DECOLONISING STRATEGIES AND POLICIES OF NON-STATE CULTURAL ACTORS IN BELARUS

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ABSTRACT

Belarus got into the limelight of the world's attention in summer 2020 due to mass protests against a fraudulent presidential election and subsequent brutal crackdown. These turbulent events sparked radically new cultural processes and caused tectonic shifts in the country's art field. This dissertation analyses the influence of the protests on contemporary strategies, tactics, and policies of non-state cultural actors of Belarus using the decolonising lens. It is argued that the current cultural situation in the country is substantially shaped by the legacy of intertwined Soviet postcoloniality and cultural neo-imperialism. While Belarusian state cultural actors try to preserve the status quo under the authoritarian regime, the activities of non-state ones contribute to the formulation of a decolonising counter-narrative and turn its strategies into practice, thus contributing to the further democratisation of Belarus. The special focus is put on the sphere of Belarusian independent theatre and such tactics as the subversion of power hierarchies, the wave of solidarity, reassertion of cultural identity, enforced placelessness, and community-building are analysed. The concepts of soft power and cultural diplomacy are applied to discuss the spectrum of international strategies including opening up to the world, the rise of diasporas and people's embassies, and cultural ambassadorship. The outcomes reveal that while implementing these tactics, non-state cultural actors contribute to an embodiment of the decolonising strategy as a base for cultural policy of post-authoritarian Belarus.

KEYWORDS

BELARUS, BELARUSIAN THEATRE, CULTURAL DIPLOMACY, CULTURAL POLICY, CULTURAL STUDIES, DECOLONIALITY, SOFT POWER

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

INDEX

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BCC   Belarusian Council for Culture
BTC   Belarus Theatre Community
NSCAs   Non-state cultural actor/s
SCAs   State cultural actor/s

INTRODUCTION

CONTEXT

According to the Oxford Dictionary, the word *'Belarusian'* became one of the words of 2020, reaching its peak of frequency of worldwide usage right after the controversy surrounding the orchestrated presidential election of August 9, 2020 in Belarus (Oxford Languages, 2020). The notorious Covid-dissident policy of Belarusian authorities headed by Aliaksandr Lukashenka, the allegations of vote-rigging due to the lack of transparency and the unprecedented scale of protests followed by a sweeping violent crackdown became the main factors why the country's name was on everyone's lips like never before. The demonstrations marked the awakening, renewal, and rise of the nation in its dedication to bringing an end to the period of a long-drawn authoritarian regime. The Belarusian society used this opportunity to call for the reconsideration of the existing balance of power. In fact, the protests became a large attempt to redesign anew the uneven field of power relations between the authoritarian state and the emancipated society calling for democratic changes.

During a short period of a relative political thaw in the late 2010s, the Belarusian cultural field was boosted by the emergence of numerous institutions and activists and the evolvement of a vibrant arts scene. Nevertheless, the Covid-influenced years 2020-2021 also became the most politically tumultuous ones in the contemporary history of Belarus. The activities of cultural actors during the protests highlighted their role as important agents of social change. However, the mass protests did not reach their aims straightforwardly as the authorities refused any attempts to hold a dialogue and instead started a disproportionate destructive backlash and targeted repressions. As of September 2021, the Belarusian cultural landscape has changed dramatically and remains volatile and fragile amidst the turbulent period of uncertainty caused both by the delayed consequences of the pandemic and the sociopolitical earthquake (Belarusian Pen Centre, 2021a). For many cultural actors, personal safety, freedom of speech and expression, and sometimes mere life in the country have become an unattainable privilege. The intense persecution of activists and mavericks became a trigger for the most massive wave of emigration of Belarusians in contemporary history (Svaboda, 2021). Those who stay in the country either compromise or continue the struggle hiding even deeper in the underground. Such a severe situation is reminiscent of positional warfare, inner occupation, or even a "cold civil war" (Shraibman, 2021).

In the situation of a deep internal crisis, large-scale emigration and unparalleled limitations of cultural activities in the country, the role and significance of Belarusian cultural work abroad is ever-increasing. Although during the period of sovereignty the

Belarusian authorities tried to create their positive image and generate soft power, the brutal crackdown has considerably undermined the regime's reputation and abilities for cultural diplomacy. Belarus turns out to be in an ambivalent situation when the persistent struggle of the pro-democratic movement attracts solidarity and aid from numerous foreign allies while simultaneously the stance and actions of the country's authorities repel lots of other key global players. In such a situation of internal tug-of-war and ideological warfare, it is as important as ever to use the international dimension in order to find the ways out of the prolonged national crisis.

Not surprisingly that ongoing cultural processes are understudied and require a closer researcher's look from different perspectives, including cultural policy analysis. The urgent question for cultural actors is how to operate within such a toxic and dangerous environment when, in fact, because of the repressions the Belarusian culture entered the mode of survivalism. Such processes as the slump of cultural offerings and participation, the shrinkage and forced shutting down of non-state infrastructure, unprecedented attack on civil society, imprisonment of cultural workers, emigration and brain drain all lead to the subsequent disappearance of burgeoning cultural life. In the situation of national burnout, apathy, terror, and the overall moral crisis on the rapid way to a police state that deploys tactics of 'everyday violence' (Viasna, 2021), it is no longer possible for cultural actors to double down on efforts the same way as it happened back in 2020. Therefore, it is crucial to analyse the applied cultural strategies and tactics, evaluate their effectiveness and future perspectives for the preservation and development of culture as well as the democratisation of the society despite all odds.

RESEARCH AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The overall aim of this dissertation is to reveal and analyse contemporary cultural strategies, tactics and policies of non-state actors in Belarus from the decolonising perspective with a special focus on the sphere of independent theatre. This aim breaks into three specific objectives that determine the outline of chapters.

1. To delineate the changes within matrix of power in cultural policy-making using the postcolonial/decolonising approach (Chapter 1);

2. To map the decolonising cultural strategies implemented domestically during the protests and crackdown in the field of Belarusian independent theatre (Chapter 2);

3. To identify the roles and international activities of NSCAs in generating soft power and exercising cultural diplomacy for the cultural policy-making (Chapter 3).

Chapter 1 provides a theoretical rationale for using the postcolonial approach for the delineation of the matrix of power within the Belarusian cultural policies. It also analyses the ways Soviet postcoloniality is reflected in the contemporary authoritarian regime and intertwined with neo-imperial tendencies, thus drastically influencing the cultural identities of Belarusians. This chapter further reflects on the paradox of Belarusian cultural policy-making, where the activities of SCAs and NSCAs contradict each other. The chapter finishes with the formulation of the essence of decoloniality and the vision of Belarusian protests as decolonial insurgency.

Chapter 2 maps and analyses the domestically implemented decolonising strategies that developed during and after protests in the independent theatre of Belarus. The focus is on such tactics as the subversion of power hierarchies, the wave of solidarity, reassertion of cultural identity, and enforced placelessness. The demarcation of post-crackdown roles of theatre-makers and the strategy of community-building is illustrated with the emergent case of the Belarus Theatre Community.

Chapter 3 concentrates on the ways how mechanisms of soft power and cultural diplomacy are used by NSCAs to achieve their goals internationally. After defining three key tactics of opening up to the world, the rise of diasporas and people's embassies, and cultural ambassadorship, the activities of the Belarusian Council for Culture are thoroughly analysed.

Finally, the outcomes revisit the aim and objectives of the dissertation. The summary of analysed strategies, tactics and policies proves the embodiment of the decolonising counter-narrative in contemporary cultural work and activism that contributes to the pro-democratic movement towards post-authoritarian Belarus.

VALUE OF RESEARCH

Although the protests brought the worldwide attention of researchers to Belarus, the ongoing cultural processes in the country are still insufficiently analysed and remain under-researched. This study aims to respond to the existing dearth of academic knowledge about Belarusian culture in general and cultural policies in particular and introduces an attempt to gain a deeper understanding of the recent changes in the cultural field.

The particular value of this dissertation is that it explores and analyses the contemporary state of affairs in the Belarusian culture using the decolonising lens as the scaffold, which is comparatively uncommon in Belarusian studies. The case of this middle-size developing country with an ongoing struggle between an autocracy and a pro-democratic civic movement aims to challenge the uneven geography within

anglophone cultural policy studies. Also, this dissertation aims to decenter the researcher's conventional gaze on cultural policy as a prerogative of states, provide a bottom-up approach as well as deconstruct the dominant discourse of soft power and cultural diplomacy immanent to some key global players. Last but not least, this thesis focuses on the achievements of NSCAs during the turbulent times despite extremely unfavourable circumstances and documents their gains amidst the devolution in culture caused by government interventions. Therefore, all these reasons together enhance the significance and timeliness of this study.

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH PARADIGM AND DESIGN

Cultural policy research as a separate field was kickstarted with the works by Paul DiMaggio (1983). From the discipline's very beginning, its focus has always been on the context-specific relationship between government interventions and culture with cultural policy interpreted as the output of a state-driven action (Paquette & Redaelli, 2015). Cultural policy is still predominantly understood as a subsector of government intervention with the range of (in)actions or (in)decisions that governments and its official agents (do not) undertake in the cultural field (Dye, 1995; Gray, 2010; Paquette & Redaelli, 2015). Their (in)activities can be either explicit or implicit, thus, using Ahearne's (2009) classification, corresponding to nominal or effective cultural policies. However, such a limited approach to cultural policies that are generated only by the will of governments was challenged with researchers that aimed to decenter the dominance of the state in cultural policy and expand the academic knowledge to the areas where these mechanisms do not work conventionally. Thus, Wyszomirski's (2002) approach appears to be more inclusive to the spectrum of non-state actors. According to her, cultural policies are created by "a large, heterogeneous set of individuals and organisations engaged in the creation, production, presentation, distribution, and preservation and education about aesthetic heritage, and entertainment activities, products and artefacts" (ibid.:186). Such a broad approach to cultural policy gives more space for manoeuvring in different contexts and allows to outline and investigate interests, motivations, ideas and influence of various actors.

This dissertation contributes to the further development of such an extended approach in its aspiration to decenter the state-focused character of cultural policy studies. It aims to highlight the existing imbalance of power and continuous struggle towards decentralised cultural policies, their formulation and/or implementation. This research attempts to estimate the weight and role of non-state actors according to their potency to shape cultural policies independent from and contrary to the government. Thus, a transdisciplinary approach to the Belarusian cultural policies is applied as a mode of knowledge production that goes beyond academia and brings together different institutional knowledge and the plurality of experts' voices (Gibbons et al., 1994; Paquette & Redaelli, 2015; Rizvi, 2012).

