hardships of forced immigration, and challenges and accomplishments of diasporic cultural production, which includes establishment of the Belarusian Independent Film Academy in exile.

## **7. New Directions in Belarusian Visual Studies**

Chair: A. M. LaVey (New York Public Library)

- a. Art as Infrastructure: Political Engagement and Collective Empowerment in Belarusian Contemporary Art / Antonina Stebur (European Humanities University)
- b. The Role of Artistic Practices in Memorialization and Deterritorialization of Soviet Belarus' Avant-Gardes / Tania Arcimovich (University of Erfurt)
- c. Subversive Visual Strategies in Decolonizing Belarusian Art and Culture Post-2020 / Almira Ousmanova (European Humanities University)
- d. Choreography of Resistance: Scoring Political Movement during the 2020 Belarusian Uprising and its Aftermath / Volha Sasnouskaya (Academy of Fine Arts Vienna)
- e. Frightened nationalism: The role of Mikola Schakaihin and InBelCult in the genesis of Belarusian art discourse / Hanna Karpenko (Independent Scholar)

- f. *Lost Links and Lingering Legacies: Digital Challenges in Preserving Belarusian Contemporary Art Information* / A. M. LaVey (New York Public Library)

Antonina Stebur's presentation focused on the intersection of art, political engagement and collective empowerment within Belarusian Contemporary art, using the Museum of Stones project as a central example. Stebur emphasized that contemporary art inherently reflects structures of power and coloniality, and suggested that Belarusian art history operates differently from Western norms, often existing outside formal institutions like galleries and museums. This context provides a distinct perspective where art serves as a tool for political imagination, social infrastructure, and activism.

The Museum of Stones emerged during the 2020-2021 Belarusian protests, blending traditional and digital forms of resistance. As a self-publishing protest newspaper and an art project, it enabled grassroots mobilization by allowing people to download, print and distribute the publication, providing an alternative means of communication during government crackdowns on independent media. The project served as a platform for marginalized voices, including LGBTQ+ communities, who were often excluded from official protest narratives.

Additionally, the project symbolically connected to the real Museum of Stones in Minsk, a site associated with Belarusian cultural and political geography. This physical museum, located near both the Belarus Hi-Tech Park and Soviet-era residential areas, became a spatial and conceptual nucleus for the art project. By reimagining protest newspapers and museums, the project highlighted the potential of revolutionary infrastructures to offer alternative interpretations of the past, present and future.

The presentation concluded by discussing the art project's role in expanding the notion of artistic and social infrastructures, intertwining political imagination with accessible, inclusive platforms for cultural expression. The Museum of Stones demonstrates how Contemporary art can actively reshape public discourse, critique power structures and support ongoing resistance movements in Belarus.

Tania Arcimovich's presentation explored the informal art scene in Soviet Belarus during the 1980s, focusing on its emancipatory, decolonial and counter-hegemonic potential. Arcimovich argued that these artistic practices challenge the dominant Eurocentric art historical narratives and should be understood as "border knowledge" within decolonial theory.

The analysis began by addressing the marginalization of Belarusian avant-garde art, which remains largely excluded from global art history due to knowledge hierarchies shaped by two main perspectives. First, Eurocentrism

prioritizes well-known radical movements, dismissing non-Western attempts as less modernist or radical. Second, post-Soviet scholarship struggles to detach local avant-garde expressions from being absorbed into the Russian avant-garde, with the Vitsebsk Art School frequently labeled as a Russian phenomenon despite its complex identity.

Historical erasure by Soviet ideology further obscured Belarusian avant-garde memory, as experimental arts were repressed from the 1930s onward. The speaker highlighted the 1988 performance “Revival of Kazimir” by artists Ludmila Rusava and Ihar Kaskurevic as a symbolic culmination of prior cultural movements. This performance, seen as an act of reclaiming Belarusian art history, disrupted established narratives by revisiting and reinterpreting avant-garde legacies.

Through decolonial and transnational frameworks, the presentation advocated for re-examining art history to include local narratives and artistic gestures as valid forms of knowledge production, resisting dominant Western or Russian models. Ultimately, the speaker argued that Belarusian art history should be recognized for its diverse and multifaceted expressions beyond its association with well-known figures like Chagall or Malevich.

Almira Ousmanova’s presentation focused on decolonizing the artistic imagination through iconoclastic differentiation, cultural re-coding and irony, using examples from recent years. Ousmanova reflected on how decolonial practices in Belarus and the broader post-Soviet space have evolved – especially since 2020, with a renewed urgency following political upheavals and Russia’s war in Ukraine.

The speaker highlighted the importance of post-colonial theory in analyzing post-socialist contexts, referencing early works, such as David Chioni Moore’s critique of the limited application of post-colonial optics to the former Soviet sphere. Decolonization efforts were discussed in the Belarusian context, noting their suppression under authoritarian rule but resurgence as a practical necessity for cultural actors in exile.

Key themes included the cultural delinking from Soviet ideological legacies, with a focus on visual language. Decolonization was framed as an ongoing process encompassing diverse approaches, such as implementing cultural diversity, challenging imperial narratives and embracing multilingualism.

A central semiotic approach was explored in visual culture, particularly in recoding Soviet signs to create new meanings. Ousmanova discussed the concept of recoding as not merely rewriting visual texts but transforming their semiotic structure. The works of artists like Antonina Slobodchikova, Vladimir Tsesler and Sergey Shabohin exemplified this semiotic process, using familiar Soviet imagery to critique and reconstruct historical narratives, thus fostering a decolonial dialogue through visual language.

Volha Sasnouskaya's presentation explored the dynamics of collective movements and political agency in Belarus, using movement scores to analyze choreographies of protest and other mass actions. It examined the evolution from Soviet-era mass events to the 2020-2021 Belarusian anti-government protests, highlighting the exhaustion of traditional forms of protest and the emergence of new social networks and practices of care.

