

# SYMBOLIC FUNCTIONS OF THE BELARUSIAN *DUDA* (BAGPIPE) IN NARRATIVES OF MODERN URBAN BAGPIPERS<sup>1</sup>

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This article analyses the symbolic functions of the Belarusian bagpipe in the narratives of modern urban bagpipers and attempts to periodise the revival of the instrument, that is connected with those functions. In the narratives of bagpipers in mass media, social media and private conversations, some common motifs concerning their musical instrument are observed. I call them *symbolic functions* to separate them from the practical function of the bagpipe – to play music. The modern urban tradition of playing the *duda* (bagpipe) has only an indirect continuity with village musicians. Since the 1970s, the bagpipe tradition has been revitalised. Different symbolic functions of the Belarusian bagpipe were relevant at various stages of its revival. This article analyses the following symbolic functions: the bagpipe as a national symbol, as an artefact, as another art project, as an object of research, as an instrument for entertainment and for political protest, as well as an object of emotional attachment.

KEYWORDS: Belarus, bagpipe, *duda*, traditional music revival

In 2024, Belarusian bagpipe culture was nominated for the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) of Humanity, previously being inscribed in the National ICH Inventory (Rudak 2023, Ministierstvo kul'tury 2024). The anthropologist Stsiapan Zakharkevich considers such processes a way of legalisation of the traditional culture as cultural heritage (Zakharkevich 2023, 46).

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In the narratives of bagpipers in mass media, social media and private conversations, there are some common motifs concerning their musical instrument. I call them *symbolic functions* to separate them from the practical function of the bagpipe – to play music. Different symbolic functions of the Belarusian bagpipe were actualised at various stages of its revival. This article analyses symbolic functions of the Belarusian bagpipe in the narratives of modern urban bagpipers and makes an attempt to create a periodisation of the actualisation of those functions.

Aliaksandr Surba has proposed the following periodisation of the Belarusian bagpipe revival:

- the 1970s: a *sumiezhny* (border) or an “experimental” period, when instrument makers tried to build a bagpipe while experimenting with different approaches and materials;
- the 1980s to the beginning of the 1990s: a “romantic” period, when the artist Ales Los started his experiments with bagpipe building;
- the early 1990s to the early 2000s: an “ethnographic” period, when craftsmen began to build bagpipes based on an ethnographic artefact (a one-drone instrument kept in the Lepel Local History Museum);
- since the early 2000s: a “new” bagpipe period, which is characterised by the appearance of two schools of bagpipe building represented by the craftsmen Ales Los and Todar Kashkurevich. The researcher himself is a follower of Ales Los (Surba 2013; Surba 2020, 149–154).

Aliaksandr Surba’s periodisation is based on the peculiarities of building the instrument, not on its symbolic functions, and covers the time period until the beginning of the 2010s only. Zmitsier Sasnouski has also addressed certain aspects of the periodisation of its revival. For example, he mentions a “romantic period of bagpipe tradition restoration (the 1970s to the 1990s)”, when many instrument makers made bagpipes with fantasy elements not based on ethnographic sources (Sasnouski 2010, 367). Eugen Baryshnikau supposes 2017 to be an important year for the periodisation of the bagpipe revival, as during that time McDonald’s created a marketing game referring to playing the bagpipe. The researcher considers that game to be an indicator of the bagpipe becoming a part of Belarusian mass culture (Baryshnikau 2025).

I would like to present a new attempt at periodisation, this time based on the various symbolic functions of the Belarusian bagpipe that were relevant at different stages of its revival.



*Photo 1: The bagpipe from the Lepel Local History Museum. Photo by Volha Hryń, 2020.  
Source: Facebook group Belarusian Bagpipe Club*

## METHODOLOGY

The history of the Belarusian bagpipe revival movement is described in the publications of bagpipers and researchers Zmitsier Sasnouski (Piâtrënka 2012; Restauracyja 2012; Ziâmkevich 2012)<sup>2</sup> and Aliaksandr Surba (Surba 2013; Surba 2020, 149–182) and in interviews with Todar Kashkurevich (Kashkurevich 2002, 2012) and Eugen Baryshnikau (Baryshnikau 2016a, 2016b, 2016c). Several other publications about bagpipes in mass media and social media groups were used as sources for research. Scientific texts written by bagpipers were also analysed as their narratives.

I have conducted several interviews with bagpipers and wrote some articles about the bagpipe revival as a journalist and published them in mass media in 2016–2019 (Leshkevich and Antanovich 2016; Leshkevich 2017a, 2017b; Leshkevich 2018b; Leshkevich 2019; Lity Taler 2018; Voranau 2018 and others). Besides media analysis, structured interviews and unstructured conversations with bagpipers and bagpipe music lovers, I have used my own field materials (photos and videos made during bagpipe music events). Participant observation and auto-ethnography were also used as research methods: I participated as a dancer in weekly dance meetings in Minsk, the capital of Belarus, and in music and historical reconstruction festivals in Belarus, Lithuania and Latvia. It is important to mention that I do not have any musical education, so my research lies exclusively in the domain of cultural anthropology and not ethnomusicology. I did my research while living in Minsk from 2005 to 2020. Due to the political repressions after the 2020 protests against the falsification of the presidential election results, many bagpipers have left Belarus. I have lived in Warsaw since 2021 and continue researching by participating in bagpipe music events (dance evenings and concerts). Writing this article, I tried to play the bagpipe from January to February 2025, attending Warsaw Bagpipe School and taking private online lessons from the bagpiper Eugen Baryshnikau. Unfortunately, my effort was not successful. Hence, this article offers not only the perspective of a researcher, but also that of a dancer and bagpipe music lover, as well as a journalist who has been observing Belarusian bagpipe revival since 2005.