The interpretive paradigm is chosen in order to emphasise meaningful socio-cultural phenomena from a relativist and contextual perspective and is combined with the critical approach that aims to reveal the multiple problematic levels of the cultural policies. Qualitative research methods are implemented including a) literature and policy reviews

which are incorporated in the texts of corresponding chapters instead of being presented as a separate section; and b) a content analysis of 11 semi-structured video interviews conducted during August and September 2021 with key cultural practitioners chosen to represent various professional backgrounds and organisational affiliation in the field of independent theatre and non-state cultural policy-making. The video format of interviews was stipulated by both the Covid-related safety measures and geographical distance. As far as all of them to a certain extent were engaged in the protests, their experiences and visions serve as valuable insights. The scope of core questions asked can be found in Supplement 1, although extra clarification questions could be asked depending on the interviewee's activities.

Regarding the duty of care, to provide extra security for the interviewees during turbulent times, every participant is attributed with a two-letter code used for referencing instead of real names (AB, CD, EF, etc.) and their gender and age are not anyhow mentioned. The codes, expertise and affiliation of the interviewees are provided in Supplement 2 As far as all interviews were conducted in 2021, the dates are omitted in references for better readability. Mapping of cultural tactics is a chosen method for the investigation of implemented decolonising strategies and the case study approach is used for the analysis of two policy-making organisations in Chapters 2 and 3.

LIMITATIONS

The academic research of cultural policies in Belarus is connected to certain limitations. One of the serious obstacles is a scarce amount of robust statistical data. Although annual reports provided by the National Statistics Committee (Medvedeva et al., 2019) give certain quantitative data, their scope is limited to SCAs and thus do not show the full picture. In return, some NSCAs deliberately withhold information about their activities due to safety reasons. As a result, Belarus remains one of a few blank spots on the European map of cultural policies in the Compendium database (2021). That is why the role of interviews and actors' personal opinions increases for the understanding of the mechanisms and processes. Hence, it is worth noting that this dissertation is meant to be a snapshot of the current state of affairs and an overview of key tendencies rather than an overwhelming and detailed investigation. Last but not least, the fact that I am a practitioner in the fields of Belarusian independent theatre and cultural management whose professional trajectory and personal safety were heavily affected during the crackdown stipulates both my interest in a chosen subject as well as a possible skew towards a certain amount of advocacy of NSCAs in the research.

CHAPTER 1.
POSTCOLONIAL/DECOLONISING APPROACH
TO CULTURAL POLICY-MAKING IN BELARUS

The first chapter delineates the matrix of power within the field of cultural policy-making in Belarus from the perspective of internal colonialism that is reflected in entwined Soviet postcoloniality and cultural neo-imperialism. The special focus is put on the role and influence of imaginary and narratives on cultural identities. The theory of two contradictory ideas of Belarusianness is provided as a rationale for contesting state and non-state cultural policies. Eventually, the critical lens of decoloniality is used for the interpretation and analysis of the protests approached as decolonial insurgency.

NARRATING INTERNAL COLONIALISM

Despite its ancient and turbulent history, Belarus is in many respects a comparatively young and emerging nation. After centuries of being an integral part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and later the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, for the majority of the 19th and 20th centuries, Belarusian lands became a part of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union successively. The independence of a state with such a name – Belarusian People's Republic – was for the first time proclaimed in 1918. However, as a truly independent country within contemporary borders, Belarus exists only since the disintegration of the USSR in 1991. Therefore, two centuries of imperial subjugation pose a question on the relevance of usage of the postcolonial approach regarding the country's contemporaneity.

The phenomenon of postcolonialism is understood differently across geographies and contexts. The traditional Western approach deals closely with the legacy of transcontinental imperialism, colonialism, and orientalism (Fanon, 1963; Said, 1997). However, in different empires, similar processes were sometimes asynchronous and possessed disparate dynamics and intensity. While implementing the postcolonial perspective to Eastern European studies, researchers "have been wary of using this terminology [of postcolonialism]" (Kovačevič, 2008). The 'colonial' experience of nations within the Russian Empire and the USSR, including Belarus, was very distinct from the former Western colonies in Africa, Asia or Latin America. For instance, Etkind (2011) describes the particularities of *internal colonisation* that was happening within the mainland borders of the Russian Empire as opposed to transoceanic *external colonisation* of the Western empires. Consequently, the decolonising processes ran way too differently as well. This is the reason why in this research I drift away from the Western approach to postcolonial studies and stick to their pluriversal understanding (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Although the terms *colonialism*, *postcoloniality* and *decoloniality* are further applied, their

usage is determined first and foremost by post-Soviet, post-socialist and post-communist contexts.

In the 21st century, the Soviet spectre still haunts its former domains, harrowing "scars of humiliating wounds" (Said, 1994:271). In the case of Belarus, it materialised in systemic and ideological dimensions of the existing authoritarian regime. With little time and experience for profound democratic changes, soon after the election of Aliaksandr Lukashenka as the president in 1994, the country made a U-turn back to Soviet-style management and a reestablished authoritarian regime. Pieterse and Parekh (1995) describe a situation when the liberated country inherits the colonial administrative structures and the newborn state continues the bureaucratic hegemony with its centralisation, policies and official culture; hence, a situation of *internal colonialism* emerges. Such a term is also fruitful for the analysis of the case of Belarus and its cultural policies, where, in fact, the period of inherited "authoritarian state socialism" (Dragićević-Šešić & Dragojević, 2005) has never been over. It is my suggestion that the matrix of power relations in contemporary cultural policies of Belarus can be described in terms of prevailing internal colonialism that is the plexus of Soviet postcoloniality and neo-imperial tendencies. Naturally, some contextual clarifications must be made on used terms that are also summarised in Table 1.

Table 1.
The suggested matrix of power relations
in cultural policy-making of Belarus

Internal colonialism	
the contemporary authoritarian regime	
Soviet postcoloniality	**Cultural neo-imperialism**
the political, social, economic and cultural legacy of the USSR in contemporary Belarus	the continuous cultural hegemony of Russia on former satellites
vs	
Decoloniality	
the bottom-up processes of democratisation and liberation	

The policies of *cultural imperialism* (Said, 1994) and *cultural hegemony* (Gramsci, 1971) are crucial for the domination of empires. Mulcahy underlines that "the essence of hegemony is its ability to destroy cultural diversity by subordinating it to a universal, homogenous culture" (2006:161). He also makes a distinction between *colonialism*, which is typically associated with direct rule by a foreign power, and *coloniality*, which is about

the internalisation of a people of a belief in their cultural inferiority (ibid.). In the USSR, the cultural policies of coloniality developed in various strategies including one of homogenisation in favour of a unified Soviet people with reinvented modernist culture and identity. This imperial strategy was implemented via the leading role of Russia and was based on the Russian language as the Union's lingua franca. Despite the proclamation of the 'friendship of peoples', the relations between the dominant people and smaller ones were far from being equal. Consequently, the state of cultural inferiority led to the collective trauma of a diminished sense of national identity and authenticity of numerous smaller nations, including Belarusians.

However, instead of healing wounds caused by Soviet cultural imperialism and gaining more independence from the former empire, Belarusian authorities did not choose the way to substantially solidify the country's cultural subjectivity. Moreover, the contemporary regime preferred to use the gains of cultural hegemony as a part of oppressive domestic policies, further stimulating the condition of internal colonialism. The regime to a great extent relies on the support of Russian authorities, who in return consider Belarus within their sphere of influence and are interested in tight control of a former satellite by the continuous process of integration (Ioffe, 2004). In their report, Kłysiński & Żochowski (2016) underline that the Belarusian regime has always been effective and firm while oppressing the pro-democratic movement bolstered by the West and comparatively passive and cautious in dealing with pro-Russian organisations that support a reinvented Eurasian vector. Thus, combined with the continuous unequal relations with a former metropolis caused by geographical and language proximity as well as high cultural import, the current Russian-Belarusian relations possess traits of *cultural neo-imperialism.*

CONTESTING IDENTITIES OF BELARUSIANS

Contemporary Belarus is a middle-size country located in the transitory space between Europe (or widely the West) and Russia (or widely Eurasia) that makes it a so-called "strait" or "borderland" nation (Savchenko, 2009). Being squeezed amidst the conflicting interests and influences of the western and eastern neighbours within a tight geopolitical knot, the country's in-betweenness is reflected in the complicated cultural identities of its nation.

If we approach a nation as an "imagined community" (Anderson, 1991), the role of culture in creating "the national imaginaire" (Robins, 2007) with shared narratives and bonding stories is crucial. Said asserts that "nations themselves *are* narrations" (1994:xv) [emphasis in original]. According to Bell and Oakley (2015:113), culture contributes to national story-telling providing "imaginative resources" as a set of "core narratives around

which national identity can coalesce". They also underline the culture's role in steering the imaginative work of a nation's self-identification and coherence (ibid.). Hence, the role of collective imagination and narratives tends to be especially important for the cultural dimension of nation-building as a dominant "imagined" narrative serves as a meta-theoretical position for cultural policies and is practically implemented via concrete ideas, institutions and interests (Pieterse & Parekh, 1997). Bell and Oakley note that "national identity is both produced by and producer of cultural policy" (2015:119) and thus "cultural policy becomes a measure or marker of national character in a broader sense [as] the very doing of national cultural policy is a statement about culture and about the nation-state" (ibid.:114). That makes the tight connections between imagination and narratives a solid basis for cultural identities, policies and, subsequently, nation's soft power.

However, in the case of Belarus, the existence of a coherent national narrative is still dubious. Nelly Bekus (2010) researched thoroughly the phenomenon of divided *Belarusianness* and outlined two contradictory narratives of Belarusian cultural identity. The official narrative is shaped predominantly by the country's Soviet past and its essential role in nation-building. This notion is actively supported by the contemporary regime, which to a great extent acts as an ideological heir of its Soviet predecessor and is reinforced by state-controlled sociocultural practices. Conversely, the alternative narrative was articulated by the Belarusian nationalist movement. It treats the Soviet period as one of subjugation and is based on the essential role of pre-Soviet national history, values and the Belarusian language (ibid.). This narrative goes along with the post-socialist trends of Eastern Europe, "where nations want to establish their identities, to restore their heritage, and to modernise their display" (Bound et al., 2007:46). Both camps "consider themselves true Belarusians, both are certain that the other has betrayed Belarus and the Belarusian idea" (Bekus, 2010:2). Such a situation of two coexisting albeit contesting ideological narratives leads to a question "whose story wins?" in maintaining a relatively coherent national story and cultural image.