Sasnouskaya emphasized the fluidity of protest techniques, which allowed for ongoing resistance even beyond the time and space of the uprising. The project engaged with movement scores as tools to capture the complexities of political action and temporality, revealing gaps and ruptures in both state-controlled archives and fragmented protest documentation.

The analysis drew on feminist and post-colonial perspectives to critique linear understandings of history, proposing that non-linear, plural temporalities characterize so-called "post-socialism." This approach seeks to unsettle traditional narratives and activate historical documents through dynamic re-interpretation, embracing interruptions and absences as meaningful elements in the ongoing struggle for political change.

Anna Karpenko's presentation focused on the complexity and challenges of contextualizing so-called "national" projects in Belarusian art history. Karpenko referred to the figure of Mikola Shchakatsikhin as an example of this type of contextualization. A Russia-born, Russian-speaking art historian, Shchakatsikhin came to Minsk in 1921 to join the newly established Belarusian State University. He was the first person in Belarusian art history to attempt to develop a national art history project, and emphasized the distinctiveness and uniqueness of Belarusian heritage in contrast to that of the Russian Empire or Poland. Shchakatsikhin was later repressed and died in exile in Bashkortostan, and his name—like many of the representatives of the Belarusian national revival—has been forgotten.

In today's context, the use of the term "national" elicits a wide range of reactions. For example, in Saxony, Germany, where Karpenko is based, she said it is almost impossible to use the word without controversy. Ironically, the cornflower—the symbol of the Belarusian revival, which is somewhat sentimentalized and romanticized—is used in Germany by right-wing parties and movements, which are heavily supported and financed by Russia.

Belarus' long-standing dependence on Russia can be seen in social and cultural projects such as the art collection of Belgazprombank—part of the Russian Gazprom, which was headed by Viktor Babariko, one of the 2020 presidential candidates and former political prisoner. The collection presents a questionable approach to a "national" art history, with an emphasis on bringing prominent figures like Chagall and Bakst back to Belarus.

A.M. LaVey's presentation highlighted the marginalization of Belarusian art in global art history due in part to insufficient, outdated digital resources. This has limited international recognition of Belarusian artists and made research challenging, exacerbated by systemic archiving issues linked to state censorship of independent artists. Documentation of Belarusian art, especially for politically sensitive projects, remains fragmented and precarious, with content often found only on social media or in remaining reviews.

LaVey emphasized the urgent need for robust archiving initiatives, particularly given the complexities added by the emigration of Belarusian artists. An assessment of digital resources revealed significant access and currency issues, with many resources deteriorating or disappearing due to political upheaval, and the dominance of Russian-language content. Additionally, outdated platforms limit access to current scholarship, undermining their authority and reliability as information sources.

From a semiotic perspective, the absence of key cultural texts disrupts the transmission of cultural meanings, impeding Belarusian self-representation and shared cultural narratives. LaVey's presentation called for collaboration among artists, researchers, cultural institutions and information professionals to develop innovative digital resources that preserve Belarusian art history and reclaim cultural space for future generations.

## **7. Print Finds a Way: Russian and Belarusian Emigré Publishing Past and Present**

Chair: Jon Giullian (University of Kansas)

1. Belarusian Emigre Periodicals in Toronto in the 1950s / Natalya Barykina (University of Toronto)
2. Collecting Contemporary Belarusian Emigre Materials / Anna Rakityanskaya (Harvard University)

Discussant: Thomas Francis Keenan (Princeton University)

This panel brings together four presentations about Russian and Belarusian émigré publishing. The panel offers perspectives from both the past and present, showing the continuities and changes in the development of publishing in exile.

Natalia Barykina's presentation addressed the Belarusian émigré periodicals published in Toronto in the 1950s. Following the end of the Second World War, many Belarusians arrived in Canada, some via displaced persons camps in Europe. The new immigrants established Belarusian community organizations and began to publish Belarusian language newspapers. These periodicals constitute a part of the collection from the estate of Valentyna and Michael Pashkievich at the University of Toronto Libraries. By resurfacing

and making use of materials in Pashkievich's remarkable collection, this presentation contributed to the historical study of the publishing activities of the postwar Belarusian diaspora in Canada. Through thematic analysis, the presenter investigated how early émigré periodicals addressed experiences during and after the Second World War and the subsequent resettlement of immigrants in their host country.

Anna Rakityanskaya's presentation noted that following the crackdown on the 2020 political protest, in Belarus the country's independent publishing industry suffered a focused attack from the government, resulting in the loss of the Union of Belarusian Writers, PEN Belarus and several publishers in 2021-2022. Consequently, Belarusian publishing outside Belarus experienced a renaissance, with many newly-created publishing outlets joining the already established émigré publishers in Poland, Lithuania, the Czech Republic and Great Britain. This brought a new challenge for Slavic collections in Western libraries that had been relying on traditional country-centric approval plans for Belarusian publications. In December 2023 Harvard Library established a special approval plan for Belarusian publishers outside Belarus, working closely with book vendors and community organizations. In her presentation, Rakityanskaya discussed the challenges and discoveries made in this process as well as the preliminary results of the plan's performance in its first year.

Thomas Keenan asked questions related to the eternal and increasingly confounding problem of defining scope when nearly everything can be looked at as grist for the scholarly mill. How do we define this new diaspora print literature as a target for collection? Does it have any discernible boundaries? As area studies librarians responding to the extreme political and cultural moment that has scattered large numbers of Russians and Belarusians into Central and Western Europe and beyond, it seems the impulse is to try to document the phenomenon of contemporary publishing of these new diasporas totally, to try to capture the total picture of what they're publishing. It is easy to imagine non-librarian scholars being very interested in this same question. How realistic, though, is this likely to be in the present and in the foreseeable future? If the number of diaspora publishers and the volume of the publishing output continues to expand, are there ways in which we can envision parts of it moving outside categories for which we feel responsible for capture, preservation and bibliographic control? If specific publishers or authors increasingly assimilate into their new environments and start publishing in other languages and for broader audiences, and on themes not directly related to their countries and cultures of origin, would they drift outside the purview of the kinds of efforts we're talking about here?

