

TOPIC: THE EVOLUTION OF BELARUS' YOUTH MOVEMENT IN THE 1980S: FROM CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL TO POLITICAL

LESSON DURATION:

45 minutes

TARGET AUDIENCE:

Schoolchildren, 14+

MATERIALS:

**Video links or other visual aids/equipment
(projector, screen, etc)**

LESSON BASED ON:

**An interview with Vintsuk Viachorka;
book excerpts and articles
(see below)**

ABSTRACT

The youth movement in Belarus, which was not under the control of the communist party leadership, emerged at the beginning of the 1980s, even predating Perestroika. This movement was first seen as a circle of lovers of Belarusian folklore, as was the case with the "Maistrounia" association. But gradually Maistrounia's activities diversified, including protecting and studying historical and cultural monuments as well as campaigning for the Belarusian language and education in it. Finally, in 1984, association members defended the construction of Minsk's first Belarusian theater, which in that context was an act of disobedience. After this, Maistrounia ceased to exist officially.

That said, Maistrounia inspired the development of independent youth organizations throughout the country. The Belarusian youth movement became rapidly politicized by the late 1980s. In 1989 the Confederation of Belarusian Communities (KBS), a coordinating body for the movement, was established. And thus began the movement's political phase.

COURSE OF THE CLASS:

1. National youth cultural activity in the early 1980s

Briefly tell the students about the political and cultural situation in the Belarusian Socialist Soviet Republic (BSSU) in the first half of the 1980s and the importance of the first youth cultural initiatives using the book and interviews:

— Siarhei Dubaviets. Workshop: The Story of a Miracle [B. m.] 2012.

— Interview: Vintsuk Viachorka (00:10 – 8:44).



Maistrounia at the Call of Spring in Zaslauje. April 24, 1982. Siarhei Dubavets and Vintsuk Viachorka are in front.

Print out and distribute the translation of the book excerpt:

From the book of Siarhei Dubaviets:

"This story began on Christmas Eve 1980. Minsk's Central Square was so hopelessly empty, so cold and dark that the sudden crowd of carolers falling into this cold, dark emptiness seemed either a stupid joke, because they weren't joking then, or a violation of the unity of time and place, or a real miracle. The Belarusian idea, which true patriots kept and cherished both underground and in their souls for decades, broke out to win more and more supporters until there were enough of them to struggle for national Belarus.

Perhaps it was a small revolution, because nothing like it had happened before. But in this revolution, there was no direct protest, confrontation or destruction. It was a positive, enthusiastic and not quite conscious birth. After all, the students from Belarusian Maistrounia, who went to Minsk's Central Square, could not fully understand what their actions would eventually lead to. Euphoria filled their hearts.

Perhaps it was a lump of previous generations' efforts, when the first drop of their dreams, sufferings and work, which now turned into a stream, gathered and eventually became a full-flowing river. The underground existence of the national idea is fragmentary, circles appear and disappear, are born and decline, are destroyed by the authorities. And as soon as the idea comes out of the underground it begins to "conquer the masses" and transforms into a "material force."

One way or another, Maistrounia became the first public organization, and the Belarusian national movement together with Maistrounia became a public phenomenon, no longer elitist and dissident, but open to all "people from the street."

Reference (background information for the teacher):

Maistrounia (Belarusian Singing and Dramatic Workshop): a youth arts association from 1979–1984 in Minsk.

It was created by students at Belarusian State University and the Belarusian Theater and Art Institute, though later students of other universities, graduate students and the studying and working youth of Minsk joined. The goal was reviving Belarusian folk rituals and holidays in an urban environment. Maistrounia members learned folk songs, organized Christmas, the Call of Spring and Kupalle (summer solstice) in Minsk, Zaslauje and Viazynka. They also held charity events and gave concerts, lectures and talks.

Maistrounia combined singing and folklore activities with cultural, educational and political activities. It considered a Belarusian folk revival to be the best way to raise national consciousness. In 1983, the "Belarusian School Society" was founded by Maistrounia members and advocated for the creation of Belarusian-language kindergartens and schools. Talaka (volunteer work) became a popular activity at archaeological excavations in Minsk's Troitsky suburb.

Maistrounia ceased activity in 1984 due to conflicts with the authorities, when members came to the defense of a demolished building that housed Minsk's first Belarusian-language theater. It was followed by the Uladzimir Karatkievich Youth Club (1985-1986) and Talaka (since 1985).

Ask the following questions:

- *Why did Maistrounia choose to work publically instead of privately?*
- *What events did Maistrounia organize?*
- *What national holidays were important for your family? What's the most popular in your country?*
- *What do you think: did the popularization of folk traditions contribute to the strengthening of national self-awareness in society (its partial decolonization)?*
- *How did similar cultural activities of youth in the 1980s look like in other countries?*
- *Were expressions of self-organization like Maistrounia a sign of democratization of Belarusian society?*
- *Is the topic of preserving folk culture relevant today?*

2. "Fathers and children": How did the parents of Maistrounia members react to their children's participation in independent cultural activities?

Briefly tell the students about the demographic changes that occurred in Belarus during the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s: Belarus became an urbanized country with a large urban population. In 1976, Belarus' urban population exceeded the rural population for the first time). But the majority of residents had their roots in the Belarusian countryside.