DEFINING STATE AND NON-STATE
CULTURAL POLICIES AND ACTORS

Pierre Bourdieu once aptly noted that "the most disputed frontier of all is the one which separates the field of cultural production and the field of power" (1993:43). Adding to that, cultures and cultural policies cannot be understood properly apart from the contexts in which they are produced, consumed or implemented (Crane, 1992; Paquette & Redaelli, 2015). Their drivers vary according to time, place and political context (Bell & Oakley, 2015), hence there exist different approaches to defining what *cultural policy* is. Some researchers apply a narrow approach to the understanding of cultural policy and connect it first and foremost to the governmental structures (ibid.; Bennett, 1998;

15

Mangset, 2020). This conventional approach is state-centred and reduces cultural policy-making to the top-down administration of culture. Bell and Oakley (2015) dissect such policies into two categories of the regulation (such as censorship, protection and ownership) and promotion (including patronage and state funding) of culture. Mulcahy also sticks to state-centricity and understands cultural policy as "the sum of government activities in relation to culture, or what government chooses to do or not to do in relation to culture" (2006:268). For him, "cultural policy does not exist in isolation from government activities and choices in a whole host of policy/political domains" (ibid.).

However, it seems crucial to expand such a narrow understanding. Depending on theoretical frameworks, definitions may focus on different aspects of the cultural policy process, including politics of administration, knowledge production, language and identity (Rindzevičiūtė, 2021). A lot more policy actors nowadays predetermine the implementation of cultural policies. Rindzevičiūtė's definition of cultural policy as "an assemblage of *formal* and *informal* means that local, national and international authorities, *collective* and *individual actors* deploy to *promote* or *contest* values, behaviours and cultural and artistic activities" seems to be all-encompassing (ibid.:149) [emphases added]. In any country, the field of cultural policy is fragmented and involves multiple state and non-state actors. There exist different approaches to define the range of cultural actors or policymakers. For instance, Vestheim distinguishes four key groups including politicians, civil servants, professionals working in cultural institutions, and professional artists (2012). According to Bell and Oakley, cultural policy actors include "government ministers and other elected political actors, civil servants, bureaucrats and technocrats, quangos, think tanks, lobbyists, consultants, academics, street-level bureaucrats and the public" (2015:48). In this research, cultural actors are understood from a broader perspective, including any institutions, organisations and private individuals who are able to influence the creation and implementation of cultural policies with their actions. Grounded on that and using the Belarusian case, my aspiration is to further challenge the established state-centricity in cultural policy research.

The intertwined complexities of internal colonialism and contesting identities provide Belarus with a challenging background for its cultural policy-making. Here, the relations between state and non-state cultural sectors to a great extent are antagonised. This situation reflects a certain dichotomy that exists between the authoritarian regime and opposition striving for democratic changes, thus making the Belarusian environment highly polarised on either side of the axiological rift. Nevertheless, even within such polarised relations, a certain penumbra exists with to some extent more liberal and flexible state institutions and independent actors more willing to cooperate with the state. Another crucial aspect is that the Belarusian state in a certain way reproduces the neo-Soviet style of governance that is suspicious of and even hostile to nationalist values, such as identity,

symbols and language. To a great extent, it is a result of intertemporal "policy transfer" (Dolowitz, 2003) that constitutes a major part of Soviet postcoloniality and clearly serves as a major constraint to the development of Belarusian national culture.

As far as the state continues to dominate the cultural field in Belarus, the configuration of SCAs who partake in cultural decision-making include public state-funded institutions that operate under the surveillance and centralised governance of the Ministry of Culture, follow its ideological requirements and hence enjoy legal status and privileges. In return, the Ministry is entirely subordinated to the president's decisions (Coordination Council, 2021). This rigid and instrumentalised system has a task to maintain underlined neutrality of cultural actors about the political situation in the country or even its ideological legitimation and celebration, if necessary. One of the interviewees describes the Ministry as a controlling institution with both financial and punitive functions (OP), while another acknowledges that "culture in Belarus has always been financed on leftovers and according to loyalty to the regime" (MN). Therefore, the cultural system reproduces "the constraint on freedom of speech, its bureaucratic ossification and the fact that nothing can happen without the approval of the authorities" (Mundy, 2000:28), making it another outstanding embodiment of Soviet postcoloniality. All these factors together contribute to the people's disillusionment, general scepticism and crisis of trust in Belarusian authorities that consequently have fueled the parallel development of alternative cultural infrastructure.

As for NSCAs, this category includes un/registered NGOs and private organisations that are independent of the state financial support. It is also worth including private individuals who are not affiliated with particular institutions but still can influence cultural policies with their creative work or political actions. The mere fact of NSCAs' existence and operation within the authoritarian regime makes their majority an integral part of the pro-democratic movement in Belarus. However, their independence is very nominal as NSCAs "are ousted from the official public scene into a peculiar parallel world" (Bekus, 2010:111) and the state has no constraints for imposing more limitations or stopping their legal activities at any moment. Their very existence and stable operation are constantly endangered and drastically precarious within the context of Belarus that gets only more insecure and contingent in times of socio-political and economic uncertainties (Alacovska & Gill, 2019). As argued by Stepan, the main goal of the opposition forces in strong authoritarian regimes is not ousting the incumbent regime, but the incremental process of "authoritarian erosion" (1997:662). Nevertheless, both SCAs and NSCAs are decision-makers that try to promote their visions of the ways culture must function, "to select the best approaches, means, and instruments to concretise the cultural policy" (Paquette & Radaelli, 2015:65), and are able to generate soft power and implement the means of cultural diplomacy to achieve their goals.

DECOLONISATION AND DECOLONIALITY

The condition of internal colonialism is to be overcome by the countermeasures of decolonising strategies that vary in contexts. Pieterse & Parekh's (1995) understanding of *internal decolonisation* is connected to freeing the imagination, "creation of a new form of consciousness and way of life". They underline that decolonising processes go hand in hand with the decolonisation of imagination and happen simultaneously in many directions, including political, intellectual and cultural ones as there exists a tight knot between power, domination, culture, and imaginaire. Liberation and emancipation are achieved by implementing a formula of substitution of a colonially imported/imposed vector of communion by other, presumably self-generated vectors where communion goes hand in hand with binding images (ibid.). Hence, "in the process, the *other* of colonialism becomes the *self* of decolonisation" (ibid.:6) [emphases added] with increased subjectivity, responsibility and independence.

Another tradition is represented by the dichotomy of *coloniality* and *decoloniality* that was introduced by Aníbal Quijano (1999) and later developed by Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh. The term 'decoloniality' signified the changing terrain of decolonisation as aimed at forming sovereign nation-states in former colonies to the expansion of "decolonial horizons of liberation beyond state designs, and corporate and financial desires" (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018:125). Although first introduced in the context of Latin America, decoloniality targets the sphere of "an emerging *global* political society" (ibid.:130) [emphasis added]. Mignolo and Walsh understand decoloniality as a confluence of theory and decolonial thinking with praxis and actions in order to grow an otherwise despite and in the borders, margins and cracks of the repressive order (ibid.). The decolonising processes are tied to the lived contexts of struggle against and the exercise of power within structures, matrices, and manifestations of structural, systemic, and systematic modes of power to undermine their mechanisms (ibid.). Such modes vary in contexts and extent but generally include modernity, coloniality, capitalism, heteropatriarchy and are reflected in rigid state structures. Therefore, decoloniality can not include state-led projects, practices or policies and, on the contrary, "implies the recognition and undoing of the hierarchical structures" (ibid.:114).

Hereinafter, 'decoloniality' is used as an umbrella term for decolonising processes and strategies, which, to my opinion, does not contradict the abovementioned characteristics of internal decolonisation. To sum up, the following aspects of decoloniality are especially important for the further analysis of the Belarusian protests. Firstly, its connection with the decolonisation of imagination and the independent creation of new imaginaire. Secondly, its complementary character includes theory and praxis. Thirdly, the bottom-up nature of decoloniality opposes the state that embodies the matrix of power

to struggle with. Finally, its international and transborder dimension is fruitful for further analysis of soft power and cultural diplomacy in Chapter 3.

BELARUSIAN PROTESTS AS DECOLONIAL INSURGENCY

The Belarusian protests further deepened the immense rift between a post-Soviet state system and the liberating and democratic aspirations of a vast majority of people. As far as "revolutions and mass protests infuse their participants with a new sense of subjectivity". (Bekus & Gabowitsch, 2021:1), they also became a long-awaited opportunity for Belarusians to reimagine their community, revise and update existing identity narratives. The protests revealed that the number of people following or compromising with the official identity narrative has radically decreased. At the same time, the new and updated "socio-cultural imaginaries" (Bekus, 2021) also showed that the protests outgrew the classical alternative narrative and can not be described in the terms of the nationalist movement anymore. The radically new characteristics of the protests included their grassroots and pointedly peaceful nature; decentralised spatial structure and horizontal management; engagement of all social groups; the absence of geopolitical choice between the East and the West in the agenda; balanced usage of Belarusian, Russian and English languages; "the gender divide in the leadership of the protest and the incumbent leadership" (Gaufman, 2021:86; Stebur & Talstou, 2020). Therefore, the protesters created "new modes of Belarusian identity" (ibid.:81) based on "pluralist civic identity" rather than "ethnocultural subjectivity" (Gabowitsh, 2020; Gerasimov, 2020).

Researchers suggest different interpretations of the protests' nature. Bekus and Gabowitsch (2021:2) define two approaches in other researchers' interpretation of the movement "either as a postcolonial revolution finally replacing stale post-imperial nationalism with a new subjectivity rooted in ethnic and cultural diversity, or as a catch-up revolution replaying the central European revolutions of 1989 to topple a regime frozen in time". Chaly (2021) considers them to be a bourgeois-democratic revolution; Shparaga (2021) applies the term 'revolution-in-progress'; Ananka et al. (2020) highlight the female face of the revolution. My interpretation goes along with the postcolonial stance but approaches Belarusian protests as 'decolonial insurgency', using Walsh's term (Mignolo & Walsh 2018:34).

