

Belarus Headlines

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Office for a Democratic
Belarus

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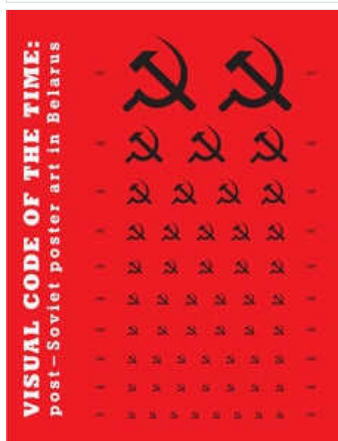
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Exhibition of Belarusian Poster Opens in Trieste



minds. They acquired an almost iconographic meaning. However, the situation has changed in the mid 1980-s. At that time Belarus was still one of the Soviet Republics, but the era when the role of an artist was reduced to that of a functionary meekly carrying out political orders was becoming a thing of the past...

The exhibition opens **at 19:00 on February 7** and is on display until February 26, 2009 at the Auditorium "Principe Raimondo" (United World College of the Adriatic): Via Trieste, 29 – Duino (Trieste), 34011.

The opening of the exhibition will be followed by a small reception and the presentation of a catalogue that includes 44 reproductions of Belarusian posters of different periods accompanied by explanatory texts in the English, French, Italian, and Belarusian languages.

In the framework of this project, works of prominent Belarusian designers have been already seen by audience in War-



saw, Berlin, Dresden, and Brussels.



The Office for a Democratic Belarus extends its gratitude to the **Robert Bosch Stiftung**, the **German Marshall Fund of the United States**, **United World College of the Adriatic** and all the partners that helped make this project possible.

03/02/2009
Source: ODB



For many years posters served to embed certain slogans and graphic symbols of the Soviet regime and communist ideology in people's



We on the Web

www.democraticbelarus.eu

EU and Belarus

EU Says Belarus 'Halfway' In Eastern Partnership Project



Ferrero-Waldner and Martynau at the meeting in Brussels

A troika of EU officials have met in Brussels with Belarusian Foreign Minister Syarhey Martynau to discuss Minsk's progress on a list of conditions set recently for increased cooperation with the European Union.

The bloc is eager to have Minsk participate fully in its proposed Eastern Partnership -- an initiative that is part of the EU's Neighbourhood Policy, designed to offer six ex-Soviet states an alternative to Russian influence -- and has been watching Belarus closely in recent months.

The EU's suspension of a travel ban on 41 of the country's top officials and accompanying sanctions in October was a gamble -- an "advance," in the words of one EU official -- designed to test the waters.

If Minsk pushed ahead with the reforms requested by Brussels, it would also signal a willingness to turn away from Russia.

That, in turn, would allow Belarus to join Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine in becoming a full member of the EU's Eastern Partnership program -- and Brussels to complete a ring of six friendly countries between itself and Moscow.

EU officials hinted in Brussels that the gamble might be paying off, saying Belarus has reacted to the prospect of Eastern Partnership membership with "great interest."

Public V. Private Assessments

Benita Ferrero-Waldner, the EU's external relations commissioner, said after the January 27 talks with Martynau that the dialogue was "encouraging."
"Of course, we're halfway, so to say, with Belarus," Ferrero-Waldner said, "but we see that they are taking important steps that go in the right direction."

Ferrero-Waldner cited a promise from the Belarusian government to simplify registration procedures for the country's media. The EU has received assurances that independent media outlets will soon need only to notify authorities by mail in order to be registered -- a far simpler procedure than the massive documentation required in the past.

Privately, however, EU diplomats say there has been little concrete evidence of reforms in Belarus. EU delegations that have travelled to Minsk since the October have reported an improved "atmosphere" for EU-Belarusian relations, but have seen few concrete reforms.

Martynau did not address his country's record on reforms during this latest meeting, saying only that Minsk expected the Eastern Partnership to be a collaboration of "equals."

