



Politics of Emotions: Belarusian Photographer Maxim Sarychau



PATRICK DOOLEY × 16TH APRIL 2017 × FORMER USSR × INTERVIEW × PHOTOGRAPHY

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“Is there anything more frightening than people?”
- Svetlana Alexievich

A unique niche that Belarus has carved out for itself is the wealth of artistic talent that explores and chronicles the emotional impact of political events. Whether it be writers like Alexievich or Adamovich, the events that are rendered by academics, journalists, and others as an accumulation of rational choices and interests, are instead understood to be emotional landmines of thoughts and reflections that the economy of language only holds a limited balance. Perhaps this is a consequence of not the totality of suffering that Belarusians have endured, but rather the sheer absurdity of events that they have experienced - be it the devastation of the Second World War, the ongoing cultural genocide of Belarusian culture, Chernobyl, or the Lukashenko regime. With each passing trauma, the reoccurring motif is the absence of agency of Belarusians to avoid these events. The Belarusian experience has been one that no model can conform to other than the potentially unlimited scope of artistic articulation.

Continuing in this vein in his ongoing project *Stolen Days*, Maxim Sarychau showcases what a diverse array of activists missed during their politically motivated incarceration by the Lukashenko regime. It accesses not simply the politically unjustifiable nature of their arrest, but instead locates the erosion of the spiritual and emotional strength of the subjects photographed. Removed from the romantic depictions of political resistance, Sarychau articulates how the operation of political violence occurs within the seemingly monotonous levels of missing out on football matches, concerts, or mass. He illustrates that political violence operates far beyond the swinging baton of riot police and violent words of political figures, but also encompasses a whole array of emotional injuries that are integral to sustaining oppression. To put it simply, Sarychau showcases the politics of emotions.

Thank you for meeting me. Your work really conveys the basic principle of *Stolen Days* of politics being personal. It conjures other Belarusians, like Svetlana Alexievich, who have looked to show the emotional landscape of political oppression, and how the consequences are often private. Can you please speak

about the emotional impact that the Lukashenko regime has had upon the characters that you interviewed and photographed?

In the project *Stolen Days*, which I started in 2014 after the next wave of political detentions, I talked to people about their traumas, and the experience of interaction with the prison system. At the same time I always asked them one question to which I had no answer myself. I was wondering about the way out of the state of stagnation and fear Belarus finds itself in at the moment. What could each one of us do?

But the most relevant answer to your question would be my project *Voices of Generation L*: portraits and monologues of young Belarusians who were born or grew up during the Lukashenko ruling. I just went out to the streets and started talking about politics with youth I randomly met. The main thing I have noticed is that young people are unhappy with many things: from the economic situation in the country to the level of education in universities. They are critical and unsatisfied. The only problem is that they do not know what to do with these feelings. Most of them do not consider state and authorities as something that can and should be managed by people. It is something stable, concrete and unchangeable.

The most popular thought that I have heard about the (im)possibility of any action (even in legitimate frames) is “*But I am alone, what can I do?*”. Quite a comfortable position, first of all for authorities. Such self-elimination is extremely popular among people of all ages and people from different social layers. And this is what any regime dreams of – a divided society with lack of solidarity, and people who don’t care about politics and don’t know laws and rights.

Speaking to many progressive Belarusians throughout these past days, the reoccurring theme I hear is an issue of fatigue. Many of them supported both the 2006 and 2010 protests and desire change, yet are now feeling emotionally drained.

Despite the current growing momentum against Lukashenko, there is a feeling that his rule is permanent because of the tremendous violence he utilizes. Many speak about a desire to isolate themselves from the state as much as possible by constructing bubbles around them that demand as little interaction as possible with the governing apparatus. How do you believe this weariness impacts the potential for change in Belarus?

Many people who were politically active in 2006 and 2010 indeed grew up and saw that nothing could be changed in direct confrontation with the authorities, so they became frustrated in protests. But their passiveness doesn't equal loyalty to the regime. Many of them redirected their desire for changes to constructive and lawful ways. Mostly there are different initiatives: from educational events to creating independent cultural and economic spaces and new media. All of this is building civil society and initiating changes.