Aiming to dismantle the postcolonial matrix of power that reproduces the Soviet modernity, protesters with their views, voices, and activities exercised the decolonising praxis and embodied their new subjectivity. Quoting Freire, "It is absolutely essential that the oppressed participate in the revolutionary process with an increasingly critical awareness of their role as subjects of the transformation" (1968:100). The decolonisation of the mind includes getting rid of both the paternalism imposed by the autocracy and the

'younger brother complex' from the former empire. The solidarity movements and decentralisation revealed that the nation's further construction can happen without the paternalist state which acts as more of an impediment. True to that, O'Callaghan (1995) underlines the strong connection between the decolonisation of the imagination and structural changes with subsequent emerging types of legitimation and new imagination. For instance, the massive comeback of a national (and pre-Soviet) white-red-white flag on the streets and the emergence of new iconography all signified the way towards a reimagined Belarusianness. Although a clear focus of the pro-democratic movement was on new free elections, the concept of *New Belarus* emerged and became a buzzword during the protests, essentially signifying the needs and desire for post-authoritarian democratic changes in the country. However, in the absence of a quick victory of the revolution, the imaginary of *New Belarus* still remains an open project with uncharted waters on the way to its realisation.

Fanon notices that "decolonisation is always a violent phenomenon" (1967:27), and the turbulent nature of Belarusian protests with a subsequent crackdown indeed reflects a decolonising "process of conflict [...] in which progressive forces are not always victorious" (Faulkner & Ramamurty, 2006:5). No surprise that during the backlash, the authorities in fact declared "war on symbols", thus launching official iconoclasm against the imagery of *New Belarus*, also were putting double effort to conquer the public space with state symbols (Gaufman, 2021). In such a situation, political and cultural actors started to develop new cultural strategies and policies aiming to continue the decentralised struggle that are reflected in the poetics of 'constant dripping wears away the stone', the partisan movements or the tactics of "death by a thousand cuts" (Khalezin, 2021). In the absence of strong military power and mechanisms of coercion, the pro-democratic movement applies the new imaginaire that would be attractive to both Belarusians and international allies, therefore constituting the basis of the movement's soft power.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter aimed to delineate the existing matrix of power within the cultural field and policies in Belarus by using the concept of internal colonialism. It revealed how Soviet postcoloniality and cultural neo-imperialism predetermine the two contradictory identities of Belarusians and consequently become a base for the inner struggle within cultural policy-making in the country. This chapter also provided a decolonising perspective on Belarusian protests, traced the simultaneous update of the cultural identities and the emergence of post-authoritarian *New Belarus* imaginaire.

CHAPTER 2.
DECOLONISING CULTURAL STRATEGIES
WITHIN THE INDEPENDENT THEATRE FIELD

Chapter 2 of the dissertation pays special attention to the dynamic shifts of the Belarusian independent theatre's landscape. This part maps and analyses the novel decolonising tactics implemented by NSCAs during the protests, including the subversion of power hierarchies, the wave of solidarity, reassertion of cultural identity, enforced placelessness, and the strategy of community-building that are juxtaposed to the state counter-measures during the crackdown. This chapter also defines the roles of theatre-makers within the post-crackdown theatre field and finishes with a case study of the newly-emerged *Belarus Theatre Community.* The interviews with independent theatre-makers provide a valuable source of first-hand data and constitute the core of this chapter's references.

PROTESTS, CRACKDOWN AND THEATRE

For the development of Belarusian culture in general and theatre in particular, the protests and crackdown had a tremendous although ambivalent impact. GH describes the situation as "a jerk same as a stop; the cultural explosion that has never happened in Belarus before". Theatre-makers played an important role during the protests, thus extending their role from narrowly cultural to a broader socio-political dimension. Therefore, their involvement could not be ignored by the reactionary state. One of the interviewees mentioned that theatre itself has not managed to become "a social tribune" (IJ), as it was repressed far too quickly with the crackdown bringing the period of "disaster" (UV), cultural devastation and survivalism for theatre. Although the independent theatre has always been insufficiently financed and under the pressure of state censorship, the crackdown signified "the death of the emerging market of cultural industries" (EF). Nevertheless, the backlash also had a boomerang effect on state theatres where a new season brought "fewer premieres, fewer visitors, fewer funds" (QR).

TACTIC 1. SUBVERSION OF POWER HIERARCHIES

The subversion comes as the first decolonising tactic, as independent and state theatre collectives joined the pro-democratic struggle and contributed to the process of undermining existing power hierarchies. The most notable case here is Janka Kupala National Theatre, "a token of national identity" (Kazharski, 2021), that was supposed to celebrate its centenary in September 2020. Soon after the peak of the protests during August 9-11, the theatre members recorded a video condemning police brutality and launched a strike. As a result, the Ministry of Culture fired its director Pavel Latushka; however, other employees, including artistic directors and actors, threatened to leave the

theatre in this case as well (Belarusian Pen Centre, 2021b). The compromise was not found and the state theatre "was literally left standing empty when its entire company walked out in solidarity with their former director" (Kazharski, 2021:15). As IJ aptly notes, "it was a social gesture, not a theatrical one". Only few members of the troupe remained, and therefore the theatre's work was, in fact, paralysed for more than half a year.

The expelled actors and directors self-organised in the company *Купалаўцы (Kupalaūcy – "Kupala's Crew")*, which became a symbolic flagship of the protest movement. One of the team members mentioned that by doing underground performances they "started to create real art with live spirit" (ST). However, a year later the company still has no possibility to perform to the audiences, thus being forced to snowball cultural content on their Youtube channel. Due to the current mode of survivalism, the interviewees agree that the symbolic status of *Kupalaūcy* "makes it hard to evaluate them [and their activities] according to theatrical criteria" (IJ). If approaching their activism as a social gesture, in my opinion, the act of parrhesia (Foucault, 1985) made the Kupala Theatre truly a National one that immediately reacts to urgent socio-political issues. The case of dissidence and rebellion of a state theatre collective is unprecedented in contemporary Belarusian history and gave a strong decentralising impulse to the entropy of state structures.

TACTIC 2. WAVE OF SOLIDARITY

Although the Kupala Theatre became the most prominent example of protest in the theatre field, other state and independent theatre collectives including the Theatre of Belarusian Drama, The New Drama Theatre, The National Opera and Ballet Theatre, Hrodna Region Drama Theatre, Modern Art Theatre publicly supported and joined the Kupala Theatre's protest, hence becoming an outstanding case of inter-theatre solidarity. Solidarity was also expressed by the Belarusian cultural workers signing open letters (ByCulture, 2021b) and by foregn theatre-makers (Teacrit, 2020; Teatr, 2020) thus tying the existing bonds and giving extra visibility to the Belarusian case on the international level.

However, the demarche of theatres gave rise to unseen repressions. IJ remembers that "in September 2020 there was a real dystopian fear that the state could shut down all theatres. [...] The pressure on the cultural sphere was much harder than on any other field because it is easy to shut down a theatre; it is much easier than to shut down a plant and fire all the employees". Later the artists who stopped the performances condemning violence or were caught during the protests were fired, some of them had to flee the country to avoid criminal convictions, as in the case of Hrodna Region Drama Theatre's actors (Belarusian Pen Centre, 2021a). The purges of dissidents in theatres continued

even after a year, such as in the Opera and Ballet theatre (ibid.). Some of the interviewees even used the term "the professional ban" (KL, ST) to describe the situation with further unemployment of repressed artists. In a few interviews, I was told about the existence of the so-called state-sanctioned "grey list" of theatre-makers that contain names of directors, playwrights, actors who are banned from any kind of work on state-owned stages (IJ, ST). Earlier performances of these theatre-makers can not be sent to the festivals or national awards. This list is not published officially, however, it circulates amidst state institutions and becomes a reason for banning theatre-makers from work. This grey list actually forbids the theatre-makers employment in any state enterprises, not only theatres, and becomes another reason that forces people to leave the country.

Due to repressions, the dependence of theatre actors on the financial aid of their audiences grew immensely. One of the ways to support the troupes was via the *Belarusian Fund of Cultural Solidarity* organised in October 2020 (and later reorganised in *Belarusian Council for Culture*). This fund managed to gather a broader public around the necessity to back repressed cultural actors and the freedom of artistic expression. The newly-founded institution launched a collection of donations and its redistribution, thus providing urgent financial aid for endangered cultural workers. Another means was organised by theatre companies via digital platforms such as Youtube where spectators could donate after watching a performance to support the artists' work. Some interviewees noticed changes in their audience's behaviour and solidarity as well. EF highlights that "people are grateful and interested, they want to help with contacts, find money or organise. They became more open and initiative, with a desire to help in a hard situation. And you can feel their solidarity". Another means of expressing solidarity became a boycott of activities of those artists who decided to stay at the Kupala theatre or joined the troupe thus replacing those who lost their jobs due to their civic stance. Among progressive theatre-makers and audiences, it is considered a bad style to collaborate with the rest of the troupe and attend their performances. All in all, these examples of inter-theatre, international and audience solidarity became an embodiment of decoloniality praxis and a driver for community-making strategy thoroughly analysed further in the chapter.

TACTIC 3. REASSERTION OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

Reaffirmation and articulation of a distinct cultural identity go hand in hand with emancipation and decoloniality. Coming back to the phenomenon of the contesting identities analysed in Chapter 1, the new wave of protest art fostered the sense of updated cultural and civic identity of Belarusians contrary to the state-imposed one. While discussing the changes that happened to the theatre audiences, some interviewees noticed that the protests made an impact on the upsurge of general understanding of the

importance of and interest in Belarusian culture. According to CD, the burst of simple and straightforward protest art on the streets has revealed the need for local cultural products that not only celebrate the updated feeling of national pride but also place the utmost importance on people and their current problems and feelings. As for theatres, OP stresses the necessity of a people-centred approach adding that "audiences want to watch performances about themselves and to answer questions posed by the theatre on their own without being given answers. Other theatres that used to ignore the current socio-political aspects now turned to them, as they realised the audiences need them".

