

Transitions

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Transitions Online_Music-‘If You Thirst for Freedom, Seize It!’

In the songs they sang during the 2020 uprising, Belarusians stood up to personal inertia, fear, and alienation.

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Protest, opposition, and revolution always have brought songs in their wake. Even after the revolutions themselves recede into the past, these songs continue to sound. The generations who came of age in the Soviet Union grew up on such songs, taking as fact that lyrics from the Russian revolutions of the 20th century were statements of a clearly delineated polarity set out in “The Internationale”:

We will build a new world, our world,

Those who had nothing will become all.

The songs of protest that have become among the most vital symbols of the 2020 Belarusian revolution are far less simple. They possess an individualistic lyricism and an introspective, philosophical subtlety that makes them atypical as revolutionary lyrics. The forerunner of these songs is the late Soviet-era rock hit “Khochu Peremen” (“I Want Changes”) by Viktor Tsoi, now more commonly known simply as “Peremen!” Tsoi, then 24, wrote the song with his underground rock group Kino in 1986, on the eve of the Gorbachev-era *perestroika*. The lyrics have a modernist, layered quality, reinforced by a shifting rhythm and use of internal rhyme (sadly not replicated in this translation), which make the song unusual as a rock hit:

Instead of warmth – the green of glass,

Instead of flame – smoke,

A day torn from the calendar’s net.



These lyrics suggest that “Changes!” was written as an expression of self, and as a recognition of a shared feeling among Tsoi’s circle of young friends, who stood on the verge of being drawn into the routine and alienation of adult life. The sense of alienation that informs the verses grows and sharpens in repeated couplets as the song proceeds, beginning with these relatively benign lines:

Cigarette in hand, tea on the table – the scheme is simple,

There is nothing else, everything is in us.

But the couplet transforms into:

Cigarette in hand, tea on the table – so the circle closes,

And suddenly we are too frightened to change a thing.

These words are so coded with personal significance that it seems impossible for the song to have become a crowd sing-along. However, its mass appeal lies in its chorus, which transcends the moody lyricism of the verses:

“Changes!” demand our hearts.

“Changes!” demand our eyes.

In our laughter and our tears,

In the beat of the pulse,

“Changes!”

“We wait for changes!”

The chorus describes the moment when the subject, drawn into self-reflexive rumination, breaks free of shackles and forms a demand that is collective rather than individual. The subject – not “them” but “we” – is significant in that it does not present an outside force the protagonist must combat to achieve change; as the line reminds the listener, “everything is in us.” Tsoi himself stated that he did not write the song about political reforms and *perestroika*. Kino member Alexei Rybin also has said that the “changes that Viktor sang about are [not political changes](#). ... These are far more fundamental changes within oneself, about which all the artists of the world have always sung, written, drawn, and sculpted.” Artemy Troitsky, a music journalist, has a similar view: “I do not think that Tsoi intended the song as a political one; moreover, he never suspected that it could achieve its status as a real hymn of the Russian revolutionary movements of the late 20th and early 21st century.”

It could be that “Changes!” reached its mass popularity precisely because the revolutions of the last decades have emerged from a desire for an abstract sense of freedom, or, in Russian, *volya*, with imprecisely defined programs for change, but with a powerful collective yearning to live without falsehood. These political revolutions, including the 2013 Turkish Gezi Park protests, the 2014 Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity, the 2014 Hong Kong Umbrella Revolution, and the 2011-2012 Occupy movement, seek – beyond their equally important, more localized demands – to escape from a world where stability and success are the consequence of living within the unwritten, unspoken rules of the dominant system: being like everyone else, staying in one’s lane.

The 2020 Belarus protests are the most recent manifestation of this 21st century revolutionary lineage. A deeply symbolic trigger for public support for the protests became the state’s press ganging of two young DJs, Kirill Galanov and Vladislav Sokolovsky, into entertaining the audience at a government event hastily organized to

prevent a pre-vote rally by then-opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. Forced to do the state's bidding, the young men resisted this latest misuse of power by playing Tsoi's "Changes!"



The song lasted only a minute before the event manager [cut the sound system](#) and the DJs were summarily loaded into a police van, but the song, or rather the heavy-handed treatment of the DJs, acted as a catalyst for the crowd. Images of the DJs, hands outstretched and throwing victory signs, captured on hundreds of phones, quickly became a memetic symbol of the dignity and integrity of the "little man," a key figure of Russian and Belarusian humanist literature of the last two centuries. Meanwhile, the song continued to blare from the speakers of hundreds of cars cruising around Minsk in the following days, supporting and protecting the women bearing flowers who had come out onto the streets to protest government injustice.

