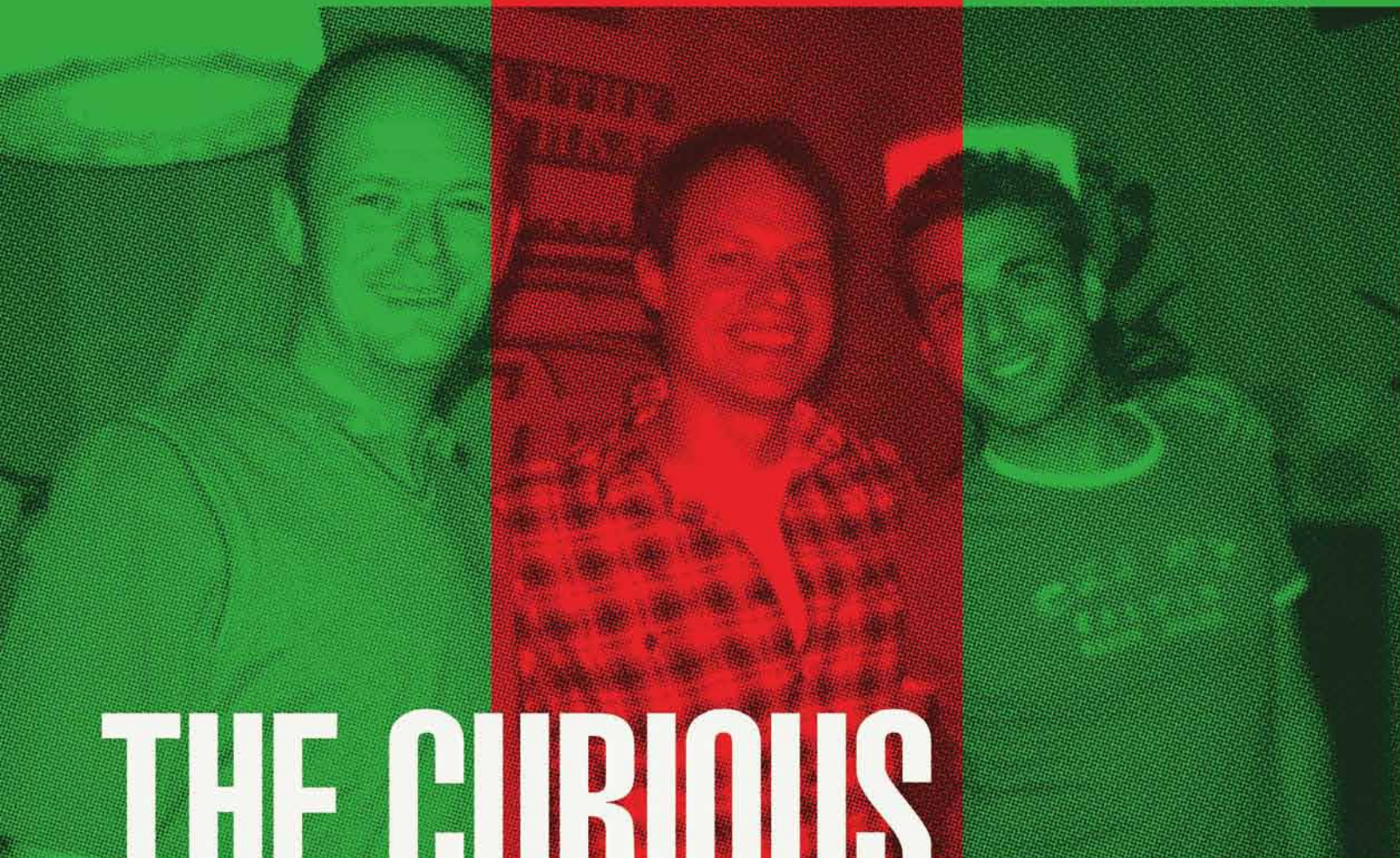


Left to right: Alex, Ales and George



# THE CURIOUS CASE OF BELARUS

NUS NEC Postgraduate Taught Representative 2011/12 **George-Konstantinos Charonis** and former NUS Assistant Director (Research) **Alex Bols** pay a visit to 'the last dictatorship in Europe', Belarus, and speak with student activist **Ales Herasimenka** about the curious case of the missing student representative body.