Due to the colonial past, the theme of Belarusian identity and its permanent crisis has always been of special concern in the works of cultural actors. The decolonial insurgency of 2020 only aggravated the trends. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that the first production of *Kupalaūcy* was a performance of the decolonising play *"Тутэйшыя"* ('*Tutejšyja'* – *The Locals*) by Janka Kupala. Alternatively, in an attempt to break with the official state-supported cultural identity, some theatre-makers launched projects that helped to reaffirm the updated identity of Belarusians with a desire for democratisation. One of the strategies used is over-identification (Džuverović, 2013) with the authoritarian regime that ironically reveals the bizarreness and absurdity of the state system, showing the hidden reverse of power by taking the symbolism literally and performing it to the extreme (Žižek, 1993). Among such projects, there are *ЧинЧинЧенэл (ChinChinChannel)*[1] and *Красная Зелень* ('*Krasnaya Zelen'* – *Red Greenery)*[2] that by means of creative re-appropriation of state symbolism, ridicule its outdated ideology in the Bakhtinian sense.

TACTIC 4. PLACELESSNESS

In the situation of total elimination of legal possibilities to express any discrepant opinions in public spaces combined with forced shutdowns of practically all independent venues, the strategy of placelessness became the only way out to continue activities. The Belarusian protests are generally characterised by their decentralised nature. In the absence of safe places for performances, the protest marches became locations for the increased usage of theatrics. Another prominent example is *Вольны Хор* ('*Volny Chor'* – *Free Choir)* whose members became genuine nomads unexpectedly performing national songs in places of mass gathering such as railway stations, shopping malls and markets.

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[1]Available at URL: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCgymY5xQUPeY48OPWyq8DOA/videos (accessed 10.9.2021)

[2] Available at URL: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLtgLk7ekvfcVU0zDotag06PLaIX3UUqpq (accessed 10.9.2021)

The strategy of such peripatetic activities helped to bring the activities of independent performers closer to their audiences spatially (Valynets, 2021). Also, a new phenomenon was the participation of musicians, theatre collectives and lecturers during yard meetings and festivals. For instance, *Belarus Free Theatre* managed to conduct a few yard performances that helped to promote theatre to new audiences and raise their engagement (Kaliada, 2020). Such emergent interventions also follow the poetics of partisan culture in Belarus. Thus, the myth of Belarusian partisans during WWII, "a cultural construct upheld by the institutions of the Soviet state" (Lewis, 2017:376), got transformed into the counter-myth of urban partisans secretly fighting with and sabotaging the regime, thus keeping it in a state of fluctuation and constant stress (Gaufman, 2021). At this juncture, there even exists an informal ban on street performances, officially due to Covid-related issues, but in fact, due to their unpredictability for state officials (ST).

The above-mentioned cases deal closely with urban mobility and the porosity of public space. However, both the pandemic and crackdown gave rise to the rapid increase of digitalisation. First, the pandemic "made the digital form more widely accepted and developed a skill of increased usage of this channel of data reception" (IJ). However, QR estimates digitalisation in Belarusian theatre as "rather weak as not everyone could watch performances online, especially non-professionals. Moreover, although some theatres had very decent equipment, there was a lack of experts and creatives who could work with it". KL adds that "proper online format is not about a mere record of a performance. Anyway, it is an opportunity to survive, a compromise of sorts". Initially driven by the pandemic, later the digital literally became a cyber-shelter and safe space for cultural workers shaping anew the virtual landscape of Belarus, and here, the Foucauldian (2008) metaphor of 'heterotopia' is useful. The buildingless character of work for *Kupalaūcy* brings extreme difficulties together with unique opportunities. Partly driven by audience solidarity, their online performances got the highest number of viewings in the history of Belarusian theatre (Kupalaūcy, 2021). Since the performances are available online, they also become the way to send the cultural message globally and represent the nation virtually. Simultaneously, a new theatre group *Drama Techie* proclaimed a transition to the new generation of theatre-making using tech language and introducing distant communication with spectators.

In general, the digital infrastructure of the "blockchain protest" (OP) exceeds the state one. Although the state has the power to ban any websites on the territory of Belarus and chase the mavericks by the digital trace, using VPN became a new normal for Belarusians. Thus, digital space becomes a bridge for connection between the country's insiders and outsiders as well as a virtual battlefield for dominance in the situation when public spaces are censored and controlled. The overall situation prevents frequent visits by foreign artists and institutions, which "ultimately leads to complete isolation of artistic

and cultural organisations" (Dragićević-Šešić & Dragojević, 2005:179); however, the Internet helps to preserve and intensify the cultural connections, be a tool of direct pressure as well as to mobilise the audiences (Nye, 2004). Similar tendencies can be seen in other spheres that gradually transform a cyber-shelter into a cyber-country.

MAPPING THE POST-CRACKDOWN THEATRE FIELD

The cultural fields of different countries experience various periods in their development, including declines. As of September 2021, the NSCAs of post-crackdown Belarus outlast "a state of emergency" (OP). One of the counter-strategies of the regime to put down the protests was forced atomisation of people and organisations as an attempt to ruin existing bonds, artificially divide the society and get rid of independent cultural workers' cooperation. By the means of forced liquidation of numerous NGOs and private enterprises, the legal grounds for their activities vanished. Naturally, significant links within and between theatre collectives were disrupted, bringing reduction in the creative dynamics and shifts in existing networks. Using the data provided by the interviewees (IJ, KL), I mapped the post-crackdown roles of theatre-makers in the aftermath of the protests and summarised the results in Table 2.

Table 2.
The post-crackdown social roles in theatre-making

Conservatives	Compromisers	Protesters	
		Émigrés	Resistance
Support of state policies	Conformism	Vocal resistance	Underground activities
Conformism	Shadow cooperation	Withdrawal	Community-building

Conservatives. This category includes the representatives of state theatre who condemned the protests or remained conspicuously neutral. IJ highlights that these people are united only formally by the criterion of working in the state field and not organised in a real community. The rigid regime in state theatres was re-established with an introduction of so-called "moral-ethical codes of cultural workers" in Spring 2021 that all workers must sign.

Compromisers*.* Due to the increased danger, some theatre-makers preferred to step back from political activities. "Last August we all manifested our readiness to cry out until we are strangled. Well, we got promptly strangled", mentions one of the interviewees that works in a state theatre although supports the protests (IJ). Such a strategy on one hand partly guaranteed professional survival in extremely unfavourable circumstances, and on the other still left space for manoeuvring and shadow cooperation with 'protesters'. IJ also mentioned the increase of self-censorship and silencing in state theatres, as "special ideological inspectors also visit performances incognito". Being a 'protester', KL sympathises with 'compromisers' and explains: "some people left theatres, some accepted the situation, but we do not exclude them. They try to remain decent people, not sign 'loyalty letters' and find some balance". KL adds that, in fact, they became "hostages of their theatres". IJ sums up that "Everyone is doing what they can while not bringing too much attention and thus not endangering their lives. Everyone who stays [in the country] is super valuable [...]. But if you are in Belarus, you can only gently speak with your voice in your space".

Protesters.
a. Émigrés. Forced relocation and brain drain lead to the dearth of expertise and the overall decline of quality and variety of theatre production. A big part of theatre-makers has left the country, including a wave of young professionals that brings a generational gap in theatre education. IJ also thinks that some of those who left could not bear the hopelessness connected to the destruction of the field and their activities, while those who stayed decided to rebuild everything from ashes. Moving abroad, emigrated theatre-makers face certain challenges including the identity crisis and the dilemmas such as to stay in the profession or abandon it, to continue the vocal struggle against the regime or pause it. Other difficulties concern the search for jobs in foreign theatres including the necessity to learn a new language or join the local competitive market. However, a big share of audiences had to emigrate as well, giving extra concern for any theatre producers in Belarus (AB, UV).

b. Resistance*.* Although vocal condemnation of the regime brings a substantial threat of criminal conviction, the underground theatre work continues. UV says that "everyone is equal now, we all live on the principle of surviving in the profession". The phenomenon of underground performances and kvartirniks that were popular during the Soviet period makes a comeback these days. Kvartirnik (Rus. *'kvartira'* – a flat) is a term signifying a performance or play-reading at someone's private accommodation. The last time they were popular was during the previous crackdown soon after the presidential elections in 2010. However, IJ thinks that kvartirniks have not really widespread, nevertheless highlighting their importance if not as acts of social descent then of documenting the epoque. Three factors constitute a possible danger of kvartirniks for

organisers and attendants including the mere fact of an unregistered mass gathering, used texts or the personae of participants. That is why the scope of those invited is very limited to trustworthy people and does not exceed the existent community (KL, QR). Adding Covid insecurities as well as possible personal and physical unsafety to the factors of risky theatre-going, audiences may be themselves psychologically traumatised, or find it difficult to get information since numerous independent media were also shut down.

STRATEGY OF COMMUNITY-BUILDING

As for the theatre community, such a turbulent situation became a moment to lay the foundations of brand-new processes that are worth an in-depth analysis. Was there a community within Belarusian independent theatre before the game-changing year of 2020? QR shares that "some critics said that we do not have a theatre community. I always opposed it, as the community has always existed and still is. There are so few of us, everyone does their own job but knows each other". IJ calls the theatre community "small and weird" in a way and names two criteria of joining the community: "1) one (sometimes) likes independent theatre; and 2) one accepts experiment", adding that the community is based on mutual respect, but not on recognition of one's creative mindset. The first impulse for collaboration was provided by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic when theatre-makers had to come up with new ideas on how to survive and save professional skills in an unfavourable environment. The pandemic was the first time when "it became clear that the Belarusian theatre community really exists" (IJ), bringing amiability and new forms of cooperation.

Another, even stronger impulse was brought by the protests. As QR notices, "nothing that extreme happened to us before and we did not have a precedent to really show our solidarity. But we were ready to have each other's back. [..] We supported each other with our voices, what else did we have? Summer 2020 became the pinnacle of solidarity, we could feel unity in the cultural sphere". However, IJ's opinion is that "everyone realised their unanimity and solidarity but at the same time extreme atomism. The community emerged but due to enforced emigration also became smaller". However, shared pain and struggle became a trigger for new collaborations and networks. CD thinks that "we had no other options left so we learned how to self-organise. For years to come we will be forced to form institutions and make alliances to get any kind of funding". Amidst the pandemic and harshest repressions, independent theatre-makers faced a necessity to consolidate gains and resources, stay back from competition and rivalry, and further develop partnerships and networks so as to withstand oppression and simply survive. Therefore, although the interviewees mentioned that a certain sense of community has always existed, it was only due to the pandemic and protests that

28

community-building intensified, became a strategy and entered the stage of institutionalisation.

