



P.O.V.

Discussion Guide

Season **21**

Belarusian Waltz

A film by Andrzej Fidyk



www.pbs.org/pov



Table of Contents

Credits, Acknowledgments

3	Introduction
4	Background Information
4	Belarus
4	Location and History
4	People
4	Economics
5	Politics
5	Holidays
6	Alexander Lukashenko
7	Alexander Pushkin
8	Selected People Featured in <i>Belarusian Waltz</i>
9	General Discussion Questions
10	Discussion Prompts
11	Taking Action
13	Resources
15	How to Buy the Film

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Introduction



Kupala Night.

Photo courtesy of *Belarusian Waltz*/Piraya Films

Belarus has been called “Europe’s last dictatorship.” Since 1994, Alexander Lukashenko has ruled the ex-Soviet republic with a despotic hand, jailing the opposition, shutting down the press and refusing to investigate the assassinations of dissidents. Though he has virtually silenced his critics, one performance artist manages to stage public stunts mocking the dictator’s pretensions. *Belarusian Waltz*, a feature-length (52 minutes) film, follows Alexander Pushkin, whose audacious exploits evoke hostility from the police and consternation from his family.

Belarusian Waltz is awash with contradictions. As Pushkin discovers, it isn’t easy being a rebel in country where the majority of people support a dictatorship precisely because it is

a dictatorship. An introduction to Belarus might sound like a Rod Serling voiceover: “a country inhabiting a twilight realm somewhere between past and present, East and West, with a lost national identity and an imposed colonial one, where freedom is slavery, and dictatorship is the new democracy.” Because of its subject’s complexity, *Belarusian Waltz* can spark rich discussions about the tensions between ethnic identity and totalitarianism, nationalism and freedom, leadership and human nature.



Background Information



Sunset over Bobr, Belarus.

Photo courtesy of *Belarusian Waltz*/Piraya Films

Belarus:

LOCATION AND HISTORY

Situated between Poland and Russia, Belarus was a province of other nations for most of the 20th century. Formerly a territory under the control of Poland, Belarus enjoyed a brief independence after the end of World War I. It spent most of the next 70 years under the control of the government in Moscow. Belarusians were fiercely persecuted in the 1930s and 1940s as Stalinist purges gave way to Nazi occupation. Caught between rival powers at the crossroads of Eastern and Central Europe, the country was invaded by Germany in 1941, then again became a Soviet possession after the end of World War II. Upon the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Belarus gained independence in 1991. Belarus and the Russian Federation maintain close connections, and a treaty signed in 1999 set out a framework for greater economic and political integration.

PEOPLE

Belarus is home to about 9.7 million people, the vast majority of whom are ethnically Belarusian. About 80 percent of the population describe themselves as Eastern Orthodox. There are also small populations of Catholics, Jews, Muslims and

Protestants. Approximately 11 percent of the population identifies as Russian; less than 5 percent describes itself as Polish, Ukrainian or another ethnic group. The population is aging and in decline, shrinking by about 0.4 percent per year. Life expectancy is highly variable in Belarus, but on average, women outlive men by 12 years.

ECONOMY

The nation's economy is largely stagnant. In 1995, President Alexander Lukashenko described the country's official economic approach as "market socialism," but in practice it differs little from that of the Soviet era. The central government controls prices and currency exchange rates, and in 2005, many of the country's privately held companies were nationalized. Intrusions on private enterprise are frequent, and international investment has been meager. The nation's infrastructure is poor, and low government revenues make significant improvement unlikely. Twenty-seven percent of the population lives below the poverty line (as compared with 12 percent in the United States and 16 percent in Russia).



Background Information

POLITICS

In 1994, Alexander Lukashenko was elected by a landslide as the newly independent country's first president. The results of subsequent elections, including those for Belarus's two-house legislature, have been labeled "flawed" by international observers. Opposition parties exist, but dissent is harshly suppressed. Many government officials who have fallen out of favor or spoken out against Lukashenko's authoritarianism have been forced to flee the country. There have also been accusations that Lukashenko's government simply eliminated some of its internal enemies, including a former deputy prime minister and a former minister of internal affairs. Political dissent is not tolerated — the government routinely arrests critics who speak out. In addition, Lukashenko's government has resisted ties with any foreign governments or investors except Russia, giving rise to suspicions that he ultimately wants Belarus to once again be ruled from Moscow.