In this article, I use the term “revival” as it is understood by Western and Polish researchers (The World 1996; Bithell and Hill 2014 as cited in Nowak 2022; Nowak 2022). “A music revival comprises an effort to perform and promote music that is valued as old or historical and is usually perceived to be threatened or moribund” (Bithell and Hill 2014, 3, as cited in Nowak 2022, 22). Belarusian bagpipers and bagpipe music lovers sometimes use the term “revival” as an emic one. Following Caroline Bithell and Juniper Hill, Polish ethnomusicologist Tomasz Nowak assumes that

2 A large proportion of publications in the first issue of the *Dudar* (Bagpiper) magazine (2012) were created by Zmitsier Sasnouski using different pseudonyms.

revival issues include six basic topics: activism and the desire for change, the valuation and reinterpretation of history, recontextualisation and transformation, legitimacy and authenticity, transmission and dissemination and post-revival outgrowths and ramifications. (Bithell and Hill 2014, 3–5, as cited in Nowak 2022, 22)

Belarusian researchers do not use the term “revival” in scientific publications. They adopt the concept of *post-folklore* from the Russian semiotician Sergey Neklyudov (1995) and develop it to describe rural traditional culture revitalisation in Belarusian cities in the second half of the twentieth century. Post-folklore is used in a rather similar way to Caroline Bithell and Juniper Hill’s (2014) concept of revival; however, there are several important moments for my research that I would like to emphasise. The philosopher Engels Darashevich notes that post-folklore is neither the institutionalised amateur art of the USSR nor part of professional culture, nor is it proper folklore – it only quotes the latter (Darashevich 2010, 13). In opposition to highly institutionalised amateur and professional folk groups in the USSR and the Republic of Belarus, “the creativity, communication and self-expression of post-folklore bearers must necessarily include the spontaneity of self-organisation and the individual’s personal creative contribution”<sup>3</sup> (Darashevich 2016, 44). In my research, I concentrate on the informal bagpipe revival movement and focus less on institutionalised ways of playing the bagpipe, such as teaching in music schools and the Belarusian State University of Culture or the participation of bagpipers in state musical ensembles.

#### HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE BELARUSIAN BAGPIPE REVIVAL

In Belarus, the modern urban tradition of playing the bagpipe has only an indirect continuity with village musicians. The last documented public performance of a Belarusian rural bagpiper took place in 1954 (Baryshnikau 2025)<sup>4</sup>. After that, the bagpipe gave way to other instruments in public spaces. The process of replacing the bagpipe with other instruments began in the nineteenth century and was typical for all of Europe (Shejn 1887, 530; Nikiforovskij 1892, 175; Przerembski 2007, 48–49).

Since the 1970s, the bagpipe tradition has been revitalised, but modern urban musicians have not had the opportunity to play with rural ones. The only exception would

3 Here, and subsequently, the translation of citations was made by Alena Leshkevich.

4 The information about the performance in 1954 discovered by Eugen Baryshnikau has not yet been published in any scientific article. Inna Nazina wrote that the last public performance of a rural bagpiper took place in Polatsk in 1951. Further research has shown that there was also a later performance in Minsk the same year (Nazina 1979, 120; Sasnouski 2010, 365–366; Sasnouski 2013, 255; Baryshnikau 2016–2).

be the meeting of musicians of the band *Stary Olsa* (Old Olsa) with Mikola Karatkevich in the village of Asinauka in the district of Hlybokaye during their field research in 2007. Karatkevich played the bagpipe as a child, learning from an older bagpiper, Piotr Burets (Voranaŭ 2020). Thus, the revival of Belarusian bagpipes took place independently of living village culture, as a purely urban phenomenon. It is, therefore, possible to consider actual bagpipe playing an invented tradition. Eric Hobsbawm distinguishes three types of invented traditions; the Belarusian bagpipe revival can be classified as the first type, which establishes or symbolises “social cohesion or the membership of groups, real or artificial communities” (Hobsbawm 1983, 9).

Belarusian bagpipers reconstruct instruments and bagpipe music using the following sources that originated from the territory of contemporary Belarus and neighbouring territories: ethnographic descriptions published at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> to the first half of the twentieth century (Shejn 1887, 530; Nikiforovskij 1892; Romanov 1910; Pryvalaŭ 1928 and others<sup>5</sup>); memories about bagpipers written down at the end of the twentieth to the beginning of the twenty-first century; nearly 30 bagpipes or parts of bagpipes made until the beginning of the twentieth century (artefacts stored in museums in Belarus (Lepiel and Grodno) and in neighbouring countries; one is stored in a private collection); nearly thirty photos of rural bagpipes and bagpipers and some artistic images (reliefs and paintings) dated to the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries (Baryshnikau 2013; Baryshnikau 2014; Baryshnikau 2025; Sasnouski 2010, 149–154, 266, 355–369; Surba 2020, 45–97); a 5-second video fragment filmed in 1939 (Kalatsej and Remishevskij 2013; Chavus 2018); and more than fifty archival audio tracks of bagpipe music recorded in 1908, 1931, 1939 and possibly in 1925, only part of which was published either in notations or as sound materials (Blagodatov, Vertkov and IĀzovitskaiā 1975; Nazina 1979, 112–114; Nazina 2014; Lietuvių 2007; Eduardo 2011; Žarskienė 2011; Dudarskaiā 2011; Morgenstern 2012b, 196–197; Baryshnikau 2025). Not all those sources were available at the beginning of the bagpipe revival. They were gradually discovered by instrument builders and musicians, as described below in the section “The bagpipe as an object of research”.

According to most of those sources, it is possible to state that the basic design of the Belarusian bagpipe consists of a *miekh* (sewn bag) with a *soska* or *sapiel* (mouth-piece), a single *pierabor* or *zhaliejka* (chanter), one drone each ending in a *rahavien* (upturned bell carved from wood). It is the main type reconstructed by contemporary instrument builders. The best known example of such a bagpipe is the specimen from the Lepel Local History Museum in Belarus (Surba 2020, 59–66). The only preserved bagpipe with three drones and without upward-curving bells originates from the former Lucyn county of Vitebsk province (the territory of contemporary Latvia close to

5 For a full review of such kind of sources, please see Nazina 1979, 107–120; Nazina 2014.

the Belarusian border) and is stored in the Lithuanian National Museum. This bagpipe specimen is called a *ma(o/uly)cianka* and is also reconstructed by contemporary Belarusian instrument builders (Romanov 1910, 126; Surba 2020, 34, 92). The bagpipe with two drones appears in written and pictorial sources from the nineteenth century; however, there are no artefacts of this type preserved (Surba 2020, 88–90). Nikolaj Nikiforovskij wrote that the two-drone instrument was the most popular type of the Belarusian bagpipe in the nineteenth century (Nikiforovskij 1892, 9). Different contemporary instrument builders tried to reconstruct such an instrument (Surba 2020, 157, 162), but the participants of the revival movement do not actually use this type. There is some information about bagpipes with four to eight drones, but no such artefacts are preserved (Nazina 1979, 108; Biarbierau 2013, 233). Anthony Baines (1960, 70, 80) puts Belarus in the zone of West Slavic *bock* (goat) bagpipes, which also includes Polish, Wendish, Bohemian, Slovakian and Lithuanian instruments. Aliaksandr Surba clarifies Baines' classification writing that "the Belarusian bagpipe territorially belongs to the western type of Eastern Europe bagpipes, which have a few peculiarities: a single chanter, one or a few drones and, possibly, bells" (Surba 2020, 45).