"I expressed our positive attitude to the idea and concept of the Eastern Partnership, our positive appreciation of the document as it is now, and our expectation that when it will be finalized it will contain the necessary provisions for equal multilateral participation of countries -- because the Eastern Partnership has to be, by definition, inclusive," Martynau said. "If it is not inclusive, it loses its whole sense -- this is the thinking."

More Carrot

The EU, for its part, wants to give Minsk every chance to cooperate. European officials avoided any public criticism of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime following their meeting.

In past years, the bloc has maintained an almost isolationist stance on Belarus. But EU officials were quick to reverse that policy in the wake of the Russia-Georgia war in August. By early autumn, there was consensus within the EU that the bloc had to do everything it could to prevent losing Minsk irretrievably to an increasingly aggressive Moscow. Even as it slammed Belarus's September parliamentary elections as undemocratic, it offered a six-month suspension of the visa ban that had grounded 41 of the country's top decision-makers since 2004.

The bloc then offered Minsk a stake in its Eastern Partnership program. An extension of the European Neighbourhood Policy, the initiative will be formally unveiled by EU leaders at a summit in March.

Another summit will then take place with the Eastern Partnership countries in Prague on May 7. If he plays his cards right, Lukashenka could be in attendance, participating alongside his colleagues from the remaining five partnership states.

To do so, Belarus will have to make progress on the five conditions the EU set out in October. These include reform of the Electoral Code, and concrete action to safeguard democratic values, the rule of law, human rights, and fundamental freedoms -- including those of expression and assembly. EU officials indicate the bloc would initially be content with relatively minor advances.

Minsk Presses Onward

Having set out on a path of reconciliation with Belarus, a number of factors will make it difficult for the EU to return to a more isolationist stance. First, a number of its eastern member states have made winning over Belarus a political priority. For the EU, where foreign policy remains a national matter, this is something the bloc cannot ignore.

Continued on page 3

EU and Belarus

EU Says Belarus 'Halfway' In Eastern Partnership Project (continuation)

Second, the EU's own prestige is at stake. Diplomats in Brussels fear a cash-strapped Minsk could easily succumb to a gas deal being dangled before it by Moscow.

Ukraine's current woes as a transit country certainly serve as a considerable temptation for Belarus to net more of the lucrative gas transit in Russia's energy sales to Europe.

Ferrero-Waldner indicated on January 27 that Minsk is already trying to exploit the situation in its favour.

"In energy, [Belarusian officials] of course have a great interest maybe to also be one of our energy suppliers in future," Ferrero-Waldner said. "There are ideas there that they have -- on transit, exactly."

Third, the EU's window of opportunity is narrow. The eastern neighbourhood is of considerable interest to both the Czech Republic and Sweden, both of whom will have held the EU's rotating presidency this year. But 2010 will see those roles go to Spain and Belgium, neither of which is likely to consider it a priority issue.

Then there is the fact that EU officials feel the Eastern Partnership program depends on Belarus's participation to succeed. Without it, they say, the project's central "multilateral" dimension, and much of its geopolitical leverage, would be lost.

Finally, there is the EU's own bureaucratic inertia. At no point in its history has the bloc revived sanctions after suspending them. Revoking a suspen-

sion requires a unanimous decision that is difficult to achieve.

A major EU worry has been Russian pressure on Belarus to recognize the breakaway Georgian provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries. The Belarusian parliament is scheduled to discuss the issue in April. Even so, diplomats say that even if Belarus decided to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia, it would not necessarily mean the offer to join the Eastern Partnership would be withdrawn. Paradoxically, Georgia's strongest advocates within the EU are the same countries that now argue for closer links to Belarus.

28/01/2009

Source: Radio Liberty

OSCE Meets With Belarusian Opposition, Officials in Minsk

The chairman of the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) has met with leading Belarusian opposition activists in Minsk.

Janez Lenarcic and the activists discussed possible amendments to the Belarusian election law.

The issue was also the subject of talks on January 22 between the ODIHR delegation and Belarusian officials.