Print out and distribute this translation of the book excerpt and let the students watch the interview:

Interview with Vintsuk Viachorka (8:50 – 11:30).
From the book written by Siarhei Dubaviets:

"From whom did each of us inherit a passion for Belarusian culture in our own way? As a rule, not from our parents. Parents are busy people; they saw us exclusively from a social perspective. So Maistrounia members had conflicts with their parents.

Most often, the miracle of Belarusian culture came from grandmothers who didn't abandon their rural culture and saw us, their grandchildren, from a more timeless perspective.

The Belarusian village was still alive, and women there were the primary custodians of traditions, culture and language. Our village grandmothers told us fantastic stories, so close to our muffled genetic memory, that everything turned upside down in the child's soul and he began to search for his human identity in the city. And it wasn't there...

How is this transfer of culture happening today, when there are almost no traditional villages left? For city dwellers, Belarusian culture can be passed on to grandchildren only when it is passed on to children. And for this, parents must see their children from a more timeless perspective. In other words, parents should also take on the role of grandmothers, acting as custodians of traditions, culture and language.

In this sense, it is easier for the former members of Maistrounia, because they managed to build their bridge from a fairy-tale village to the current urban reality. But the transition of each Maistrounia member took place in its own way.

Ask the following questions:

- *Has there always been mutual understanding between the participants of Maistrounia and their parents?*
- *How important was the connection with the small family of their ancestors for the new city dwellers?*

Educational Game: "National Revival and Different Generations"

Divide the students into groups of 5-6. You will organize a discussion on the question of the relationship between different age groups in Belarus during the 1980s in the context of growing interest in national culture. Divide the students into groups of youth, parents and grandparents. Based on the information just heard, these groups must justify their approach to social processes surrounding Belarus' youth and cultural environment in the 1980s. They must express the aspirations and fears of these different demographic groups.

3. How did youth movements become politicized in the late 1980s and early 1990s?

Briefly tell the students about the political situation in Belarus and the USSR at the end of the 1980s, as well as about the unfolding Perestroika processes and the simultaneous deepening of the socio-economic crisis.

The teacher is invited to familiarize themselves with the reference literature, and students are invited to watch the interview:

Use:

— [Democratic opposition of Belarus \(1956-1991\)](#). — Mn.: Archive of Recent History, 1999

— Civil movements in Belarus. [Documents and materials. 1986-1991 / Compiled by P. Tereshkovich, V. Lebedev. Moscow, 1991. Section IV.](#)

— Interview with Vintsuk Viachorka (13:20 – 19:10)

Reference (print and distribute to students):

The Confederation of Belarusian Communities (KBS)/Confederation of Belarusian Youth Communities was an independent social and political youth association in 1989-1990. It included youth clubs, societies and communities whose goal was the national, cultural and democratic revival of Belarus, also concerned with its sovereignty. It was announced at the confederation meeting on January 14-15, 1989, at the Second Free (General) Council of Belarusian Communities in Vilnius.

The illegal group "Independence," which was created after Maistrounia closed down in 1984, decided to further develop the movement in legal cultural forms. It explicitly aimed at politicization. In February 1985, the group held a meeting of youth from Minsk, Gomel, Brest and Navapolatsk. There they decided to promote the creation of social and cultural youth organizations with the aim of developing them into a national movement. The following years saw the creation of youth associations like "Talaka," "Tuteyshiya," "Svitanak," "Agmen," "Nashchadki," the Rock Club "Nyamiga" (Minsk), "Talaka" (Gomel), "Pakhodnia" (Grodno), "Krynitsa," "March" and the Rock Club (Novopolatsk), "Uzgorye" (Vitebsk), "Krai" (Brest), "Povyaz" (Orsha), "Run" (Lida), "Syabrina" (Vilnius), "New Moon" (Polatsk) and others. Their main activities from 1985-1989 were educational, the revival of national holidays, archaeological and restoration work, the protection of historical and architectural monuments, the creation of Belarusian classes and schools, the declaration of the Belarusian language as the state language and holding rock festivals. Among their largest initiatives were mass, politicized celebrations of "Kupalle," the summer solstice, a Belarusian-Latvian ecological-patriotic water protest rally against the construction of the Dzvin-Daugava-87 hydro plant station in Daugavpils (April 29 – May 3, 1987); the ecological expedition "Pripyat-88" (May 1988); working with the memory of victims of Stalinist political repressions (November 1, 1987); rallies in Minsk in defense of historical buildings of the Upper City (March 20, 1988), in Kuropaty (June 19, 1988), near Minsk's Eastern Cemetery (October 30, 1988)

and publically raising questions about the return of historical symbols (August 1988).

Since 1989, KBS has published bulletins: "Community," "Revival News" and "Student Thought." In 1990, KBS was integrated into the Belarusian Popular Front as a coordinating body. Some communities stopped their activities while others renewed their numbers and continued their activities. In 1990, KBS activists formed the Association of Belarusian Students.



15.01.1989, II General Sejm of the KBS, Vilnius. Vintsuk Viachorka is the first on the left.

Ask the following questions

- Was the politicization of youth movements inevitable in the late 1980s?*
- What forms of political and cultural activity did youth communities use in the late 1980s and early 1990s?*
- Is the influence of youth association activities in the 1980s felt today?*
- How can the youth movement look and function nowadays?*