



# ‘Dissenting Belarus’ through the eyes of Belarusian documentary filmmakers

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DIANA EL<sup>1</sup>

*Independent cultural journalist*

*Abstract:* Diana El focuses on protest documentary films by Belarusian directors. The text combines several narratives: the author captures the changes in the cultural landscape since the Belarusian protests in 2020, in what conditions the authors are forced to create their films now, and also gives a mini-review of documentaries created by Belarusian cinematographers in 2020–2022. The events of 2020, the repressions by the authorities, the further “cleansing” of the cultural space, the emigration of filmmakers, the survival and recognition of Belarusian cinema in exile – it was important for the author to trace and recreate the processes in the independent cinema of Belarus on the example of documentary filmmakers. Cinema is not born in a vacuum, it is born in a “whirlwind of time”, in social and political conditions; to outline, to show the context in which independent filmmakers create cinema is one of the main tasks of the author. The article also gives mini-reviews on such films as *Courage* by Aliaksei Paluyan, *The Route is Recalculated* by Maksim Shved, *When Flowers Are Not Silent* by Andrei Kutsila, *Handbook* by Pavel Mozhar. The movies *We Did Not Know Each Other Until This Summer* by Olga Abramchik, *Minsk Barricades* by Pavel Niedzvedz, *Mara* by Sasha Kulak are also mentioned. Cinema as a position, as an ‘act of resistance’, and at the same time, as a statement that requires new artistic means to reflect the changing reality – these moments are noted by Diana El.

*Keywords:* Belarusian documentaries, Belarusian protests in 2020, Belarusian cinema, cinema as resistance, cinema “under press”, Aliaksei Paluyan, Maksim Shved, Andrei Kutsila, Pavel Mozhar, Olga Abramchik, Pavel Niedzvedz, Sasha Kulak

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This is a war’, says an eyewitness of the Belarusian protests on August 9, 2020 in Olga Abramchik’s film *We Didn’t Know Each Other Until This Summer*. An anonymous author shoots a video on his phone: on the screen there are flashes from explosions behind Minsk high-rise buildings, sounds of the stun grenades exploding and shots being fired.

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonym.

Somewhere in the distance a peaceful demonstration has been brutally dispersed. This documentary by the Belarusian director is based on the eyewitness' amateur video footage. Now there is a war that Russia unleashed on the territory of sovereign Ukraine. The war in Belarus has been ongoing since 2020. Only this is the war of the Belarusian authorities against their people.

In the most difficult conditions, Belarusian documentary filmmakers are trying to record both obvious and obscure presence of this war. The shocking and gruesome reality is not always easily appropriated by the artist. Especially, when you are practically alone in the field. However, the movies about the Belarusian protests keep emerging despite the repression and the 'purged' cultural field. In this review, I consider the Belarusian documentary protest cinema and the conditions in which it is created.

## 1. Re-routing

When documentary filmmaker Maksim Shved started the making of his film with the then working title *Pre-election Mood*, he could not foresee its actual ending. In the film, there are two main characters. They are taxi drivers Pavel, who works in Minsk, and Anna Mikhailovna, who is a cabbie in the regional Belarusian center of Baranovichi. The plot is simple – drivers ask their passengers: what is your mood on the eve of the elections? And then the imminent voters share their worries and concerns during the taxi journey.

Ahead of August 9, 2020 – the date of the election of the President of the Republic of Belarus – Belarusians are excited and hopeful. The capital city is changing before our eyes: white-red-white flags on the shoulders of passengers, a rally of three women representing a unified oppositional camp, white ribbons on their hands as a sign of support for the new presidential candidate Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, as well as signs of the regime's power presence – the military parade in the city center, the paddy wagons causing traffic jams. What is going on in people's minds as they travel around Minsk and Baranovichi by car and look at the countless billboards with the patriotic slogans, and shops with telling names such as 'Soviet' and 'My homeland – Belarus!'.

