

The Pushkin Paradox

Bobr is a sleepy village in eastern Belarus with a population of 1,200. Its houses are quaint and wooden, mostly occupied by farmers. It has one paved road and no plumbing system. Little about it gives the authorities cause for concern; there is little to Bobr at all.

But even while the mass beatings and arrests of Belarusian pro-democracy activists caught the world's eye last December in the run-up to the stage-managed, widely criticized reelection of president Alexander Lukashenko, the long arm of the law found its way even here.

For Bobr is home to Belarus' most paradoxical political dissident. He is a Belarusian nationalist and contemporary performance artist who shares a name with Russia's national poet. He is an Afghan war veteran and a devout Orthodox Christian. His name is Alexander Pushkin – "Ales" to his friends.

Last December 9th, he was sentenced to 13 days' imprisonment for "malicious hooliganism" after an altercation provoked by a drunken neighbor – one Pushkin assumes was staged, as this was the second time in a row Pushkin had been jailed on the eve of the presidential election. His sentence conveniently expired the day after voting took place on both occasions.

Pushkin, of course, has dallied with the presidential office before. His most famous performance, 1999's "A Present for the President," gained him national notoriety. On the date Lukashenko's first term in office officially expired, he appeared outside the presidential palace dressed in traditional peasant costume and pushing a wheelbarrow full of manure, on top of which lay a pile of Belarusian banknotes bearing Soviet symbols reintroduced by Lukashenko and a portrait of Lukashenko himself. In the few seconds before he was arrested, beaten, and fined \$4,000, Pushkin spilled the wheelbarrow's contents onto the ground and drove a pitchfork through the portrait. He was only saved from a harsher sentence by pointing out the added irony in his offering: manure, money, and tools would be an entirely sincere gift for any peasant.

I met Pushkin in a decrepit café on the fourth floor of Minsk's train station, with windows offering a panorama of classical Stalinist skyscrapers and the drab apartment blocks ubiquitous across the Soviet Union. The threat he poses to the Lukashenko regime was not abundantly clear. Pushkin is an amiable man of 45 with long hair and gold teeth. He wore a frayed trilby hat, an embroidered present shirt, and an overcoat that Americans would generously describe as "vintage." Drawing a worn envelope and a yellowing address-book from his black briefcase, he half seemed to have stepped from the 1950s.

"There are two kinds of Belarusian artists," he said, drawing a line down the back of the envelope, "official and unofficial. But it's not a question of 'this art is good, this art is bad,' it's a question of complicity and conformism."

Conformism is perhaps not strong enough a word. Top of the list on the left-hand side was the late Mikhail Andreevich Savitsky – one of the five Heroes of Belarus, alongside the metropolitan and the head of the collective farm agency – who dutifully churned out portraits

of Stalin at the ripe old age of 87. “They all lie, these old men,” grinned Pushkin, “they made the decision to shake the hand, accept the awards, and not question anything.”

Pushkin, by contrast, is a contemporary performance artist – a genre that essentially does not exist in Belarus. There is only one art gallery and no art market. The vast majority of non-state artists have long emigrated, mostly to Germany and the United States. Steeped in critical theory and social engagement, contemporary art is effectively smothered by the repression of independent media and the regressive, village-oriented culture promoted by the state – Pushkin calls it “collective farm fascism.”

“There aren’t many politically engaged artists in Belarus, and few share Pushkin’s radical interests,” comments Marina Naprushkina, a Berlin-based Belarusian artist who makes “anti-propaganda” aimed at countering the Lukashenko regime’s informational control. “Ales is a very strong personality, an idealist, a principled, politicized artist. He doesn’t distinguish between art and life. He fears nothing. People like that make life very unpleasant for the regime.”

Another series of performances uses March 25th, the date the short-lived Belarusian National Republic declared its independence in 1918, as a conceptual locus. Instead of participating in the rallies held by Belarus’ opposition on that date, Pushkin stages mock celebrations designed foremost to attract the ire of Bobr’s police. Every year, he takes down a painting of a historical Belarusian scene from his attic and works on it outside, vowing not to finish it until the Lukashenko regime has been deposed. Others have included handing out slices of cake in Bobr’s central square and erecting a series of birdhouses dedicated to diverse sectors of Belarusian society including nationalists, supporters of integration with the EU, military veterans and the broken-hearted.

