

Belarus Headlines

Issue XXXVI

January 16, 2009



Office for a Democratic
Belarus

Inside this issue:

**Belarusian
posters in
Brussels** 1

EU and Belarus 2

**Politics and
Society news** 3-4

**Economy and
Finance news** 5-6

Culture 7-8

**Yakub Kolas:
Belarusian
Homer**

We on the Web

www.democraticbelarus.eu

Exhibition of Belarusian Poster Art Reaches Brussels



The travelling exhibition of Belarusian posters, “Visual Code of the Time: Post-Soviet Art in Belarus”, has arrived in Belgium. The exhibition that features works of the country’s 19 leading masters of poster has opened in Brussels’ Aula Toots gallery on 15 January.

The residents and guests of the European capital attending the exhibition on the first night had the opportunity to meet the chairman of the Belarusian Union of Designers, Dzmitry Surski, and a member of the Union and designer, Tatsyana Hardashnikava.

In his opening speech, Mr Surski noted that the works presented in this exhibition

are part of a larger collection of over 1000 posters dating from the Perestroika era to the present day. In selecting works, the curators of the exhibition wanted to acquaint the Western public with the most important works of Belarus’ prominent masters. Many of these works received critical acclaim and awards in international competition and are now on display in museums and galleries throughout the world.

Mr Surski also explained the significant role that this flexible and powerful medium played in late Soviet and contemporary art of the country. For Surski, and for many of his contemporaries, something that had started many years ago as a hobby had become an important, and often the only, way of expression.

The opening of the exhibition was fol-

lowed by a reception during which the visitors had a chance to address their questions to Dzmitry Surski and Tatsyana Hardashnikava. The organisers also presented the 2nd edition of a catalogue accompanying the travelling exhibition that features 44 reproductions of Belarusian posters with explanatory texts in the English, French, Italian, and Belarusian languages.

The Office for a Democratic Belarus extends its gratitude to **Administration Communale d’Evere**, **Curieus Evere**, the **Robert Bosch Stiftung**, the **German Marshall Fund of the United States** and all the partners that helped make this project possible.

The posters will be on display **until January 22**. The entrance to the exhibition is free.



More photos can be found on our web-site at [photo gallery section](#)

16/01/2009
Source: ODB



EU and Belarus

Belarusian Lawmakers Discuss Climate Change with Belarusian Nordic Council Delegation



Dagfinn Høybråten

A Nordic Council delegation headed by Dagfinn Høybråten (NO) visited Minsk, the capital of Belarus, 12-13 January. They met representatives of opposition parties on Monday and government representatives

in the parliament on Tuesday. Both parties support closer dialogue with the Nordic Region.

Nordic and Baltic politicians have twice held roundtable discussions in Vilnius with government and opposition politicians from Belarus. A third seminar will be held in Lithuania, 23-24 March

2009. Climate change and energy policy will again feature on the agenda but this time a debate will also be held about the impact of the economic crisis on climate and environmental policy.

"Through the Nordic Council and the Baltic Assembly we have managed to create a meeting place for dialogue between government supporters and political leaders outside the Belarus parliament. It is a unique achievement, which we wish to develop by addressing themes like the environment, climate challenges and the economic crisis. As far as I am concerned, I hope it will be considered natural for the Nordic Council to follow up on these contacts by establishing a Nordic office in Minsk in the same way as the Nordic Region did in the Baltic capitals during a critical phase," said Høybråten, a former President of the Nordic Council

and now the person responsible for Nordic contacts with Belarus, after the visit.

As well as the two seminars in Vilnius, the Nordic Council Environment and Natural Resources Committee visited Belarus in summer 2008. During the visit to Minsk, various forms of more regular partnership between the Nordic Region, the Baltic countries and Belarus were discussed.

Some members of the opposition are disappointed that Europe has "opened the doors" after a disappointing election in the autumn, but the majority support closer dialogue.

14/01/2009

Source: norden.org

Photo: norden.org

MEPs Stress the Need for Greater Democratisation

In order to significantly improve relations with the EU, the European Parliament points out five conditions in a resolution adopted on January 15, 2009 in Strasbourg.

According to MEPs, Belarus should:

- (1) remain a country without political prisoners,
- (2) guarantee freedom of expression for the media,
- (3) continue to cooperate with the OSCE on reform of the electoral law,
- (4) improve conditions for the work of NGOs and
- (5) guarantee freedom of assembly and political association. [...]