Anatol Lyabedka, the leader of the opposition United Civic Party, called the meeting with Lenarcic a "constructive, concrete, and professional."

Lenarcic said the Belarusian officials looked eager to introduce changes to the election code, but added that the process might be slow and drawn out.

23/01/2009

Source: RFE

Foreign Ministries of Belarus and Denmark Held Consultations

On 29 January, the Foreign Ministries of Belarus and the Kingdom of Denmark held consultations in Minsk.

The Belarusian delegation was led by Deputy Foreign Minister of Belarus Valery Varanetsky, the Danish delegation by Deputy Foreign Minister of Denmark Michael Silmer-Jons. Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Belarus to Sweden and Denmark (with residence in Stockholm) Andrei Grinkevich also took part in the consultations.

The Foreign Ministries discussed a wide range of issues of bilateral cooperation, including those related to de-

veloping political dialogue, enlarging trade, economic and investment cooperation, improving legal framework of bilateral relations, as well as relations between Belarus and EU, cooperation within the Council of Baltic Sea States and other issues.

Related information. In January-November 2008, the trade between Belarus and Denmark totalled US \$ 116.3 million with 103.1 per cent growth against the same timeframe of 2007. Belarusian export went down by 39.3 per cent amounting to US \$ 19.8 million. Meanwhile, Danish imports increased by 20.3 per cent making up

US \$ 96.5 million. Trade balance turned up negative for Belarus with US \$ 76.8 million.

Belarusian export to Denmark features rapeseed oil, medical appliances, plastic materials and timber. Belarus hosts 21 enterprises with Danish investment (9 joint ventures and 12 foreign companies). They specialize in medical equipment and cloth production, as well as in retail trade and services. In January-September 2008, Denmark invested to Belarus 6.6 US \$ million with US \$ 4.5 million as FDI.

30/01/2009

Source: ISRIA

Politics and Society

Yushchenko, Lukashenka: No Serious Problems in Relations between Ukraine and Belarus



Viktor Yushchenko and Alyaksandr Lukashenka

There are at present no serious problems in relations between Ukraine and Belarus, Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko and Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka said at a joint meeting in Chernihiv on Tuesday.

"It is a great honor to greet the Belarusian president and the friendly Belarusian people he represents - people with a similar historic past and the great, active modern life," Yushchenko said at the beginning of the meeting.

He stressed the importance for Ukraine of preserving friendly neighbourhood relations of the highest quality.

Yushchenko in particular said there are no serious problems in relations between two states. At the same time he stressed there were urgent issues for discussion in such fields as energy, trade, the oil refinery sector, and transport.

Yushchenko also highly praised the dynamics of the trade relations between two states during the last two years, noting that trade has increased by more than 70%.

Yushchenko also said the sides could sign four significant documents of interstate importance.

For his part, Lukashenka also stressed that there have never been any problems between Belarus and Ukraine, in particular on a diplomatic level, in relations between the two states. He noted that the two stated

had good border relations, and expressed his confidence that they would continue to develop at the same high level.

Lukashenka also underlined the considerable efforts taken by both sides to develop bilateral relations.

Lukashenka also agreed with Yushchenko's positive view of trade dynamics.

However, the Belarusian president also named some urgent issues that should be resolved, in particular, energy proposals.

Lukashenka also praised the documents prepared for signing.

He told Yushchenko he was welcome to visit Minsk at any time.

20/01/2009

Source: Interfax-Ukraine

Prosecutor General Says Abolition of Death Penalty Possible



Ryhor Vasilevich

Belarus can abolish the death penalty in its pursuit to join the Council of Europe, Prosecutor General of Belarus Ryhor Vasilevich told a press conference on January 21.

"If we are moving towards joining the Council of Europe, we should stick to the rules of this organisation. When in Rome, do as the Romans do," said Ryhor Vasilevich.

The Prosecutor General stressed that a small number of such sentences were passed in Belarus in 2008.

