

Keeping Belarusian Music Alive | An Artist's Story Of Struggles And Triumphs

By Edge of Humanity Magazine (<https://edgeofhumanity.com/author/eoh2014/>), May 28, 2022

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"Belarusian Language, culture, dance, and folklore had been forgotten in our country."



(<http://www.cetinbostanoglu.com/index.html>) "My name is Tatsiana MATAFONAVA I was born on November 10, 1977, in Belarus.

Belarus is a former Soviet Union country that declared its independence in 1991 with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. There was Russian education in Belarus at the time of the Soviet Union. Most Russians would say we won the war, we defeated fascist Germany, we don't want war anymore, we Russians are the happiest people, everything is fine. This is how they were brainwashing us. Everyone is happy, everything is fine, but the markets are empty, with no clothes, no food.

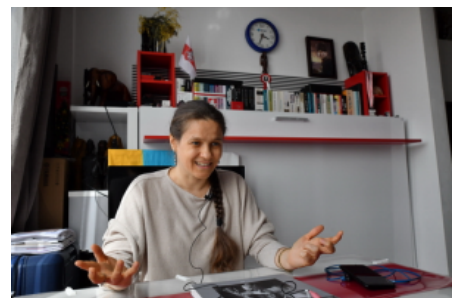
Only in the heads, everything was fine, but there was nothing. They were just saying nice things. In the regular Russian school, they only taught the Belarusian language for 3 years. My father spoke Belarusian. There were lessons in Belarusian, but it was not interesting for me. Because everything was about the Soviet Union, nothing else.

Then, when I started college, the Soviet Union broke up and democracy won. In 1991, democracy came to Belarus. Our flag has been white, red, and white for four years, our Belarusian history has started again. The Russian-backed Lukashenko won the 1995 election. When Lukashenko came to power, there were 4 years of Belarusian language education in schools. Lukashenko changed everything. He changed our flag. Changed the duration of Belarusian language education. Belarusian language education in schools has been reduced every year. They replaced the one-hour music lesson in college with Belarusian history, I didn't want it. They put a writing lesson, I did not want a writing lesson.

Then a female friend of mine said that Lukashenko was a dictator. That's when I heard this word for the first time. At that time I told my father to explain to me, "What do you mean dictator, what is our language, our country?" It was then that I asked my father for the first time. I was 16 years old. My father then said: "Our country, our Belarusian language, is Belarusian, but we do not know Belarusian". I realized that my father is against Lukashenko. I was very curious and I started reading newspapers and followed the news. Eight important people were killed in 1998-1999-2000. The KGB was given a list of people to be killed and they disappeared. It was unclear where they happened. Those who wanted to investigate were also killed and disappeared. Journalists disappeared. When I was a young girl, I read about it in the news and I countered, thinking about how this could happen.

At the age of 18, I bought the books of the great Belarusian poet, read 2 books, and learned. I started learning the Belarusian language. My son was born in 2000. I was 23 years old.

(<http://www.cetinbostanoglu.com/index.html>) In our education, there was music education after normal school. My mother was a music teacher, and piano teacher at the music school. And I went to 2 schools. Normal school in the morning, a music school in the evening. I attended music school for 8 years. Then I studied music in college (high school) for 4 years. Then I studied music for 5 years at the Conservatory (university). After my son was born, I started using the Belarusian language fully. It was difficult for me alone to speak Belarusian while others were speaking Russian. You come to work, everyone speaks Russian. Of course, I used it too, but I only spoke Belarusian to my son. He was growing and the language was growing. Because he began to use more words. My son went to kindergarten. In Minsk, only 2 kindergartens were in Belarusian, 2 nurseries for the population of 2 million. We were getting up in the morning and going to the kindergarten 1 hour away with my son, this is how we trained chil-



dren. At that time I was working in the Minsk Philharmonic orchestra. I worked at the Minsk Philharmonic for 12 years. I worked as a singer.

One day my friend brought home a violin and we started working together. At first, the sound of the violin was like the creak of a door. After 2 months, I learned to play the violin and went to my first concert. I learned to play the violin myself. I took a lesson or two about violin from music school. How to play softer, how to use arm and hand, and finally I found the soft voice. Then came the second concert and others. Maybe 8 months later we formed a small orchestra. We started folk dances and folklore with 4 instruments. Language, culture, dance, and folklore were forgotten in our country. It was important to us to come back. We started to do folk dances by meeting at the cafe every Thursday, this lasted 4 years. It was very popular, everyone started waiting for Thursday to go to the dance. We did another cafe, another club and street music for 12 years. When summer came, we were out on the street. This music is now available in many cities. I was a singer. I sang in Belarusian, I traveled all over Belarus for 10 years. I gave concerts for children in schools. We sang and danced together. I made a lot of discs (CD) for school and for kids. Because my child is small, he needs to listen to music, but what music? There is no Belarusian music. But it is necessary for a small child. My son was born in 2000. I found books with sheet music and lyrics but only in the book, you won't hear and you won't listen. We made music with a friend, but who will sing the song? My child sang at 5 years old. There was no New Year's song. We made songs for children. These songs were sung in the past but were removed during the Soviet Union but remained in the books. I took them out and convert them to musical notes. The words are already there. I wrote songs myself for school. My friends have written songs. When I read the words, the music was coming right away. I see what's wrong, I was doing it right away. Children go to school, learn poetry, poets, actors, everyone helped me so that the child can learn easily, we made a disc. Belarusian teachers do not know our writers and poets.