Over time, the conversations of people in the taxi are accompanied by the beeping cars, the applause of peaceful demonstrators, as the city begins to 'buzz' approaching an election date. And the political road-movie, which was supposed to culminate the moment the protagonists vote, changes its trajectory. When they get out of the taxi to exercise their right to vote, the driver Pasha finds himself to be a witness to an open confrontation between the people and police at a polling station at the time of the announcement of the falsified results.

*The Route Is Recalculated* will become the title of this documentary, directed by Maksim Shved, who will follow people on the streets and will be detained at the time of filming, beaten up, and sentenced to 5 days 'for participating in an unauthorized rally'. The film, shot for the Russian independent channel 'Current Time', will capture the turning point of the communal sentiment: from hope, future aspirations and peaceful life to the tension, anger and shock triggered by the sanctioned brutality and violence, as the security forces use water cannons, stun grenades, gas and rubber bullets towards the indignant citizens. A film

designed as a report-observation becomes a testament to a turning point in Belarusian history. It captures a shift from authoritarian liberalisation to state terror.

**Image 1.** Still from the film *The route is recalculated* by Maksim Shved.



*Image description:* On the still, two guys with white-red-white flags on their shoulders are riding in a taxi.

*Source:* Currenttime TV.

## 2. Prior to 2020

Even before 2020, the Belarusian film community existed in a mode of some sort of an ideological confrontation. On the one hand, there were filmmakers employed by the only state film studio – Belarusfilm. On the other hand, there were independent filmmakers working in cooperation with the European cinema groups and professionals. One group mainly looked to the East – Russia, the other – to the West, to Europe. One group had an opportunity to receive state funds and subsidies for their thematically ‘safe’ projects, others were forced to look for funding elsewhere, unsupported by their own state. And often – to make films at their own expense. It is no coincidence that Maksim Shved’s film about the pre-election disposition was sourced by the channel Current Time [Nastoiashchee Vremia], created by RFE/RL with the participation of the Voice of America. It is impossible to shoot such films in Belarus with the state support.

Until 2020, the ideological split between the two sides was clear, but not irreversible. The community of independent cinematographers sought reforms in the Belarusian industry via the creation of equal conditions for the film production, the inclusion of Belarus in European

film support programs, access of productions by independent studios to the network of republican film distribution, etc. It was difficult but certain initiatives were accomplished.

A unique example of this coexistence of the state and private initiatives until 2020 was Minsk International Festival 'Listapad' [Falling Leaves], which for more than ten years was managed by the private company Art Corporation. The festival team achieved permanent accreditation of the forum in the International Federation of Film Producers Associations FIAPF, cooperation with FIPRESCI, with the films of independent filmmakers and studios were presented in the National Competition.

The events of 2020 became a watershed moment. Repressions began against the civil sector, independent film organisations and filmmakers. Inevitably, the state removed the Art Corporation from the organisers of Listapad, appointing the state film studio Belarusfilm as the directorate. Two groups of filmmakers ultimately separated. Currently making independent films in Belarus is not just difficult, but impossible and dangerous.

### 3. In the thick of things

When the director of the film *The Route is Recalculated* Maksim Shved was detained on the night of August 10–11, 2020, he was wearing a bright vest. The filmmaker repeated to the security forces that he was the press. But this did not save him from further abuse and torture to which peaceful demonstrators detained in the period from August 9–12 were subjected. The miracle is that five days later the film director got his equipment back with the footage preserved.

Pavel Niedzvedz, who filmed the uprising and the dispersal of barricades near the Minsk supermarket Riga at the peak of the August protests managed to avoid detention. His short chronicle film is called *Minsk barricades*. Director Olga Abramchik built her documentary *We Didn't Know Each Other Until This Summer* from the videos shot by Belarusians on their mobile phones during the protests and after them, recording violence in the streets, in courtyards and in squares. For security reasons, she does not name the authors. In both cases, we cannot talk about the author's reflection, but this is a documentary chronicle, which is going to increase in value with every passing day.