In order to end the country's self-imposed isolation from the rest of Europe, MEPs urge the Belarusian government to respect human rights by (1) making changes to the Belarus Criminal Code, (2) refraining from threatening criminal prosecution, (3) eliminating all obstacles to the proper registration of NGOs in Belarus, (4) improving the treatment of and respect for national minorities.

Freedom of political association and media

Parliament acknowledges that some efforts have been made by the Belarusian authorities, in particular the decision to register the 'For Freedom' movement headed by former Belarusian presidential candidate Aliaksandr Milinkevich.

MEPs welcome the allowance of the printing and distribution of the two independent newspapers, *Narodnaia Volia* and *Nasha Niva*. Otherwise, they point out that there are still 13 independent newspapers awaiting registration. MEPs also welcome the decision by the Belarusian Government to discuss the international Internet media standards and to consult the Belarusian Association of Journalists.

Political prisoners and death penalty

Parliament welcomes the release of political prisoners in Belarus but also criticises the fact that some other activists remain subject to various forms of restrictions on their freedom.

MEPs also condemn the fact that Bela-

rus is the only country in Europe which still has the death penalty and call on the authorities to respect freedom of religion.

Cost of visas and 'European Humanities University' in exile

Further steps should be taken to liberalise visa procedures for Belarusian citizens, especially by reducing the cost of visas to enter the Schengen Area and simplifying the procedure for obtaining them. [...]

MEPs also call on the Council and Commission to urge the Belarusian Government to enable the 'European Humanities University' in exile in Vilnius to return legally to Belarus and re-establish itself in Minsk.

Parliament urges the Czech Presidency to make it a priority to negotiate an EU-wide agreement with the Belarusian authorities allowing children to travel from Belarus to any EU Member State organising such recuperation programmes.

15/01/2009

Source: europarl.europa.eu

Politics and Society

Experts Offer Gloomy Forecast for Media Freedom in 2009



Legal experts of the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) believe the situation regarding freedom of speech is unlikely to improve in Belarus in 2009. Director of the BAJ Centre for Media Legal Protection, Mikhail Pastukhou, expects the government to crack down on the independent media with the help of the new Media Law signed by Alyaksandr Lukashenka last year. "This [law] will affect both print and electronic media outlets. Reporters who cooperate with foreign media outlets will be hit particularly hard," predicts Pastukhou.

He also believes the Belarusian authorities would grant accreditation to

the Polish-funded pro-opposition Bel-sat television channel in order to keep its reporters under control. "The newspaper *Narodnaya Volya* now has the opportunity to get printed and distributed in Belarus. We will see in 2009 whether the newspaper will be doing better. Anyway, journalists should not count on an easy life," warns Pastukhou.

BAJ Deputy Chairman Andrei Bastunets echoed Pastukhou's opinion, expressing concerns over the Media Law that comes into force this February. According to Bastunets, the law provides for tighter control over "Internet media outlets" but does not provide a clear definition of what they are. "Second, the law envisages the re-registration of media outlets. Third,

everything depends not even on the new law but on its application. And the practice of law application [by the Belarusian authorities] has shown that it is always 'a one-goal game' and one should not expect anything good," says Bastunets.

"One should not expect the law to be abolished. When it was still being discussed by the legislature, many influential journalist organisations, human rights and non-governmental organisations, Western politicians requested it not to approve the law and urged the Belarusian president not to sign it. Nevertheless, the law was signed and is to take effect," says Bastunets.

03/01/2009

Source: BelaPAN

Belarus Church Appeals for Lifting of Ban on Priests and Nuns



The Catholic Church in Belarus has appealed for the state to rescind its ban on four priests and three nuns working in the country...

One of the priests, Fr Zbigniew Gry-

gorcewicz, was told that he was being expelled for arranging a banned Christian music festival.

Like his colleagues, Fr Grygorcewicz was active in serving the people of his parish, arranging for a sports pitch for local children to be built, providing humanitarian aid in the area, promoting ecumenical activity among the town's Christian churches, and lecturing in the Belarusian State University.

