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# Natalia Kaliada on Free Speech and Belarus

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**Nigel Warburton:** *Natalia Kaliada is co-founder of the Belarus Free Theatre. I asked her about freedom of expression in Belarus, the last dictatorship in Europe. In the course of the interview she describes her own experience of torture.*

**Nigel Warburton:** *Natalia Kaliada welcome to Free Speech Bites.*

**Natalia Kaliada:** Hello everyone. Hi Nigel. Very nice to meet you.

**Nigel Warburton:** *The topic we're going to focus on is free speech in Belarus. Now, I suspect some people listening to this won't realise just how repressive the government in Belarus is. I wonder if you could just say a little bit about what Belarus is like?*

**Natalia Kaliada:** I believe I would start even not only from explaining how repressive Belarussian regime is, but I would tell to our audience where this country is located, because many people don't know where it is located. So it is located inbetween Poland and Russia, and it's located just a two-and-a-half hour flight from London or any other European capital: it's located right in the heart of Europe. For the last eighteen years the country has been ruled by Alexander Lukashenko who is the called 'the last dictator of Europe'. And there are political kidnappings, murders, tortures going on in our country and all possible articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are violated in our country. There is no independent media, journalists are killed and there is no independent news, so everything is under unbelievable separation.

**Nigel Warburton:** *So presumably there is no free expression?*

**Natalia Kaliada:** If it is possible to say that there is free expression, but it's underground. So it's very controversial because it's not possible for audiences in  
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Europe to understand that it's possible to have freedom of expression only underground where everything is suppressed. When we talked at the Dublin International Theatre we said public space exists only underground in Belarus. Exactly the same stuff. So it's not possible for the public space, it exists underground. This is because public space is open to everyone. Same thing with freedom of expression: it's possible to find theatre performances, it's possible to find concerts but all of it would be in apartments, in private houses, and again then we have this situation whether we have freedom of expression. Because, if you have freedom of expression all these performances, concerts and books would be distributed in bookstores or big theatres or big concert halls; but no, it's suppressed. So yes, there is a voice, but there is no freedom to this voice.

**Nigel Warburton:** *Just to get this clear, if I stood in a public square and said 'I hate Lukashenko, I think his moustache is ridiculous, I don't think you should vote for him in any election, it's just a farce', what would happen to me?*

**Natalia Kaliada:** It depends how loud you do it. If you are alone saying that and nobody could hear you, then nothing would happen to you. But if it's a very obvious street protest, even if you are alone as it was happening, with Ales Pushkin who is a famous Belarusian artist, he was arrested when he was the only one, but he brought, I think it was, forgive my language, a cow's shit, and he brought a portrait of Lukashenko and he put it on the and brought it to the presidential residency. He was arrested and he spent years in jail, but he was the only person who went to do it. Even if you are alone, and if you go and make very clear statements, you will be arrested there.

**Nigel Warburton:** *Are you saying that it's mainly the police that actually restrict people or do the government use other people sometimes to hide behind, as it were?*

**Natalia Kaliada:** It's not just police, we have KGB and it's intelligence forces that interrogate people and intimidate people. It's very easy to give an example based on our story, because just imagine that you are a spectator. Imagine you are a spectator who is a 15 yearold boy and you are studying in secondary school. Somehow it's happened that KGB inform us – they could film you when you come to a meeting point and from where you are taken to a place where we would perform. So this is what they do: they will not arrest you right away but they film you, you know, then