In the wake of the DJs' arrests, as in the time of *perestroika*, "Changes!" was taken up by Belarusian society as a song of liberation – primarily individual, personal liberation, as intended by its author.

Stakes to 'Walls'

Belarusian opposition figure Siarhei Tsikhanouski popularized another song, "Walls," which after his arrest also served as a soundtrack for the rallies of his wife, Sviatlana. Its origins lie in a 1968 song by the Catalan singer-songwriter Lluís Llach called "L'Estaca" ("The Stake"). A Russian-language variant of the song by Kirill Medvedev called "[Steny](#)" ("Walls") appeared in 2012; this version sounded during protests outside the Belarusian embassy in Moscow after the 2020 August elections in Belarus. The text of the Russian song is close to Llach's original; however, the symbolic stake to which the unfree are tied is replaced by the more readily understandable symbol of walls; this transformation was likely abetted by earlier metamorphoses into Polish and Belarusian.

The Polish version "Mury" ("Walls") was written in 1978 by [Jacek Kaczmarski](#), who kept the melody of the original and the destructive energy of its chorus but otherwise completely reworked the text and its philosophical and political message. This song became the hymn of the Polish Solidarity trade union movement. In 2010, during a wave of protests in Belarus, Andrei Khadanovich, a Belarusian poet, translated the Polish variant into Belarusian; the song was titled "Razbury Turmy Mury" ("Break the Prison Walls"). The Belarusian text was very close to the Polish original but gained a distinct new accent. During Tsikhanouski's presidential campaign (until he was thrown in jail), in a bid to give the song mass appeal, the complex conceptual final stanzas were replaced with more direct, forceful verses.

All versions of the song are united by the melody and the powerful chorus, which calls on listeners to destroy the vertical structures of power through the repetition of "will fall, will fall, will fall." In the Catalan original, injustice is symbolized by the stake; "*l'estaca*" is similar in sound to "*estat*" (government), standing in for Franco's Spanish regime at the time of the song's composition. In the Russian variant the symbol becomes the "long-decaying" walls

of prison. Prison walls also feature in the Polish variant; while the word “prison” disappears, it is evoked metonymically through its attributes, including walls, bars on windows, handcuffs, and the lash. The Belarusian variant returns the prison to center stage. The outcome of the peoples’ destruction in the Catalan and Russian variants is an abstract sense of liberation; in Polish and Belarusian, the ruined walls more directly bury beneath themselves the “world of old.” Most interesting in this regard is the Belarusian variant:

Destroy the prison walls!

If you thirst for freedom, seize it!

The walls soon will fall, will fall, will fall

And bury beneath them the world of old.

In these lines, the original concept of the song is brought to its clearest realization. The lyrics are so sparse and dynamic that space is made for a new line added by Khadanovich, which becomes key to his performance: “If you thirst for freedom, seize it!” In response to my question of how this line came to be, Khadanovich replied, “Ten years ago, on the day of a protest rally, I was translating Kaczmarek’s version from Polish, and the chorus wasn’t really working out. Closer to the evening I understood that I wanted to speak and sing at the rally myself – and the new words came to me immediately.” The new line is born, then, of dynamism and a desperation for action, functioning as a rallying cry. These were the [2010 protests](#) on Independence Square in Minsk, which were violently repressed by Alyaksandr Lukashenka, and to speak at them would have required great bravery.

Despite the destructive tenor of the chorus, the overall mood of the song is tragic; the walls ultimately remain standing. In the Catalan and Russian versions this seems to be an objective fact – “the walls will never wear down” – and the singer’s hopes are buoyed only by the old song, which continues to be heard despite the absolute power of the state. In the Polish and Belarusian versions, on the other hand, the reasons for the continuance of the walls are presented metaphorically. The singer leads a crowd of thousands:

So a movement of thousands surged up,

A legion of warriors

To topple statues and break the pavement

Into stones.

Each felt that time had come for them

To lend the battle their strength.

Those not with us are against us.

But at this moment, the victorious beat of the song is interrupted by an unexpected conclusion:

... The singer found himself alone.

He watched as the marching rows

Walked to the beat of his song,

And the song was fading, fading, fading ...

And the walls were growing, growing, growing ...

Kaczmarek, who grew up among the creative intelligentsia in socialist Poland, understood very well how the revolution devours its own children, destroys its own ideals, and divides the world into allies and enemies; only [the lone singer](#) is able to retain the clarity and purity of the revolution's original convictions.