One of the many parishioners and students who have protested against the bans, Lena Akalovicz, told Forum

18 that it is "absurd" that foreigners need special permission from the state before they can conduct religious work in the country. "I think believers should take the decision over which priest should serve where, not the state."

But Mikhail Rybakou of the government's Office of the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs told Forum 18 that "the views of the parishioners are nothing to us."

08/01/2009

Source: Religious Intelligence

Belarus Plans to Build Nuclear Power Station, Lithuania Opposes Project



Vygaudas Ushatskas

Lithuania's authorities expressed their concerns over Minsk's plans to build a

nuclear power station, suggesting that meetings between the European Commission and Belarus should take place prior to the implementation of the project. A statement to this regard was made yesterday in Prague by Lithuania's Foreign Affairs Minister, Vygaudas Ushatskas, at the end of this meeting with Benita Ferrero-Waldner, European Commissioner for Foreign Affairs...

According to the Press Service of the Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "The Lithuanian political class and civil society wish to express their concern about certain issues relating to energy security and the impact upon the environment of the nuclear power station Belarus intends to build," the Foreign Affairs Minister said during his discussions with Benita Ferrero - Waldner.

Continued on page 4

Politics and Society

Belarus Plans to Build Nuclear Power Station, Lithuania Opposes Project

Therefore, Minister Ushatskas suggested that special meetings between representatives of the European Commission and the Belarusian authorities, approaching the subject of respecting should take place on the subject of nuclear safety, respect of International Conventions in this field. Independent studies should be conducted in order to

estimate the impact of the Belarusian nuclear power stations upon the environment. "The main alternative for reducing Lithuania's energy dependency is to implement as soon as possible unification projects in the electricity systems of the Baltic countries and those of Poland and Sweden, especially considering the closing of

the nuclear power station in Ignalin (Lithuania), in 2009."

Belarus intends to build a nuclear power station in Mogiliovsk. It is expected to be in operation by 2020 with a generation power of 2,000 MW.

09/01/2009

Source: Nine O'Clock

Milinkevich Announces His Presidential Bid



Alyaksandr Milinkevich, leader of the recently registered Movement for Freedom, told reporters in Minsk on Wednesday that he plans to run in the next presidential election.

"I'm going to run in the election, but if I see a worthy candidate, who enjoys support among the population and has a good chance of being elected, I'll stand by him and work for him," said Mr Milinkevich.

He expressed doubts that opposition forces would manage to put forward a single candidate. "Some opposition forces may refuse to support the idea of Belarus' independence from Russia and may advocate the formation of a united state but by methods different from

those employed by the current authorities," said leader of the For Freedom Movement.

Viktar Karnyayenka, deputy chairman of the Movement for Freedom, noted that a person meant to be the single candidate of the opposition would have "to prove his weight in the society and show that he is well-known in Belarus, and that people are ready to vote for him." It is likely that opposition forces will fail to promptly settle the issue of a single candidate, said Mr Karnyayenka. Some co-chairmen of the United Pro-democratic Forces are currently unready to discuss this issue, he noted, adding that the Movement for Freedom would make an active effort to form an impressive nomination group for Mr Milinkevich.

Mr Milinkevich predicted that an important role in Belarus' presidential election would be played by Russia. "There may be a triangle of candidates, with one representing the nomenklatura, for instance Alyak-

sandr Lukashenka, one representing pro-democratic forces and one supported by Russia". He further suggested that "Russia is unlikely to support the current Belarusian authorities".

Mr Milinkevich stressed that Belarus' independence in the framework of the Union State with Russia is impossible. "Belarus and Russia are different countries with different territories and different economies." The formation of a united state is an "ideologized, mythologized and unrealistic project that does not meet the interests of Belarus," noted Mr. Milinkevich. He nonetheless added that he advocates friendly relations with Russia. "We should take Russia's interests into consideration, but only if they don't run counter to the interests of Belarus," stressed Mr Milinkevich.

The next presidential election in Belarus is to be held no later than February 8, 2011.

14/01/2009

Source: BelaPAN

Foreign Minister Martynaw to meet with EU officials on January 26

Foreign Minister Syarhey Martynaw will hold talks with top representatives of the European Union's institutions in Brussels on January 26.