The bagpipe revival went hand-in-hand with the Belarusian national rebirth in the 1980s–1990s. Miroslav Hroch mentions the essential role of people's desire to feel a sense of belonging in this process. "National aspirations of the 1990s emerged after the collapse of the systems of political control [...] In the situation of general uncertainty and distrust, people were looking for any kind of certainty – and they found it in national identity, i.e., in sharing the national destiny with others" (Hroch 2020, 118–119).

The second half of the 1980s was a time of economic and governmental reforms in the USSR (Perestroika). On the wave of the increased social activism, the Belarusian youth organisations *Majstrounia* (Workshop) and *Talaka* (Communal Work) were founded. Some of their members started to be interested in folklore. They were young people born in big cities who tried to search for their Belarusian roots in a Russified Soviet society. Although the Belarusian language and culture were declared to be important, people in Belarusian cities spoke Russian, and Belarusian national culture played a rather limited role. As the historian Tatsiana Astrouskaya writes, the Soviet principle was "to encourage national diversity as an outer layer to support the multinational Soviet society, which in reality led to homogeneity and the erasure of particularities". The researcher also mentions that the Soviet state approved of "purely staged folklore traditions". On the other hand, participants of the informal folklore movement (grassroots, not connected with official culture institutions) "sought to return to their roots and uncover an authentic tradition that they believed had survived only in rural areas" (Astrouskaya 2022, 129). Such a tendency was not a Belarusian peculiarity. As Owe Ronström mentions,

the folk revival in Hungary and other parts of Eastern Europe can be explained as a heretical opposition to the state-supported (if not appropriated) revival of 1940s[...]. While the opposed institutionalised forms of folk music and dance were geared towards making folk traditions a part of national high culture or “the great tradition”, the revival of the 1970s was rather aimed at making the folk traditions again a part of everyday life, “the little tradition”. (Ronström 1996, 11)

The invention of tradition in cities showed the gap with rural culture: as Hobsbawm mentioned, “Where the old ways are alive, traditions need be neither revived nor invented” (Hobsbawm 1983, 8). The bagpipe playing revival was a part of that national rebirth and the turn to folklore. Researching those processes is important for understanding the actual state of Belarusian nation-building.

It is important to emphasise that the Soviet or Belarusian post-Soviet state and Communist Party did not invest in the bagpipe and the wider folklore revival, so we are talking about an informal movement not connected with state cultural institutions. As the sociologist Larissa Titarenko mentions, there were two political projects of constructing a new Belarusian national identity: one supported by Belarusian intellectuals and the leaders of the Belarusian National Front political party, and another by the official pro-regime ideologists (Titarenko 2007, 52). The bagpipe revival is part of the former. The role of traditional rural culture in this approach is quite important. As the philosopher Valiantsin Akudovich writes, a village (meaning rural culture and people of rural origin) within a city “completes the process of consolidating Belarusians and formalising their own state” (Akudovich 2007, 67). Therefore, the folklore revival in Belarus in the 1980s was a bottom-up process, which could be linked to the opposition and the need for reforms in Soviet society. It is consistent with the opinion of Miroslav Hroch, who writes that the new national movements in the 1990s “had a goal similar to that of the classical national movements of the nineteenth century: to acquire all the missing attributes of a full national existence: a distinct culture, political autonomy and – gradually – unequivocal statehood” (Hroch 2020, 118).

The independent Belarusian state did not show any interest in the bagpipe revival until the second half of the 2010s. After the presidential elections in 2015, a relative liberalisation of Belarusian society took place. The apogee of liberalisation was the concert dedicated to Liberty Day on 25 March 2018<sup>6</sup>, which state authorities allowed opposition forces to organise in the centre of Minsk near the Grand Theatre

6 It was a celebration of a hundred years of proclaiming the independence of the BPR (Belarusian People's Republic) on 25 March 1918. The BPR was part of a nationally oriented project of state building opposed to the Soviet project. March 25 is supposed to be the main holiday of the Belarusian opposition forces since the end of the 1980s. Activities dedicated to that day are usually suppressed by



of Opera and Ballet. Bagpipers were also invited to perform at that concert, but, in the end, they did not due to a lack of stage time (Leshkevich 2018a). The period of liberalisation ended before the presidential elections in 2020.

In 2016, the first attempt to begin working on inscribing Belarusian bagpipe culture on the UNESCO Representative List of ICH happened, in collaboration with bagpipers involved in the revival movement (Leshkevich and Antanovich 2016). However, Belarusian bagpipe culture was inscribed in the National ICH Inventory only in 2023 (Rudak 2023) and nominated to the UNESCO List in 2024 (Ministerstvo kultury 2024). As mentioned in the National ICH Inventory, “Today this tradition is supported by community and state efforts” (Žhyvaiȧ). However, this is not entirely true. The state exclusively supports musicians operating under official cultural institutions (those listed in the National ICH Inventory), while the informal movement of the Belarusian bagpipe revival exists on its own. Many bagpipers participating in this movement took part in the 2020 anti-government protests against the falsification of the presidential election results in Belarus.

Aliaksandr Surba proclaims the existence of the bagpipe subculture in Belarusian cities (Surba 2010, 150). In my opinion, Belarusian bagpipers and bagpipe music lovers form an informal urban community, established by the invented tradition of the first type in Eric Hobsbawm’s terminology (Hobsbawm 1983, 9). Owe Ronström mentions that “revival movements can be directed towards creating a larger national community or towards smaller ethnic, regional or group communities” (Ronström 1996, 15). It is worth emphasising that the Belarusian bagpipe revival community consists not only of musicians, but also involves dancers and music lovers, who are also an important part of the *musicizing*<sup>7</sup> (Small 1999) process.