It is unsurprising, then, that the 2020 Belarusian variant, at the initiative of Tsikhanouski, was fashioned to be more optimistic: The final tragic stanzas were removed, and two new life-affirming couplets reflecting on contemporary Belarus were added by Alexander Kiss and Sergey Kosmas:

From all Belarus the people rose

To defend their freedom.

Our spirits are moved by one goal:

To dispel the darkness with light.

The song then calls on Belarusians to join the singer in a peaceful march for the eternal ideals of truth and goodness, transforming Belarus into a “land for living.”

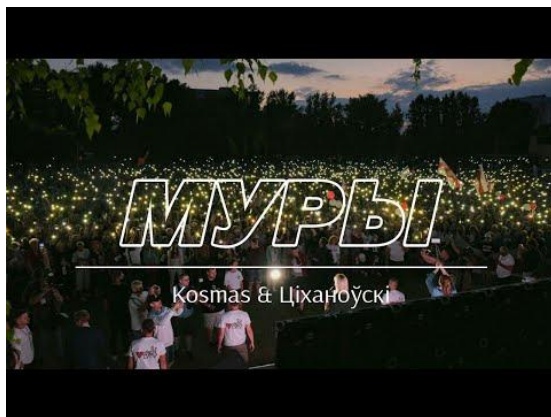
Given these changes, Tsikhanouski's variant of “Walls,” to the tune of which the “people's president” Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya won her victory, seems at first glance to have become self-contradictory. It retains its core sense – a celebratory destruction of injustice – and the stirring image of the singer leading the people by the thousands but loses Kaczmarek's tragic awareness of the fact that every form of violence, including violence for a just cause, has tended to lead to a new cycle of violence and dictatorship. Furthermore, it deals in far clearer – arguably abstract and formulaic – imagery of the truth, goodness, and purity of those marching against corruption, evil, and darkness. Where Khadanovich's text called on each member of the revolutionary mass to join the fight individually, the new stanzas address the crowd as a whole, in the third person plural, already assuming that their unity is beyond question. In one of the added stanzas, the authors address the state security forces directly, announcing the peaceful intention and universal righteousness of their march:

Brother-officers, we are one people.

We live in this world together.

Let your conscience make your choice.

We do not want this war.



Despite these apparent contradictions in subject and tone, this version of the song has become wildly successful. No small part of this success, it seems, must be attributed to Khadanovich's brilliantly simple line "If you thirst for freedom, seize it!" It came to him 10 years ago when he himself had to stand at the walls of abuse and injustice. This line reveals the core message of the song – every person's individual freedom to choose freedom, and the sense that the walls that must be destroyed lie first within ourselves. This image indeed was hidden in the symbolism of the Catalan text, with each of us tied to the stake. "As I age, I begin to appreciate the Catalan version more and more," Khadanovich wrote to me. "In our situation, it begins to sound more honest, although it isn't as useful at a rally."

The chains of women dressed in white with flowers in their arms, who stood in 2020 along the streets of Minsk in silent protest against the overreaches of state power, became a turning point in the Belarusian people's revolution. They represented victory over fear, individual liberation, a sense of unity, and the birth of a new, free nation. It was on that day that the walls of the authoritarian Soviet world crumbled for thousands of Belarusians. Political scientists and commentators, analyzing the Belarusian protests, have tended to criticize the actions of this period for their lack of a political program, absence of leadership, and seeming lack of willingness to seize upon their small gains. But precisely these might have been the point of the Belarusian protests: to peacefully and symbolically claim victory over untruth and fear, so that "a bright and sunlit path" would bring them, as Tsikhanouski's variant puts it, "into a land for living." One is reminded of the classic words of another Russian bard, Bulat Okudzhava: "Oh, let our aspirations be pure, and the rest will come."

Atop Three Turtles

Among other songs of the Belarusian revolution, one stands out for its sudden and surprising popularity: "Three Turtles" by the rock band N.R.M. (an acronym standing for "Independent Republic of Dreams"). In a [widely shared video](#), it is daringly performed by a guitar player as he walks up to a wall of shielded riot police "defending" the presidential residence from peaceful protesters. A nonsensical tale of three turtles, or perhaps elephants or whales, upon whose backs the world sits, it appears on the band's eponymous 2000 album. The song sounds like a lighthearted joke, but only on first listen. It is impelled by the same allegorical power that empowers Tsoi's "Changes!" Its hero also longs to escape from the everyday world of safe choices, shaped by "communal kitchen smells," into a comradeship of all people; into freedom; the city; the mountains; distant lands.