HOLIDAYS

Belarus observes its official Independence Day on July 3, commemorating the country's liberation from German occupation. The liberating forces were Soviet troops. The event represented the beginning of five decades of Soviet domination. Another date of significance, August 15, 1991, represents Belarus's independence from the former Soviet Union. Dissidents inside Belarus have organized commemorations to take place on May 25 to pay tribute to the Belarusian National Republic, the first truly independent Belarusian state, which existed for just a few months in World War I, between the defeat of Germany and the arrival of the Red Army.



Bonfire, Kupala Night.
Photo courtesy of *Belarusian Waltz*/Piraya Films

The summer solstice is also celebrated by some Belarusians and is commonly known as Kupala or Kupalle. Kupala was known to be a female goddess of fertility whose name meant "she who bathes." Nowadays, the holiday has been reshaped into a Christian holiday celebrating the male saint Ivan Kupala.

Sources:

"Belarus," CIA World Factbook (updated April 15, 2008), <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bo.html>;
"Country Profile: Belarus," British Broadcasting Corporation (updated March 5, 2008), http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/country_profiles/1102180.stm; "Post-Soviet Belarus: A Timeline," Radio Free Europe (February 24, 2006), <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2006/02/a031b659-e44d-45e4-81de-eba9a01e589c.html>; "Profile: Europe's Last Dictator?" British Broadcasting Corporation (September 10, 2001), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/116265.stm>;
<http://www.belarusguide.com/culture1/religion/Religion.html>.



Background Information

ALEXANDER LUKASHENKO:

Born in 1954, Alexander Lukashenko was raised by a single mother. After service in the Soviet army and study at two universities, he served in several administrative positions before joining the state legislature in 1990. Belarus declared independence in 1991; Lukashenko emerged as the victor in the resulting 1994 presidential election, defeating a powerful former Communist Party official. After a 1996 referendum effectively gave Lukashenko the power to pick the members of parliament, he was harshly criticized as “Europe’s last Communist dictator.”

Lukashenko has been Belarus’s only president. He has continued to spark criticism abroad, but maintains a strong base of popularity in Belarus, although state controls of politics and media make it difficult to know for certain. He has described himself as an authoritarian, asserting that only a strong government can protect its people. With a carefully cultivated image as a “man of the people,” Lukashenko cites stability and the need for order as the primary reasons for his strong base of support.

The first post-Soviet-era constitution limited presidents to two terms, but Lukashenko has spoken frequently of serving for longer than that. In 2004 the constitution was amended to remove presidential term limits, allowing Lukashenko to serve in the position for a third term.

Sources:

“Country Profile: Belarus,” British Broadcasting Corporation (updated March 5, 2008).

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/country_profiles/1102180.stm;

“Profile: Alexander Lukashenko,” British Broadcasting Corporation (January 9, 2007), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3882843.stm>;

“Profile: Europe’s Last Dictator?” British Broadcasting Corporation (September 10, 2001) <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/116265.stm>.



A Wheelbarrow of Dung for President Lukashenko, 1999.
Photo courtesy of *Belarusian Waltz*/Piraya Films



Background Information

ALEXANDER PUSHKIN:

Alexander Pushkin was born in 1965 in the town of Bobr, in the Krupki region of Belarus. He studied at the Belarusian Art College beginning in 1978. After completing his military service in the Soviet army, during which he was sent to Afghanistan, Pushkin continued his studies and was eventually placed into a government-sponsored job as a painter. After the Soviet Union collapsed, his work was featured in several exhibitions. When the Lukashenko government came to power, Pushkin found it more difficult to show his art, although he did some work as a theatrical set designer. The new government followed the model of the centrally controlled Soviet Union, and private exhibitions and work for artists were subject to the control of the regime.

Since the mid-1990s, Pushkin has regularly been arrested for protesting the government through his works. In 1999, Pushkin carted a load of manure to the steps of the presidential palace, to protest the extension of Lukashenko's first term as president beyond its original legal limit. In 2002, he was once again arrested, this time for his protest on Independence Day in Minsk. He was held for 24 hours, then released.