## 8. Belarusian Culture I: Language(s)

Chair: Jenya Mironava (Harvard University)

- a. Language Shifts in Belarus Post-2020: A Comparative Analysis with Ukraine / Maryna Antaniuk-Prouteau (Stanford University)
- b. Power as identity category: Discursive construction of politics via Russian-language political discourse in Belarus / Anton Dinerstein (Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences)
- c. Language politics and world literature in *Maladosć* / Natasha Kadlec (Harvard University)
- d. The Belarusian Language – breaking free from social and educational stereotypes / Radoslaw Kaleta (University of Warsaw)
- e. Borders, Identity and Language Use: Cross-Border Divergence among Russian Speakers in the Contemporary Belarusian-Russian Border Region / Curt Woolhiser (Boston College).

This interdisciplinary roundtable focuses on language use and discursive practices across diverse cultural, socio-political, and historical contexts in Belarus. Widely seen as the republic where the Soviet policies of Russification were most successful, the country is also unique among the post-Soviet states: after a brief period of national revival in the early 1990s, the Lukashenka regime has favored further Russification, which only intensified after the 2020 protests.

Bringing together scholars representing a variety of thematic and disciplinary perspectives (linguistics, literary and translation studies, political science, and language pedagogy), this roundtable explores the complex dynamic between Belarusian and Russian—two state languages of Belarus—and what may be termed “Belarusian Russian” spoken in the border regions. How are these languages used and for what purposes? What value judgments and stereotypes are attached to them? What is the relationship between language and power? How do pivotal political events (re)shape the linguistic landscape in the country and the diasporas? And why, despite its marginalized status in the titular nation, is Belarusian a language worthy of teaching in North American universities?

Antaniuk-Prouteau offered a contemporary sociolinguistic examination of the Belarusian and Ukrainian linguistic landscapes in the aftermath of significant political events. Her paper focused on the consequences of Russification efforts and initiatives towards de-Russification, highlighting the fragile position of the Belarusian language, which faces the threat of extinction due to an acceleration of Russification processes after the 2020 protests. The study contrasts the Belarusian experience with the situation in Ukraine, where there has been a notable push toward revitalizing the national language

among political and social turmoil. This comparative analysis sheds light on the Belarusian government's contradictory approach to its national language, characterized by a crackdown on language advocates, while simultaneously observing an increase in the popularity and use of the Belarusian language. This includes an increase in non-governmental Belarusian-language projects, efforts towards digitalization, and an enhancement of the language's social prestige.

The research stands out for its comparative methodology, examining the socio-political disruptions such as the Belarusian protests in 2020 and the ongoing war in Ukraine. These events have significantly impacted regional sociolinguistic patterns, altering language usage, politics, and perceptions, and underscoring the importance of national languages as emblems of unity and defiance in times of political conflict. Antaniuk-Prouteau aims to enrich the discourse on the sociolinguistic evolution within Belarus and Ukraine, addressing the challenges and opportunities for language policy. The research underscores the necessity of reevaluating the social functions and statuses of national languages in these contexts and advocates for the support and development of the Belarusian language as a critical component of the national identity of Belarusians.

Dinerstein's paper explores how the concept of power becomes an identity category in Russian-language political discourse. The Belarusian case shows how various actors, such as public officials, the opposition and regular citizens attribute personality traits to power when discussing political topics. This happens by using a set of political terms most salient in the local political discourse, such as "state," "country," "people" and "West," and via their relationship to the terms "power" and "authorities." As a result, such personification of power allows for the reproduction of a logical fallacy based on the metonymic use of key political terms that leads to the reproduction of discursive opposition between "authorities" and those not involved in direct political governance. Eventually, this leads to a specific understanding of politics that discursively excludes those not affiliated with official political posts and institutions from the political process, thus discursively depriving them of the political will. Since these political terms are employed by the populace at large, another complication arises—political discussions are being conducted in populist terms by various actors across the political spectrum. As a result, the existing Russian-language political vocabulary may be one of the important factors that make local political discourse prone to populism no matter who speaks on a political topic or makes a political statement.

Kadlec's presentation discussed the early years of the Belarusian-language periodical *Maladosć*, founded in 1953. As the 1950s went on, the journal rapidly transformed from a largely agitational organ of the *Kamsamol* to a serious

literary journal, and by publishing works of world literature in Belarusian translation as well as original Belarusian literature, it played a role in combating the increasing Russification of the cultural sphere in the BSSR.

Confronted with the “great” Russian language, Belarusian has often been marginalised, falsely regarded as a dialect of Russian. It has been even often said that the Belarusians have been silent *на-беларуску*. The war in Ukraine is also a war for the Ukrainian identity, for the language and culture that differentiate Ukraine from Russia. “Free Belarus” has a similar goal and wants to liberate the Belarusian language, culture and literature from stereotypes, to come out from the shadows of Russia’s “great brotherly nation.” Kaleta’s research aims at de-stereotyping the Belarusian language, restoring it to its rightful position, showing its rich history and intrinsic value, and the value of teaching Belarusian to foreigners. The presentation analysed materials from 2018-2023 on the teaching of Belarusian, and discussed prospects and strategies for the development of the Belarusian language.

Over the last two decades researchers have drawn attention to signs of a nascent national variety of Russian in Belarus, differing from Moscow-based standard Russian with respect to a number of phonological, morphological and lexical features. Nonetheless, the linguistic and educational establishments and language planners in Russia and Belarus have to date largely resisted the concept of “Belarusian Russian” as a distinct non-dominant standard variety, akin to other European non-dominant standard varieties such as Austrian German, Belgian French, Belgian Dutch, Scottish Standard English and Irish English.

The question of the potential pluricentricity of modern Russian is thrown into particularly sharp relief in the contemporary Belarusian-Russian border region, where a once fairly uniform group of transitional Belarusian-Russian dialects is transected by a national border that only vaguely follows the frequently shifting historical frontier between the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Muscovite Russia.