21/01/2009

Source: Trend

Georgia Accuses Russia of Blackmailing Belarus

Georgian lawmakers accuse Russia of blackmailing Belarus. The parliament of the country announced that it would consider the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia independence from Georgia soon. The issue is on the agenda on April 2.

Russia has been forcing Belarus to rec-

ognize Georgia's breakaway regions since they were recognized by the Russian Federation.

Georgian MPs say it is an open blackmail and the Belarus should evade taking such a decision if the country wants to integrate into the European community.

"This country is under serious pressure and blackmail from Russia and if this country wants to join the international society and accept new western values, they should refuse to take such a decision," says Petre Tsiskarishvili, the leader of the parliamentary majority.

23/01/2009

Source: Geo Times

Politics and Society

Chief Named For New Belarusian Human Rights Office



Uladzimir Makey

lished earlier this week.

The chief of the Presidential Office of Belarus, Uladzimir Makey, has been named to run the country's Consultative Council for Human Rights, which was estab-

The presidential press service told journalists that the council, under Makey's leadership, will work to deepen Belarus's involvement in international processes and bodies dealing with human rights.

The council's staff includes representatives of various political parties and nongovernmental organizations.

The chief of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's office in Minsk, Hans-Jochen Schmidt, told journalists that the OSCE supports the Belarusian authorities' decision to create the human rights council.

24/01/2009

Source: Radio Free Europe

Belarusian Authorities Find New Ways to Press upon Opposition Activists



Ivan Shyla, Zmitser Fedaruk, Franak Vyachorka

An activist of the *Malady Front* opposition youth group, Ivan Shyla, began a hunger strike after being forcedly recruited into the army. Tatsyana Shaputska, the spokeswoman of the *Malady Front*, says Shyla demands a revision of a medical commission's report that declared him fit for the military service.

Shyla claims the decision to recruit him is 'illegal' and calls on the authorities to put an end to such 'a form of politically motivated persecution'. A medical commission initially declared Shyla as unfit for military service. However, the decision

was unexpectedly reversed. Shyla was detained in Salihorsk on Wednesday, January 28. He was immediately taken to a Minsk recruiting station and was expected to be sent to an air defence unit the next day.

On June 3, 2008, the then 17-year-old Shyla was expelled from a general education school in Salihorsk, one day before his final graduation examination. The school administration then claimed Shyla frequently violated the school's regulations by participating in unsanctioned demonstrations and other opposition activities.

On January 28, police arrested another activist of the *Malady Front*, Zmitser Fedaruk. According to Tatsyana Shaputska, Fedaruk was summoned to a district recruiting office in Minsk,

where he was told to come back the following day. Fedaruk explained he was a student at a theological school and was eligible to defer his service in the army. However, later on that day, he was taken to a Pershamayski district police office. Having checked his name against a database, the police found out that the young man had not served a 10-day jail sentence that he received for participation in an unauthorised demonstration in May 2008. On 10 p.m., Fedaruk was taken to a detention centre on Akrestsina Street in Minsk to serve his sentence.

Earlier on Wednesday, another opposition activist of the Belarusian Popular Front's youth wing, Franak Vyachorka, was forcedly recruited into the army.

28-30/01/2009

Source: naviny.by, nn.by, ODB

Russia, Belarus to Sign Integrated Air-Defence System Agreement



According to a Russian presidential aide, Russia and Belarus have signed on Tuesday (03/02/2009) an agreement on the joint protection of the Union State airspace and the creation of an integrated regional air-defence system.

Syarhei Prikhodka said the documents

were signed at a meeting of the Union State Supreme Council, co-chaired in Moscow by Presidents Dmitry Medvedev and Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

Prikhodka added that the agreements significantly strengthened the countries' defence capability and would advance their military cooperation.

Col. Gen. Alexander Zelin, Commander of the Russian Air Force, previously said the integrated air-defence system would comprise five Air Force units, 10 anti-aircraft units, five techni-

cal service and support units and one electronic warfare (EW) unit. The system will be placed under the command of a Russian or Belarusian Air Force or Air Defence Force senior commander, at the presidents' discretion.