Sources:

"Aching Souls of Belarus Pine for Liberation," *The Globe and Mail* (March 2, 2000); "Belarus: Nationalist Artist to Stand Trial for Independence Day Exhibition," Belapan News Agency, Minsk, supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring (July 5, 2002); Biography of Alexander Pushkin on his personal website, http://www.pushkin.by/info01_en.htm.



Background Information

Selected People Featured in *Belarusian Waltz*



Ania – Pushkin's daughter with Margarita



Janka – Pushkin's current wife



Margarita Stalbovskaya – Ania's mother, a Russian woman who has lived in Belarus for more than 25 years; had a love affair with Pushkin in 1991



Swietka – Pushkin's sister



General Discussion Questions

Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen. If the mood seems tense, you can pose a general question and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion.

Unless you think participants are so uncomfortable that they can't engage until they have had a break, don't encourage people to leave the room between the film and the discussion. If you save your break for an appropriate moment during the discussion, you won't lose the feeling of the film as you begin your dialogue.

One way to get a discussion going is to pose a general question such as:

- If you could ask anyone in the film a single question, who would you ask and what would you ask him or her?
- What did you learn from this film? What insights did it provide?
- If friends asked you what this film was about, what would you tell them?
- Describe a moment or scene in the film that you found particularly disturbing or moving. What was it about that scene that was especially compelling for you?



Filmmaker Andrzej Fidyk.
Photo courtesy of *Belarusian Waltz*/Piraya Films



Discussion Prompts

Exploring Nationalism

- How is American patriotism different from and similar to Pushkin's nationalism?
- Margarita, Pushkin's former lover and mother of his child, accuses him of espousing a "totalitarian nationalism." What are the benefits and drawbacks of nationalism as a response to an authoritarian government? In what ways can ethnic pride be used to support fascism? What role can it play in strengthening a free society?

Exploring Totalitarianism

- Pushkin observes, "Our nation can't live without a shepherd; we're not used to it." What do you think he means? What do you see in the film about resistance and how does that shape your opinion?
- Pushkin says that people are afraid to be filmed because "they're afraid that they and their loved ones will be punished for telling the truth." What specific threats do media pose to a totalitarian government? What does that tell us about the importance of media to a democracy?
- Pushkin says, "Keeping the people drunk is a national priority so that we all stay drunk and dumb and don't think about serious things happening before our eyes." What is the role of alcohol in anesthetizing people to injustice or preventing resistance? In your opinion, what other things numb people to injustice or preventing resistance?
- Pushkin says that "Belarus is a folklore museum of Communism." What do you learn from this "museum" about the human consequences of living for generations under totalitarian rule?
- Pushkin mentions that totalitarian regimes destroyed the nation's intelligentsia. Why do you think dictators often attack intellectuals and artists? What are the consequences for those who remain? Where else have you seen attacks on intellectuals and artists, and why might it be important to a democracy to protect their right to free expression?

- Pushkin paints portraits of historical Belarusian figures. What makes them patriots to one person and collaborators or traitors to another? Can you think of other historical figures that are heroic to some and evil to others? Who decides which label(s) to use?

Promoting Change

- In your view, is Pushkin's art a useful tool in promoting change? What kind of political art have you seen or heard? What was its effect on you? On your community or country?
- Pushkin's sister is upset that he shows up with a camera at their mother's gravesite on the holiday honoring the dead. What are the ethics of protest when one's actions seem insensitive to family or friends?
- What do you make of Pushkin's treatment of the women in his life? What lessons is he modeling for his daughter, Ania, whose mother is Russian? If Pushkin's view of women prevailed, what would life be like for them in a free Belarus?
- Why would the Lukashenko government allow Pushkin to fly the Belarusian flag? Pushkin suggests that if everyone flew the flag, there would be no more fear. What is the power of collective action to overcome injustice? Can you think of other examples of collective action that have changed a place or society for the better? What kinds of circumstances or resources made such action possible?
- Pushkin's father believes that his son lives in a fantasy world. In your view, can a person like Pushkin provide inspiration to people? Why or why not? What kind of leader might inspire change in Belarus?