Belarusian Foreign Minister is expected to meet with the European Union "troika," which normally includes Benita Ferrero-Waldner, the EU's commissioner for external relations and the European Neighbourhood Policy; Javier Solana, the EU's high representative for the common foreign and security policy; and the foreign minister of the country that holds the EU presidency, currently the Czech Republic, a Czech diplomat in Brussels told journalists.

15/01/2009

Source: naviny.by

Finance and Economics

Belarus Devalues Rouble, Hikes Rate after IMF Deal

Belarus devalued its rouble currency by 20 percent as of Jan. 2 and raised its key refinancing rate, its central bank said a day after the country struck a deal with the IMF for a \$2.5 billion loan.

The Belarusian economy, still largely in state hands, has not been hit as hard by the global financial crisis as have those of neighbouring Russia and Ukraine, but the country has had to spend some of its reserves to maintain its currency above a floor of 2,200 to the U.S. dollar.

As of Friday, the rouble's rate will be 2,650 to the dollar. The central bank will raise its key refinancing rate to 14 percent as of Jan. 8 from 12 percent.

The devaluation is not as sharp as the fall in Ukraine's hryvnia currency

which at one point last month had lost half its value against the dollar since September, nor the Russian rouble which has lost about 30 percent against the dollar since the summer.

"The Belarusian rouble has proved to be more stable in comparison to currencies in other ex-Soviet states," a central bank spokesman said. Belarus has said it would make some changes to its monetary and fiscal policies as it was negotiating the loan agreement with the International Monetary Fund.

Long-serving President Alyaksandr Lukashenka said in December he was willing to devalue the currency, predicting a rate of 2,600. Authorities have said they would also cut budget spending and have already started re-capitalising banks.

Lukashenka, striving to improve diplomatic and economic ties with the West while remaining a close ally of Russia, has talked of greater economic liberalisation and selective privatisation.

The country received its maiden ratings from international agencies in August 2007 and had hoped to issue its first Eurobond, though was unable to do so as emerging market debt issue ground to a halt due to the global crisis. Foreign investor interest has been piqued in the past 12 months or so. Austria Telekom and Turkcell have both entered the market and authorities hoped to sell a large stake in one bank to Commerzbank.

01/01/2009

Source: guardian.co.uk

Belarus Raises Transit Tariffs for Russian Oil - Government



Germany, Poland and Ukraine, under a

Belarus has raised tariffs for the transit of Russian oil through its territory to

government order which came into force Thursday in a widely expected move.

The oil tariffs were raised by 22.5% to EUR1.47 a metric ton of crude oil pumped through the Druzhba pipeline, Russia's main export pipeline and the longest in the world, said the order published in the official legal

register.

A bitter dispute between Russia and Belarus two years ago in which Minsk angered Moscow by imposing a large customs duty on oil transits led to a three-day cut in Russian oil supplies to the European Union.

08/01/2009

Source: AFP

Currency Devaluation a Shock for Belarusians

A surprise 20 percent devaluation of the Belarusian currency has sent people rushing to shops before prices go up.

The devaluation shocked many in this ex-Soviet state where President Alexander Lukashenka, widely known as "Bat'ka" or "Dad", insulated the population from the turbulence of world markets by keeping much of the economy in state hands.

But the global turmoil has caught up with Belarus and has forced it to seek a \$2.5 billion loan from the International

Monetary Fund.

The devaluation may have been linked to the loan as freeing up the currency system, cutting social spending to balance budgets and wage controls are common conditions set by the IMF for its loans to help rebalance ailing economies.

On Dec. 31 Minsk agreed to the IMF loan and on New Year's Day it devalued the rouble to 2,600/\$ from 2,200/\$. Belarusians rushed to the shops the next day to buy what they could in anticipation of steep price rises once

the next set of imports hit the shelves.

"I don't remember such queues since the Soviet times," said Marina, a 38-year-old housewife, out shopping in Minsk. "I saw a woman grabbing onto a fridge and shouting that she got it first, while a man was telling her that he had ordered it."

"We sold 10-days worth of stock in three days," said Tatyana, a furniture store assistant. "Today, there were a lot of unhappy people. People couldn't believe that we've sold out."

Continued on p. 6

Finance and Economics

Currency Devaluation a Shock for Belarusians



The average wage, at \$400 a month according to the latest data, is now worth \$333 after the devaluation. Alyaksandr Chubrik, a Minsk economist at the Institute of Privatisation and Management, said the central bank should have cushioned the shock by devaluing the currency in stages. "This was a bad move. No one expected this," he said. "The main result is a collapse in confidence in government policies, and possibly in the banking system."