### 4. Comprehending Courage

Aliaksei Paluyan, a Belarusian director who was educated at the Institute of Film and Television of the Higher School of Arts in Kassel, Germany, began to shoot his film *Courage* [Kurazh] long before the August Revolution. Three heroes of his documentary are actors of the Belarus Free Theatre – a theater that has been operating under dictatorship for more than a decade. Marina, Pavel and Denis are artists who faced an ongoing pressure in relation to their theater (at the time of filming Belarus Free Theatre had not yet left Belarus). Denis, for instance, had been detained and beaten up during 1996 protests. As depicted in the film, the actors know in which country they live, and nevertheless, the events of the summer of 2020 become both a shock and an inspiration. It seemed that people around them, for

whom they worked for all these years narrating about the crimes of the regime, saw through the regime, got united and started to act in unison.

*Courage* is, in a sense, personal 'records' in the book of the Belarusian epic. Personal-political in the picture of Aliaksei Paluyan is demonstrated by a simple narrative line – today, you feed the child, wash the dishes, catch the wasp, and tomorrow, you go to a rally at which you can be detained, tortured and injured.

History is made in front of our eyes, and it is impossible to stay away... Fear, courage, shock, courage, hope, solidarity, euphoria... Everything at the same time. Tatiana Gavrilchik's camera catches these strong emotions on the faces of people when they take to the streets, making their choices, joining human flows. The camera captures the overall picture from the moments of the very first clashes between protesters and security forces (at Stella monument, on Pushkinskaya street) to the release of the first detainees on Akrestsina. Demonstrators unfold the flags, clap, carry flowers, wave, shout slogans, they put the lights on their mobile phones and raise them upwards – human flows are like a swaying sea. This is a spectacle that gives an idea of the scale of the event; it's impossible to forget.

**Image 2.** Still from the film *Courage* by Aliaksei Paluyan.



*Image description:* The image shows one of the mass Belarusian rallies. People are holding mobile phones with lighted flashlights in their hands; a sea of flags.

*Source:* Living Pictures Production.

But in the end, Aliaksei Paluyan returns us back to the theater – to the play of Belarus Free Theatre *Comprehending Love*. The heroes of the film – Pavel and Marina – perform as businessman Anatoly Krasovsky and his wife Irina. Anatoly Krasovsky disappeared together with the politician Viktor Gonchar in 1999. These crimes of the regime of Alexander Lukashenko have not yet been solved. The director loops back the story, returning us to the past, which was never fully understood, discussed, named. The violence, which happened in August 2020, happened much earlier – with the first repressed person in 1996. It grew and asserted itself with each year of Alexander Lukashenko's rule, the director concludes, showing the chronicle of the protests of the 1990s and 2000s, the chains of solidarity of

Belarusians who hold posters of missing people. Is it enough today to oppose the regime built over the years with your courage? This question remains open.

In order to preserve the footage and his future film, Aliaksei Paluyan was forced to leave Belarus in September 2020. In 2021, the regime started its ‘purge’ of the civil and cultural landscape.

## **5. ‘Sweep’**

In April, Tatiana Gatsura-Yavorskaya, head of the Zveno [A Chain Link] public association and director of the Watch Docs Belarus Human Rights film festival, was arrested for organising the exhibition ‘The Machine Breathes, But I Don’t’, dedicated to the work of doctors. Tatiana was imprisoned, like her colleagues, activists of Zveno, for a critical artistic statement – if not in cinema, but in art. This news had a striking effect then.

A few days later, the largest film institution in the world, the European Film Academy, posted on its website a letter of appeal calling for the release of Tatiana Gatsura-Yavorskaya and all political prisoners. It was signed by more than 150 film festivals – the solidarity of the international community was incredible. As a result, the director of Watch Docs Belarus was released from prison, but at the same time the Belarusian authorities expelled her husband, a citizen of Ukraine, from the country, with a ban on entry into Belarus for 10 years. ‘This is only the beginning of my personal tragedy’, the filmmaker wrote on social media at the time. In June, the Ministry of Justice issued a written warning to the public association Zveno, and the organization was liquidated in October. In March 2022, Tatiana Gatsura-Yavorskaya illegally left Belarus – she went to her family in Ukraine.