Besides, the two countries signed a protocol on the equal rights for Belarusian and Russian citizens on the territory of the Union State concerning movements and settlement.

03/02/2009

Source: RIA Novosti, ERB

Finance and Economics

Belarus Proposes Laying Gas Pipeline to Bypass Ukraine



According to a source in the Belarusian delegation to the current gas summit in Moscow, Belarus proposes laying a new pipeline to guarantee stable supplies of Russian gas to Europe and offers to seek the consent of Poland

and Germany to such a project.

"Belarus believes that it would be an economically efficient project today to build a Yamal-Europe-2 gas pipeline. The situation that has emerged today shows that additional reliable facilities for the transit of Russian gas to Europe are needed as soon as possible," the source told Interfax.

The proposed pipeline would carry gas from the Yamal Peninsula in north-western Siberia. It would be a second strand of the current Yamal- Europe pipeline.

"The Nord Stream and South Stream [pipeline] projects that Russia is considering cannot be implemented before 2010 [while] Yamal- Europe 2 might be put into operation within a period of a year and a half to two years with much lower financial inputs," said the source.

"Belarus is willing to take on a commitment to seek the consent of Poland and Germany to the construction of Yamal-Europe-2," said the source.

17/01/2009

Source: Interfax

Belarus Raises Gas Price for Consumers by 9.8 pct

Belarusian authorities raised prices for domestic consumers by 9.8 percent on Tuesday ahead of talks in Moscow aimed at setting a price for gas to be imported from Russia.

A resolution issued by the economy ministry said the price had climbed to \$174.18 from the previous rate of \$158.67 per 1,000 cubic metres. "The gas price for domestic producers was subject to review in connection with a rise in prices from January 1st of gas from the Russian Federation and also in connection with overall changes in economic operations," the resolution said.

The increase could be an indicator of what Belarus can expect to pay for imports from its eastern neighbour in the aftermath of the conclusion of a new gas deal between Russia and Ukraine after Gazprom cut supplies for two weeks. Neither Belarus nor Rus-

sian giant Gazprom has indicated what price will be set for 2009.

At the end of last year, both sides said agreement had been reached on conditions of supply and pricing, with details to be announced subsequently. Belarusian Prime Minister Syarhei Sidorsky is to visit Moscow next week. Belarus paid \$128 per tcm last year. Officials in the country of 10 million had earlier said they expected to pay up to \$160 this year, while Russian representatives have suggested the price will be nearer \$200. Belarus, led by President Alyaksandr Lukashenka since 1994, still regards Russia as its strategic partner and long-term plans for a post-Soviet merged state remain in effect, though without great enthusiasm from either side. But Lukashenka, long accused in the West of crushing fundamental rights, has tried in the past two years to improve ties with Western states after an earlier quarrel with Mos-

cow over energy prices.

Belarus and Gazprom signed a 2007 deal providing for Belarus to pay 80 percent of average European prices by 2009. But gas prices have in recent months been closely linked to oil prices. Under Gazprom's deal signed with Ukraine, Kiev is to pay no more than \$250 per tcm over the course of 2009, with the highest price to be paid in the first quarter.

Following big price increases in 2007, Russia extended Belarus a credit of \$1.5 billion and a further \$1 billion last year, with \$1 billion more promised this year. Belarus has so far this year received \$788 from the International Monetary Fund, the first tranche of a credit of \$2.5 billion.

20/01/2009

Source: Reuters

Belarus Forex Reserves Fall in January despite IMF Loan

Belarus' foreign exchange reserves fell \$100 million since January 1, despite receiving \$788 million as part of an IMF loan, an official said on Friday, indicating the central bank had spent almost \$900 million on propping up its currency. Belarus devalued its rouble by 20 percent on January 1, partly to meet IMF conditions set on a \$2.5 billion loan. It also cut budget expenditure and salaries in the state sector, and raised rates for communal services and increased the refinancing rate. Officials say they sought the IMF loan to create a cushion against the impact of the global financial crisis. While Russia and Ukraine have been suffering since September, Belarus's largely state-controlled economy had fared well.