Woolhiser discussed some of the preliminary results of a pilot online survey of residents of a number of cities and towns along both sides of the Belarusian-Russian border (Viciebsk and Mahiloŭ regions of Belarus and the western part of the Smolensk region of Russia) that he conducted in June- September 2022, focusing on use of, and attitudes toward, a number of features characteristic of “Belarusian Russian” in the speech repertoires of local Russian speakers. Data on informants’ social identities and views on the relationship between Belarus and Russia were also elicited to investigate whether use of “Belarusian Russian” variants may be influenced not only by country of residence (Belarus or Russia), but also by speaker identities, socio-political attitudes and stances.

Analysis of the linguistic and sociolinguistic data from the pilot survey indicates that despite a process of de-dialectization, that is, convergence of transitional Belarusian-Russian dialects toward Russian on both sides of the border, there is a significant “border effect” in terms of respondents’ awareness of and reported use of typical features of “Belarusian Russian.” In the case of Belarusian respondents in the border region, there is evidence of a correlation between reported use of “Belarusian Russian” variants and perceived distance between the Belarusian and Russian peoples, and attitudes toward a potential Belarusian Anschluss with Russia.

## **Roundtables**

### **1. Belarus I: Civil Resistance in Contemporary Belarus**

Anna Rakityanskaya (Harvard University), Emily Curtin (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), Andrei Kureichyk (Yale University), Alexei Lalo (North Carolina State University) and Olena Nikolayenko (Fordham University).

This roundtable brings together scholars from political science, comparative literature, theater studies and anthropology to discuss the civil resistance that erupted in the aftermath of the 2020 Belarusian presidential election. What factors can explain the unprecedented mobilization of tens of thousands of protestors from all segments of Belarusian society? How have the repercussions of this “failed revolution” played out in the intervening four years? Olena Nikolayenko examined diverse methods of resistance that industrial workers employed to signal their disapproval of the brutal regime. Emily Curtin discussed how new ideas about health, bodies, and self-improvement ushered in by the mid-2010s consumer culture boom helped to galvanize mass resistance against the state. Andrei Kureichik traced the far-reaching consequences of the choices made by several Belarusian theater workers. Finally, Alexei Lalo compared and contrasted patterns of mass mobilization in Ukraine (2013-2014) and Belarus (2020). The roundtable’s focus on civil resistance aligned with the convention’s focus on different practices of liberation in Eastern Europe.

### **2. Between Past and Future: Liberating the Post-Socialist World through Children’s Literature II**

Serguei Alex Oushakine (Princeton University), Bella Delacroix Ostromoukhova (University of Paris, Sorbonne), Svetlana Efimova (Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich), Gun-Britt Johanna Maria Kohler, (University of Oldenburg) and Daria Semenova (Vilnius University).

This roundtable explored the ways how contemporary children's literature fosters liberal thinking in an epistemic transition between reflecting on the past and facing the future. This section focused on three societies in the state of an ongoing war: Ukraine, Belarus and Russia. Our discussions combined aesthetic, institutional and political perspectives on the children's book market.

What strategies do independent authors and publishers use to circumvent political pressure in contemporary Belarus and Russia and to bring subversive, non-conformist children's literature onto the book market? At the same time, the roundtable addressed Ukrainian books showing the experience of everyday life in an authoritarian society and juxtaposing it to democratic agency as a basic value.

Section II also continued the discussion on genre variety dealing with the past in contemporary children's literature. Roundtable participants looked at several representations of the Soviet experience in Ukrainian historical fiction and young adult fantasy, as well as in Russian non-fiction books, emphasizing the history of the dissident movement.

### **3. The Decolonization of Education and Research in Belarus and Ukraine: Theoretical Challenges and Practical Tasks**

Tatiana Shchytsova (European Humanities University), Valeria Korablyova (Charles University in Prague), Aliaksei Lastouski (Uppsala University) and Andrzej W. Tymowski (American Council of Learned Societies).

Presentation of the special issue of the *Topos* journal "Decolonizing Knowledge Production in Belarus and Ukraine": <https://journals.ehu.lt/index.php/topos/issue/view/71>.

The session discusses the urgency of decolonization as a process of overcoming structural, political, and cultural subjugation by the empire, particularly within the context of Belarusian and Ukrainian education and scholarly research. Key topics include national liberation and decolonization in/of education, decommunization, de-Sovietization, knowledge production, self-colonization in research, and overcoming the post-Soviet paradigm. This roundtable aims to develop theoretical and methodological foundations for decolonization during and after the war, addressing global research prospects.

The full-scale war launched by Russia against Ukraine in 2022 and supported by the Lukashenka regime has focused attention on the urgency of decolonization as a process of overcoming the structural, political, and cultural subjugation by the "empire." Decolonization as a practical task unites Belarusians and Ukrainians in their aspirations for national independence including liberation from the Russian imperial ideology in such key fields

of knowledge (re)production as education and academic research. The journal issue to be presented and discussed at the round table is concentrated on determining the meaning and relevance of the concept of decolonization with regard to the system of education and scholarly research in Belarus and Ukraine. Thereby it aims to develop the theoretical and methodological foundations for decolonization both in today's conditions and after the end of the war. Speaking in practical terms, the issue addresses the question: How exactly is decolonization to be achieved in education and in humanistic and social science research? The participants of the discussion (resp. the authors of the issue) are going to touch upon the following topics:

1. National liberation and decolonization in/of education;
2. Decommunization, de-Sovietization, decolonization;
3. Knowledge production and the phenomenon of self-colonization in scholarly research;
4. Overcoming the "post-Soviet" paradigm and the prospects for Belarusian and Ukrainian research in the global context.

#### **4. Envisioning Post-Violent Times in Ukraine and Belarus**

Olga Plakhotnik (University of Greifswald), Oleksandr Chertenko (University of Giessen), Roman Dubasevych (University of Greifswald) and Iryna Ramanava (European Humanities University).