At the end of June 2021, the film producer and owner of the Modum cosmetics company, Viktor Labkovich, was detained. He was released from custody only in 2022, after spending a year behind bars.

In July, Social Film Studio that supported young filmmakers and promoted improvements to the film sphere at the legislative level got eliminated. In August, the company Art-corporation – one of the leading organisers of cultural events, the ex-organizer of the Listapad film festival, was also liquidated by the decision of the Minsk City Executive Committee. ‘All living things are being cut out’, commented the ex-director of the art institution Angelika Kra-shevskaya.

As a result of these purges, one of the main events of the year – the film festival Listapad – lost its reputation that it had earned with great difficulty over the past years. The Forum lost permanent accreditation in the International Federation of Film Producers’ Associations FIAPF. The new directorate abandoned the concept of a film festival of the countries of the post-communist bloc, simplifying the ideological framework to the one of the ‘cinema with a human face’. The National Competition disappeared from Listapad’s programme.

At the same time, many actors, critics, screenwriters and filmmakers left the country due to high probability of persecution. The Belarusian film industry (if we can talk about it, as it is) was thrown back for many years.

## **6. In the face of fear**

Today, independent Belarusian cinema is in exile. Relying on the help and support of European colleagues and various institutions, the film directors are looking for opportunities to create their own cinema and continue to talk about what is happening in their country. One of the Belarusian authors who completed work on his film abroad was the famous documentary filmmaker Andrei Kutsila. His film *When Flowers Are Not Silent* focuses on women who became the driving force of the Belarusian protest movement and peaceful confrontation.

One of the heroines of the picture is the director's sister. She was detained in the early days of the August demonstrations and ended up on Akrestina. We get acquainted with the heroine when she talks about what she happened to see and hear there. She shares her memories with a human rights activist in an interview that will serve as evidence of a crime against humanity. Even though it is difficult and painful for the heroine to remember, she continues to speak. In Andrei Kutsila's documentary, the encounter with violence in its horrific forms for the characters has only just happened. How does this affect a person? How does such an experience manifest itself in everyday life? Andrei Kutsila goes on to explore further layers: how to live in conditions of state terror? How does the psyche of a person, who encountered it, change?

**Image 3.** Still from the film *When Flowers Are Not Silent* by Andrei Kutsila.



*Image description:* The image shows a woman crying in a human flow at one of the Belarusian protest rallies.

*Source:* Solidarity Zone, Belsat TV.

In *When Flowers Are Not Silent*, we look into the face of trauma, pain, fear. The director captures the suffering on the faces of mothers who are waiting for their sons under the walls of Akrestina, the emotions of wives and sisters. Women hide their eyes behind sunglasses.

The viewer sees the shock of encountering inhumane treatment during the detention, which manifests itself in conversations and tears. And courage of women who come out to protest and patience of women who support their men injured in clashes with security forces or in prisons.

The director's sister is trying to overcome her fear, which prevents her from living a full life. She admits that she is afraid, does not find a place for herself. One of the heroines of the film sees off her husband to Poland, as she is dreading his detention after the re-start of repressions. The female protagonist remains in Belarus with three children. The director traces her life step by step, as the woman has to cope with household chores and raise children alone, communicate with her husband on the phone among children's noise, with an interrupted connection. 'I feel like I don't feel anything anymore,' she says.

The film has a beautiful montage: the lives of the heroines are rendered through a sort of 'compressed' episodes that give an idea of the psychological tension, depression, despair, 'hardening' (*ocherstvenie*) of women. Another line in the film shows violence – indirectly via the mobile phone screen. Like a crazy tape. Like a bifurcation of reality. You can only tackle it with your own action. Voice. Protest. Resistance. Presence here and now. And yet, it's hard for a survivor of violence not to look back.