that they are making pressure on you. And then you are in school and some people in black uniforms come to you and say 'If you go to this performance you will not get your secondary education.' It's not possible to believe in it because secondary education in Belarus it's obligatory education: should get it, there is no way to avoid it. But you are threatened that you will not get even this education, and there is no chance for a young person to get a higher education after such threats. If a person continues to go to our performance he is threatened that his parents would lose their jobs. We call it silent repressions and there are many, many mechanisms how to make people to build up this very strong fear and self-censorship and it's in all possible ways in the society. Because, if you imagine, last summer, summer of 2011, people were getting to the streets all over Belarus and it was happening for the first time for the last 17 years of dictatorship. And they were coming to the square of major cities of Belarus to clap or to use mobile phones when they would put for example 8 o'clock in the evening when they would get to the square and they would put an alarm clock on it and it would just buzz – so you get arrested for that. 2000 people got arrested over summer for doing nothing and *The New York Times* wrote an article that in Belarus you could be arrested for doing nothing. This was one of the ways how people resisted. So they wanted to show that there is no need to use arms and weapons but it's just possible to go and stay there in order for authorities to understand that there are so many people who are against them. But to show that we do believe in non-violent resistance and we do believe that it could be changed this way. But people got arrested and the police were using ambulance machines, ambulance cars, instead of paddy wagons, and the only time when it was used in our history was Stalin's time, and it's possible to compare only to it. So at every single level there are informers, there are intelligence forces, and there are 16 different special forces, 16 – one, six - in Belarus that suppress people.

**Nigel Warburton:** *Now you've been personally involved with the Belarus Free Theatre, perhaps you could say a little bit about how that got started and the sorts of performances that you put on?*

**Natalia Kaliada:** It started with my husband [Nikolai Khalezin] in 2005. It was a moment where it was absolutely clear that it wasn't possible to have street riots, street protests and all possible ways of resistance were checked. We tried whatever was possible. And then we thought that we would just start theatre, and I should be honest with you we wanted to do theatre not because of resistance, because we just wanted to do theatre. And Nikolai was writing plays and we started to meet with many Belarusian playwrights who had received many, many awards outside Belarus, but they were prohibited inside of Belarus, and we thought that maybe we needed

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to bring all these names back to the country and try to present them to Belarusian audiences. And playwrights, they're very unique with regards to mirroring situations in the society. Not doing political stuff but doing theatre you could get the same communication between people and inform each other and enrich each other with experience. Again, British playwrights such as Mark Ravenhill and Sarah Kane, they were good teachers for us who were able to show us examples of how they wrote on their societies, on their lives. And we met with Vladimir Scherban who is our partner, who joined us, and we started to do theatre together with him, and we had only two actresses at that time and it was not possible for us to present Sara Kane in Belarus because she was writing on issues that were not possible at all to present in Belarusian society: such as sexual minorities, suicide. Because Belarus authorities say that there are no such topics in Belarus. But, you can't find any gay clubs in Belarus because it's suppressed; if there are gay parades in fifteen or twenty minutes everyone in the woods threatened to be raped and killed. If you talk about suicide Belarus stays on one of the first five countries in Europe on suicide. So these are topics that exist in the society and they are not political ones. But everything in such countries like Belarus becomes political.

**Nigel Warburton:** *Were you putting on your plays in actual theatres?*

**Natalia Kaliada:** In Belarus we never put our productions in actual theatres. When we had the press conference with Nikolai the day when we announced that Belarus Free Theatre starts its existence, it was just a press conference, but we didn't have any place, we didn't have any actors, any directors. In the months when we met with Vladimir and two actresses it was kind of that starting point: there were just five of us looking for a place where we could perform British playwrights in Belarus. And we checked up to 30 places and it was not possible for us to find any. Finally we found it. It was in suburbs of Minsk and since that time we've started to perform in very different locations: bars, clubs, restaurants, woods. But at the same time, today we got back from Amsterdam where we performed at the Stadsschouwburg, this is the main theatre of the Netherlands.

**Nigel Warburton:** *Through your theatre, you said you began because you were passionate about theatre, but you clearly rubbed up against the government in numerous ways so you are now an enemy, you've become refugees. You were imprisoned by the government briefly. Could you just say something about that and what it was like?*

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**Natalia Kaliada:** First of all, this is all started before the theatre because Nikolai he was a very famous journalist. He led three major independent newspapers in Belarus and all of them got closed down. I was working for the American government and I had my long story of when KGB followed me every single day when I was going to the office and from the office. It's about names: so, in our country for authorities it's very clear what you do. It really doesn't matter whether you do a newspaper or you do theatre, it's just who you are and then it will be prohibition on your name. So this is the major idea: that nobody in the whole country would know you and so people will not start to think that there are some alternatives and that there are people who think differently from the authorities. So this is the major thing.

