

# DIY punk/hardcore subculture in Belarus

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**Abstract:** *Being an authoritarian state, Belarus is a place where political activity and political protest as it is understood in Western democracies are not allowed. Under the conditions of absence of institutions of political socialization, the general level of political culture is low. Any public protest is suppressed, but since the deeprooted reasons for protest continue to exist, the dissatisfied, especially the youth, look for alternative ways to protest and express their dissatisfaction, which are probably less controlled by the state and not perceived as a political threat.*

*In Belarus DIY punk/hardcore subculture became one of such ways. Having originated in the mid-90s, it created (or adopted) values, beliefs and cultural norms opposing to state ones, and influenced cultural and political climate in Belarus. Since the emergence of this culture and during its development, considering that the “official” political opposition is constantly devastated by the state, repressive structures of the state paid more and more attention to alternative culture and the threats it is posing to the cultural/value hegemony of the ruling class.*

**Key words:** subculture, punk, hardcore, antifascism, anticapitalism, anarchism, music, fanzines, Belarus, state repression.

## Theory

Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines subculture as “an ethnic, regional, economic, or social group exhibiting characteristic patterns of behavior sufficient to distinguish it from others within an embracing culture or society.»<sup>1</sup>

Chijioke J. Nwalozie in his article «Rethinking Subculture and Subcultural Theory in the Study of Youth Crime - A Theoretical Discourse» refers to subcultures as to groups «distinguished by their class, ethnicity, language, poor and working class situations, age or generation with cultural and socio structural variables [which] make subcultures relatively homogeneous»<sup>2</sup>

Thus, we can list at least three distinctive features of a subculture:

1. It is a group of people with a certain level of homogeneity (based on class, ethnicity, social stance, etc.)
2. It is a group that has distinctions from the relative «majority» of the society.
3. It is a group that is self-aware, e.g. understands its cultural difference.

Also, the abbreviation “DIY” is short for “Do It Yourself”, an approach to everyday life, according to which it is preferable to make any material or non-material product with your own effort, without purchasing it. In relation to DIY in punk/hardcore subculture it means producing

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1 Dictionary by Merriam-Webster. Subculture. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/subculture>. Last access 28.09.2017

2 Journal of Theoretical&Philosophical Criminology. Nwalozie. Rethinking Subculture & Subcultural Theory. January, 2015. 7:1-16. <http://www.jtpcrim.org/January-2015/Rethinking-subculture.pdf> Last access 28.09.2017

music and attributes, organizing concerts and events with no or minimal involvement of capitalist society.

### Origin and ideas

DIY punk/hardcore subculture in Belarus falls under the definition mentioned above and has its own values, beliefs, cultural norms and ways of expressing them, which considerably contradict those of the majority of Belarusian society.

The origins of Belarusian punk-hardcore subculture stem from the mid 1990s, when after the fall of the iron curtain and declaration of independence of Belarus, Western cultural features started to leak into Belarus much faster than previously. This process was eased by the fact that Belarus was geographically the most Western republic of the USSR. According to some subjective observations, DIY punk-hardcore subculture leaked from West to Belarus much faster than to Russia. So there is no surprise that one of the first, if not the first, cities where this subculture emerged was Grodno – a city on the Belarus-Poland border. As the oldest participants of the punk-rock scene argue, they got involved into subculture by reading Polish punk/hardcore fanzines and listening to Polish punk-hardcore bands<sup>3</sup>.

For obvious reasons, it is almost impossible to identify the day or year of emergence of a certain subculture, but we can identify the time of the most significant events of the subcultural life. In our case, these are:

- a) The emergence of the first explicitly politicized punk-hardcore band «Deviation»<sup>4</sup> in 1993.
- b) The first festival «Razdavim fashistskuyu gadzinu» (“Lets smash the fascist beast”), which was first held in 1995<sup>5</sup>.
- c) First punk-hardcore fanzines issued: ‘Don’t panic’ (1999), B-r-r-r-r (2000), Left hander (2000), *Rebro Zhestkosti* (“The strong back”) (2000).

A large lag between the creation of the first punk-band and the emergence of the first fanzines most probably can be explained by the fact that in the first steps of the subculture, there were not enough events or knowledge to be reflected in printed press, and the scene itself was not big enough, lacking “concerned punks” who would be interested in something except entertainment.

Ideas of the punk/hardcore scene are reflecting the patterns of European punk/hardcore scene: antifascism, anti-consumerism, anti-sexism, anti-homophobia, veganism, protest against the state and its institutions, manifestation of the socially active and disobedient personality, who is not aware of hypocritical and conservative society norms. Taken together, these values construct something very close to anarchism (and many members of the scene, expressing themselves through songs and fanzines, actually call themselves anarchists) but with mostly cultural, existential and personal – not political – implication.

The remarkable feature of Belarusian punk/hardcore scene is a rather wide usage of the Belarusian language in songs and fanzines. Almost every punk band, especially the ones from the early stage of the scene (end of 90-s, beginning of 2000-s) has at least one song in Belarusian<sup>6</sup>. In the songs of the above-mentioned band “Deviation” Belarusian language prevails. So the usage of the Belarusian language in DIY punk/hc subculture explicitly exceeds the usage of it in Belarusian society as a whole. This fact deserves further research, but we can assume that the reason is that

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3 Stas Pochobut (2016, October 26) The headliner of punk-band «Deviation». Kaunas. 10.00.