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CASE A.
BELARUS THEATRE COMMUNITY

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The strategy and process of community-building can be illustrated with a case study of an emerging organisation *Belarus Theatre Community (BTC).* It was secretly organised amidst the crackdown in February 2021 and publicly manifested itself in August 2021 as an "independent association of Belarusian theatre workers who spoke out against the lawlessness and violence of the authorities after the presidential elections in August 2020" (BTC, 2021). Using Wyszomirski's term (1995:196), this NSCA tends to play the role of a so-called *policy community,* that is a "network of specialists in a given policy area, drawn from inside and outside the government, spanning a range of partisan and ideological perspectives". However, in Belarusian realities, the network consists of predominantly non-state cultural workers. After conducting a few interviews with BTC members, it is my suggestion that this association is an example of a decolonising cultural policy-maker. To prove that, let us have a close look at the organisation's manifested aims, activities, current structure, issues, and perspectives.

Aims and activities. Based on BTC's manifesto (Supplement 3) and interviews, the following aims of the association can be defined:

1. *Community-building.* The first proclaimed goal is "the creation of a professional community of theatre workers of Belarus". The association aims to recruit new members, thus overcoming forced atomisation and separation. However, this is not an easy task in theatre due to its nature, as OP comments: "theatre collectives are partly secluded structures, even 'sectarian' in a good way, and that does not always work well for associations". However, the creation of BTC contributes to the "unification of the creative precariat" (Gapova, 2021) and the building of a sense of collective identity.

2. *Preservation.* The manifesto underlines the necessity "to preserve what has been achieved in the theatrical art of Belarus till nowadays and enhance the cultural heritage of the country". In the situation of a professional ban and forced emigration, BTC aims to help to preserve professional artistic skills that are doomed to be lost without regular practice.

3. *Survival.* The association aims to provide "assistance to the repressed theatre workers" in withstanding repressions by the means of sharing and using each other's resources for the common good (KL). The common synergy of theatre experts is to give an opportunity to reveal potency and develop best practices despite all odds. IJ suggests

that "professional interchangeability" can be a temporary way out as long as it gives a chance to try a new facet of professional identity.

4. *Opportunities*. The search, creation and announcement of new opportunities including partnerships, internships, residencies, participation in festivals, jobs (especially abroad) are crucial for the professional development of theatre-makers. Assistance from external agents often helps to get access to international cultural channels and cooperation schemes. KL underlines that it is crucial to approach partnerships with other foreign theatre companies and funds on an equal basis without an imposter syndrome as "we have our competencies and they are competitive, we are professionals in our field". CD adds that "we have competitive ideas for the global market, and our experience is important on a global scale". This approach goes hand in hand with an emerging trend of higher self-value of Belarusian theatre-makers that during the crisis "started to value money we receive for our labour a lot more" (IJ), thus resisting underpaid labour. All of the opportunities are posted regularly on a secret Telegram channel to join which a person must fill in an application form and be approved.

5. *Therapy*. The sense of unity, synergy and shared struggle also brings inducement and inspiration for members.

Structure. BTC mostly consists of those theatre-makers and activists who decided to stay in Belarus, although those abroad are the only ones who can show their faces in public. Members of the association mention the hardship of establishing a brand-new system connected to the absence of a same-type organisation in Belarus, thus leading to issues with formulating its content (CD, GH). Another obstacle is "the legacy of post-Soviet theatre as an authoritarian and archaic structure where a director is a person that decides on everything" (KL). The association aims to dismantle traditional power hierarchies and to become more horizontal despite difficult circumstances. KL comments that "we have created the system of communication anew, learned to agree and solve problems collectively. Those for whom it was unacceptable left our group". Such a trend goes hand in hand with aspirations to make *New Belarus* less vertical and more horizontal as well.

Issues. As of September 2021, BTC still goes through the painful period of establishing and debugging a newly-born system. A set of difficulties was mentioned in interviews including constant fear and danger, personal and professional burnout, lots of voluntary work, dispersion of theatre-makers, absence of immediate results. In Belarusian realities, the risks are higher for people who proclaim themselves a community or a group, which partly explains still a relatively small number of members. The interviewees mention that another difficulty is brought by the necessity to become self-employed and self-

educated managers, organisers and fundraisers without enough proper experience (QR). However, it is also considered as a point of growth with more autonomy and less paternalism.

Another array of issues is connected to fundraising. The biggest obstacle is still the impossibility to create products within the country in safety and a necessity to appeal to foreign partners for resources and opportunities. The majority of members of BTC have to remain anonymous, which brings more uncertainties and questions from the donors' perspective. Moreover, as far as Belarusian theatre is still not well-represented on European platforms, exit to the international theatre market is connected to certain struggles including building trust and reputation, distancing from state theatres and proving the necessity to rechannel funds to the independent theatre-makers so as to avoid sponsorship of the regime (CD). BTC is a young association, and in order to claim support in many cases, the organisation must exist for more than one year.

Perspectives. Keeping the above-mentioned issues in mind, BTC considers further institutionalisation and legalisation, although most likely abroad. Thinking from a long-term perspective, "when it is all over", BTC might become a labour union for the defence of theatre-makers rights and a curating organisation of separate destinations in theatre. As one of the members summed up, "this is a long-distance work for the future of the Belarusian theatre field as an independent cultural association with support and funds" (GH).

CONCLUSIONS

The shifting role of theatre-makers during the decolonial insurgency can be summarised as 'theatre for democracy'. The applied tactics of subversion of power hierarchies, expression of solidarity, reassertion of cultural identity, placelessness and a strategy of community-building highlight the processes of internal decolonisation in the theatre field. Self-help and solidarity became the ways the independent theatre further fostered its autonomy and independence. And Belarus Theatre Community becomes a prospective policy-maker to reinforce self-sufficiency, cohesion and civic consciousness of theatre-makers.

CHAPTER 3.
GENERATING SOFT POWER
AND EXERCISING CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

The aim of the third chapter is to analyse the new tendencies within the international dimension of cultural policy-making of Belarusian NSCAs. This part is based on a critical review of existing academic literature and recent practical developments on soft power and cultural diplomacy. The understanding of the former term as 'standing out', and the latter as 'reaching out' (Doeser & Nisbett, 2017) is used as a dividing line. Both concepts are approached as lasting processes that are aimed at increasing attraction to a nation according to the conceptualised cultural and political needs of NSCAs. This chapter aims to overturn the state-centricity and geographical imbalance of existing research, examines the contemporary usage of both terms, follows the ongoing shift of the role in generating soft power and exercising cultural diplomacy from states to NSCAs, and finally focuses on the case study of Belarusian Council for Culture.

CULTURE AS SOFT POWER AND DIPLOMACY

Soft power is a concept that is increasingly used as a practical tool in politics and diplomacy, as well as in national cultural policies around the globe. The term was coined by Joseph Nye (1990) and signifies the power of a country's attraction and its ability to co-opt as opposed to the 'hard power' of threat and coercion by military and economic means. Nye introduces three key resources of soft power including political values, foreign policies, and culture that work together "to harness the charm of culture to enhance a country's strength" (Nye, 2020:105). It usually takes years to generate and deploy soft power, and for any country, it works better in connection to hard power. Soft power is never static and is hard to wield, as its fluctuations are sensitive to the smallest reputation changes. The contemporary trend is that soft power is becoming more diffuse, as more non-state actors play larger roles in driving local and global affairs (Nye, 2004; Soft Power 30, 2019). Depending on the context, their activities can either enhance, reinforce, oppose, or even undercut the official state policies (Nye, 2020). In order to achieve better results states have to coordinate the effort with civil society groups and influential private individuals, who also wield a certain amount of soft power.

Started from an Americentric perspective, the soft power discourse gradually ramified to other rising countries and global players. However, credible measurement of soft power remains elusive due to the complexity of its diverse and numerous sources (Doeser & Nisbett, 2017). Although national and international reports on soft power are being published regularly, their scope remains unbalanced and limited to a handful of cultural hegemonies. Middle and small sized countries that are unlikely to have global

ambitions and affect "the future world order" (Soft Power 30, 2019) are often excluded and remain under-researched by a majority of Western and local experts. Belarus is a good example here, as its soft power potential has always been absent from key *Soft Power 30* and Monocle's *Soft Power Survey* reports, a fact that asks whether the country actually possesses any soft power.

As for cultural diplomacy, some researchers emphasise its crucial role in providing a channel for the exchange of ideas, information and artefacts between nations in order to foster greater understanding (Cummings, 2009; Bell & Oakley, 2014). Pigman (2010) adds on its involvement in the process of construction and representation of national identity. The importance of crossing borders intellectually and culturally is underlined by Said (2003) as an alternative to the ignorance caused by isolation. Here again, cultural diplomacy is traditionally linked to state activities with the key role of diplomats who are "both the delivery channel for their government's policies, as well as the embodiment of national culture and values" (Doeser & Nisbett, 2017:8). Thus, Isar (2010) provides the following definition of cultural diplomacy as a process of "state actors engaging in the accrual of symbolic capital in the international economy of cultural prestige through exercising cultural policy as display". The rest of the chapter aims to challenge such an approach.

(NON-)EXISTENT SOFT POWER OF BELARUSIAN STATE

The research on Belarusian soft power is comparatively insufficient. Since both Russia and Europe deploy soft power over the country, that leads to the approach in recent studies of Belarus as an object rather than a subject of soft power (Kłysiński & Żochowski, 2016; Dimitrova, 2017; Viačorka, 2018). Another issue is that official statistics do not provide relevant quantitative information, while some qualitative studies produced by scholars affiliated with state institutions are too abstract and lack concrete cases (e.g Slutskaya & Poberezhnaya, 2015), which may be the result of the overall unclear cultural policy of the state. As Nye mentions, authoritarian regimes often fail to generate their own soft power due to "their unwillingness to free the vast talents of their civil societies" (2020:107). Naturally, it is hard to maintain the soft power of attraction with brutal domestic policies and censorship. At the same time, independent Belarusian researchers occasionally produce reports such as Melyantsov & Artiomenko's (2016) one on the image that Belarus radiates to its five neighbouring countries; albeit its scope is limited to sociological polls and search requests on Google. Others, like Pavluchenko (2017), provide a set of concrete cases of how Belarus exercises its soft power abroad.