At present, there are presumably more than 600 Belarusian bagpipes in Belarus and abroad: Dzianis Sukhi has built 300 bagpipes up until April 2025 (Sukhi 2025), Viktor Kulpin has built nearly 200 bagpipes, as reported in 2019 (Surba 2020, 159), Todor Kashkurevich has built nearly 50 bagpipes for Belarusians and 50 for Lithuanians<sup>8</sup> (online interview with the author, 7 January 2025). There are also other

state authorities. Officially, National Independence Day in Belarus is 3 July, the day of the Soviet liberation of Minsk from the Wehrmacht in 1944.

- 7 “If there is anything that is clear about performing and listening, it is that they are actions, they are something that people do. As I thought about this, I realised that if music isn’t a thing but an action, then the word ‘music’ shouldn’t be a noun at all. It ought to be a verb – the verb ‘to music’. Not just to express the idea of performing – we already have verbs for that – but to express the much broader idea of taking part in a musical performance” (Small 1999, 12).
- 8 Lithuanians often play bagpipes built by Belarusians, as instruments in Southern-Eastern Lithuania were of the same type as in Belarus. There are different opinions on how this instrument should be called: a Belarusian bagpipe, a Lithuanian bagpipe (referring to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania

craftsmen who build custom-made bagpipes (Surba 2020, 155–179). A bagpiper can possess more than one bagpipe. There are more than 50 bagpipers who perform Belarusian music in public spaces, as counted by the Bagpipe Club (an informal organisation of Belarusian bagpipers), but only 30 bagpipers connected to state cultural institutions were mentioned on the nomination form for inscribing Belarusian bagpipe culture in the National ICH Inventory. It is worth mentioning that members of the Bagpipe Club, whose narratives are mostly researched in this article, have almost no connection with state cultural institutions and are hardly familiar with bagpipers who operate in such institutions. Therefore, it can be stated that in Belarus, there are two groups of bagpipers, almost unrelated to each other, and their total number is more than 80.

The ICH nomination form also includes a list of folk groups that use the bagpipe and operate under state culture institutions. It concludes, “In total, about a hundred people are involved in the ancient tradition” (Rudak 2023). I tend to believe that there are many more people involved, as dancers and bagpipe music lovers are also a significant part of the bagpipe revival movement. As Christopher Small notes,

To music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance. That means not only to perform but also to listen [...]. We should certainly include dancing, [...] and the cleaners who clean up afterwards, for what they do also affects the nature of the event, which is a musical performance. (Small 1999, 12)

As of 29 April 2025, there were 991 subscribers to the Bagpipe Club’s page (Dudarski klub n.d.b) on Facebook and 3,045 subscribers to its page (Dudarski klub n.d.a) on the social media site V Kontakte. Partly, they are the same people, so it is reasonable to say that the Belarusian bagpipe revival movement has at least 3,500 members.

#### THE BAGPIPE AS A NATIONAL SYMBOL

According to the bagpiper and researcher Eugen Baryshnikau, the bagpipe as a symbol of Belarus has existed uninterrupted since the first half of the nineteenth century, although the musical instrument itself was not very popular for a time, giving way to the squeezebox and the *cimbal* (a hammered dulcimer-type folk instrument)

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Commonwealth, the state that existed from the thirteenth century to the late eighteenth century and included the territory of modern Belarus and Lithuania), or a Baltic bagpipe (Kashkurevich 2008, 102). There are also such variants as a “Belarusian-Lithuanian bagpipe” and a “Bagpipe from the Dzvinia River region” (Baryshnikau 2025).

(Baryshnikau 2016a). The end of the bagpipe playing tradition correlates with the neglect of the Belarusian language and national culture in the USSR. Thus, the bagpipe revival can be considered one of the components of the Belarusian national rebirth. The bagpiper and researcher Todor Kashkurevich even compares the bagpipe to Belarus itself: “The fate of the bagpipe is somewhat reminiscent of the fate of our land, whose name – Lithuania<sup>9</sup> – was replaced by a name foreign to this land, coming from beyond the eastern border – Belarus” (Kashkurevich 2008, 102).

The motif of the bagpipe as a national symbol also appears in the narratives of other bagpipers. Ales Los tells us about his hope: “God bless me to live to the time when the bagpipe turns from a folk symbol into a national one. The bagpipe is a crucial symbol for our land” (Restauracyja 2012, 48). Zmicier Sasnouski assumes that the long-term goal of the bagpipe revival is “to develop the idea of once again making the bagpipe the main<sup>10</sup> musical instrument in Belarus” (Piâtrënka 2012, 121). The motif of the bagpipe as a national symbol appears not only in private, but also in official communication. For example, organisers of the Dudarski Fest (Bagpipe Festival) wrote: “The bagpipe is the soul of our nation. It is the voice of our land itself” (Dudarski Fest 2017).

Bagpipe culture is considered to be a national treasure, a part of cultural heritage, by Belarusian state authorities, as it was inscribed in the National ICH Inventory in 2023 (Rudak 2023), and nominated for the UNESCO Representative List of ICH (Ministierstvo kultury 2024). The example of bagpipe culture illustrates Stsiapan Zakharkevich’s argument that the narrative of traditional culture binds together a politically divided Belarusian society (Zakharkevich 2023, 46): the bagpipe has a symbolic value both for the Belarusian state authorities and for the informal community of bagpipers and bagpipe music lovers, who would rather stay in opposition to the government (as seen below in the symbolic function of the bagpipe as an instrument for political protest).

Thus, the bagpipe’s function as a national symbol has been relevant since the nineteenth century and throughout the bagpipe playing revival since the 1970s.