The inhumane ferocity and suffering brought about by the war in Ukraine and, to a lesser extent, by severe repressions in the wake of the mass protests in Belarus necessarily prioritized the issues of trauma and violence in public discourse and academia. Being utterly important in terms of witnessing the atrocities and giving voice to previously overheard perspectives, these often highly emotional testimonies of violence, however, mostly exclude the prospects of any post-violent/post-war reconciliation, i.a., by promoting the ideal scenarios of "total victory" or "regime collapse." But is such thinking of post-violent coexistence really so "untimely" and "offensive" to the victims?

With our roundtable focusing on Ukraine and Belarus, we sought to initiate this debate, which was beforehand virtually non-existent, and reflect upon the possible modalities—or even the plain possibility—of post-violent reconciliation. Could warring parties and violence-induced internal cleavages—exiled/refugees vs. non-migrants, civilians vs. combatants, dissidents vs. loyalists, peace-doves vs. bellicists—be overridden culturally and politically, and if yes—in what way? What frameworks might (and should) be built to "disinvent" war(s) and stop violence? What post-violent futures do culture and intellectual elites conceive, if any? What lessons can be derived from other comparable historical situations, e.g., the 19th century confrontations

between empires and their national challengers, the peacebuilding after the two world wars, or the post-Cold War military conflicts in Yugoslavia, Chechnya or Nagorno Karabakh? And, finally, in what way, if indeed any, can the perpetuation of trauma and violence be curtailed?

### **5. Practices of Decolonial Writing**

Antonina Stebur (European Humanities University), Volha Kastsiuk (Independent Scholar) Hanna Komar (University of Brighton), Tony Lashden, (Independent Scholar), Tatiana Shchyttsova (European Humanities University) and Tatsiana Zamirouskaya (Independent Scholar).

This roundtable is envisioned as a forum for scholars, activists, and writers to discuss diverse practices of decolonial writing that are emerging in the contemporary Belarusian world of letters. What does decolonial writing entail? What forms does it take? What strategies of subversion does it employ? And what opportunities for resistance and liberation does it create? Central to this practice is linguistic decolonization. Notably, within the Belarusian context, both Belarusian and Russian can serve as suitable tools for—and expression of—decolonial critique that aims to liberate thought, individual and cultural identity, personal and collective memory from imposed norms and inherited narratives. The goal is to cultivate a more authentic and inclusive literary discourse.

### **6. Relocation: Professional Trajectories and Life Stories**

Elena Gapova (Western Michigan University / European Humanities University) Maria Mayofis (Amherst College), Sciapan Sturejka (European Humanities University) and Jessica Zychowicz (U.S. Fulbright Program / Institute of International Education, Ukraine).

The roundtable explores the phenomenon of ‘relocation’ (or exodus) from their native countries of thousands of academic professionals, intellectuals and literati after the rigged election and violence in Belarus in 2020 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The events that pushed out Ukrainian refugees are unprecedented; Belarusians and Russians mostly left either to escape persecution and incarceration or in disagreement with the politics of their governments and in solidarity with the Ukrainian cause; many are active in helping war refugees. The issues pursued in the discussion mostly concern their professional and intellectual trajectories in the new situation.

The idea was to bring together refugees from Belarus, Russia and Ukraine and to have a conversation on professional trajectories and life stories. That

proved difficult, as most Ukrainian scholars currently employed in American academic institutions would not agree to sit at the same table with Belarusians and Russians considering them (us) 'aggressors,' in spite of the fact that we are talking of scholars who are anti-war and most are currently without any professional positions – and quite often without any legitimate status at all.

### **7. Russia's Unrecognized Crimes: Colonial Erasure of Culture and Theft of Cultural Identities, Archives and Artefacts**

Alesia Mankouskaya (University College London), Ksenya I. Kiebusinski (University of Toronto) and Oksana Semenik (Ukrainian Museum, New York).

By interrogating the intersections of power, identity, and representation embedded within literature, fine art and theatre, this roundtable underscored the diverse national identities that have shaped the stolen cultures of Ukraine and Belarus. Alesia Mankouskaya interrogated Russian literary and theatrical discourses in the 17th century by highlighting the poet Simeon of Polotsk's Belarusian legacy as well as the Ukrainian legacy of Theophan Prokopovich, the dramatist from Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. Oksana Semenik spoke about Russia's theft of Ukrainian art, both symbolic and physical. The symbolic refers to the appropriation of Ukrainian art history by Russia as well as the erasure of Ukrainian identity among artists. The physical refers to museum valuables that were taken from Ukrainian museums during the Russian Empire and Soviet period in Ukraine, along with the destruction of art works and art schools. Finally, Ksenya Kiebusinski spoke about Russia's theft and ongoing holdup of Ukrainian archives. By amplifying the voices of Ukrainian and Belarusian scholars, artists and librarians, the speakers embark on a journey of rediscovery and affirmation of their cultural identity and, ultimately, of regaining the agency to define their own culture, putting an end to Russians' long-standing erasure of national cultures.

### **8. Teaching Russian in 2022–2024 I: Breaking down Putin's Russia and Lukashenka's Belarus**

Diana Avdeeva (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign), Olga Klimova (University of Pittsburgh), Alexandra Shapiro (University of Georgia) and Veronika Williams (University of Arizona).

The Kremlin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine unleashed on February 24, 2022, has become a significant event for the field of Slavic studies. The aggression of the Russian state backed by the Belarusian government against its sovereign neighbor did not only bring due attention to the studies of Ukraine,

but also boosted the relevance of the opposition in Russia and Belarus. Becoming the new reality for these states, new quickly-introduced oppressive laws, mass persecution of Russians and Belarusians speaking out against the war and the regimes, and growing opposition movements inside and outside both countries call for academic attention and inclusion of these themes into the conversations on Russian language pedagogy.