Continued on page 8

Finance and Economics

Belarus Forex Reserves Fall in January despite IMF Loan

There are now clear signs, however, that the crisis has hit Belarus -- officials expect zero percent economic growth in January against 8.3 percent growth a year ago. The rouble has been under pressure despite the IMF loan because its exports have slumped. Prices for potash,

of which Belarus is one of the largest exporters in the world, have dropped from historic highs. The currency's rate was set at 2,695 per dollar for Friday, weaker than the original devaluation to 2,650/\$ from 2,200/\$. "Taking into account the credit that was

received, reserves now have been reduced by \$100 million in comparison to Jan. 1," Deputy Central Bank Chairman Pavel Kallaur told a news conference.

23/01/2009

Source: [forbes.com](#)

Turkey Interested in Construction Activity in Belarus

Mr Vedat Oflaz, the chairman of the Belarusian-Turkish Business Cooperation Council, said that Belarus and Turkey intended to step up mutual trade and investments in 2009.

According to Mr Oflaz, the two countries can cooperate most fruitfully in the construction sector and main contract business as Turkish companies show an interest in the construction of city infrastructure, shopping centres and exhibition pavilions in Belarus. Turkey's subcontracting organizations are considered one of the leading companies in this field worldwide.

Mr Gudzin Bayar, commercial counselor of the embassy of Turkey in Belarus said that Turkey has taken part in all large construction tenders in Belarus. Mr Bayar informed that "In 2008, Belarus' cooperation with Turkey was developing quite successfully in terms of establishment of bilateral relations. The bilateral trade reached USD 400 million. The volume of Turkish investments in the Belarusian economy increased too. Turkcell acquired an 80% stake in the BeST mobile operator for USD 500 million. I am sure that in 2009 the mutually beneficial cooperation will be continued."

01/02/2009

Source: [steelguru.com](#)

National Banks Reduces Reserve Requirements

The National Bank of Belarus has cut the reserve requirements for the country's banks and other financial institutions. The required reserved ratio for Belarusian-rubel deposits placed by individuals was reduced from 1.5 to 1 percent, Belarusian-rubel deposits held by legal entities from seven to six percent and deposits in foreign currencies from seven to six percent.

The new ratios are effective from February 2.

02/02/2009

Source: [BelaPAN](#)

Venezuela-Belarus Gas Projects Face Problems - Venezuelan Envoy

The Belarusian gas pipeline construction company Belgazstroy has suspended work in Venezuela, while two other Belarusian contracts are in doubt, the Venezuelan ambassador to Minsk Americo Diaz Nunez informs.

"The company suspended work over non-payments for the first part of the contract," he said.

The contract on the provision of consulting services by Belgazstroy for the construction of gas networks in the state of Barinas in western Venezuela

amounts at \$2 million and is supposed to be completed during 18 months.

The ambassador said that the problems with payments would be resolved soon.

The Venezuelan diplomat said that a second contract on cooperation between Venezuela and Belarus in the gas sphere was also experiencing difficulties. According to the diplomat, the \$1.5 million contract covers training, re-training and advanced training of Venezuelan gas specialists. The con-

tractor is the Belarusian Gas Institute.

The third contract on the provision of consulting services by the Belarusian side for the designing of gas pipelines has also run into difficulties, Nunez said.

Fresh negotiations are under way due to objections by the Belarusian side relating to the sum of the contract signed by both parties, Nunez said.

02/02/2009

Source: [RIA Novosti](#)

Culture



Butterflies and Spider Webs

A few words about Belarusian theatre



If you are looking for a pastime in Minsk, a visit to a theatre could be an option worth to think about. After all, you don't risk much: a nice seat in a major theatre would set you back about five euros. Thus, in terms of money you have a fair choice between a six-pack of local beer (another affordable way to spend a nice evening in the Belarusian capital) and a theatre ticket. Not to offend the feelings of beer-fans, what does Minsk have to offer for a theatre-lover? After all, the capital reflects the most recent trends of national theatre culture.