08/01/2009

Source: Reuters

EU Experts to Inspect Belarusian Food Companies

"A team of the EU experts will arrive in Minsk on January 19 to carry out inspections of the Belarusian food companies which intend to export their foodstuffs to the EU market", said head of the veterinary department of the Belarusian Ministry of Agriculture and Food Piotr Antanovich.

According to Piotr Antanovich, the EU experts will work in Belarus until January 30. They intend to inspect three companies in the Brest oblast - the Savushkin Product Company, the Bereza Butter and Cheese Making

Plant, the Santa Bremor Company. The main goal of the inspection is to certify their products for compliance with the EU standards and give them the right to export their products to the EU member states.

09/01/2009

Source: Trend News

IMF Executive Board Approves US\$2.46 Billion Stand-By Arrangement for Belarus

The Executive Board of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) today approved a 15-month SDR 1.62 billion (about US\$2.46 billion) Stand-By Arrangement for Belarus in support of the country's efforts to adjust to external shocks. The approval makes an amount equivalent to SDR 517.8 million (about US\$787.9 million) available immediately. The remainder will be phased thereafter, subject to quarterly reviews. The Stand-By Arrangement entails exceptional access to IMF resources, amounting to 418.8 percent of Belarus's quota. [...]

Following the Executive Board discussion on Belarus, Mr. Takatoshi Kato, Deputy Managing Director and Acting Chairman, said:

"Belarus is experiencing serious economic problems. External vulnerabilities have been exposed by adverse terms of trade movements, falling demand from trading partners, and difficulties in securing external finance, leading to a decline in international reserves. In the face of these shocks and the adjustment needed to contain them, the economy is likely to slow in 2009.

[...]"The adjustment of the exchange

rate parity will help restore competitiveness and address external imbalances. The adoption of the new currency basket and wider band will leave the economy better able to adapt to external shocks, thus making it less likely that further exchange rate adjustment will be needed. The increase in interest rates that preceded the shift in the exchange rate regime, and their subsequent further upward adjustment, will help support the new exchange rate regime.

"Fiscal tightening will help to bring demand into line with external financing constraints. Key measures include the planned reduction in directed lending, observance of the target of a balanced central government budget balance, and maintenance of a prudent wage policy in the broader public sector. The authorities also plan to review the social safety net, in cooperation with the World Bank, to ensure that the most vulnerable groups are protected against the economic downturn and the effects of utility tariff increases.

"Key structural reforms, including price and wage liberalization, should follow the realignment of the currency. Broader measures to support private

sector development-including reductions in the size of government, deregulation, and privatization-are also needed to underpin better medium-term growth, and should be undertaken as fast as market conditions allow. "Structural reform in the financial sector is an important priority in the program. The authorities have already enacted a blanket deposit guarantee, but the framework for financial sector liquidity and solvency support still needs to be refined. It will also be crucial to purge the banking system of directed lending. Doing so will improve incentives for banks and their borrowers to manage risks, and strengthen banks' capital positions.

Program Summary Belarus's economic program is designed to facilitate adjustment to external shocks and reduce the vulnerabilities, and also includes a number of structural reforms on issues that are critical to the mitigation of vulnerabilities. A sharp economic slowdown is forecast for 2009, with GDP projected to grow at 1-2 percent, after reaching 10.5 percent in 2008. Inflation is projected to slow to 11.5 percent in 2009.

13/01/2009

Source: IMF.org

Culture

Belarusian Homer



The Yakub Kolas square in Minsk is an enormous free space, which is extremely popular with pigeons, skateboarders and exhausted shoppers of a

nearby department store and marketplace. On sunny days people spend their time here, under the shade of birches, enjoying the breeze, which occasionally refreshes them with splatters of water from the nearby fountains. A bulky black statue overlooks this urban oasis. A bronze-cast bold man is propping up his chin, as if he were daydreaming. This is Yakub Kolas - the writer and poet, the square is named after.