With regards to repressions, I was detained four times but all of it was shortly, especially knowing the experience of all of our friends who stayed in jails for two years. I started to talk about my experience after a very close friend of ours, who gave us a place where to live here in the UK in Aldershot, Irina Bogdanova, who leads the campaign *Free Belarus Now*, her brother got to jail, Andrei Sannikov, who was the major presidential candidate from democratic forces in Belarus. I said I can't share my experience because I was in jail for 20 hours, and she said you should do it because then people would understand what's happening to them who are still in jail for many years. And 20 hours for me was more than enough in order that when I see water I will drink it because I still have in my mind that I could be deprived of this possibility, because within 20 hours we were deprived of sleep, water, toilets, we were standing along the walls of a long corridor with our hands back, and it was not possible to move. If you moved then a special division of police, soldiers, they beat you up. There were different ways of humiliation because we had the women's floor, but in the end the police started to bring men to our floor, and if somebody from the men would say 'I need to go to the toilet' the police would say then 'In order then to understand what it means to be humiliated you need to shit your pants in front of women.' And this is exactly, it is not possible to believe that all of it is happening in Europe today.

In January of 2011, it was two weeks after the crackdown after the presidential elections when up to 2000 people got arrested, our friends who were in a KGB jail when it was minus 30 Celsius outside, they were taken out of their cells, they were

stripped, stretched, and electro-shocked. And again, I will scream about tortures in Belarus and how to make the world to hear that, why, if it is happening right here nobody wants to pay attention to it.

When Nikolai was in jail, and it was in 2004, he was kept in, it's called 'stone-glass', so it is 80 metres by 80 centimetres cell, and obviously there are no windows there, you just can't move there. And he was there only five hours, but he's claustrophobic and this five hours still makes our life very complicated because he lost his ability to breathe. It's still coming back every three, four months, so we never know when it's going to happen that he can't sleep. It's like attacks of suffocation. So five hours in Belarusian jail could make these things to you.

**Nigel Warburton:** *And your crimes were showing opposition to the government? That was the limit of what you had done?*

**Natalia Kaliada:** Well, we started a global artistic campaign that was called 'Free Belarus', and we started to ask artists from different countries of the world, and there were three of them, first, who did the video appeals: it was Sir Tom Stoppard, President Václav Havel, who introduced us to Mick Jagger. And three of them made video appeals to people of Belarus and they said that they wished us freedom of expression, assembly and all these words of support for people in Belarus to that there are people in the world who support them and who think about them. And all of them ended up saying 'Long Live Belarus!' in the Belarusian language. And we put all of it on the Internet, Charter97.org, the major website in Belarus. The founder of this website was killed in September of 2010 and editing chief of this website was in jail after the 19<sup>th</sup> of December, in a KGB jail. So actually that was a starting point for Belarusian authorities to react on our activities as a theatre company, because, they understood that if such artists support Belarus, and when Mick Jagger said that he would come and give a concert when there's no dictatorship in Belarus, for Lukashenko it is a very clear message because Mick Jagger came to Czechoslovakia after the Velvet Revolution and he gave a concert there. So he understood that all of this was possible, and that's why they got very scared of this amazing support of artists who started to make these statements. That's why they started to react to what we do, to every single movement that we do. And again on the 19<sup>th</sup> of December of 2010, again I read a letter of Václav Havel who sent a letter of support to people of Belarus. And again I read appeals of Jude Law, Sienna Miller, Sam West,

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Adjoa Andoh, to people of Belarus, to 50,000 people of Belarus who gather together to protest against falsification of the elections. And when I was in jail it was absolutely unbelievable because women – it was obviously not possible for them to see me because all of us were very far away from each other - and they said ‘do you imagine these people support us’, and it’s such a strong message to them and exactly, we’re coming to this idea of freedom of expression, for people in Belarus who go to protest against falsification of presidential elections to understand that artists from London and the president of the Czech Republic send them support: it’s just unbelievable. And this is the moment when they stay in jail facing walls and talking about that. I think this is the whole meaning of our activities. That’s why we can’t stop it.

**Nigel Warburton:** *Natalia Kaliada thank you very much.*

**Natalia Kaliada:** It was a great pleasure to talk to you.

[ends]