#### THE BAGPIPE AS AN ARTEFACT

In the 1970s, instrument makers saw the bagpipe primarily as a material artefact. It was challenging to make it, but they had no intention of playing the bagpipe actively in public spaces at that time. Scientific research of the bagpipe was theoretical:

9 Todor Kashkurevich is referring to the polytonym, which is a short version of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

10 Underlined by Alena Leshkevich.

ethnomusicologist Inna Nazina referenced written sources from the nineteenth to the beginning of the twentieth century with descriptions of bagpipes. However, she did not examine the old bagpipes from the collections of museums. Nor did the instrument makers (Surba 2013, 255; Restauracyja 2012, 43). Eugen Baryshnikau notes the great value of Nazina's monograph (1979) for the beginning of the bagpipe's reconstruction (Baryshnikau 2016b). The first attempts to build an instrument in the 1970s were not very successful: bagpipes made by Ivan Lychkovsky, Aliaksandr Zhukovsky and Uladzimir Hrom could hardly be played (Restauracyja 2012, 43).

The informal folklore movement in Belarus was not massive at first. Researchers write that, in the 1970s and 1980s, mainly intellectuals participated (Dubavets 2004; Zakharkevich 2023, 45). Siarhej Dubavets mentions traditional calendar holiday celebrations and singing folk songs among the activities of folklore movement members during those decades (Dubavets 2004). There is no information about instrumental music or folk dance reconstruction. Tatsiana Astrouskaya emphasises the role of singing among the Majstrounia youth organisation's folklore activities (Astrouskaya 2022, 129).

The reconstruction of bagpipes and other aspects of Belarusian folklore in the 1970s–1980s was inspired by professional research on traditional culture. As mentioned above, the monograph by Inna Nazina (1979) was important for bagpipe reconstruction. As an inspiration for traditional calendar holiday celebrations and singing folk songs, a series of archive and field materials publications called *Belarusian Folk Art* was used. The series has been edited since 1970 by the Institute of Art History, Ethnography and Folkloristics of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus (Zakharkevich 2023, 45). Another inspiration was a book by the ethnomusicologist Zinaida Mozheiko *Kalendarsno-pesennaiŭ kultura Belorussii: opyt sistemo-tipologicheskogo issledovaniŭ* (Calendar and Song Culture of Belarus: Experience of Systematic and Typological Research) (1985). As the ethnophilosopher Engels Darashevich mentioned, the book was “an absolute bestseller among the national intellectual elite in the 1980s” (Darashevich 2015, 12).

Thus, in the 1970s, individual craftsmen built musical instruments, including bagpipes, but did not play for the public and had hardly any connection with the informal folklore movement.

#### THE BAGPIPE AS ANOTHER ART PROJECT

In the 1980s, such Belarusian musicians and instrument makers as Ales Los, Uladzimir Hrom, Ivan Lychkovsky and Uladzimir Puzynia considered building a bagpipe and playing it to be just one form of their creativity, another art project. They built and played other musical instruments as well. Ales Los was also involved

in non-musical activities – *batlejka* (traditional puppet theatre) revival and painting. There is a difference between the musicians mentioned above and the bagpipers who have joined the revival movement since the 2000s and later. The latter often did not have an education or a professional interest in music or the arts, and they played the bagpipe as their only or their main instrument.

The symbolic function of the bagpipe as another art project was still relevant in the 1990s, when artists Todar Kashkurevich and Ales Zhura began to learn how to build and play bagpipes from Ales Los. Todar Kashkurevich said in one of his interviews: “Yes, I have an art degree. But one day I realised that I could not allow myself to think in terms of aspects of only one type of art” (Kashkurevich 2002). Todar Kashkurevich also worked in monumental art, painting, book graphics and design. Ales’ Zhura studied architecture.

The symbolic function of the bagpipe as another art project is still relevant for the older generation of bagpipers who joined the revival movement in the 1990s or earlier. The majority of the younger musicians who started to play the bagpipe in the 2000s or later consider it to be their main or only artistic activity.

#### THE BAGPIPE AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR ENTERTAINMENT

Some dancing events with bagpipe music were organised in the 1990s: Ihar Mikhno played Belarusian, Lithuanian and Latvian dance melodies performing in different Belarusian cities (Restauracyja 2012, 46), Siarzhuk Vinagradau built a bagpipe and accompanied singing and played during the events of the Talaka youth organisation in Homiel (Surba 2020, 157), but it has only been since the 2000s that the bagpipe has become a popular instrument for entertainment. This function of the instrument is older than the revival, as the bagpipers played dance music in the time of the rural bagpipe playing tradition (Nikiforovskij 1892, 9, 12; Romanov 1910, 127; Pryvalaw 1928, 19). Nikolaj Nikiforovskij mentioned that playing dance music was the main activity of a rural bagpiper (Nikiforovskij 1892, 12). Inna Nazina supposed that making people happy was the social purpose of bagpipes (Nazina 1979, 111).

Using the bagpipe to play in the “medieval” style was to a large extent inspired by the German band *In Extremo* (in the extreme). Ethnomusicologist Ulrich Morgenstern proposes to place the Belarusian bagpipe revival alongside the folk and medieval movement in Western European countries (Morgenstern 2012a, 13). The music band Stry Olsa, formed in 1999 by bagpiper Zmicier Sasnouski, had the bagpipe as one of its leading instruments. The band became very popular in the 2000s. Many bands copied their style, including the bagpipe playing. At that time, experiments with various styles and directions began (e.g., playing rock hits with the Belarusian bagpipe or Belarusian dance music with medieval bagpipes). Experiments

continued later. The bagpiper Dzianis Shmatko said: “We force the bagpipe to do such things[...]. We squeeze the unsqueezable out of a diatonic instrument. The bagpipe acquires a new sound; it is not the main instrument anymore, but if it is completely absent from the compositions, that does not sound right” (Lity Taler 2018).