And of course these people don't close their eyes to politics. It is impossible to avoid anger and not react to the events. So I think many people are just waiting for the decisive moment in the protests to take part in some way.

Looking at Minsk superficially, I see all the bars and galleries on *Kastraychnitskaya Vulitsa* and throughout the city that are progressive and fashionable. I meet young people that have Schengen visas and speak multiple languages. It would be easy to assume from the fashionable nature of the city that there is a vibrant democratic counterculture. However, that clearly is a misrepresentation of the city. Do you believe that these sorts of establishments act as a distraction, or do they create fertile ground for change?

I believe that changes are starting from minds and from people. The more open-minded and integrated with the global world Belarusians appear, the more freedom grows in Belarus.

We can't just sit and wait for some messian who will crush the black Soviet jackets of the authorities, and will bring us to a bright future. Nobody cares about Belarus except its citizens. Probably, this is normal. Dialogue with authorities should be going at the same time on different levels - utilizing the mechanisms of the law from one side while pressing the state by resisting through protest and other means (that unfortunately may be out of law) from another side.

Extending personal freedom step by step, pushing the limits of censorship and social constraints, and thinking about the people around, I am sure, moves the country to a better place to live. It is a long process in which everyone is involved - from urbanists and journalists to artists and activists.

The problem is that each step forward requires fearless, huge efforts and thinking twice. Because it is impossible to predict how the system will react, and when it will consider your step as a threat that should be prevented. It may ignore this interview today, but can consider it illegal a few years later and create one more fake criminal case. This invisible and unpredictable force definitely influences everyone, even if we would like to ignore it.

I work with this feeling of danger and fear in my ongoing project *Blind Spot*, which lies on the intersection of art and documentary photography. It deals with extreme cases of legitimized violence that society provides to the State. I feel that it is important to look in the deep corners of history and dark places where laws and human rights do not work for different reasons. Asking questions and provoking feelings and thoughts with the viewer is my goal as an artist.

Lastly, the sudden surge in protests in Belarus has been linked to the so-called parasite tax on unemployed citizens. Unlike other protests, these protests have included many citizens outside of the intelligentsia and members of the opposition in Minsk. What makes these protests different from the others is that they are economic in nature, as opposed to expressing a desire for democracy. Has the parasite tax revealed the corrupt and malicious nature of the Lukashenko regime or

~~PARASITE TAX REVEALED THE CORRUPT AND MALICIOUS NATURE OF THE LUKASHENKO REGIME, OR
WILL THESE PROTESTS BE QUELLED BY LUKASHENKO APPEASING THE ECONOMIC CONCERN?~~

Yes, that is the big difference of the spring 2017 protests in Belarus from the previous ones. People who are far away from politics became politically engaged and active these days. That is why we have seen so many people in the regions protesting. I don't remember that happening ever before. And I don't think that in the marches we only see people who are protesting against the parasite tax. Most of them are just tired of the extremely low level of life and lack of working places in Belarus, especially in the regions.

I think that if Lukashenko would spread money among the working class and budget sphere, what he usually does on the evening of each presidential election, then the degree of dissatisfaction would be subsided. Receiving credits from Russia makes it possible. But each time the authorities bust money to minimize the consequences of the dying economy of the country. Instead of initiative reforms, hiring crisis managers with high competence, reducing the amount of money spent on police and unprofitable enterprises, authorities are continuing... like pumping an air balloon with huge holes. So the question of when this balloon will go down is a matter of time. The only thing that we can hope for is that the landing will be soft and Belarus will not become part of Russia.

If you are interested in Maxim's work, then please follow him on Facebook or check out his site



PATRICK DOOLEY

Blurring the lines between right, wrong, the erotic, and the outright bullshit, Patrick spends his days lost in his love of Borjomi and shawl-collared sweaters. He is currently working on an 18 volume biography of Boris Yeltsin due sometime in the spring of 2068.

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