Culture has always been a target of the Belarusian regime's repressions as this asset is relatively hard to navigate and easier to censor. The regime's toxic and

reactionary cultural policies based on coercion and command power generally work poorly for the field. Another crucial element is that culture is often linked to the national language and history, which, as was mentioned in Chapter 1, are less important values for the post-Soviet authoritarian regime. That is the reason why it could hardly be used by the state as a valuable source of its soft power: state-supported cultural products eventually turn out to be crude and vapid ideological content, far from being attractive even domestically. Instead, the Belarusian state puts its stake on sports and invests in mega-events, such as the Ice Hockey Championship 2014 or European Games 2019. As Nye aptly notes, "even the best advertising cannot sell an unpopular product, and [..] policies that appear narrowly self-serving or are arrogantly presented are likely to consume rather than produce soft power" (2004:110). Consequently, the regime's heavy-handed policy is not *attractive* but appears outdated and marginal for its neighbours. The post-election crackdown revealed how quickly soft power can be undermined and squandered as it caused general judgement and repulsion from numerous countries. In the absence of their own soft power, the authorities preferred the familiar toolkit of sharp power of disruption and censorship.

RAISING SOFT POWER AND CULTURAL DIPLOMACY
OF BELARUSIAN NSCAs

The understanding of soft power as "a critical foreign policy tool used to align values, norms, objectives, and ultimately action through attraction and persuasion" is crucial in the case of contemporary Belarusian NSCAs (Doeser & Nisbett, 2017:10). The years of 2012-2019 of relative liberalisation and the state's non-interference helped the pro-democratic movement to generate and reinforce sufficient soft-power resources and cultural contacts, while the years of 2020-21 brought the assets of the mass peaceful protests, resistance to unjust repressions and the increase in the corps of legitimate and credible policy-makers. The Belarusian NSCAs deploy these assets to claim aid, increase visibility and acceptance of democratic ideals and thus get more support and public attraction. Soft power rests on shared values and interests to bond with the relationships of attraction and duty, so in 2020 the Belarusian pro-democratic movement tried to channel its soft power both west- and eastbound. The Western countries have a goal of promoting "milieu goals" (Nye, 2004:17) such as democracy and human rights among their Eastern neighbours, which corresponds to the aspirations of the movement, while, on the contrary, the attempts to find support in Russia mostly failed.

STRATEGY 1. OPENING UP TO THE WORLD

The protests brought unseen attention to Belarus and the visibility of its people's struggle in the world, thus temporarily overcoming its long-standing peripherality. Culture became an important channel of 'standing out' the updated Belarusian identity and helped to locate the country on the mental maps of numerous people, challenge its conventional image or renew the outdated views and stereotypes. The opening-up also contributed to the global thinking of Belarusians and overcoming cultural isolation. Belarusian art has a huge potential now to increase the country's cultural export, thus raising awareness, keeping the focus on the agenda, as well as contributing to the formation of specific perceptions and opinions about Belarus (Rozwora, 2020).

Here comes a paradox of protest art that has been mentioned in several interviews. Some interviewees agreed that it is a "great chance for Belarusian identity and art to manifest itself in various contexts" (IJ) as far as cultural workers "have now once in a while this opportunity to get funds, space, people to do something" (CD). KL elaborates that "during this period protest art is productive. It is what we are living in, what we have to work through internally. [..] It is hard to think about something else and important to reflect upon what happened and is still happening. Protest art helps us to be heard and understood abroad". On the contrary, IJ sometimes has a feeling "that you are being accepted not as a cool author but because of your identity only. Sometimes our art just becomes a reason to spark a discussion on the topic [of the struggle], not about the artwork itself".

Meanwhile, some interviewees expressed their concern with the abundance of explicit protest art and performance and mentioned the pitfalls of speculation where it is easy to get stuck. QR shares that "in some projects, I see terrific speculation on the topic but not deep reinterpretation". CD's opinion is that "speculation is happening, it is inevitable in terms of time. We are not given time to process the situation, this whole thing was and is being so traumatic". EF adds that "I do not think we can use this agenda in a long perspective, I want to produce deeper statements". AB is also afraid of the "unproductive whining energy of Belarusian art. It must not become a unified "struggling" vector, it must consider Belarusian events from different perspectives. It may not justify it, it may mock it or even take the conservative pro-state stance, but it must be done in a professional, cool and contemporary manner. I am not against such views. [...] I am afraid of self-victimisation, the binary "we are good and they are bad". We must sing in a pluralistic and asynchronous manner. It must be polemic art". Nevertheless, none of the interviewees devalues the ongoing effort of protesting artists to raise awareness about the struggle.

STRATEGY 2. RISE OF DIASPORAS AND PEOPLE'S EMBASSIES

The crackdown brought a new wave of centrifugal movement out of the country, thus signifying a 'doughnut effect' in the cultural life of Belarus but simultaneously increasing the visibility of Belarusians abroad. KL notices that "for lots of people, Belarus has appeared on a global map only now". Connected, coordinated and self-organised via the Internet, Belarusian diasporas provide culturally sensitive and linguistically skilled connections in corresponding countries (Nye, 2020). MN thinks that the newly-emerged communities will last for a long time and stresses that he "does not consider Belarusians to be either 'here' or 'there'; this is one universe despite the location. Such an artificial split demotivates us and devalues our achievements". Apart from political and humanitarian work, Belarusians also started to map new cultural trajectories, reaffirming international links and connections. OP underlines that emigration stimulated the increased border-crossing and mobility of artists and border-crossing: "A big number of Belarusian cultural workers abroad is more of a positive aspect for culture as new communication emerges and frames us in the European context". The consolidated cultural diasporas create hubs for networks of solidarity, spaces of diasporic connectivity and resistance, thus contributing to transnational community-building.

A new phenomenon is an emergence of a constellation of independent *people's embassies* that also function as cultural centres and counter-institutions to official centralised embassies. The geography is quite widespread among democratic countries where organisers take up the responsibilities of the state (BelarusAbroad, 2021). KL highlights that the Western countries became the key allies during the last year: "in the beginning, we actually wanted to balance and move in two directions, but now it's undoubtedly the West. Russia's political vector and stance are absolutely unacceptable for us". Hence, the Belarusian regime preserves its influence in other autocracies. The absence of support from Russian officials naturally pushes the Belarusian NSCAs to collaborate more with the European governments, thus contributing to decoloniality, overcoming cultural neo-imperialism and "getting off the Russian needle" (MN).

STRATEGY 3. CULTURAL AMBASSADORSHIP

The increased role of cultural diplomacy is first and foremost underpinned by the necessities of a search for external aid and allies of the pro-democratic movement. The role of a cultural ambassador is defined differently. One understanding of this figure is that ambassadors are individuals or institutions nominated by the governments, with special attention to cultural figures already resident abroad. The alternative vision is that cultural professionals automatically become ambassadors for each country "where they were born or brought up" (Bound et al., 2007:39). However, cultural ambassadors hardly

can be self-proclaimed, as in this case, they would lack credibility and legitimacy. CD shared their view of gaining this symbolic status which I interpreted as '*the loop of recognition':* "If someone creates artwork or performance that resonates abroad, brings international attention or wins a prestigious award, this person is more recognized in Belarus and automatically becomes a cultural ambassadorr". That brings double responsibility to a cultural worker as their work is considered not only of their own but also representing the country with consequences for reputation. A noteworthy example here is Svetlana Alexievich, the winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature and the only Belarusian awardee, whose significant symbolic capital and weighty opinions, in fact, make her an everyday cultural ambassador. Another vision is of KL who notices that in BTC they started to use this term at first intuitively, then consciously, understanding the role as a mission to bring the message to the world using theatre to tell about the country and its people, to set up a dialogue and get some feedback.

Alternatively, OP approaches the understanding of cultural ambassadors differently, underlining that a Belarusian can not be one for own country. The involvement of foreign celebrities, such as influential actors and directors, is what makes them the agents of influence and ambassadors for Belarus. OP imagines that in *New Belarus* the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Culture could grant the status of the Belarusian cultural ambassador to approximately 100 people, thus making them an unprecedented lobbyist group that is able to get through any doors in their countries, asking for extra support. OP thinks that this would be a great strategy for a country in post-authoritarian transition, as even one action per year by each of these ambassadors makes a huge difference and is a sort of international philanthropy. Although terminology varies, in all above-mentioned understandings cultural ambassadorship seems to be a valid and effective means to achieve cultural and political goals. Now, let us refer to the concrete case of an institution that introduced cultural ambassadorship in its activities.

CASE B.
BELARUSIAN COUNCIL FOR CULTURE

Belarusian Cultural Solidarity Fund emerged as an organisation that aimed to generate funds for the repressed cultural activists. In 2021 it went through rebranding into *Belarusian Council for Culture (BCC)* that now presents itself as "a union of art managers, cultural activists, painters, musicians, poets and all other kinds of artists, creating a *progressive cultural policy* [emphasis added] in Belarus, without terror and repressions" (ByCulture, 2021a) or simply the "cultural headquarters of New Belarus" (MN). I conducted interviews with three representatives (MN, OP, UV) of this organisation to understand its mission and workings better.

Aims and activities. The team consider themselves neither the alternative Ministry of Culture nor a labour union. Their vision is of a structure that participates in public administration and influences cultural policy-making and adjacent spheres. However, in a certain way, its activities are juxtaposed to the Ministry of Culture. MN states that among foreign counterparts "there is no wish to communicate with the regime", so in terms of culture they contact BCC. Therefore, BCC gradually accumulates legitimacy and recognition both domestically and internationally, thus channelling symbolic power away from the Ministry.

1. *Targeted emergency help for repressed cultural workers*. Since the very beginning, this activity has been the top priority and remains such. UV even called BCC a "cultural ambulance". As of September 2021, according to BCC statistics shared by MN, more than 800 cultural actors of Belarus suffered from repressions, and 300+ cases got targeted aid from BCC including help with visas, relocation, consultancy, fine coverings, psychological help. These activities also provide financial support for projects, thus creating temporary jobs and newsworthy events.

2. *Fund-raising*. Emerging as a fund, BCC introduced mechanisms for collecting donations and auctions that are all directed to provide emergency help. However, the amount of support could not cover all needs. With time, the unstable flow of donations tends to decrease as the repetitive call becomes blank noise. Therefore, for BCC it is crucial to diversify the income resources as well as ways to attract attention. The scheme of patronage with exclusive access to cultural products is used. One of BCC's inventions is *Reels of Solidarity*, when one artist holds an event to bolster another artist and solve their specific problem, thus fostering mutual help [A=>B=>C]. MN mentions that personalised mini-campaigns are the most successful. However, for its own existence and production, the organisation has to search for additional donors, sponsors, and partnerships. UV underlines that "financing of culture by funds has never been popular". Hence, MN mentions that BCC is doing its best to add a cultural sphere in the programmes of support of Belarusian civic society, mostly European ones, thus "fighting back the EU money dedicated to Belarusian development".