*Photo 2: The bagpiper Antoś Bielski holds a Belarusian bagpipe while the bagpiper Mikola Stoliar plays the dudelsack. Dance meeting on Korch in Minsk, June 27, 2018. Photo by Alena Leshkevich*

Starting in the year 2000, bands *Vetakh* (‘The last quarter of the Moon’) and *Stary Olsa* organised several dance parties in Minsk clubs. In the first half of the 2000s, dance parties with bagpipe music took place in the open air during the summer in Minsk. Since 2006, such open-air dance parties have become regular (called *Korch* or *Koriaga*<sup>11</sup>), and then in the colder season of 2007/2008 (October–April) regular weekly parties with bagpipe music were organised in clubs, cafes and pubs. The popularity of such parties can probably be explained by their free atmosphere:

About half of the dances are in couples, most of them in a circle or a chain. You can invite anyone to dance at the party, so it’s not scary to come without a partner. You

11 Named after the Belarusian “корч” or Russian “коряга” – a gnarled piece of wood that once sat on the place of such meetings near the *Uskhod* metro station in Minsk.

can join the circle without hesitation, but it is desirable, if the number of dancers allows, for the guys and girls to take turns. If there are fewer guys, they should at least stand between the girls, not next to each other. It is not customary to refuse an invitation to a couple dance, but this is not a strict rule: no one would force anyone to dance. (Leshkevich 2019)

Starting in 2006, Dudarski Fest (founded in 1992) was held annually and continued until 2013, when the format changed to biennial (Mukhamor 2013, Ziāmkevich 2012). In 2007, the *Dudarski klub* (Bagpipe Club) was founded. As mentioned on social media, it is an “informal community of Belarusian bagpipers and their sympathisers” (Dudarski klub n.d.b). Among the preconditions of the Bagpipe Club’s founding, a sharp increase in the number of bagpipers is noted (Piātrēnka 2012, 119).

Eugen Baryshnikau mentions dancing to bagpipe music as a Belarusian peculiarity: “To have a systematic, many-years’ tradition, and to have the bagpipes lead the way in dancing – at least, I don’t know of such a thing anywhere else. I remember my Lithuanian friends being surprised when they saw that one could dance to the bagpipes. For them, it was (and mostly remains) an instrument of pathos and beauty”<sup>12</sup> (Leshkevich 2017a). Summarising the 2000s, Todor Kashkurevich said “Belarusian bagpipe no longer appears exclusively in folklore forms; it has penetrated the jazz, modern folk projects and hard rock. This is our success. We managed to reach youth subcultures. The bagpipe has not become a part of subcultures in Lithuania, Ukraine or Russia. It only happened in Belarus” (Kashkurevich 2012, 101).

The bagpipe as an instrument for entertainment also remained relevant after the 2000s. Dance events and music festivals continued to be organised. In 2017, the bagpiper Vital Voranau founded the International Festival of Bagpipe Regions: Dudarski Rej (Bagpiper’s Reign) in Hlybokaje (a town in northern Belarus) (Voranau 2018). The same year, McDonald’s issued a smartphone application with a marketing game *Dudzim pa-pansku* (Play the Bagpipe Like a Nobleman). Users were to play the virtual bagpipe to get bonuses for buying burgers (The bytheway 2017). Eugen Baryshnikau draws attention to the role of the game, considering it to be an indicator that the bagpipe has finally been revived and has become a part of Belarusian popular culture (Baryshnikau 2025).

Thus, the bagpipe’s function as an instrument for entertainment was relevant for old rural bagpipers and reappeared in the bagpipe revival movement in the 1990s.

12 In this and the next quote the musicians probably compare the situation in Belarus only to the revival in neighbouring countries. Of course, they know about a big role of the bagpipe in Ireland, Scotland and Estonia, for example. It is worth to mention that in recent years the bagpipe has become more and more popular in Latvia (including playing during traditional dance events).

It became a trend in the 2000s and is still relevant: there are dance evenings with the bagpipe music in Belarus and abroad for diaspora.



*Photot 3: The bagpiper Mikola Stoliar performs with the band Trollwald on the festival „Kupalskaje Kola” in Minsk. June 23, 2018. Photo by Alena Leshkevich*

#### THE BAGPIPE AS AN OBJECT OF RESEARCH

Until the 1990s, bagpipers and craftsmen did not conduct their own scientific research. They used the publication of Inna Nazina (1979) for their experiments with building and playing bagpipes. At the beginning of the 1990s, Todor Kashkurevich and Ales Zhura visited the Lepel Local History Museum to study the bagpipe made in the nineteenth century and preserved there. That research was practically oriented: they tried to understand how to make such a bagpipe. Aliaksandr Surba attaches great importance to this event as the beginning of a new stage in his periodisation of the bagpipe-building neotradition: the researcher dates the early 1990s to early 2000s as an “ethnographic” period, when craftsmen began to build bagpipes inspired by the instrument kept in the museum in Lepel (Surba 2013, 256; Surba 2020, 150–152). From 1997 to 2000, Ales Los and Todor Kashkurevich conducted fieldwork in northern Belarus, recording the local people’s memories of rural bagpipers (Surba 2013, 256; Kashkurevich 2008, 108). Valuable information about old bagpipers’



playing position, repertoire and the role of a bagpiper in rural society was recorded. Those materials were not easily accessible. Ales Los published a part of them on his Facebook page in 2023 (Los n.d. 2023), thus, it is still too early to say to what extent this information has influenced the bagpipe revival.

In 2002, Todor Kashkurevich noted the lack of sound sources for bagpipe music reconstruction, although the instrument itself had already been studied (Kashkurevich 2002). At that time, only some musical notations of Belarusian bagpipes were published, but audio recordings were not accessible to bagpipers. Nowadays, more than fifty rural bagpipers' melody recordings are known. Most of them were found in the archives or discovered in publications made in neighbouring countries by bagpipers themselves (not by professional researchers). The first of such discoveries was made by Dzianis Sukhi at the end of the 2000s (Sukhi 2019; Leshkevich 2017b). Those findings changed craftsmen's approach to bagpipe tuning and fingering. First, at the very beginning of the revival, bagpipes were built in the key of G (drone and the tonic note, which was played when all the chanter holes are closed), open fingering was used (starting with all holes covered, to play a note, a bagpiper opens a certain hole on the chanter and all the holes below). After discovering archival audio materials, it became clear that traditionally the Belarusian bagpipe had closed fingering (the fingers cover holes until a finger-lift is needed to get a particular note). The bagpipe of Gauryla Slauchyk from Haradok district, recorded in 1931, was in the key of C with the tonic (drone) note on the second chanter hole from down. Nowadays, the fingering of his instrument is used to build new ones, but bagpipes in the key of G are also still popular.

