

# Translation from Belarusan —

## *No hobby for the sane*

*Anonymous*

I started out as a translator of Belarusian\* literature over the winter of 2010–2011. The stone-cold murderous dictatorship was already in existence, only back then they used to imprison those who held a different opinion one by one, not by the thousands. After that parody of a presidential election in December 2010, a mere eight out of the remaining nine candidates were locked up by the tenth – the ‘winner’ – and only one of them got beaten half to death before the polls closed. He was the one Lukashenka feared the most because no-one can enthral a crowd like a great poet – Uladzimir Niakliaeu. He was taken to hospital but by the time he came to, he found himself in a KGB prison (the same acronym is still used in Belarus to this day). For a week, the country had no way of knowing whether he was dead or alive. Since then he has been incarcerated several times. This is why I changed professions. My first translation of one of his short stories came out (under an alias) quicker, in fact, than he got out of prison. Thus, I was bludgeoned into becoming a literary translator – a less than ideal beginning.

### **Undesirable spreading of Belarusian literature**

The years 2012/2013 more or less marked the end of interest in Belarusian culture that had been temporarily enlivened by the ‘presidential election’ of 2010 and was only reignited last year – not by the subsequent ‘election’ but by the brutally stifled wave of protest that followed. In the meantime, I, for one, was unable to get a line published for two years. It is also worth mentioning that it requires a great deal more effort to coax publishing houses into accepting a text translated from Belarusian than the actual translation process. Routinely hopeless. Neither the Republic of Belarus nor potential target cultures show any inclination to support translation of this kind in any way, Poland, perhaps, being a notable exception – due to the fact that the two countries share much of their history. There is, to the best of my knowledge, a handful of translators in Europe – mostly in German-speaking regions – who possess somewhat keener skills in advancing their interests and/or having their work published privately.

All this, of course, is rooted in Belarus. According to the official Belarusian standpoint, spreading Belarusian literature is undesirable and has been so, for countless years now. The work of the Nobel prize winner, Alexievich, is no exception.

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The target language doesn't matter, either. Some of the publishing houses that specialise in Belarusian language literature operate abroad and the same goes for several printing houses. The 'reimportation' of printed products is then zealously hindered by Belarusian customs officials and the police force who, more often than not, are successful.

One of the consequences of this is that my few and far between translations still get published before their originals. If I am lucky enough, a literary journal

might print my translation but, in the meantime, the author – unable to publish – keeps fine tuning their work. A side-effect of this is that the translation strongly resembles but does not fully reflect 'the original'. Luckily, my contemporary authors understand this since I have been fortunate enough to make their acquaintance and am proud to call the majority my friends.

### Speaking Belarusian

It is a blessing that the local literary community took me in. The 'opposition' writers' society (ah yes, there is also a writers' society in agreement with the



**Postcard of Minsk.**  
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government) even admitted me into its ranks. Otherwise, I wouldn't have anyone to talk to in Belarusian: hundreds of years of oppression of the language, from East and West alike, has borne fruit. Using Belarusian can be an act of political

protest. In old-fashioned rural areas, it is not uncommon that inhabitants speak some sort of – or rather several sorts of – mixed languages, most often a Ukrainian-Belarusian-Russian-Polish mix (so-called ‘Trasianka’).

In this completely KGB-controlled country, the use of the Belarusian language was persecuted even ten to twenty years ago. Then it was tolerated, now it’s punishable again, albeit not always in the word’s legal sense. During mass arrests/detentions, the police mark people with paint, using specific colours corresponding to specific activities. Those who use Belarusian are given the cruellest of beatings at the police station. This is in a country where, over the last decade, eager volunteers have offered Belarusian language courses in several towns and cities. Anyone can attend the weekly classes, foreigners included. It represents an opportunity for those who speak the language to converse and build a community.

In a situation like this you think long and hard before you decide to chat with your friends in Belarusian over the phone, like you used to. Personally, I haven’t given up the old habit just yet, but I would be lying if I said I feel no fear whatsoever.

### **Books and translators**

Since they are foreigners for the most part, it is more difficult for the regime to put pressure on translators. Those who still live in Belarus would be considered an oddity and are generally lost in the literary crowd. In any case, if they are European citizens, they are in an easier position than all the writers and poets who have seen the inside of a prison for varying amounts of time

over these 26 years of dictatorship – many of them more than once.

**“According to the official Belarusian standpoint, spreading Belarusian literature is undesirable”**

Nevertheless, a translator who is not in personal contact with Belarusian authors has no opportunity to become familiar with contemporary literature. Books are customarily printed in batches of 100 to 500 copies. Book stores only keep the most well-known Belarusian literature classics and one or two copies of a few contemporary titles are lucky to be included at all. Which is (among other reasons) why only two or three, relatively fashionable living authors’ works gets published in foreign languages apart from the odd exception. Then, as mentioned above, there is the complete lack of support for translation of Belarusian literature. There’s not much more the regime could do in this regard to make matters worse in the current, progressively more devastating political atmosphere. On the other hand, several authors have noted that interest in Belarusian texts has increased remarkably in the current situation. As a literary translator, I find the increase in

demand for news from Belarus palpable and – for this exact reason – there seems to be a greater appetite for Belarusian culture as well. I have had some work published in recent years, and other work translated a long time ago, appeared in journals. Larger publishing houses and print journals remain uninterested in Belarusian literature – but some sort of break-through is undeniable.

### Tipping scale

I do believe in the future of Belarus. I also work for it as a literary translator by promoting the culture and commentating on events. But I cannot finish this piece optimistically based solely on my beliefs.

*“Contre nous de la tyrannie l’étendard sanglant est levé!”* (“Against us tyranny’s bloody flag is raised!” – tr. Laura K. Lawless.) They truly know no bounds. On 26 February, 24 elderly ladies were detained in Minsk, some because they were reading Belarusian literature on the suburban railway and others because they were found in possession of Belarusian books. The charge was the usual: “attendance at an unauthorised event”. The most common punishment was a fine equivalent to one or two months’ pension although some were detained for between 15 and 20 days. One 75-year-old woman’s trial was expedited but many others were kept in prison a number of days waiting for legal proceedings to take place. This is just one example, nothing extraordinary.

Between August and December 2020, the game between peaceful protesters and a police force armed to the teeth was leaning towards a draw even though it took the lives of 12 people. (Only 4 are officially recognised.) As I am writing

these words, the scale is tipping towards a power that, at this point, has lost all its legitimacy. Tipping – temporarily, one hopes. If the powers that be win, what will happen then to Belarusian language and literature, and what will happen to us, its translators?

*\*‘Belarusan’ is the author’s choice of spelling. It is used by some academics and linguists who strive for sovereignty of the Republic of Belarus, and was also employed by the UN from 1992 – 1995.*

*Translated by a colleague of the author*