

# “Communication Explosion” in Authoritarian Minsk: Public Lectures, Counterpublics, and Counterspaces

Svetlana Poleschuk

**Abstract:** *Western scholarship on contemporary Belarus tends to be dominated by a narrow focus on Aliaksandr Lukashenka’s authoritarian regime, and often exclusively on the figure of Lukashenka himself. This article sets out to take a different approach, by examining social and cultural structures at the micro-level through an exploration of the phenomenon of intellectual public lectures in Minsk, and how these fit into the higher educational and broader social and cultural landscape. The efflorescence of independent cultural activity that has taken place in recent years has been hailed in Belarus as marking a “communication explosion,” and yet this development has received little attention in the Western scholarship on Belarus to date. This article explores this phenomenon with a view to gaining insight into the functioning of agency in contemporary Belarus, and the possibilities for the existence of a public sphere under the authoritarian regime. Without question, Belarus is an authoritarian state where harsh repressions towards political opponents are taking place. But this article invites the reader to look beyond the state/opposition dichotomy, and also beyond the political/apolitical dichotomy. It argues that intellectual public lectures are inherently political because they create a counterdiscourse challenging the dominant state ideology. This kind of politics, however, takes place not on the central squares, but in the cafés. Drawing on in-depth interviews and fieldwork in Minsk, the article gives voice to those who are actively engaged in hosting and delivering independent public lectures, providing a thick description of the most vivid public initiatives, exploring the boundaries of the politically permissible,*

*and interpreting educational activism as an alternative to direct political confrontation.*

## Introduction

On 9 October 2012, Belarusian artist Mikhail Gulin brought six yellow-and-pink cubes to October Square in the center of Minsk and used them to build a column there. This art intervention was performed as part of the project *Going Public—On the Difficulty of a Public Statement*, supported by the Goethe-Institut. The aim of the project was to explore the relationship between art and the public sphere in Klaipeda, Kaliningrad, and Minsk.<sup>1</sup> It only took a few minutes before Gulin's intervention was interrupted. The artist and his assistants were arrested by the Belarusian Special Police Force, escorted to the District Office of Internal Affairs, beaten, and charged with resisting arrest. These charges were later dismissed in court, but the incident disrupted Gulin's academic career—his contract with the Belarusian National Technical University where he worked as a lecturer was terminated. The case of Gulin's performance illustrates how impossible it is for citizens to voice even the subtlest criticism of the authorities in the official public space in Belarus without severe consequences. It is just one of numerous examples—sad, shocking, and bizarre—that we might cite here; other such instances include the violent suppression of the mass demonstrations associated with the presidential elections in 2010;<sup>2</sup> of the hand-clapping protests in 2011;<sup>3</sup> or of the 2014 campaign in which ribbons bearing the traditional national ornament were distributed.<sup>4</sup> All of these examples offer vivid evidence of the

---

<sup>1</sup> "Going Public: On the Difficulty of a Public Statement," *Goethe-Institut* website, <http://www.goethe.de/ins/lt/prj/gop/enindex.htm>. All URLs cited in this article were accessible on 17 May 2017.

<sup>2</sup> See further Alena Minchenia's article in this issue.

<sup>3</sup> For more on the clapping protests, see: "Clapping 'Bout a Revolution," *The Economist*, 28 June 2011, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/easternapproaches/2011/06/protest-belarus>.

<sup>4</sup> "Belaruskaia stuzhka—zamest heorhieuskai. U Mensku razdali 12 tysiach stuzhak z arnamentam," *Radyio Svaboda*, 6 December 2014, <http://www.svaboda.org/a/a26729077.html>.