Using open fingering, a bagpiper produces smooth transitions between notes. Closed fingering allows for a more ornamented style of playing; with all the chanter holes closed between notes, it also produces what is called a phantom drone. Nowadays, most Belarusian bagpipers use open fingering. Closed fingering is used by nearly fifteen bagpipers. Musicians with bagpipes of the Western European style (*dudelsacks*) and with Scottish bagpipes often play during Belarusian bagpipe music events. There are serious debates about what is traditional and what is Belarusian in bagpipe music. The bagpiper and researcher Stanislau Chavus explained the situation of the bagpipe revival in 2016, which is still partly relevant: "What is now perceived in the media as the Belarusian bagpipe tradition is a very motley thing. There are Scottish bagpipes, German dudelsacks and medieval repertoire in it. This is our living tradition today, no matter how much individual bagpipers try to work with ethnographic material" (Leshkevich and Antanovich, 2016). It is hard to say that archival audio recordings of the bagpipe are widely used by contemporary urban musicians. They reconstruct some tunes, but not all of them. Most of their repertoire is dance melodies learned from the recordings of other instruments and adapted for the bagpipe.

In the 2010s, the study of Belarusian bagpipes intensified: scientists, bagpipe builders and musicians were engaged in it. Bagpipers found more and more archive recordings of bagpipe music and discovered museum artefacts<sup>13</sup>. Knowledge was disseminated through social media, academic publications and private conversations. Eugen Baryshnikau organised a section on bagpipes at the International Congress of Belarusian Studies in 2013, 2014, 2016 and 2022. Aliaksandr Surba defended his thesis in art history, “*Belaruskaiā duda ŭ kantėkstse ŭskhodneeŭrapeiskaj tradytsyi: typalohiā, kanstruksyjnyā i dėkaratyŭnyā asablivastsi*” (The Belarusian Duda in the Context of Eastern European Tradition: Typology, Constructive and Decorative Features) in 2016, and published a book with the same title in 2019 (the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition was published in 2020) (Surba 2020). Many research-based books, articles and even a glossy magazine were published by bagpipers in the 2010s (Sasnouski 2010; Dudar 2012; Kalatsej and Remishevskij 2013; Surba 2013; Baryshnikau 2013, 2014; Chavus 2018; Voranau 2019 and others). Dzianis Sukhi emphasises the role of the internet in researching archival music recordings (Sukhi 2019).

The function of the bagpipe as an object of research is noticeable in the bagpipers’ narratives. Here is a fragment of an interview with Eugen Baryshnikau:

– What is necessary for the practical embodiment of the [bagpipe] myth to be successful?

– It seems to me that there are three components crucial for mass success. The first is a factual musical tradition, the second is a myth that arises based on this tradition, and the third is the real use [of the bagpipe] in the present [...] In the case of Belarus, we possess not only a strong myth but also enough information about the authentic tradition and the foundation of the myth. So far, this is perhaps the weakest point of the three: serious research work is necessary, the analysis of available materials, tools, sources and modern field records. (Baryshnikau 2016b)

- 13 Giving a presentation on the topic of the article in St. Petersburg, the author received a comment from the keeper of the collection of musical instruments at the Russian Ethnographic Museum, Aishat Gadzhieva. She said that she had noticed the trend of “the bagpipe as an object of research” in her work. No country has shown such curiosity about the instruments it looks after as Belarus. The assumption of one of the reviewers of this article is worth quoting: “The implication seems to be that interest in bagpipes is higher in Belarus than elsewhere in northeast Europe, but that might be an erroneous conclusion. Some other countries have more extensive collections of bagpipes of local origin to study, or have relatively easy access to museums in nearby lands (besides Russia) with specimens from the researcher’s land, so the need to visit the St. Petersburg museum is not as urgent as it is for a Belarusian researcher who can study[...] fewer specimens in Belarus”. Separate research is required for verification of this assumption.

Bagpiper Vital Voranau states, “It is not just an instrument. It’s one thing to learn how to play the bagpipe by medieval standards, or to make covers of some well-known tunes, and it’s quite another to delve into authentic folklore and a closed, traditional manner of playing, while simultaneously studying historical and literary sources” (Voranau 2018).

“What attracts people to the bagpipe is that it was restored slowly and with difficulty. Reconstructors still argue about what it should be like. It is ours, something that has been here. If we had waited a little longer, nothing might have survived; there would have been nothing to argue about”, notes Zaryna Shauko (*Lity Taler* 2018).

Thus, the research on the bagpipe started by bagpipers in the 1990s intensified in the 2010s and continues to do so.

#### THE BAGPIPE AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR POLITICAL PROTEST

In 2020, massive street protests against the falsification of the presidential election results were happening in Belarus. The music band Irdorath and their friends played at the protest in Minsk on 16 August 2020. As a result, the musicians were imprisoned for two years. Now, after being released, they live in Warsaw and Berlin. The members Irdorath do not use Belarusian traditional bagpipes, but those modelled on German dudelsacks. At the same time, their music has become an integral part of the bagpipe revival, as medieval and Belarusian tunes are often played at the same events. In general, the revival movement is open to other cultures. For example, Dzianis Shmatko noted that having learned to play the Belarusian bagpipe, one can easily learn to play the bagpipe of any country in the world (Leshkevich 2022).

The bagpipe is so important for the musicians of Irdorath that they played it right after being released from prison. The bagpiper Uladzimir Kalach recounts meeting his wife Nadzeja:

When we met for the first time after prison, on the 21<sup>st</sup> [of April 2023], we took our bagpipes and went to play near the lake. We just hugged everybody and greeted everybody. Nadia asked, when I met her with my bagpipe, “Where’s mine?” I gave her the instrument, and we just went to the lake to play, to see if we remembered the old programme. (Irdorath 2024)

The bagpiper Dzianis Shmatko had a similar approach: the main thing he thought about after being released from prison was a concert his group *Lity Taler* (A Cast Thaler) was going to perform at:

We hadn't played anywhere for a long time because of the coronavirus, so it was the only chance. And it hurt me a lot that I wouldn't be there, because I was in prison. Well, I also told the judge about the concert. And she sentenced me to three days (counted from the moment of detention), so I was released two hours later.

I called my girlfriend and said:

- That's great, I'll play at the concert.
- What concert are you talking about? It's good that you are alive after prison! All the concerts are cancelled. (Shmatko 2022)

Besides Irdorath and their friends, other bagpipers have also left Belarus and are now leading active social lives in exile. Bagpipers accompany almost every action of the Belarusian democratic forces in Warsaw, take part in music festivals and perform at dance parties. Musicians living in Warsaw learn Polish traditional melodies and play them on the Belarusian bagpipe, for example, the song *Lipka* (A Small Linden Tree), widespread all over Poland, different kinds of *oberek* (a typical Polish dance) or dances from the *Wielkopolska* (Greater Poland) region in the western part of the country.