(<http://www.cetinbostanoglu.com/index.html>) I found 60 poets who read their own poems. I found it on the radio, old tapes, old discs. This was very necessary for Belarus, because the state did not do it. Once we were sitting at the table with the minister of education and culture, there was a meeting. I gave him some discs I made. I said it would be easier for you to distribute these discs to schools. "Nice job," he said. Then he looks at me and sees the opposite poet, the opposite actors. "We will not help you, you yourself hold the Belarusian culture," he said. The Minister is Belarusian. They only look at Lukashenko, if he is against "no". He said

to me "why are you going after those people against it". I said, "I'm not a politician, I'm just singing and doing my culture and don't touch me." I worked in the philharmonic for 12 years, they kicked me out. Because how many times has the KGB wondered about me? They called me several times after work, we talked for 2 hours.

There was a holiday in the summer, Lukashenko's holiday. I work in the philharmonic, we will give three concerts for Lukashenko in three days. We came, put on the costumes, got ready and left. A KGB agent "where is here Tatsiana" I said "I'm here". "Take off your dress and go and don't come for 3 days so we won't see you." Lukashenko today, Putin coming tomorrow, then again you are not allowed to sing for Lukashenko. I called the director of the philharmonic and told him. "The KGB threw me out," I said. "How so?" said the director, surprised. But the director is unauthorized, the KGB is more important. I worked for another year and then they fired me. I also performed concerts myself, I traveled in Belarus with the teachers I got along with, I gave concerts in every school, we sang and danced with the children.

I met Sabri a few years later. He came to Belarus, I came to Turkey. Elections were held in Belarus on August 9, 2020. In Belarus, all the people voted, the percentage of turnout was very high, they wanted to overthrow Lukashenko. Everyone participated in the election. Lukashenko's biggest rival was a woman, her name was Svetlana Tikhonovskaya. She all voted for him, but Lukashenko said 95% of my vote. People got angry and took to the streets to protest. On the first night, several protesters were killed by soldiers. 300,000 people attended the protest in August 2020, the ringleaders were arrested, I was singing and playing guitar and violin. I was fixed there. I fled to Turkey without being arrested. Our protests were held with flowers, women did not show strength, they protested with flowers and songs.

If 300 thousand people who participated in this protest were in Turkey, people would burn and destroy everywhere. But in Belarus, because people were brought up in the Soviet system, people are digested and act peacefully. Men are in the background, women are in the foreground, the police and soldiers cannot do anything to the female protesters. They fired all civil servants who participated in the demonstrations. When the squares were full, I wanted to make music in my own language. Because people did not know Belarusian songs and dances. They were singing in Russian. I came, I sang in Belarusian, I danced. They call me Spasibo (What does it mean?) in Russian. I was saying there is no Russian, only Belarusian. I taught them Belarusian songs and 1 year later I went to Poland.

Some of the people in the square were speaking Belarusian. Not a year ago. It was very important for me to protest government's official cultural policy. Belarusian language, Belarusian culture. People were very surprised. So much dancing, so

many songs, how beautiful. Then the police and soldiers cleared the protest square. We gathered in the gardens of the houses and made music with those who brought their instruments. They see who is making music, they were arresting them and put him in jail. Sabri said, "Enough, come to Turkey". Whenever the first person to make music went to jail, I escaped too. I thought, "It's over in two months and I'll be back". But I'm looking worse. They videotaped it, and then they started arresting and imprisoning Belarusian musicians from there. They began to give 5-6 years in prison. Prisons are not like in Turkey. There is no place to sleep. Let's say you were imprisoned during protests and they sentenced you to 1 year.

Winter is very cold, when families bring clothes and blankets to their relatives, they do not give them to you, they say you will live with whatever you have on you. They don't provide beds, no blankets, pillows, rooms are small. Moreover, the government takes some money from you. (Hotel fee). The windows are closed and they pour chlorine on the floor, eyes burn. The light is on at night, they make high-frequency interference sounds and psychologically torture people, I was very scared and came here. I came 2 years ago. My son is 21 years old. He studied high school in Belarus, on a scholarship to Poland to study at the conservatory. They give scholarships around \$300 per month. At school in the pianist department. I, as a singer, have repeatedly traveled from Belarus to Kiev as a singer. Our friends, as a group of poets, went to the conference every year in the Spring. I sang and traveled in Ukraine. I sang in Ukrainian. I have many friends there. The war has begun, too bad. I don't live, it's like I'm fighting in Ukraine. This is very stressful for me. Bombs are falling on my friends there. How do they live?

Why did I go to this protest in Beyoglu, Istanbul? It was very important to me. My state dictator allowed to Russian troops pass from Belarus through to Ukraine. In the protest, they said, "you are the enemy". I said, "I am not the enemy, the enemy is Lukashenko." That's why I went to the protest in Beyoglu a few times. I played the Ukrainian national anthem with the violin for the last time. I sang, recorded, and shared Ukrainian songs on YouTube.

I'm going to America in a week. New York, Chicago, Cleveland, Miami, Washington, Texas. Belarusians called me, they wanted a concert. In America, there is an organization called Baza, which was founded by Belarusians. It is an organization that keeps the Belarusian culture alive abroad. My trip will take 2 months. Maybe it will be interesting, but I learned 10 songs in Turkish. Because sometimes we travel in Turkey, I make music for neighbors and friends."

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