The roundtable sought to fill the gap in the discussion on how to teach the Russian language and culture in the context of the aggressive appropriation and weaponization of these elements by Putin and Lukashenka's regimes. It is of crucial importance to draw a clear line between utilizing a language for the propagation of hostile nationalistic discourse and employing it as a means to express disagreement with and protest against the regime. Thus, it becomes necessary for Russian language pedagogy and Russian studies more broadly to discuss the Russian language in the context of political resistance. Along with discussion, this roundtable presented practical ideas and activities to integrate the above-mentioned topics into language and culture classrooms, such as specialized courses, digital humanities projects, and other educational resources for the students of the Russian language.

### **Individual papers**

#### **1.The Liberatory Potentials of Memory Activism in Central-East Europe and the Balkans.**

a. Inclusive Actionism: Disability Performance as Liberatory Force in Belarus / Margarita Kompelmakher (Alliance Theatre)

Kompelmakher's presentation develops the concept of "inclusive actionism" through the lens of the Ability for Disability project by students in the Belarus Free Theatre's educational program, Studio Fontibras. Conducted in Minsk in 2015, this series of thirteen performative actions raised awareness about accessibility and the rights of people with disabilities in Belarus. Kompelmakher situates "inclusive actionism" within a regional movement of actionism and contrasts it with Belarus' authoritarian model of "paternal care," which perpetuates dependency and exclusion. The project's tactics—such as direct requests for accommodations, disruption of public routines, recasting disability into empowered roles, and challenging binaries of "disabled" and "healthy"—were analyzed for their liberatory potential. By modeling radical care and collaboration, these actions redefined activism as relational and generative. Finally, the presentation explored how Ability for Disability prefigured broader mobilizations, including the mass protests of 2020, reframing vulnerability as a source of strength in resisting oppressive systems.

The discussant asked if Ability for Disability was indicative of a shift in strategy for the Belarus Free Theatre and if it was unique in the context of disability performance in other places. The discussant also asked a broader question to the group about how performance might be an everyday social practice of resistance.

## **2. War, Liberation, Repression: Trials as Storytelling in the USSR and Post-Soviet Space**

### **a. Beyond Death: 'Genocide' Trials in Belarusian Courts / Gundula Pohl (University of Hagen)**

Since 2021, Belarusian state actors have been developing a master narrative about a "genocide of the Belarusian people" that is said to have taken place between 1941 and 1951. The development of this narrative is closely based on the concept of the "genocide of the Soviet people" pursued in Russia, but differs, e.g., in terms of time period and territory. Under the guise of historical reappraisal, the Belarusian state leadership is attempting to control civil society opposition by means of "memory laws." By aggressively propagating a historical master narrative, the regime also wants to create legitimacy and a basis for national identity. In April 2021, the General Prosecutor's Office opened criminal proceedings for the "genocide of the Belarusian people" and began investigating former Nazi perpetrators and their collaborators, mainly of Latvian, Lithuanian, Ukrainian and Estonian nationalities. Amendments to the Belarusian Code of Criminal Procedure now allow posthumous trials. On February 8, 2024, the trial of Volodymyr Katriuk, who had been involved in the 1943 Khatyn massacre as a member of the *Schutzmannschaft* Battalion 118, began at the Belarus Supreme Court. The case of Katriuk, who emigrated to Canada in 1951, was investigated several times while he was alive, but he was never convicted. Katriuk died in 2015. This paper discusses the approach of the General Prosecutor's Office to prosecuting individuals as National Socialism perpetrators under the specially created criminal acts even after their death and using this approach to legitimize the regime in terms of historical politics.

Discussant Diana Dumitru (Georgetown University) asked the following questions:

1. What contribution will this research make to East European studies?
2. Does the Office of the General Prosecutor produce material that could be important for scientific research on the war of extermination and the Holocaust?
3. Is there cooperation with "Western" countries?
4. How is the diaspora in Canada reacting?
5. How did the Canadian state react?

Questions from the audience:

1. Were cultural sources also used as evidence in the court case?
2. Is there any cooperation between the Russian and the Belarusian project?
3. Which Soviet sources were used as evidence in the court case?

### **3. From Eurovision to Military Propaganda: Reckoning with Liberation and Violence in Contemporary Media**

- a. Genre of Satirical Review of Russian and Belarusian Authoritarian and Military Propaganda on YouTube / Tatsiana Amosava (Carleton University)

Humor against autocracy in Russia and Belarus, and against war in Ukraine has different genres: political satirical animation, satirical song, and others make up this humorous arsenal. One of the most prominent genres of satire practiced by YouTubers is a satirical political review of authoritarian and military propaganda. Many influential agents involved in politics often have their own shows made in this genre. The YouTubers working in this genre, undermine Russian and Belarusian authorities through showing a huge contrast between life of Russians and Belarusians, and life of the civilized world. They often show that human excrement flows in the center of a Russian city, as well as half-destroyed hospitals in the Moscow region that are still functioning. They broadcast pictures of horrible hallways of residential buildings, where (as the frequent joke goes) Joe Biden urinated and wrote swear words with his feces on the walls, because Russian propaganda teaches Russians to complain about America if something goes wrong in Russia. If a drunk villager drowns in the toilet, it's also Biden's fault. Their subscribers send them videos from both Russia and the rest of the world which is "being frozen to death without Russian gas," or which is rotten "due to rotten Western ideology." This genre has a fairly uniform character, because often YouTubers respond to the same political or social news, following the same rules of satirizing the reality. This presentation demonstrated that humor and satire are an effective weapon against autocracy.

Discussant Mariya Rohozha asked about the presence of catharsis in the modern satire. Amosava responded, saying "if we understand catharsis like purification of the soul, I don't think that it is present in modern satire. However, if we perceive catharsis as the relief from heavy emotions, it is definitely there." Panel chair Olena Pavlova mentioned that usually satire does not influence the military or political situation directly, to which Amosava agreed.

