

The Red Thread: Rufina Bazlova's Cross-Stitch Protest

Annebella Pollen

When artist Rufina Bazlova travels on public transport in the Czech Republic, her home for the last 13 years, she often gets out her sewing. Produced in red thread on white linen, in a cross-stitch formation, her embroidery shares stylistic elements with Slavic textile traditions, where red embellishments have long decorated ceremonial and ritual clothing and textiles in geometric grids and borders. Often older women on the bus will start conversations with Bazlova, politely enquiring about what she is making. The red decorative borders look familiar to them, but the stylised figures appear to be waving flags, pointing guns and using loudhailers.

Bazlova's fellow passengers are surprised to hear that she is stitching symbolic portraits of each of the 900+ political prisoners in her native Belarus, incarcerated for their participation in pro-democracy campaigns in and around 2020. Each embroidery depicts a named two-dimensional prisoner, trapped behind cross-stitched bars, with further dramatised detail provided of their so-called crime. Through the sewing in her lap, the conversations between strangers turn to the current authoritarian regime, under president Alyaksandr Lukashenka, whose heavy-handed tactics to stifle debate and critique have created a culture of fear and intimidation in the former Soviet state. The political prisoners, classified by Human Rights organisation, *Viasna* (in English: *Spring 96*), include Bazlova's friends, from bloggers to folk musicians, whose peaceful protests led to prosecutions.

Growing up in Grodno, Bazlova's mother and grandmother were talented seamstresses, weavers and knitters; like others in Belarus, Bazlova learned to sew at school. But her own creative practice – and the reason she moved to Prague to study – was originally in illustration and works on paper. Ten years ago, looking for new symbolic languages to explore, Bazlova began to explore motifs from folkloric textiles as a coded system for communicating, adapting their abstracted ornamental vocabularies into pictogrammatic figurative scenarios. She used these to create fictional myths about the life cycles of women, produced as a folded book but also sewn into sequential panels in a never-ending circle around the hem of a dress. The red thread on white ground conjured up enduring feminine experience but the visual language of the work she called *Zhenokol* [*Feminnature*] borrowed as much from comic strips and vector graphics as it did from village traditions.

Red-and-white has remained central to Bazlova's palette across media forms. In the more politicised stitched body of work she has produced in recent years, in response to the dictatorial crackdown in her home country, the colour pairing has taken on a further national dimension. The Belarusian flag of the People's Republic, established 1918 but later outlawed, is comprised of a single red horizontal stripe across a white base. This flag – superseded by Lukashenka's official red and green banner - has become a symbol of grassroots protest; it featured regularly in the uprisings of 2020 against the totalitarian government, and her cross-stitched figures wave it in the blank space where massed protestors and armed police meet in the tense centre of the woven canvas. *The History of the Belarusian Vyzhyvanka*, the title of Bazlova's protest series, contains a linguistic pun. *Vyzhyvanka* is the name of a traditional embroidered Belarusian shirt but 'vyzhyvat' also means 'to survive'.

After Bazlova's activist textiles achieved international attention, many artists and makers asked if she had patterns that she could share; others wanted to know what they could do to help. In Bazlova's latest series, *Framed in Belarus*, she invites interested others to thread their own needles with red, and to join her in the vital work of making visible the names and stories of the ever-growing numbers of Belarusian prisoners of conscience. Inspired by letters exchanged by Bazlova with current detainees – many of whom cannot easily receive outside news or engage in uncensored

correspondence - each volunteer embroiderer will receive information about an individual incarcerated inmate and the invitation to stitch their story. Each participant's contribution will form part of a larger collective quilt that will go on show in exhibitions, currently planned for Museum of Contemporary Art Krakow (MOCAK), and travelling, from Spring 2022.

When I asked Bazlova in 2021 what she hoped *Framed in Belarus* might achieve, she stated that the ideal would be prisoners' release – in which case, the project would document of a past period of dictatorial censure and restraint. Even if that aspirational goal cannot be achieved, she hopes that she will be able to draw attention to the political conditions in Belarus, especially for those who might not ordinarily be engaged in the conversation. As she put it, 'Most people cannot stand to view brutal photographs or videos, but embroidery can bring people close to the topic. Through textiles I have been able to speak with many who are alienated by political discourse. Many people do not know what is going on in Belarus or how it relates to them. Even among those not directly affected, the situation in Belarus offers a means to reflect on their own political circumstances.'

The value of the project, Bazlova suggests, lies in its medium and how it is misunderstood. 'The current regime in Belarus', she is certain, 'doesn't think art has power'. As such, embroidered communication can pass under its radar. The decorative nature of activist textiles disarms those who cannot see beyond its fabric forms. Its soft messages can convey hard truths without drawing unwanted attention from authorities. Bazlova's position outside Belarusian borders offers further protection. 'I have not yet been labelled an "extremist" in government terms', she notes, 'but if I returned, they would surely find a way to classify me. At the moment,' she says, 'I can't go back'.

To join the collective project, *Framed in Belarus*, click on the cross-stitch QR code.