Anton (2015, October 31) An activist of Belarusian anarchist movement. Minsk. Central train station cafe. 12.00

4 Wikipedia. The free encyclopedia. Deviation. <https://be-tarask.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deviation> Last access 28.09.2017

5 Pauluk Kanavalchyk (2015, October 24) An activist of Belarusian anarchist movement. Minsk. Prospect Cafe, 14.00

6 Vkontakte.ru. Pet Hihil. Songs. <https://vk.com/audios-11168998> Last access 29.09.2017

Last.fm music service. Deviation. <https://www.last.fm/ru/music/Deviation> Last access 29.09.2017

Vkontakte.ru social media. Contra la contra. <https://vk.com/audios-3300985> Last access 29.09.2017

Belarusian language, due to its attachment to the opposition and anti-President activities, is perceived as an attribute of protest and disobedience to the official politics.

### **Ways of expression**

DIY punk/hc subculture expresses itself both in external and ideological dimensions. In the external dimension it is expressed by the dress-code and appearance of its members: characteristic haircut, shoes, clothes with a number of badges and patches (usually containing names of punk bands, political slogans and symbols). Behavior also matters: informality, frankness and even a certain level of disgraceful behavior are encouraged. Specific slang and patterns of communication make a certain code, distinguishing subculture members not only from the ordinary people, but also from non-ideological punks, who are not attached to DIY principles.

Ideological dimension is expressed at concerts: apart from songs, the politicized speeches between songs also matter, and through fanzines, which usually are dedicated (depending on the author) to music, affairs of the scene, world and local politics and proper lifestyle.

A typical punk-hardcore fanzine consists of news on recent shows and other significant events of the scene, interview with one or more punk/hc bands, author's speculations on music, politics or everyday life related issues, articles borrowed from other fanzines or the Internet, some practical advices related to subcultural or political life (like "How to behave yourself with cops" or "How to make a homemade alcohol drink"). Drawings and verses are also quite frequent.

### **State reaction**

From 1994 to nowadays Belarus experiences a growing level of political repression. A sphere of authorized and legal political action is drastically narrowed. Political parties, along with NGOs and any non-state youth organizations are present but inactive, unable to act freely because of legal constrains and direct state pressure. But since the social problems, inconsistencies and widespread dissatisfaction of the youth with certain social conditions still exist, they seek an expression. It seems that DIY punk/hc subculture in Belarus became one of the ways of such an expression.

As mentioned above, punk/hc subculture has an anarchist ideological core. As a result, it became an environment for recruiting activists of the anarchist movement<sup>7</sup>.

This fact was recognized by the Belarusian authorities after 2010, when a massive wave of repressions against Belarusian anarchists has started<sup>8</sup>. As a result, in the following years, the raids of the police on the DIY punk/hc concerts became quite frequent: the scenario is similar in most of the cases. Riot police rushes into a concert space, puts everybody face to the wall, beats those who refuses to obey or starts arguing, then identifies each of the visitors and arrests some of them administratively (up to 15 days). Such attacks occurred at least 5 times in recent years: 2012<sup>9</sup>, 2013,<sup>10</sup> 2015<sup>11</sup>, 2016<sup>12</sup>.

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7 Novosti soprotivleniya. «Svoboda ili smert» magazine. January-April 2007. Page 5.  
<https://mikola.noblogs.org/files/2017/01/SiliS5.pdf> Last access 29.09.2017

Anarchist Black Cross – Belarus. <https://abc-belarus.org/?p=5460> Last access  
Anarchist Black Cross – Belarus <https://abc-belarus.org/?p=5480> Last access

8 Belaruskij mulymediinyj portal «Arche». Sprava belaruskich anarchistau. 26.09.2011.  
<http://krytyka.by/by/page/ideas/palityka-idei/6468> Last access 29.09.2017

9 Charter97-Novosti Belarusi. Na knocerte v DK MTZ arestovali okolo 100 anarchistov. 24.03.2012  
<https://charter97.org/ru/news/2012/3/24/49741/> Last access 29.08.2017

10 Zarya.by. Pochemu OMON prerval rok-koncert v Breste? <http://www.zarya.by/event/message/view/9272>  
23.01.2013. Last access 29.09.2017

11 Anarchist Black Cross – Belarus <https://abc-belarus.org/?p=5460> Last access 29.09.2017

Anarchist Black Cross – Belarus <https://abc-belarus.org/?p=6260> Last access 29.09.2017

12 Anarchist Black Cross – Belarus <https://abc-belarus.org/?p=6922> Last access 29.09.2017

The amount of resources drawn for these operations (tens of riot police officers, detectives, judges, experts for scrutinizing the “extremist literature”) demonstrates that active manifestation of DIY punk/hc subculture is perceived by the state as a threat which needs to be prevented, or, at least, constrained by repressive measures.

### **Conclusion**

Punks/hc subculture in Belarus started its existence as an alternative culture, appropriated from Western countries in mid-90s. Over its development, it became covered with a number of local characteristics and qualities. The context - authoritarian state with no ability to express political protest freely - had set a strong stamp upon the subculture, pushing it towards politicization and radicalization, and eventually made it one of the ways of recruiting for radical political groups. As a consequence, state authorities started to perceive punk/hc subculture as a potential threat, which pushes youth far away from the official values and beliefs, based on conformism, conservatism and obedience. Attacks of the riot police on punk-hardcore events widely reported in media, along with an open manifestation of anarchist ideas in punk-hardcore concerts and fanzines made Belarusian punk/hc subculture not only a cultural, but also a political issue.

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