A member of the audience asked about the reaction of the Russian and Belarusian authorities and propagandists to the satire aimed against

them since Russians usually ignore their opponents as they ignored Navalny. Amosava responded, saying “I know about one particular reaction from the most disgusting Belarusian propagandist Grigorii Azarenok to the satirical songs of Margarita Levchuk and Andrey Pauk, aimed against him personally and against Lukashenka. It was a very vivid reaction in which Azarenok used obscene vocabulary in relation to Margarita Levchuk. In their turn, Margarita and Andrey used this insulting utterance of Azarenok in their next song against him.”

#### 4. Revolutionary Life beyond the State

- a. ‘The Locals’: Alternatives to Nationalism in Ianka Kupala’s *‘Tutejshiiia’* / Oliver Okun (University of Chicago)

During the years after World War I Belarus saw a brief reprieve from intensive censorship and repression. The thinkers who gathered around Belarusian language journals and periodicals such as *Nasha Niva* and *Polymia* could suddenly express some of their most daring ideas. Literary great Ianka Kupala took this opportunity to prime his readers for a new form of social and political organization based on *tutejshiiia*, a uniquely East European expression of radical localness. This current of thought tragically met its demise in one night of mass executions in October 1937. Yet still, this alternative to the state continues to set the stage for a pluralistic and democratic Belarus.

#### 5. Counter-Monuments, Poetic Myth, and Coal: New Vantage Points on the Holocaust in Eastern Europe

- a. Walking and Remembering: The Ghetto in the Cityscape of Minsk / Anastasia Mitrofanova (Russian State University for the Humanities)

The theoretical framework of this presentation is based on J. Young’s (1992) concept of the “counter-monument.” Unlike traditional solid, immobile, and territorially localized monuments, counter-monuments differentiate themselves through their dispersed, performative, and participatory nature. These monuments often commemorate traumatic events deliberately silenced and excluded from the dominant collective memory.

The author’s field research focuses on preserving the memory of the Jewish ghetto in the cityscape of Minsk, Belarus. In large cities, commemoration necessarily encompasses vast territories that undergo massive reconstructions and population migrations. This underscores the importance of material memorial signs. However, the topic of the Holocaust clashes with the dominant historical narrative depicting Belarus as a ‘partisan republic.’

While the existence of the ghetto is not silenced, its memory is not clearly integrated into the cityscape. The ghetto area underwent renovation, with most streets renamed (none in memory of the ghetto), and memorial signs scattered across a vast territory, lacking a concise memorial route. Some signs contribute to oblivion, such as a plaque commemorating a specific part of the ghetto where Jews from Europe were interned. There are no specific signs indicating the location of important buildings or the gallows. The memory of the resistance movement is almost excluded from the cityscape.

To restore the ghetto's space in one's memory, visitors must use its old map overlaying it onto the modern cityscape. This practice requires active interaction with memorial sites, transforming them into a 'walking monument' (T. Schult), and turning movement through the former ghetto into a counter-monumental practice.

## **6. Digital Politics, Dissent, and Mobilization in Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia.**

- a. We are 97%: Network and Content Analyses of Belarusian Grassroot Activism via Local Telegram Channels / Larissa Doroshenko (Northeastern University) and Steven Lloyd Wilson (Brandeis University)

This project analyzes the network structure and content of local Telegram chats in Belarus using the theoretical framework of connective action logic (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013) and its premises for organizing decentralized grassroots movements in the digital age. We argue that the network structure of these chats is crowd-enabled and resembles the dispersed power signature of the network of networks. With almost 800 local chats and over 440,000 unique users, this network follows the scale-free model (Barabási and Albert, 1999) with several important hubs of regional cities; however, it also has smaller hubs within country's regions, smaller cities, and city districts, connecting parts of the network together and enabling coordination among members of various chats. This network also presents an opportunity to explore the role of Belarusian diasporas abroad and their central role in supporting pro-democratic movements.

This project demonstrates the role of local Telegram chats in enabling and sustaining pro-democratic movements in Belarus in the conditions of an authoritarian political regime. These findings advance our understanding of digital technologies in social movements, while also pointing out its limitations against non-democratic regimes.

## 7. Radio, Television, Social Media: The Art of Transmission as Liberation

- a. Weaponizing Colors: Red and White as Protest Signifiers in Belarusian Cyberculture / Elena Gapova (Western Michigan University)

This paper explores how the combination of red and white—colors with significant cultural meaning in Belarus—has been reinterpreted in cyberspace. It treats this combination as a “semantic system” (a concept developed by structuralist thinkers like Derrida and Levi-Strauss), operating within the Belarusian section of the internet. On the web, colors and shapes can be easily altered, a phenomenon referred to as “participatory culture,” where users take an active role in creating and modifying content. This process, known as *produsage*, involves users producing content by remixing or changing existing media.

This is similar to early Soviet photomontage, but online manipulations are more complex due to the rise of Web 2.0 in the 2000s. Web 2.0 introduced social software that made it easier for users to create content. Today, internet users share, remix, tag, edit, and transform various forms of media—text, images and audio—moving them across different digital platforms. As people now live in a world shaped by digital devices, the influence of signs, symbols, and images has grown. According to J. Hartley, in the postmodern world, the image has become more important than reality itself. The internet has amplified this shift, providing a space for visual messages to be shared with a larger, more dispersed audience that relies on digital devices and a variety of media sources.

### Literary event: Voices from Belarus

On November 22, the “Voices from Belarus: Conversation, Readings and Discussion” event brought together authors, translators, scholars, readers and Boston’s Belarusian community for an insightful discussion on the state of Belarusian literature, its diaspora and its cultural future. Hosted by Sasha Razor (University of California, Santa Barbara) and Jenya Mironava (Harvard University), the event provided a unique platform for discussions on Belarusian identity, the challenges faced by Belarusian writers in exile and the role of language and literature in the context of immigration and conflict.