Key to his performances’ success is their inevitable end as Pushkin is arrested by the police. “The police and the judge who administers the fine become part of the performance,” he beams, “without realizing it themselves. Though they do, naturally, realize what an absurd situation they’ve put themselves in.”

Pushkin’s work, however, can be as troubling for the Western viewer as for the Belarusian state. An unabashed nationalist, he frequently appears as a black-clad paramilitary soldier exhibiting portraits of controversial Belarusian “resistance heroes” from the Second World War. While not comparable to the sentiments still held by some in Latvia or Estonia, where surviving SS veterans still hold parades, Pushkin protests in support of members of the Belarusian Independence Party, a separatist paramilitary organization partly supported by Nazi Germany in its attempts to “liberate” Belarus from Soviet rule towards the end of the war.

The war remains a major event for Belarusians, and it is commemorated largely according to the traditional pro-Soviet narrative. Brezhnev-style Victory Day celebrations have lost none of their Soviet-era pomp, not least because, as Professor David Marples of the University of Alberta points out, “virtually everyone lost a relative in the war.”

Nationalism in Pushkin’s vein, however, is limited to the “cultural renaissance” movement associated with Zianon Pozniak, leader of the Belarusian National Front in the

1990s. Though many of the causes at the root of that movement – ethnic anxiety, economic troubles, and fear of Russian aggression – have, if anything, been exacerbated since, its support has only decreased.

“The vast majority of Belarusians don’t see the Soviet era as one of occupation,” explains Dr. Jana Kobzova of the European Council on Foreign Relations. “The longing for the return of the ‘good old Soviet times’ has been much stronger than in other countries in Eastern Europe - after all, Lukashenko was initially popular not only because of his anti-corruption drive, but also because he re-instated Soviet-era state symbols and his foreign policy was narrowly focused on building closer ties with Russia.”

Pushkin remains unconcerned. “World War II in Belarus was a civil war,” he insists. “I’m completely convinced of that.

The heroes I try to commemorate had a strong, principled position – to be independent from both the Germans and the Soviets. This required that they wear collaborationist German uniforms. Recently I’ve been coming across heroes who wore ‘Russian uniforms’ to make Belarusian Belarus independent.”

The contradictory positions Pushkin’s nationalism leads him to take indicate the wider paradox at the heart of Pushkin’s personality. He speaks Russian with a heavy accent and only speaks with his fellow-countrymen in Belarusian, but his name immediately evokes the Golden Age of Russian poetry in the 19th century. He frequently rails against Russia’s overbearing political and cultural influence, but is a devout member of the Belarusian Orthodox eparchy – which is subordinate to the Russian church. He is a contemporary performance artist, but trained as a classical painter and earns a living restoring frescoes in rural churches.

Pushkin attributes much of this to his service in the Afghan war, proudly showing me his veteran’s card. “I was the only one in my battalion who became an artist! That’s when I stopped being scared of the government, the KGB, the police. And it was only twenty years later that I came to realize I paint icons for Orthodox and Catholic churches by way of repentance for my cruelty – even if it was in a faraway land.”

But even when at his most penitent, the anarchic glee that characterizes his performances cannot be repressed. One mural in the Church of St. Nicholas in Bobr was hastily repainted after an image of Lukashenko himself depicted among the sinful appeared on Russian television.

There is a sense that an outlier like Pushkin is the natural byproduct of Belarus’ authoritarian system. Widespread repression and censorship may prevent a pluralistic, Western-style culture from developing, but they are bound to create a twisted mirror image of themselves much like the other Belarus Pushkin celebrates.

Faced with repression and censorship, he does not simply revel in them, but feels they set him free:

“The particulars of our profession allow artists to be the freest of all in a totalitarian society: society: we only need a small space, an easel, some paint, a conscience, a soul, and creative thinking to create artifacts commemorating our time. I’m the freest artist in the country!”