**T**he last dictatorship in Europe. That's how Belarus is often described. The big square buildings, many bearing the hammer and sickle, the KGB headquarters opposite our flat and the giant statue of Lenin in the main square all give a strong sense of a very different era.

But it was the small things as well. The lengthy visa applications, taking out a million roubles from the cash machine, the museum for the Great Patriotic War – also known as the Second World War to you and me!

It did, however, feel incredibly safe, although there was still a sense that everything was fine unless you disagree with the regime. When Alex was Secretary General of the European Students' Union, the Belarusian Students' Association (BSA) were members and he regularly received reports of their offices being raided, files taken and computers removed, and representatives not getting visas to leave the country, or getting questioned or imprisoned if they dissented.

Nowadays, BSA barely exists, but we met with Ales Herasimenka, a youth activist and student at the European Humanities University in Vilnius, Lithuania, who is originally from Minsk, to find out more about everyday life in Belarus.

#### What is it like living in Belarus now?

We have quite a strong political dictatorship. According to large agencies and NGOs, Belarus is the most restrictive country in Europe, placed 154th out of 178 countries in the most recent Press Freedom Index. Reporters Without Borders, Amnesty International and Freedom House gave Belarus a status of 'not free', placing it alongside countries such as China, Saudi Arabia and Cuba.

Nearly all ten candidates in the last presidential elections were imprisoned on the night of the election, with one still remaining in prison. Amnesty International granted him 'prisoner of conscience' status. As in Soviet times, we have strict state control over the economy (70 per cent of it is nationalised) and media, with the regime's propaganda promoted through major public media, limitations of political rights and civic freedoms. Another big problem is weak national identity and civic cultures.

#### Is there much opposition to President Lukashenko's regime? How easy is it to disagree with the regime?

President Alexander Lukashenko has been ruling the country for the last 17 years. You can find his portrait in every classroom around the country and he appears on the evening news every day. However, hearing his name on public transport is a rare occasion – only drunk people or those with nothing to lose dare to say his name openly. It reminds me of the Harry Potter story, you know.

The secret services are able to listen to your phone conversations and arrive at your residence without a judge's decision, which is why people are scared about

their safety. This is why being in opposition to Lukashenko is very hard. If you are in the political opposition you live knowing that every minute you could lose something, from time to property or freedom.

The political opposition is intimidated and disorientated. A great political divide also exists within society: self-isolation from the West combined with strong pressure from the East.

#### Do student organisations exist?

Independent student organisations don't really exist. The biggest one, ZBS (Zadzinochannie Bielaruskich Studentau), was officially closed nine years ago. Now it tries to work underground, but it's quite difficult. Several months ago the organisation tried to revive itself; however even its new leader's name is not spoken in public.

#### What does the future look like?

The future is uncertain and depends on many factors. Even the possible change in political figures or regime altogether will not bring certainty. We are still very dependent on Russia, so the cultural problems and situation as well as reforms to the educational system will not be resolved instantly. As for me, I feel more insecure in this country every day.

Following election protests in 2006, nearly 300 students were expelled from university for their actions with the same again happening in 2010. One email from a BSA alumnus dated 26 December 2011 reads: *"Believe me, what's going on here is really awful! Even today, on Christmas, searches and arrests continue. I personally feel helpless and hopeless. It is like in Stalin's 1930s: you never know who will be visited during the night..."*

When it comes to educational reforms, Belarus recently applied to join the European Higher Education Area of 47 countries across Europe, all of which commit to upholding academic freedom and ensuring student rights, among other things. Seen by other countries and the higher education community as tokenistic rather than a sign of fundamental reform, the application was rejected and Belarus is banned from joining, at least until 2015.

Visiting Belarus was certainly a unique and interesting experience. One local commented: "Why can't Belarus just be a democracy, like the rest of Europe?" But this question is more complicated than one may think. What is clearly demonstrated by persisting fundamental tensions in Belarusian society is that the answer lies beyond issues solely surrounding the political regime. ■

**> With special thanks to Ales Herasimenka for replying to the questions. Also a blogger, Ales regularly writes for generation.by, a website which portrays life in Belarus through the eyes of young people. Although mostly in Belarusian, there is an English section of the website.**