## 7. International recognition

Emigration. Risks. The impossibility of making films in Belarus. The inability to show the movie to the Belarusian audience. The inability to return home in general. It is in such conditions that the Belarusian protest documentary now lives. But the authors find ways to express themselves.

The continuation of the resistance in a certain sense is the participation of films by Belarusian directors in international film festivals. The premiere of the film '*Courage*' by Aliaksei Paluyan took place at the Berlin Film Festival in 2021. It was released in Germany, Poland, Lithuania and America; it was nominated for an Oscar; each screening of the picture was preceded by an action in support of political prisoners. Andrei Kutsila's film '*When flowers are not silent*' took the main award in the documentary section of the 37th Warsaw Film Festival; it was praised at the Artdocfest in 2022.

At the International Documentary Film Festival in Amsterdam in 2021, the best short film competition was Pavel Mozhar's film '*Handbook*'. A filmmaker from Belarus, who lives in Germany, responded to the events in his native country by making a brief film about the punitive method of the suppression of the protest operation documenting the shocked testimonies of the injured people in the August protests.

## 8. Torture protocol

After analysing the interviews of the affected Belarusians, Pavel Mozhar derived the general formula of punishment applied by the security forces to the detainees. *Handbook* [Metodichka] is a staged documentary. In the manner of protocol, it stages the ritual of



apprehending, delivering, and holding 'political' detainees in pre-trial detention. To understand what happened – starting from the transporting people in paddy wagons, their arrivals to the local police stations to the imprisonment in cells – the director uses the 'method' and explores the 'handbook' – the 'metodichka' – of the security forces. He does not recreate the torture and beatings literally, but shows the method, how it was prescribed to be executed. It is done without showing blood and unnecessary graphic scenes; through a character – a person (a law enforcer) in a mask and a fe/male detainee.

**Image 4.** Still from the film *Handbook* by Pavel Mozhar.



*Image description:* The image shows a staged scene of the transportation of detained civilians in a paddy wagon. One on one, four people are lying on the 'floor' with their hands behind their heads. Above them is a 'riot policeman' in a mask.

*Source:* Kolja Wolle, Pavel Mozhar.

What would happen if you remove emotions and dismember the elements of the crime? What will be taken away or added? How, in general, can you tell what happened? What artistic language can convey this?

And Pavel Mozhar's staged format works: the dramatisation is no less terrifying than the direct depiction of violence. The author's short film not only captures the state crimes, exposing the framework of the punitive procedure, but also connects our imagination and memory, which just completes the picture. Perhaps, to understand the trauma of Belarusian society, you need to watch such a movie?

In one of the interviews, when asked whether cinema after Akrestina is possible similarly to poetry after Auschwitz, Maksim Shved says: 'The language that we spoke is no longer applicable. We need to look for new imagery to describe what happened to us. Yes, cinema after

Akrestsina is possible, but this is a matter of a new artistic language' (Belarusian Filmmakers Network 2022).

At the Artdocfest Documentary Film Festival, which ended in March last year, one of the competition's favorites was Sasha Kulak's surreal documentary film *Mara* [A dream]. Perhaps such a movie is a new form of displaying such events?

### 9. A final note

After the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Belarusian film community issued an open condemnation of the war in Ukraine – an anti-war appeal was signed by more than a hundred Belarusian filmmakers. Among the signatories of the open letter are film professionals who are outside the country and in occupied Belarus.

The Belarusian Independent Film Academy was represented at the Berlinale 2023 European Film Market for the first time in the history of independent Belarusian cinema – the institution is being formed right now.

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DIANA EL is a cultural journalist. They were born and live in Minsk. Graduated from the faculty of Journalism at the Belarusian State University (Minsk). Their interest is focused on Belarusian cinema and photography. The author's gender, further details of the bio, and contact e-mail have been redacted to protect anonymity.