In Belarus, Yakub Kolas is sometimes compared to Homer. Indeed, the two major works by Yakub Kolas, his epic poems "The New Land" and "Simon the Musician" can be compared to "The Iliad" and "The Odyssey". Similar to "The Iliad", "The New Land" describes a long and exhausting struggle, however, this struggle takes place not under the walls of Troy, but in a Belarusian village on the verge of the 19th and 20th centuries, where a poor family desperately strives to acquire a piece of land in order to gain self-respect and become independent from greedy and arrogant landlords. "Simon the Musician" is a story about a traveler and a kind-hearted musician Simon, who, like Odysseus, gets into plenty of trouble until he finally reaches his goal, which, in his case, is freedom of creation.

Yakub Kolas' real name was Kanstantsin Mikhajlavich Mitskevich (1882-1956). He was born into a big family of 13 children, in a village near the town of Staubtsy. His father Mikhal was a forester, who worked for Duke Radzivil and rented a piece of land from him.

Yakub Kolas wrote his first poem when he was 12. His father was so glad and proud of his son that he even rewarded him with a ruble. Later in his famous poem "The New Land" (is now being translated into English) Yakub Kolas will describe the life of his own family. If yes, maybe then it should be a different paragraph, otherwise I see no connection) It is a real encyclopedia of authentic rural Belarusian life, which guides you from Christmas to Easter, from winter to summer, takes you along to apiaries, harvesting, hunting... The whole year passes in front of your eyes, as you read it.

The main character in Kolas' "The New Land" poem, the father of the family Mikhal, is obsessed with an idea of purchasing a piece of land. "To buy some land, to get a place of your own, in order to escape the landlord's fetter" – this is a prosaic translation of one of the most famous lines from "The New Land". In the end of the poem, Mikhal dies and we don't know if the family ever managed to reach their goal.

Soviet ideologists had no problem with the image of a poor peasant family struggling with greedy landlords. It was the family's desire to take possession of its own land, which was problematic. After all, the very idea of the right to private property was seen as illegitimate by the communist doctrine. Nevertheless, the poem was so powerful that it instantly became a classic and even entered school textbooks. Today, the main character's wish to live on their own piece of land is also understood as metaphoric to the nation, which strives for independence.

Having graduated from a seminary, in 1902-1905, Yakub Kolas worked as a teacher in the region of Palesse in southern Belarus. He taught children, conducted ethnographic studies, and collected interesting examples of folklore. At that time the Russian empire was fermenting with revolutionary ideas, and so did Yakub Kolas. He even helped the residents of the village he worked and lived in to write a petition to their landlord, demanding the right to use a lake and some fields for their needs. Police

reacted immediately. The young troublemaker was ordered to leave the village.

In 1906, Yakub Kolas participated in an illegal convention of free-thinking teachers. The gathering was dissolved by police, and Yakub Kolas for a while lost the right to work as a teacher. He described this period of life in the novel "On the Crossroads", one of the first major novels of Belaurisian literature. The book is autobiographic and includes a story of a poor young teacher's unrequited love for a girl from a noble family, who refused to get engaged with an educated peasant. Maybe his disastrous experience explains why, unlike many other poets, Yakub Kolas is not known as someone who wrote passionate poems about love. Actually, the only short love poem he wrote, tells us a story about a girl, who takes her beloved guy's dirty socks and brings them to the river to wash. Quite an exotic love confession, isn't it?

In 1908, Yakub Kolas was sentenced to three years in prison for his "revolutionary activities" (he participated in the work of an unofficial liberal teachers' association). Yakub Kolas served the sentence at a notorious prison of Minsk, Valadarka, which provided free bed and breakfast to many prominent political prisoners until our days. It was shut down only in 2008 after the collapse of one of its towers.

In prison, Yakub Kolas began to write his second major poem "Simon the Musician". Simon, a young village boy, is shunned by everyone, including parents, for his love for music and beauty. He travels around the country meeting all kinds of people and constantly getting into trouble. The poem ends with Simon falling asleep on the grave of his beloved girl Hanna. Why did Yakub Kolas create such a tragic end? It could perhaps be explained by his mood. The poet finished "Simon the Musician" in 1918, shortly after the Bolshevik coup. He couldn't help noticing that the hero of the time was not a kind-hearted musician, but a person with a weapon and no mercy. In this new world, there was no place for such Simons.