Taking Action

- Hold a public forum to discuss the difference between patriotism and nationalism. When and under what circumstances is love for country used as a way to separate people from one another or provoke fear? When and under what circumstances is it used to unite people? Look for ways that patriotism or ethnic pride can be passed along to the next generation without also instilling a sense of superiority toward or hatred of others who are different.
- Create some kind of art to express a political belief that you hold. Consider sharing (via video, a blog, a news report, etc.) people's reaction to your artwork.
- Investigate U.S. foreign policy on Belarus. Meet or communicate with your elected federal representatives to let them know what kinds of actions you would like them to take.



Alexander Pushkin/ "Glory of the Soldiers of Independence"
performance, 2003.
Photo courtesy of *Belarusian Waltz*/Piraya Films



Resources

FILM-RELATED WEB SITES

Original Online Content on P.O.V. Interactive (www.pbs.org/pov)

P.O.V.'s *Belarusian Waltz* companion website www.pbs.org/pov/belarusianwaltz

The companion website to *Belarusian Waltz* offers exclusive streaming video clips from the film, a podcast version of the filmmaker interview and a wealth of additional resources, including a Q&A with filmmaker Andrzej Fidyk, ample opportunities for viewers to “talk back” and talk to each other about the film, and the following special features:

PHOTO GALLERY: THE POLITICAL ART OF ALEXANDER PUSHKIN

View a slideshow of images of Alexander Pushkin in action as he performs his political art in Belarus.

BACKGROUND: DICTATORSHIP AND ART IN BELARUS

Learn more about the political regime in Belarus and the circumstances that have inspired Alexander Pushkin's art. Find out how its close ties to Russia contribute to the former Soviet state's current totalitarian atmosphere, despite its official status as an independent democracy.

What's Your P.O.V.?

*P.O.V.'s online Talking Back Tapestry is a colorful, interactive representation of your feelings about **Belarusian Waltz**.*

Listen to other P.O.V. viewers talk about the film and add your thoughts by calling 1-800-688-4768. www.pbs.org/pov/talkingback.html

Film Related Websites

FILMMAKER WEBSITE

www.belarusianwaltz.org

You can order the DVD from this official website for the film, watch the trailer, read press and get information about human rights in Belarus.

ALES PUSHKIN'S WEBSITE

www.pushkin.by/index_en.htm

Check out more of *Belarusian Waltz* protagonist Ales Pushkin's other works including his paintings, pictures and performances along with updates and a bio of the artist.

Belarus

INDEPENDENT BELARUSIAN WEBSITE

www.data.minsk.by/

Belarusian youth organizations, music, and bulletins can all be found here along with links to other Belarusian websites provided in both Belarusian and English.

U.S. STATE DEPARTMENT WEBSITE: THE REPUBLIC OF BELARUS

www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5371.htm

The U.S. State Department's website on Belarus offers statistics, maps, historical highlights and political conditions, and provides general information about Belarus' geography, people and culture.



Resources

BELARUSIAN EMBASSY WEBSITE

www.belarusembassy.org

The Belarusian embassy's website offers news updates that cover a range of topics, from the economy to social sciences and more.

VIRTUAL GUIDE TO BELARUS

www.belarusguide.com/main/index.html

An online home for the Belarusian Diaspora, this non-political, bilingual guide to Belarus contains information on Belarusian culture and history.

RADIO FREE EUROPE/RADIO LIBERTY: POST-SOVIET BELARUS: A TIMELINE

www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2006/02/a031b659-e44d-45e4-81de-eba9a01e589c.html

Belarus remains a country under a repressive dictatorship. Find out more about recent Belarusian history in this post-Soviet timeline, spanning from 1988 to 2006.

Human Rights in Belarus

VIASNA

<http://spring96.org/en/>

The English language blog of Visana, an internationally-recognized Belarusian human rights organization, is regularly updated with political news and commentary on what's happening in Belarus today.

BBC NEWS: BELARUS GOES TO THE POLLS

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in_pictures/4823208.stm

A slideshow with photos of Belarusians going to the polls for the contested 2006 election, which caused massive protests.