Mironava addressed the current state of Belarusian studies in the United States, noting the absence of a formalized academic field dedicated to Belarus and the limited offerings of Belarusian language courses, available only at institutions such as Harvard and Yale. Despite this, Mironava emphasized the power of the Belarusian diaspora, which continues to serve as a significant force for the preservation and dissemination of Belarusian culture and literature abroad.

### **Siarhiej Šupa: On the role of literature in exile**

The event began with an engaging conversation with Siarhiej Šupa, a renowned literary translator, publisher and editor who has dedicated much of his career to translating foreign literature into Belarusian. Šupa's deep involvement in the Belarusian literary scene, particularly post-2020, provided valuable insights into the challenges faced by Belarusian writers and publishers in exile.

In response to Razor's questions, Šupa shared his personal experience during the political upheavals of August 2020, which saw widespread protests in Belarus following the disputed presidential elections. Working for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty at the time, Šupa witnessed firsthand the repression that followed the protests, which directly impacted his work and the operations of his publishing house Vesna, which had been sending books into Belarus until 2021. He explained that the Belarusian literary market is no longer viable within the country due to the ongoing repression, leading many writers, cultural activists and publishers to relocate abroad. While the Belarusian literary scene has shifted to the diaspora, with major events and publications now occurring outside Belarus, Šupa expressed hope for the future and a continued dedication to preserving and promoting Belarusian literature globally.

The conversation also delved into the significance of Belarusian Yiddish literature, particularly the works of Moyshe Kulbak, who Šupa believes is a writer whose legacy has been overlooked. Šupa noted that Yiddish literature was once an integral part of Belarusian cultural life but was almost entirely eradicated due to the tragic consequences of both Bolshevik and Nazi repressions: "Belarus was known as a place for Yiddish literature until the Bolsheviks killed all the writers and the Nazis killed all the readers," he said. Šupa's Vesna seeks to reclaim and preserve this vital part of Belarusian cultural heritage.

Finally, in response to a question about the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Šupa discussed the shifting relationships between Belarusian and Ukrainian writers. While these communities had previously enjoyed close cultural ties, the war has strained relations due to Belarus's role in facilitating Russian military actions. Despite these tensions, Šupa expressed solidarity with Ukraine, wishing for its victory.

### **Literary Readings**

Following the conversation with Šupa, the audience was treated to live readings from three Belarusian writers who have navigated the complexities of exile and migration.

Tatsiana Zamirouskaya, an author and journalist, read from her experimental novel in English about Kosciuszko Street in Brooklyn, N.Y, exploring the intersection of Belarusian, Russian and American identities in the United States. Zamirouskaya also read from her short story *Can I Speak to a Real Person?*, a whimsical yet poignant tale about a woman who believes her grandfather's ghost resides in a robot dog, raising questions about identity, memory and technology in contemporary life.

Maria Malinovskaya, a poet and doctoral student at Stanford, presented her powerful poetry that addresses themes of identity and protest. Malinovskaya's work, including the poem "Finding a reversible language: Find the words," was read in both Belarusian and English. She also shared an excerpt from her most recent poetry collection, *The Line of Escape*, exploring the unstable nature of language and identity, as captured in the poem "B(y)e\_la\_lo\_rus(s)ian: The unstable name of my language."

Yuliya Charnyshova, a poet and doctoral student based in New Haven and Lviv, read selections from her prose piece "One Heart Left for Us All," a deeply personal autofiction about the early weeks of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, written while she was in Lviv. The work offers a raw and emotional testimony of her experiences and those of her family during the war, capturing the upheaval and displacement faced by many in the region.

### **A Conversation on immigration and exile**

At the heart of the event was a discussion on how immigration and exile shape the creative writing of Belarusian authors. Each of the writers reflected on how their experiences of displacement have influenced their work. Zamirouskaya spoke about the effect of her "limbo" state on her relationship with the Russian language, which she has embraced in its "broken" form, integrating Belarusian words and expressions into her writing. Malinovskaya acknowledged the challenge of maintaining a connection to her homeland and the question of how to represent Belarus through her poetry, which grapples with themes of loss and dislocation. Charnyshova described how the war forced her to confront the question of identity as an emigre, and how her writing—once focused on Ukrainian literature and culture—has now returned to her Belarusian roots. Razor emphasized the importance of restoring normalcy for displaced authors, urging collective action to re-establish connections between authors and readers, both within the diaspora and beyond.

### Commentary

“Voices from Belarus” resonated deeply with the convention’s theme of liberation, particularly when viewed through the lens of cultural memory, semiotics, and the role of the diaspora in preserving and transforming identity. The interaction between the center and periphery, and the understanding of how exile and displacement shape cultural expression, provides a compelling framework for understanding the experiences shared by the writers at this event.

The diaspora is not simply a site of loss or absence but a dynamic cultural space where identity is both preserved and reinvented. The writers featured in the event exemplified this dual process of maintaining continuity with their Belarusian heritage while also adapting to new linguistic and cultural contexts. As Šupa explained, the relocation of Belarusian literary life to the diaspora is not an end but a transformation. In this way, exile becomes a form of liberation—a space where new forms of expression and collective memory can emerge, even in the face of political repression. The diaspora serves as a semiotic space where cultural meanings are both translated and reinterpreted in response to changing historical and political conditions.

Through the works of Zamirouskaya, Malinovskaya and Charnyshova, the event demonstrated how the Belarusian diaspora continues to function as a crucial site of cultural production and resistance. Their works are not merely reflections of a lost homeland but are actively shaping new narratives of belonging, protest and hope. These writers are part of a larger, evolving Belarusian cultural system that transcends borders, creating new meanings and solidarities that affirm the possibility of liberation through art and language.

In this sense, the writers at the event are participating in a form of cultural liberation that sees the Belarusian diaspora as a space where cultural memory is both preserved and liberated from the constraints of centralized state power. Their voices challenge the forces that seek to suppress Belarusian identity, offering a dynamic and transformative view of what it means to be Belarusian.