

Awaking in One's Own Country

BY

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Valancin Akudovič

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Awaking in One's Own Country is a new collection of texts written by Valancin Akudovič, a renowned Belarusian philosopher. Akudovič sets out to prove that language, history, and culture are not after all so important in the nation-building process – the process of constructing the nation's collective identification as Belarusian. Instead, the most important factor is merely the fact that a country or state exists. This exerts a more tangible influence on people's everyday lives. When Belarusians take money out of their pocket – they see Belarusian money. When they join the army, they join the Belarusian army, and when they go to gaol – they are put in a Belarusian gaol and not sent to Siberia. Moreover, they have their own president, their own television channels, and, what's more, they even have their own dictator at the very top of the state. All of this makes Belarusians become more Belarusian every day, little by little.

Valancin Akudovič remains probably the most famous Belarusian philosopher. A graduate of the Gorky Literary Institute (Moscow, 1980), Akudovič went on to work in the weeklies *Kultura* and *LiM* and the magazines *Krynica* and *Frahmienty*. Akudovič's works have been translated into Swedish, Polish, Russian, and Lithuanian.

Writing about the national cultural canon, Valancin Akudovič aptly points out that there was only a 15-year gap between the 'Spring of Nations' in 1848, which marked the beginning of many European nationalisms, and the Kalinoŭski uprising, which signalled the beginning of a Belarusian national movement. In other words, in the context of the era of nationalism, the Belarusians experienced a 'national awakening' at more or less the same time as many other European nations. However, the comprehensive search for a particularly Belarusian idea began only after the end of the Russian revolution of 1905. The Vilnia newspaper *Naša Niva*, alongside the cultural and political milieus which emerged under its

influence, played a crucial role in the Belarusian movement. At this time, most of the national cultural canon was established, and it lasted until the end of the 20th century without major transformations.

Akudovič provides a careful analysis of a number of important aspects of the Belarusian state: the geopolitical (Belarus in its ethnographic borders), cultural (domination of the Belarusian language and culture), historical (continuity with the Principality of Połack and the Great Duchy of Lithuania), political (national democracy) and, finally, constitutional (an independent state).

Awaking in One's Own Country is also an important book for the history of Belarusian philosophy. Akudovič suggests that the 1990s constituted the most significant period in the history of Belarusian thinking as such, as this was the first time it had manifested itself clearly and systematically in this role. The philosopher mentions what he believes to be two of the most iconic projects of that era – the literary-philosophical fascicle ZNO in the weekly *Kultura* (1993-1997), and the first truly Belarusian philosophical magazine *Frahmienty* (1996), which represented the most vivid manifestation of the collective intervention of Belarusians into the philosophical space. Akudovič notes that the most remarkable feature of these projects was their aspiration to isolate the discourse surrounding the universal entirety of Belarusian culture and to record it independently as just one (extremely significant) dimension of this culture.

In his book, Valancin Akudovič provides a thorough bibliography, often citing works of thinkers such as Heidegger, Junger, José Ortega y Gasset, and Sloterdijk. However, Akudovič often refers to works written by other Belarusians. In particular, the author regrets the fact that studies of different iterations of the Belarusian national idea have often disregarded the extent to which these concepts are intertwined, a brilliant example of which being an essay by Ihnat Abdzirałovič (Kančeŭski) entitled 'On the Eternal Way'.

Akudovič emphasises that Ihnat Abdzirałovič was the first Belarusian to renounce a Belarusian national idea, suggesting in its place the concept of an 'eternal Belarusian way'. In another projection, instead of the idea as a logocentric form, he popularised the concept of the 'streaming form', resembling Foucault's notion of 'discourse'.

The book also contains the author's reflections on the state of modern philosophy. Akudovič notes that philosophy is rapidly being marginalized. According to him, as with literature, philosophy began voluntarily renouncing the 'heights' (of metaphysics) in favour of a mutual understanding of the contexts of the 'surface,' the permanent domain of the everyman. However, unlike in literature, where this 'fall' occurred by means of a simplification of language and a paradigm shift away from literature as a heuristic, philosophy (which cannot by definition follow this

course) firstly stopped being concerned with its 'highest discourse' – metaphysics, and then reformatted itself to suit social and political sciences.

The author argues that philosophy has no prospects today as a discipline. 'Disciplinary' philosophers will move further towards what is sometimes called 'social thinking' or simply move on to fields in which analytical or reflective skills are required. Philosophy is becoming even more thoroughly embedded in aesthetic discourses, especially in literature. Fiction has been moving towards non-fiction (real history) and philosophy has been moving towards fiction (reflective literature). Philosophy – as we understand the term today – will gradually return to its pre-institutional roots, the era of 'schools' and 'academies' of antiquity, when individuals opened practices to engage in philosophy.

The book also contains the author's reflections on various other subjects.

Akudovič touches upon the problem of Čarnobył as compared with previous tragedies faced by Belarusians, including the many endless and merciless wars which were perpetually fought in the Belarusian lands. The author points out that the Čarnobył disaster was not the most significant catastrophe for the nation in terms of scale: As in the case of wars and occupations, people had to put out fires, leave their homes, die from 'cholera', mourn their dead and worry about their children's future.

Later, the philosopher brilliantly describes the fate of Mark Chagall in the context of Belarus. Akudovič describes how the 'Belarusian factor' gradually became an important element for Chagall's work and, in a certain way, perhaps the primary theme, as the Belarusian space (Viciebsk) provided Chagall with an existential place in life. Moreover, if we consider this existentiality not only in the context of temporal time but also in the domain of personal space, we can recognize Chagall the Jew also as a Belarusian, accepting that it is fully legitimate to characterize him as possessing 'dual nationality'.

Valancin Akudovič also goes on to offer advice to the Nobel Committee regarding prize-worthy modern Belarusian writers. According to him, Aleś Razanaŭ is the Belarusian most worthy of the Nobel Prize. Akudovič explains his choice by arguing that a winner of the world's most prestigious literary award must be open to the possibility of discovering new senses and contents of human existence or non-existence in literature.

The book is written in simple language, so despite the seriousness of the material, it is very readable. The author masterfully uses rich vocabulary, even if questions sometimes arise regarding word choice. For example, in some situations the author uses calques from other Slavic languages when accurate Belarusian equivalents are available.

Awaking in One's Own Country is a book that has great cultural significance for Belarusian philosophy. Moreover, Valancin Akudovič's book occupies an important place in the social and political discourse. Impressively, Akudovič manages to remain a 'neutral analyst' despite his participation in numerous events described in the book, which are illustrated by numerous personal anecdotes. He masterfully offers his reader a look at well-known events seen from a different angle and placed in a larger perspective.