RADIO FREE EUROPE/RADIO LIBERTY: BELARUS: PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE SAYS OPPOSITION HAS LITTLE CHANCE

www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2006/01/5b6751df-49ed-43f7-b925-2b96578510db.html

Ales Pushkin is speaking out for Belarus, but he's not the only one. In this interview, *Radio Free Europe* interviews Alyaksandr Voytovich, a Belarusian member of parliament and 2006 presidential candidate, about his hopes for the future of Belarus. (January 6, 2006)

NEW YORK TIMES: A DICTATOR'S 'RE-ELECTION'

www.nytimes.com/2006/03/22/opinion/22wed2.html

Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko has, since the events of Belarusian Waltz, been re-elected with a landslide victory that many find suspicious. This *New York Times* editorial explains why. (March 22, 2006)

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH: BELARUS

<http://hrw.org/doc/?t=europe&c=belaru>

Offering a compilation of Belarus's human rights abuses and archival press releases, Human Rights Watch also documents human rights abuses around the world.



Resources

NPR AND PBS

NPR

WEEKEND EDITION: BELARUS' ARTS UNDERGROUND CHIPS AWAY AT REGIME

www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5450403

Musicians, actors and artists from Belarus are being forced underground due to the increasingly authoritarian regime of President Alexander Lukashenko. Find out more on NPR's *Weekend Edition*. (June 4, 2006)

ALL THINGS CONSIDERED: BELARUS TO SEE LARGE PROTESTS OVER VOTE

www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5362412

Since the completion of *Belarusian Waltz* (filmed in 2002), political challenges to the Lukashenko regime have become more frequent. NPR covers the suppression of mass protests against the government in Minsk. (April 25, 2006)

PBS

FRONTLINE: ELECTION 2004 - BELARUS

www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/elections/belarus/index.html

In this PBS story from 2004, photojournalist student and Frontline correspondent Keli Dailey travels to Minsk to work with opposition journalists in the run-up to the 2006 Belarusian election. (September 28, 2004)



How to Buy the Film

To order *Belarusian Waltz*, go to www.belarusianwaltz.org



Produced by American Documentary, Inc. and entering its 21st season on PBS, the award-winning P.O.V. series is the longest-running series on television to feature the work of America's best contemporary-issue independent filmmakers. Airing Tuesdays at 10 p.m., June through October, with primetime specials during the year, P.O.V. has brought more than 250 award-winning documentaries to millions nationwide and now has a Webby Award-winning online series, P.O.V.'s Borders. Since 1988, P.O.V. has pioneered the art of presentation and outreach using independent nonfiction media to build new communities in conversation around today's most pressing social issues. More information about P.O.V. is available online at www.pbs.org/pov.

Major funding for P.O.V. is provided by PBS, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts, The Educational Foundation of America, The Fledgling Fund, New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, New York State Council on the Arts, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, The September 11th Fund, and public television viewers. Funding for P.O.V.'s Diverse Voices Project is provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. P.O.V. is presented by a consortium of public television stations, including KCET Los Angeles, WGBH Boston and Thirteen/WNET New York.

P.O.V. Community Engagement and Education

P.O.V. provides Discussion Guides for all films as well as curriculum-based P.O.V. Lesson Plans for select films to promote the use of independent media among varied constituencies. Available free online, these originally produced materials ensure the ongoing use of P.O.V.'s documentaries with educators, community workers, opinion leaders, and general audiences nationally. P.O.V. also works closely with local public-television stations to partner with local museums, libraries, schools, and community-based organizations to raise awareness of the issues in P.O.V.'s films.

P.O.V. Interactive

www.pbs.org/pov

P.O.V.'s award-winning Web department produces a Web-only showcase for interactive storytelling, P.O.V.'s Borders. It also produces a website for every P.O.V. presentation, extending the life of P.O.V. films through community-based and educational applications, focusing on involving viewers in activities, information and feedback on the issues. In addition, www.pbs.org/pov houses our unique Talking Back feature, filmmaker interviews, viewer resources and information on the P.O.V. archives as well as myriad special sites for previous P.O.V. broadcasts.

American Documentary, Inc.

www.americandocumentary.org

American Documentary, Inc. (AmDoc) is a multimedia company dedicated to creating, identifying and presenting contemporary stories that express opinions and perspectives rarely featured in mainstream-media outlets. AmDoc is a catalyst for public culture, developing collaborative strategic-engagement activities around socially relevant content on television, online and in community settings. These activities are designed to trigger action, from dialogue and feedback to educational opportunities and community participation.

Front cover: The arrest.

Photo courtesy of *Belarusian Waltz*/Piraya Films