What surprises you the most, is how traditional Belarusian theatre is. In the West, it wouldn't be a novelty to see, for instance, Hamlet reciting his famous monologue while lying down on a couch of a psychoanalyst. In Belarus, however, Shakespeare is quite often taken literally. The premiere of "Mackbeth", which took place at the Yanka Kupala theatre in 2006, offered enough sword fights, armour rattling and bellicose screams to please the entertainment-hungry crowd visiting The Globe in its early times.

For a present-day Westerner, used to minimalist scenery sets, flamboyant decorations found in major theatres of Minsk may look impressive. However, those who search for bold versions of drama classics and are craving to discover new names and plays will have a hard time in the capital of Belarus, let alone the rest of the country. In a fight "tradition versus innovation" the former still poses as a heavyweight. For most of the 20th century, Belarusian theatres were run and financed by the state. Top directors occupied offices with comfortable armchairs, being typical Soviet-type managers rather than innovators. In the Soviet time, theatre was supposed to provide support to ideological dogmas or merely serve as a living illustration to the printed editions of drama classics,

something like a visual aid for groups of school pupils studying the history of literature.

The Soviet legacy of artistic apathy can still be felt today, even though the financial situation has changed. The state dramatically curtailed its support, which is now limited to providing maintenance costs for theatre houses and salaries for their employees. In order to stage new plays, theatres must earn money themselves. As an exception, the state budget provides financial assistance to certain "socially relevant" performances – domestic and international classics, or modern plays dealing with Belarusian history. Of course, if you want to secure financing for such a play, you soon become entangled in procedures required by the Ministry of Culture and various ideological institutions. The spider web they have woven is apt at capturing butterflies of innovation.

Rather than getting involved in a risky business of uncovering new approaches and names, many theatre directors choose to bet on the safe horse by accepting state-sponsored commissions for plays. As a result, different theatres closely resemble each other in their repertoire, which, to a large extent, reflects the current tastes of officials in the Ministry of Culture.

While the uniform state ideology is omnipresent, the unique ideologies of theatre creators are lacking. "The biggest problem of Belarusian theatre is, perhaps, the absence of "ideologists", the shortage of theatre-makers (actors, directors as well as playwrights) which have their own programme to offer, their idea of theatre, which they firmly believe in," writes Belarusian theatre critic Tatjana Kamonava in her comprehensive article "World Seen in a Mirror" published in the edited book entitled "Landvermessungen" (Theater der Zeit, Berlin, Germany, 2008). "And this doesn't have anything to do with censorship. During the last century we relied upon 'great masters', artistic directors of state-run theatre companies, which held

their offices for decades. As a result, the subculture of creative directors, so vital for the diversity of theatrical life and healthy artistic rivalry, was neglected. The generation of 25-, 30-, 40-year-old theatre directors is lacking in Belarus."

Today, the state not just gives away money – it invests into culture and expects to have a return on its portfolio. The reconstruction of Opera and Ballet theatre in Minsk is the most recent example of this controversial approach. The theatre is an imposing constructivist landmark, built in 1934-1937 by Joseph Langbard, architect, who largely shaped the image of the new Soviet-era Minsk. For decades, this grey concrete barrel silently overlooked the Belarusian capital, slowly eroding and hosting flocks of ghostly pigeons under its tin roof. Now, the theatre undergoes an unprecedented renovation. On the outside, the walls are freshly painted and decorated with large but somewhat kitschy sculptures, on the inside a state-of-the-art



Belarusian ballet dancers with maestro Elizaryeu

hydraulically powered stage is being constructed under the guidance of specialists from the tradition-rich Semperoper opera theatre (Dresden, Germany). However, for Valyantsin Elizaryeu, the legendary director of the Ballet theatre, this sight brings no optimism. Having returned from a month-long tour of South Korea with his ballet company in December 2008, Elizaryeu learned that the Ministry of Culture ordered to reorganize the theatre. He was offered a position of artistic director, subordinate to a new general director, who still had to be appointed. "Our Opera and Ballet theatre needs a strong "hozyaystvennik" as its head," he