Culture



In the 1920's, the Soviet regime pursued its "the liberal policy of "Belarusification". The Belarusian-language education developed rapidly, the cultural life boomed. Inspired by these developments, Yakub Kolas rewrote "Simon the Musician" in 1925. In this new version Simon wakes up and raises Hanna from the dead by playing his violin. Yakub Kolas began to believe that art and beauty would be able to revive the country.

However, if Yakub Kolas decided to rewrite his poem again a decade later, he would have probably created an even more pessimistic finale, than the first one. The blood-soaked 1930s had taken their toll on Yakub Kolas. On one hand the Soviet regime showered him with various prizes, honourable and lucrative positions, generous pensions and tempting stipends. On the other hand, the poet lived under constant threat of being arrested. He was accused of all kinds of "deadly sins" a Soviet poet could commit, including "propagating the class-free Belarusian nation", "idealising wealthy peasantry", "exaggerating the role of intellectuals", etc. In 1930, Yakub Kolas was forced to go through the humiliation of public self-condemnation for his "mistakes". Despite this, his uncle and his brother-in-law were arrested. The persecution reached its climax on

February 6, 1938, when secret service agents searched Yakub Kolas' home, while the poet's face was pressed against the wall and hands lifted.

By some miracle, the authorities hesitated to authorise his arrest – probably because of Kolas' tremendous popularity. Still, the poet became hostage of the totalitarian system. While speaking out against the repressions would have been equal to a physical suicide, remaining silent was going to be a suicide for Kolas as a writer. Yakub Kolas had to accept one Stalin prize after another, taking it from the bloodstained hands of people who repressed and murdered not only his relatives, but also hundreds of his colleagues and hundreds of thousands of his native people. Nevertheless, Yakub Kolas participated in official public life, adapting in his works a "social-realistic" style, and quietly residing in his house in Minsk. There, he sowed grain on a small plot of land, which reminded him of his childhood in the countryside. Yakub Kolas never criticised the regime publicly, at least not until Stalin's death. Only in 1956 the poet wrote a letter to the Communist Party leadership, voicing his concern over the suppression of the Belarusian language in public life.

How can the silence of Kolas be explained? What did he think about the brutal purges? Was Kolas a coward? Or maybe a talented but cynical careerist? Perhaps, he decided (by no means groundless) that any protest would be senseless and disastrous not only to him personally, but also to the whole Belarusian culture? After all, Kolas was one of a handful of people, who were allowed to do at least something to keep up the existence of Belarusian culture in public life.

We still have no idea about what was going in Yakub Kolas' mind – he left no notes about that. The recollections of his contemporaries are the only source that may shed some light on his feelings. While studying them, Siarhey Dubavets, one of the prominent modern Belarusian essayists and literary critics, noticed one interesting thing. He points out the passage by a literature scientist, Stsiapan Alexandrovich, who described the last day of Kolas' life in the following way:

"On August 13, 1956, after breakfast, Kanstantsin Mikhlailavich asked his driver to bring him to the forest. They went down the Moscow highway and turned left, to the hill covered with tall pines, with a grove of strong birches at its feet.

He walked around a bit, as if he was looking for mushrooms in green moss or in bushes. Then he set down on a stump. The sun was still summer-bright, but once in a while cold wind drifted in, so the poet had to look for shelter in a ravine near the birches. He lied down on a dry hummock, and noticed a big anthill under three birch-trees. He sat there for a while, withdrawn from reality, observing the ants' bustling. Then, without saying a word, he stood up, strolled around some more, sat into the car and went home. With difficulty he climbed up to his small studio, had a little snack, and, suddenly, felt unwell.

At 1.20 p.m. his heart stopped beating..."

Now, says Siarhey Dubavets, anyone familiar with Minsk's topography and surroundings, would immediately recognise that the pine-tree hill must have been Kurapaty - the place, where massive executions took place during the Stalin times. Somewhere here, where Yakub Kolas lied down on the grass, the skulls with bullet holes were buried. Many of them belonged to Yakub Kolas' colleagues, executed on October 29, 1937 during "the night of the murdered poets". Yakub Kolas couldn't have helped them, despite all his power. After all, a national poet in the Soviet Union was nothing more than a tiny ant, one of the many millions building the anthill of the great Utopia...

14/01/2009

By Ales Kudrytski for ODB



Monument to Yakub Kolas in Minsk