Repressions after the 2020 presidential elections led to the termination of a large proportion of the music festivals organised by non-state actors, as well of those where bagpipers performed. Some dance events with bagpipe music now take place underground in Belarus. At the same time, bagpipers connected to state cultural institutions participate in concerts organised by such institutions as well as in other official events, for example, performing during the propagandistic All-Belarusian People's Assembly. As Eugen Baryshnikau mentions, for some musicians, the bagpipe is an instrument for political protest, while for others it is an instrument for obeying state ideology (Baryshnikau 2025).

Some bagpipers had participated in the actions of Belarusian democratic forces in Minsk before 2020; however, their participation was not as noticeable and important as in 2020 and, after that, in exile. For example, bagpipers were invited to perform in a concert dedicated to Liberty Day in Minsk on 25 March 2018<sup>14</sup>, organised by democratic forces, but in the end, there was no time for it because of changes in the programme (Leshkevich 2018a). Rock performances seemed more important to the organisers than those of bagpipers.

<sup>14</sup> See footnote 6.

## THE BAGPIPE AS AN OBJECT OF EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENT

The instrument has a great significance not only on a national level, which is illustrated by the bagpipe's function as a national symbol, but also on a personal level. The latter involves the bagpipe's function as an object of emotional attachment. For many people, the first acquaintance with the bagpipe was accidental and at the same time serendipitous. For example, Dzianis Shmatko recounts: "He saw a bagpipe – and the man couldn't be stopped" (Lity Taler 2018). "My fascination with the bagpipe sound began as soon as I first heard it. [...] I didn't play any music in my adult life; I thought it wasn't right for me, but the bagpipe has changed everything," Vital Voranau recalls (2018). As the last quote demonstrates, when first getting acquainted with the bagpipe, its distinctive sound is very important. This is what Denis Sukhi (2019) also says: "The bagpipe has fascinated me with its powerful sound and its timbre from the moment I first heard it."

Many musicians say that playing the bagpipe helps them to maintain emotional balance and that a prolonged lack of playing depresses their mood. Here is a very representative quote from Dzianis Shmatko:

I'll be honest to say that I don't always play for people. Fifty to sixty per cent of the time I'm playing for myself [...] Once I lost the reed. And it's impossible to play the bagpipe without it. I was looking for the reed for a week, and the whole week, everything fell out of my hands. When I found it, I played all day, not letting go of the bagpipe [...] To learn to play the bagpipe well, you have to live with it. When you breathe in the air into her<sup>15</sup>, she comes alive. If she breathes, she lives. And if you don't breathe, you will die. And when you learned to breathe together with the bagpipe, live with the bagpipe, absorb it into your life [...] Then, in the morning, it's a family: mom, dad, daughter, wife, bagpipe, cat, dog – that's how it should be. (Lity Taler 2018)

Almost every bagpiper has an artistic photo with a bagpipe and a romantic landscape or a sunset background on his or her social media pages. Often, such photos are bagpipers' profile pictures.

The bagpipe's symbolic function as an object of emotional attachment was also relevant at the time of the living tradition of rural bagpipe playing. "The musician I heard played a lot of Belarusian tunes, mostly dance ones, and he was fanatically attached to his bagpipe and considered this music the best in the world" (Pryvalaŭ 1928, 19). With even dancers demonstrating such a high level of emotional attachment to the sound of the instrument, it seems that a nineteenth century Belarusian folk song is still relevant:

15 The word *duda* in Belarusian is feminine.

Oj, biez dudy, biez dudy,  
 Chodziuć nożki nia tudy,  
 A jak dudku počujuć,  
 Sami nohi tancujuć<sup>16</sup>.  
 (Shejn 1887, 530)

The bagpipe's symbolic function as an object of emotional attachment is hard to connect to any particular period of time. It was relevant to the living tradition of rural bagpipe playing and has stayed important during the bagpipe revival.

### CONCLUSION

The bagpipe playing revival in Belarus has already experienced an almost 50-year history. The instrument has various symbolic functions for musicians that are obvious from their narratives and the historical facts. Some of those functions can, with a certain degree of conventionality, be called trends with specific time intervals:

- the bagpipe as an artefact – a trend in the 1970s;
- the bagpipe as another art project – relevant since the 1980s for bagpipers who joined the revival movement in the 1990s or earlier;
- the bagpipe as an object of research – relevant since the 1990s, especially a trend in the 2010s;
- the bagpipe as an instrument for entertainment – relevant since the 1990s; and
- the bagpipe as an instrument for political protest – a trend in the 2020s.

The functions of the bagpipe as a national symbol and as an object of emotional attachment are not connected strictly to any particular period of time. The former arose among intellectuals in the nineteenth century but was unimportant for rural bagpipers. However, it became essential for urban musicians during the bagpipe playing revival. The bagpipe's symbolic functions as an object of emotional attachment and as an instrument for entertainment are important not only for modern urban musicians but also for the traditional rural ones.

The bagpipe revival in Belarus was initiated from the 1970s to the 1990s by artists and instrument makers who first regarded the bagpipe as an artefact (just trying

<sup>16</sup> Oh, without the bagpipe, without the bagpipe,  
 My legs go in the wrong direction,  
 My feet don't go right,  
 And when they hear the bagpipe,  
 They dance by themselves.

to build it) and considered it just one of their art projects. An increasing number of manual labourers and IT specialists among modern musicians who started to play the bagpipe in the 2000s and later. They use modern technologies for research and the reproduction of old bagpipe recordings. Almost all bagpipers declare a high emotional attachment to their instruments.

The Belarusian bagpipe revival movement became more substantial in the 2000s: there were more bands using the bagpipe, more musicians, bagpipe makers, dancers and lovers of bagpipe music. Perhaps this surge in popularity is due to the bagpipe's symbolic function as an instrument for entertainment. Another possible explanation is the increasing role of the internet and social media, and hence the increased awareness among potential participants of the bagpipe revival movement about the existence of the instrument, concerts and dance events. The internet has also facilitated research since the 2010s.

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