



Den norske Forfatterforening

The situation in Belarus has become much worse and is still developing in the wrong direction

interview with Hanna Komar

recipient of The Norwegian Authors' Union's Freedom of Expression Prize 2020

When did you receive the message that you were awarded the prize, and how did you react?

I received a message from The Norwegian Authors' Union's Secretary General Ms. Mette Møller on January 29th 2021. I replied, 'I am honoured to receive this award from you!! It came as a big surprise, and a huge joy! I appreciate it a lot, the value you consider my voice has.'

Dmitry Strotsev, with whom I share the award, and I, were also asked to record a little video greeting for the digitally AGM for March 19th that year, and I found it symbolical, as my birthday is on March 20th.

Back then I was living in Belarus, and my every day was dedicated to the Belarusians' struggle for freedom from dictatorship and violence, to solidarity. Receiving this award was a strong signal that we were heard and supported. I knew, for sure, that there were other Belarusian authors who deserved this recognition and support not less and maybe more than me, but still for me as a young author it was incredibly significant. I also considered it a great decision that I shared it with Dmitry, whose contribution to Belarusian literature and beyond has been immense. It was an honour for me to share this award with him, and it also reflected the fact that today Belarusian literature is diverse and is created by authors of different gender, age, writing style, etc.

Has the prize influenced your work or situation, and in that case, how?

It definitely helped to raise awareness about Belarus. There were some meetings, events and interviews enabled by the award so we had a platform to talk about Belarus, to draw some attention and solidarity. For me personally, it has created an opportunity to be invited to some literary festivals, and I always mention this award on my profile, in my CVs or applications, as it's a great achievement which shows that I'm an established writer, and it helps me along my professional path, which may be at times bumpy for a young Belarusian poet, especially now that I live in exile.

What the money element of the prize also did was it gave me an opportunity to start a PhD in the UK. I came to do a one-year MA in Creative Writing in London in 2021, on a Chevening Scholarship. After that, I was hoping to return to Belarus, but it was too dangerous, as in London I kept being politically active in the diaspora. So, I had to find a way to stay and

continue my literary and activist work for Belarus. A PhD was the only way. But it was also a costly way in economic terms, but the prize money allowed me to have a safety cushion needed to apply for a student visa, etc. Later, I gave part of the prize money to help someone in Belarus experiencing domestic abuse. I can't tell who that is, but I can tell that to save even one woman from domestic abuse in Belarus, a lot of resources are needed.

Would you like to share some of what you are currently working on?

Domestic abuse, then topped by state violence, is something I experienced myself and that I've been writing about. Today, according to the [research](#) by Victoria Lauryniuk, every second Belarusian woman is concerned about facing physical or sexualized violence and 83% of women are afraid of violence from the law enforcement agencies. These women are often left on their own and silent, so the trauma is expanding. The topic of my PhD is 'Supporting Belarusian women to share experiences of gender-based violence and patriarchy using poetry: an autoethnographic approach.' So that's the work I'm focused on now. It's practice-based, and it's autoethnography, which means that I include a lot of personal experiences – autobiography and poetry – as well as poetry and prose by other Belarusian authors into it. I hope that with this work I will not only raise awareness about Belarus but also create a community, be it physical or virtual, and networks of support.

Together with a friend of mine, an artist, we're working on designing, layouting and preparing for publication my non-fiction book 'When I'm out of here' written in Belarusian and Russian languages. It's a combination of my prison diary and interviews: I interviewed people who went through the experience of detention at the same time as me, and my friends and family who supported me at that time.

I also recently had a bilingual poetry collection published – [Ribwort](#) – by a Scotland-based publisher 3TimesRebel. I also participated in the Ordkaalotten literature festival in Tromsø in November 2023.

How has the situation for writers in your country developed since the time you received the prize?

The situation in Belarus in general has become much worse, and it keeps getting even worse. As I'm writing this, someone in Belarus is arrested – while they're walking to work, while they're preparing their lunch, while they're speaking on the phone, while they're dreaming, while they're picking up their child from school. It's people who participated in the peaceful protest, wear white and red or blue and yellow colours, left a critical comment on social media, made a donation to help the victims of the regime, voted for Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, do their job honestly – as lawyers, doctors, teachers, journalists... In September 2023 – 386 cases of political persecution were registered in Belarus.

According to the latest chronicle of human rights violations in the sphere of culture prepared by PEN Belarus, 'as of 30 September 2023, at least 127 cultural figures, including not less than 31 People of the Word, were behind bars.' Imprisoned writers, like the other [political prisoners](#) (the number is over 1700) are deprived of correspondence, their access to books is often blocked, they face lack of health care, hard labour, and other forms of torture. They die in prison, like the artist [Ales Pushkin](#) who was serving a four-year term for a painting of an anti-Soviet resistance fighter.

Dozens of Belarusian writers are exiled, some without any means for living. Books, even [classics](#) of Belarusian literature are labelled 'extremist' and removed from school curriculum and libraries. Almost all independent publishers publishing Belarusian books, those in the Belarusian language in particular, have been shut down. It means that people inside Belarus don't have access to the contemporary Belarusian literature which often reflects on the events of the last years. It deprives people of the possibilities to reflect on the events and their experience, which leads to the traumas not being dealt with. Although when you expect to be arrested any day, there's no chance for the traumas to heal. It also means that Belarusian literature is replaced by propaganda and Russian literature. Quoting the [report](#) of PEN Belarus on repressions in the cultural sector in Belarus in 2022 – 2023, 'the shelves of the state-owned stores are mainly filled with "state-sponsored books" and many Russian books.' Censorship and black lists also exist for theatre, music, visual and other forms of art, and everyone is checked against that list. When one applies for a job in public sector, one's name is checked too. If you've had a history of protest or arrest – you can't get a job, even the least prestigious and the least well-paid. The Belarusian language has been pushed out from media, governmental management, and the sphere of services, Belarusian speaking political prisoners [face](#) even harsher treatment and pressure in prisons.

At the same time, thanks to the individual and collective effort as well as international support, Belarusian books are published abroad, publishing houses open, events and festivals are held. Belarusian authors are invited to international festivals, they participate in discussions, their work is translated into different languages. Four Belarusian novels will be translated into Norwegian, as far as I'm aware. There are authors who stay in Belarus, it's their firm position, despite the obvious risks. I respect their decision because I believe that they don't let Belarusian literature inside Belarus die out, be replaced by the Russian hegemony and Lukashenka's propaganda. Yet, the gap between the literary life and freedom of expression of those who stay in Belarus and those who left is growing. From both sides we try to preserve and develop Belarusian literature in these circumstances. Interesting new projects appear, such as the online [Laboratory of decolonial writing](#) 'Roots/Leaves' organized by the Archive of feminist writing and literary zine Fihury.

If you were to award the next prize, who would you like to give it to?

I'm sure in different countries across the globe there are many great authors who would benefit from this award. I may not know these authors because, for example, they write in the languages different to ones I read. Which brings us to the necessity to have platforms and opportunities to meet, to hear each other, to translate each other's work. What I personally believe is that authors from disadvantaged backgrounds and living under oppression are of course the ones to consider first. You never know how it can change their life and the way their national literature develops thanks to that.

Are there question you would like us to ask or other comments you would like to add?

I want again to thank the Norwegian Writers' Union and everyone involved in this award. I know it's hard times for writers in many places in the world, and the Norwegian Writers' Union is doing a hugely meaningful work by supporting those writers to the best of their capacity. It matters.