“All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players.”

*— As You Like It* (Act 2, Scene 7)

Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them.

— *Twelfth Night* (Act 2, Scene 5)

“Cowards die many times before their deaths; the valiant never taste of death but once.”

— *Julius Caesar* (Act 2, Scene 2)

*Historically, politically, and culturally speaking, Belarus is an enigma. This perception is most obvious on the world stage where scholars and journalists often unfairly present this vast European nation as nothing more than a bleak dictatorship, a Russian dupe, or a Soviet relic, with a docile and resigned people. All instance The concept of an inconspicuous, monochromatic Belarus plagues the Belarusian struggle for liberation. When the international community shirks its responsibility to understand Belarus’s complexities, it only aids the regime’s erosion of popular resistance*.

To prepare for the meeting, follow these steps: (i) review the agenda to understand key discussion points, (ii) gather necessary documents like reports and presentations, (iii) test any required technology, such as projectors or video conferencing tools, (iv) arrive early to set up and be ready for discussions, (v) take notes on key topics and action items, (vi) engage actively by asking questions and providing input, and (vii) follow up afterward with a summary email and next steps.

An essential aspect of both the exhibition’s goals, as well as Levinas’s understanding of the face-to-face, is the authenticity of the encounter. The line between a spectacle and an encounter is fine. The former consists of an asymmetrical presentation with the intention to entertain. The latter is more symmetrical, and exists outside of intention, free of teleological ends. Any project at risk of putting human suffering on display must tread extremely carefully so as to not cross the moral boundary of voyeurism. The question becomes, “how do we ensure that this exhibition does not become a spectacle of Belarusian suffering, and instead produces authentic face-to-face encounters?” As Levinas puts it:

I *think rather that access to the face is straightaway ethical. You turn yourself toward the Other as toward an object when you see a nose, eyes, a forehead, a chin, and you can describe them. The best way of encountering the Other is not even to notice the color of his eyes! When one observes the color of the eyes one is not in social relationship with the Other. The relation with the face can surely be dominated by perception, but what is specifically the face is what cannot be reduced to that.[[1]](#footnote-3)*

The challenge is to encourage viewers not to just perceive the protestors’ faces, but to experience the faces authentically. There are several stylistic choices that facilitated this goal and guided the curatorial selection. Preference was given to images where the subject gazes directly at the camera lens. This is most prevalent in Aliaksandr Pasechnik’s photography of joyous protestors pausing to allow their likeness to be captured. The direct gaze most accurately recreates the sensation of having a face-to-face encounter. Photography displaying intense emotions, such as fear or defiance, as well as images filled with movement similarly pull the viewer in. These types of photographs apply pressure to the gallery’s guests, giving them the sense that there is not enough time to carefully dissect the subjects’ features. Intensity and speed dampen the impulse to reduce the face to disjointed components, thus preserving its ethical power.

*Participants: Serguei Parkhomenko (“The Last Address”/Memorial); Belarusian Human Rights Activist Ales Bialiatski (Belarusian Prison Literature Series); Vasyl Cherepanyn (director of the Visual Culture Research Center in Kyiv, Ukraine). Introduced by Yuliya Ilchuk (Stanford University), and moderated by Yuliya Ilchuk and Olga V. Solovieva (University of Chicago)*

Yuliya Ilchuk and Olga V. Solovieva

It is the first time that I see a Western institution demonstrate in a powerful way that they understand our solidarity, our common work, and our shared vision of a democratic future in the East Slavic region.

Back in 2019 in Chicago, when Ales, the members of Memorial, and Vasyl Cherepanyn’s Visual Culture Research Center came together to enunciate the commonalities among East Slavic cultures of protest, our goal was to create a productive dialogue among Ukrainian, Belarusian and Russian intellectuals and artists who share the values of democratic governance, human and civil rights, and freedom of artistic expression, as well as among scholars of the recent history and culture of these three countries. Shakespeare in one of his popular play states: “We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep.” Establishing this dialogue remains crucial to a better understanding of the complex interconnection of culture and politics in the region. Such a dialogue should be especially fruitful because these three countries have much political and cultural history in common, but interpret this cultural heritage differently.

* The fight for democracy, human rights and independence coincides in Belarus and Ukraine with the cultivation of national language, literature, and culture.
* It started like this in Russia too. At what point and why does the liberation of national consciousness turn into a suffocating chauvinism?
* When does it promote democracy and the embrace of the community of nations, and when does it lead to oppression, persecution of others, and political isolation? How do forms of cultivation of national identity come to differ in these three countries?
* What features of their historical backgrounds are most relevant? Are there cultural and political safeguards against the dangers of nationalism?
* This year’s Nobel Peace Prize recipients answered these questions by appeal to the universal, transnational nature of human rights. The three East Slavic cultures are conjoined by history and tradition, with Ukraine and Belarus having been for long stretches of time parts of the Russian and then Soviet empires.
* They also show many differences, conditioned by these countries’ peculiar political experience and geographical locations.
* Both contemporary Belarus and Ukraine belonged to the Duchy of Lithuania between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries. These are defined in the steps:

1. Then part of Belarus and right-bank Ukraine belonged to the Polish Commonwealth. In the eighteenth century, the Austro-Hungarian empire claimed the Galician part of Ukraine.
2. After a short episode of independence in 1918, both Belarus and Ukraine were reabsorbed as republics within the Soviet Union until they gained legal sovereignty in 1991.
3. They also show many differences, conditioned by these countries’ peculiar political experience and geographical locations.

* Many differences, conditioned by these countries’ peculiar political experience and geographical locations.

1. Emmanuel Levinas, “The Face,” in *Ethics and Infinity. Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1985 [1982]), 85–86. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)