Culture

some kind of “apparatchik” with a business grip. Elizaryeu rejected the offer, wrote an open letter to President Lukashenka, called a press-conference – to no avail. Finally, he resigned completely, and was dismissed in an instant – despite of his 36-year-long experience of making the Belarusian Ballet one of the few truly profitable and internationally demanded products of our modern culture. Will the new “hozyaystvennik” manage to keep up his successes – even with a hydraulically powered stage?

But a crisis can also force a theatre to reinvent itself. Towering managerial, financial, and artistic problems brought the Yanka Kupala Theatre, another pillar of Belarusian theatre scene, to the verge of collapse. The Yanka Kupala Theatre is situated in an old park in the heart of the Belarusian capital. Built in 1888, it is the oldest Belarusian city theatre house, which survived until our days. Today this is the leading Belarusian theatre, which stages plays in the Belarusian language. After a long period of lethargy, a big scandal erupted in October 2008. Miniscule salaries, administrative pressure, and stagnation of creativity forced a group of actors to voice their concerns, which climaxed in an open letter to the president, blazing with fury over the inadequate state policy towards the Yanka Kupala Theatre in particular and the whole sphere in general.

The situation was so severe, that usual tactics of firing dissenters would not have worked. In the end, the Ministry of Culture made a bold move. It proposed Mikalay Pinigin, a relatively young and ultimately talented theatre director, to become the head of the Yanka Kupala Theatre. Pinigin made a name with staging plays by classical Belarusian authors like Yanka Kupala or Dunin-Martsinkevich. He turned every play into a parable of the present Belarusian reality. His works are anything but politically correct, and yet witty enough to escape ideological Scylla



*New director of
Yanka Kupala
Theatre
Mikalay Pinigin*

and Charybdis. It seems that Mikalay Pinigin, (born in Ukraine, studied in Belarus, worked in Russia) has a unique multicultural view of Belarus, which allows him to see the country from a new angle. At the same time, he would not be a very comfortable figure for the Ministry of Culture, because of his independent attitudes. Nevertheless, the deal was made. Actors welcomed Mikalay Pinigin the way Americans greeted Barack Obama on the Mall. Many, reportedly, had tears in their eyes, and most had new hopes for a better future for their theatre. The address of Pinigin to his new company was short. “There will be no long speeches, the work begins.”

Actually, Yanka Kupala does seem to have a rebel aura. In 1917, its building hosted the First All-Belarusian Congress. It was the first attempt by the Belarusian nation to make important decisions in a parliamentary way. The idea was to bring 1800 delegates representing all regions of this land and all strata of the Belarusian society in order to decide upon the future of the country. The Congress was boiling up with ideas and emotions for more than a week. Some delegates supported independence of the country, others stood for a union with Russia. After it became clear that the Congress was likely to vote for the independence of Belarus, Bolshevik troops surrounded the theatre and dismantled the gathering in a dramatic showdown, which involved a lot of swearing, swinging pistols and some skirmishes. Belarusian theatres may seem to be havens of tranquillity, but there are times when they become places of exciting performances.

But let’s go back to our time and listen to Tatjana Kamonava again. “If you speak about contemporary Belarusian theatre, it becomes obvious that although there are singular personalities who think in terms of modern art, still most of Belarusian theatres have effectively shut themselves out in isolated cocoons, like caterpillars. They will turn into butterflies only when they have courage to look around. They will be surprised to see how diverse and exciting life around them is.” One should only add here: watch out for spider webs.

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By Ales Kudrytski for ODB



A scene from a play “Pinskaya Shliakha” (Noblemen of Pinsk)



Yanka Kupala Theatre in Minsk



*One of the leading actors of
Yanka Kupala Theatre Mikalay
Kirychenka*