Its cheerful chorus originally went:

Hey, hey-la-ley, don't you wait, there are no surprises,

Hey, hey-la-ley, don't you wait, don't you wait.

In the protests, it has been extended with new lyrics that sharply invert the meaning of the chorus: “Don’t you wait, fed up with waiting.” In essence, this sense of being “fed up with waiting” is the same as “Changes!” and “If you thirst for freedom, seize it!”

“Three Turtles,” however, differs significantly from these songs in the following lines, which have made it even more pertinent to the current situation and may explain its sudden popularity in the protests:

To love Belarus, our beloved mama

You must visit other lands!

It is no accident that here Belarus is associated not with the authoritarian *batka* (a respectful, loving word for father), as Lukashenka has been called for decades and as he continues to cast himself, but with the caring, peaceful figure of *mama*. The paean to *mama* also strikes a chord with the youth and almost childlike enthusiasm of the Belarusian protesters, which has made the levels of state violence levied against them particularly difficult to watch. The contemporary cosmopolitan rebel is encouraged to lean on the presence of this comforting homeland:

Then you will know that under your feet

The three elephants stand firm.

The official brand of patriotism into which both Soviet and Belarusian children were indoctrinated for generations is injected here with a new, more worldly meaning, supporting the song’s audience in resisting violence, exactly as the youths demonstrated by singing the song in front of riot police.

The final song heard continually throughout the Belarusian protests was “Warriors of Light,” written by Belarusian poet and musician Sergey Mikhailok for his rock band Lyapis Trubetskoy. Written in Russian about a fantasy world unrelated to political events, the song was unexpectedly taken up by the Ukrainian Maidan protests in 2013 and became their unofficial anthem. It was translated into Belarusian by Dmitri Sosnovsky and found its place in the Belarusian protests. Like the other, aforementioned songs, it centers on an explicitly allegorical, symbolic battle between the forces of darkness and light, which “extinguishes fear.” Like “Three Turtles,” which addresses its speakers directly, imparting a sense of playfulness and gentle stability as they take the fight to the police, “Warriors of Light” opens with an exhortation to its listener to “rejoice in the sledgehammer in your strong hand / waterfall, youth, the raging river.” A music video for the song, created by Alexey Terehoff, doubles down on this imagery, featuring nimble, youthful mythological warriors fighting riot police above planet Earth, as cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, “USSR” plastered on his helmet, drifts behind them in an ungainly, immobile spacesuit.

The Song Remains the Same

In August of 2020, Belarus was full of darkness and light, courage and fear, joy and cruelty. The forces of light were bolstered by the songs they heard and sung – in Minsk as well as in every corner of the country. Khadanovich wrote on Facebook about events in the provincial town of Pruzhany two weeks after that month’s elections:

Yesterday evening we gathered in the square and marched through Pruzhany. There weren’t many of us, but we were greatly encouraged by songs and flags. A column of cars waving flags slowly drove alongside our own column. And from every car sounded a song. From the first came “Warriors of Light.” From the second, Tsoi’s “Changes!” From the third, Volsky sang “Three Turtles,” so that the line “To love Belarus, our beloved mum” coincided with the same line from the fourth car: “To love Belarus,” but in Danchik’s version. Songs are a wonderful thing!

Khadanovich himself sang “Walls” in the town square the following day.

A year has passed since those eventful days in Belarus when, it seemed, a peaceful nation could, united, withstand injustice and the dictatorship and win. They did not win and incurred profound losses. One of the most tragic was the death at the hands of the security forces of [Raman Bondarenka](#), a young activist who came out to defend a mural

of the rebellious DJs in a suburban Minsk courtyard known as the [“Square of Changes.”](#) Occasionally daredevils still organize flash mobs performing “Walls” or Belarusian folk songs and prayers, but as the powers of darkness tighten their grip, the prophetic imagery of the original “*L’Estaca*” of Lluís Llach with its desperate dream of impossible freedom seems to come to the fore.

Still, the Belarusian revolution of 2020 has not been completely lost; it is just markedly different from the Russian revolution of 1917. The Belarusian people today do not long for blood and destruction and do not wish to repeat the mistakes of their grandfathers and great-grandfathers. Their enemies are altogether different: personal inertia, fear, and alienation. It is these battles that inform the songs the Belarusians chose to sing last year, although sometimes it seems as if the songs themselves, with the magical sense of continuity encoded within them, have chosen the Belarusians and are leading them on into the fight. One wants only to believe that the walls soon will fall, and that Tsoi’s magnetic words, “everything is in us,” will at last help the Belarusian people build their “land for living.”

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