3. *Media support*. BCC occupied the niche of a medium on cultural resistance and contemporary culture using social media with separate agendas. For example, the content on Telegram covers the repressions against cultural actors and records cases of cultural resistance. Youtube is mostly used for streaming videos and performances for donations. Thus, BCC helps to spread the news about repressions in culture and also keep the agenda on social media, for instance, by introducing and active using hashtags #by_culture and #justice4belarus.

4. *International campaigns*. BCC influence in cultural diplomacy is growing as one of its aims is lobbying the Belarusian cultural agenda among other institutions and organisations. The prominent case here is the disqualification of Belarus from participation in Eurovision 2021 as a result of a pressure campaign (ByCulture, 2021a). BCC coordinated the campaign to "name and shame" state-owned BTRC for their political choice of a band and song as a propaganda tool. Eventually, the company was banned from participation in subsequent Eurovisions until 2024. The suspension signified a whole new level of a NSCA to initiate the cancellation of state organisations whose actions are considered socially unacceptable, thus launching a cultural blockade of the regime in order to alienate it and stop unethical sponsorship. Another massive international campaign was the Global Week of Belarusian Culture with festivities in more than 40 cities worldwide, organised by 68 representatives of diasporas (ibid.).

5. *Reforms of cultural policy-making*. BCC pays special attention to the development of reforms in cultural policy-making for *New Belarus* in terms of decoloniality theory-praxis. According to their understanding, "cultural policy is made not by a state programme but by the joint movement of all creative resources of the nation" (ibid.). Using both the Belarusian experience and of other post-Soviet and post-authoritarian countries, BCC experts have created a roadmap for reforms. MN mentions that it is crucial in the future not to just "turn the system [of cultural policy-making] upside down", the vision is rather to substitute it with an updated coherent national system that proved its viability and work. An important aspect here is that BCC provides managerial services in the organisation of the reform-making process by setting up a dialogue within the community and exchange of opinions, collecting them and reaching consensus, without pushing their own vision: "we would like cultural workers to create their own rules according to which to live and work in the field" (MN).

Structure. BCC is an organisation with flexible membership that consists of about 10 people on the collegiate board, more than 30 permanent members for different directions and more than 100 people joining for particular projects. MN says that they strive for a horizontal structure that remains autonomous from other political actors. Although the headquarters of BCC is in Vilnius where collection and redistribution of funds happen together with production, it is not an emigrant structure as the majority of members are in Belarus.

Issues. The structure was organised from scratch in extremely difficult circumstances. The majority of its members in Belarus have to remain anonymous for their safety, therefore BCC can not publicly reveal all projects and cases of support, which brings extra issues during communication with patrons. MN also confesses that it is hard

to gather cultural influencers and talk about the future as not everyone thinks it is worth now "to build a new house while everything else is burning around".

Perspectives. The further development of BCC remains an open project, however, there is a firm understanding that in terms of policy-making BCC would continue to work *between* the state and cultural actors, not *instead of* the state (MN). Different scenarios depend on overall processes in the country. It might focus on the promotion of Belarusian culture abroad and thus occupy the niche of an absent 'Belarusian Institute'. Alternatively, it might become a labour union of cultural workers or a lobbyist of NSCAs in communication with a post-transition state. The sunsetting strategy also remains possible if their mission is complete.

CONCLUSIONS

Summing up, the means of soft power and cultural diplomacy are helpful for achieving the decoloniality goals of Belarusian NSCAs. Using the strategies of opening up to the world, establishing people's embassies and engaging cultural ambassadors, they increase the country's soft power of attraction and raise more support for the pro-democratic movement. Belarusian Council for Culture is a potential flagship of cultural policy-making that manages to gather cultural workers for formulating and implementing reforms while not turning into a centralised and dominating structure.

OUTCOMES

The protests signified a point of no return for the Belarusian society that outgrew the state-imposed paradigm of the country's development. Amidst the most unfavourable circumstances, the cultural processes are still happening, and the decolonising strategies, tactics and policies implemented by the non-state actors prove it. On the one hand, Belarus is facing the danger of the largest cultural abyss in contemporary history as a result of a state-led cultural war that leaves scorched earth behind. However, on the other hand, the enforced mode of survivalism brought to life phenomena that mark the readiness of the cultural field to embrace its increased subjectivity, recalibrate relationships with the state, overcome post-Soviet paternalism and get off the needle of cultural neo-imperialism.

This dissertation was an attempt to provide an overview of contemporary strategies and policies implemented by non-state cultural actors on the way to internal decolonisation and democratisation. After delineating the complexities of the post-colonial matrix of power and contesting identities in Chapter 1, the protests were approached as a decolonial insurgency. Decoloniality as a combination of theory and praxis revealed itself in the accelerated development of civic society and the cultural field.

The mapping of decolonising cultural strategies within the independent theatre constituted the core of Chapter 2. The interviews with theatre-makers trace their aspiration for a democratised theatre, thus being a reflection of the overall trends towards post-authoritarian *New Belarus.* The pivotal statement of Kupala Theatre subverted the established power hierarchies and sparked the wave of inter-theatre and international solidarity with Belarusian theatre-makers. The reassertion of reimagined cultural identities was manifested in the exponential growth of local cultural production fueled by the increased interest of Belarusians in local artists, theatre-makers, musicians, and art activists. The forced placelessness turned out to be an impulse for spatial decentralisation and the rapid development of the digital cultural infrastructure. The necessity to stay together and back each other made an impulse towards the bottom-up building of the theatre community, a step showcased by the emergence of the novel association Belarus Theatre Community.

The growing significance of the international activities of Belarusians was thoroughly discussed in Chapter 3. The enforced emigration was turned into a strategy of opening up to the world and bringing the message of decolonising liberation. The rise of diasporas and the emergence of people's embassies triggered the creation of a decentralised constellation of actors that are ready to apply the mechanisms of cultural ambassadorship in order to gain soft power of attraction and exercise cultural diplomacy

for their pro-democratic movement. Here, the Belarusian Council for Culture serves as an example of a policy-making institution that can coordinate this archipelago of independent actors, embodying the decolonising tactics in its activities and contributing to the development of polycentrism, not turning into a centralised Ministry of Culture in exile.

The arduous pro-democratic struggle at this point can be reflected in Samuel Beckett's phrase "I can't go on, I'll go on" which was echoed in one of the interviews as "There is no future, but still, there is" (CD). The decolonising struggle of Belarusian cultural actors revealed the uniqueness and huge potential of Belarusian art on a global scale. Although it is uncertain when the transition of power will exactly happen, there is no doubt that the activities of cultural workers will turn Belarus into an energetic vortex that will lure creatives from all over the world to explore the country and contribute to its post-authoritarian transformation.

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SUPPLEMENTS

Supplement 1
Interview questions

1. How would you describe the current role of your (your institution's) activities for the Belarusian culture?

2. How would you estimate the events of 2020-2021 for the Belarusian culture in general?

3. What are the main recent changes in the cultural/theatre field (including infrastructure, theatre-makers, audiences)?

4. What are your views on the self-organisation of non-state cultural/theatre actors?

5. What are the perspectives of independent cultural actors amidst the repressions?

6. How would you evaluate the role and influence of Belarusian cultural actors/theatre-makers that had to leave the country?

7. Do you consider yourself/your institution to be a cultural ambassador to the world?

8. What is your vision of the future of Belarusian culture after the events of 2020-2021?

Supplement 2
Conducted interviews

No	Code	Date	Expertise	Affiliation
1	AB	05.08.21	Theatre Director	Independent
2	CD	06.08.21	Playwright	Independent
3	EF	30.08.21	Theatre Director, Manager	Belarus Theatre Community
4	GH	31.08.21	Theatre Director, Actor	Belarus Theatre Community
5	IJ	31.08.21	Theatre Director, Curator	State institution
6	KL	02.09.21	Theatre Director	Belarus Theatre Community
7	MN	02.09.21	Arts Manager	Belarusian Council for Culture
8	OP	08.09.21	Theatre Director, Manager	Belarus Theatre Community,
9	QR	09.09.21	Theatre Researcher	Belarus Theatre Community
10	ST	10.09.21	Theatre Researcher	Kupalaūcy
11	UV	14.09.21	Arts Manager	Belarus Theatre Community, Belarusian Council for Culture

BELARUS THEATRE COMMUNITY

We, the **Belarus Theatre Community,** are an independent association of the Belarusian theatre workers who spoke out against the lawlessness and violence of the authorities after the presidential elections in August 2020. We appeal for support and assistance to our colleagues and specialized institutions around the world.

The goals of our association are:
- the creation of the Belarus Theatre Community to preserve and enhance the cultural heritage of the country;
- the assistance to the repressed theatre workers.

Over the year of the ongoing political crisis in Belarus, repressions by the state against artists who publicly express support for democratic reforms have become systemic. In the first half of 2021 alone, 621 cases of violation of cultural rights and human rights against cultural workers were recorded. As of June 30th 2021, 526 people in Belarus were recognized as political prisoners, 39 of them are cultural workers. 13 people have already been sentenced by the court to prison from 2 to 8 years, 9 people have received 1.5-3 years of probation, 2 people have been given 1-2 years of restriction of freedom without being sent to a correctional institution.

Today, many independent theatre groups and representatives of culture in Belarus are deprived by the state of the possibility to work. Cultural venues are being closed, legal funding opportunities are being rapidly reduced, and non-governmental organizations are being liquidated. Representatives of the theatrical art are fired for political reasons, followed by a ban on future employment.

But we continue to look for possibilities of interaction within the community and support from outside for the development and preservation of the Belarusian theatre, with its significant history, which is now systematically destroyed by state repression. We are appealing to our foreign colleagues and partners for assistance.

Having in our team ambassadors of independent theatre (both in Belarus and abroad), our working group formulated a number of possible formats of cooperation with potential partners, which we are ready to provide to all those who are concerned about the fate of the Belarusian theatre.

If you have possibilities and other ideas, useful contacts and information, you can contact the theatre community volunteers by submitting the application form on the Community's website or via email: theatrecommunity.by@gmail.com

The Belarus Theatre Community