

Belarus Headlines

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*Office for a Democratic
Belarus*

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We on the Web

www.democraticbelarus.eu

EU AND BELARUS SIX MONTHS AFTER: ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES AHEAD

March 4, 2009

14:00 – 17:30, room P7C050, Paul-Henri Spaak building, European Parliament, Brussels

Dear colleagues,

The Parliamentary Groups of the **Party of European Socialists**, the **European People's Party (Christian Democrats)** and **European Democrats** in the European Parliament in co-operation with the **Office for a Democratic Belarus** and the **Pontis Foundation** are pleased to invite you to take part in a debate on EU-Belarus relations that will bring together representatives of Belarusian NGOs, Members of the European Parliament, senior officials of the EU Council and the European Commission, as well as other interested parties.

The debate will be preceded by a presentation of a 'Monitoring Report on Developments in Belarus, October 2008 – January 2009' prepared by the *Belarusian International Implementers Meeting (BIIM)*.



with enthusiasm and have hitherto made some, albeit limited, progress towards greater political openness. But will that be enough to justify the expansion of contacts with the

In October 2008 the EU granted Belarus a six-month "grace period", temporarily lifting a visa ban on state officials. The change of policy was meant to encourage development of democracy and respect for human rights in the country. The EU is to review Belarus' progress in April 2009, and decide whether to re-impose restrictions or expand its links with the Belarusian government. The debate organised in the European Parliament provides a forum to evaluate developments in Belarus since October 2008 and to discuss steps the EU can take in relations with Belarus after the April review.

Belarusian authorities reacted to the EU's decision

current regime in Belarus? And will the Belarusian government be able, and willing, to continue the liberalisation process after April 2009?

24/02/2009

Source: ODB



EU and Belarus

EU Foreign Policy Chief on First Visit to Belarus



The Secretary-General of the EU Council and the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, Javier Solana, paid his first visit to Minsk. On February 19, Solana held a meeting with the representatives of Belarusian civil society and the opposition, including former presidential candidates Alyksandr Milinkevich and Alyksandr Kazulin, human rights activist Aleh Hulak, legal expert Elena Tonkacheva, economist Pavel Daneyka, leader of the Congress of Democratic Trade Unions Alyksandr Yarashuk and chair of the Belarusian Association of Journalists Zhanna Litvina. The Belarusian activists told the EU official they were in favour of the Minsk-Brussels dialogue, but they also informed him about the controversial



drafting of young opposition activists into the army, the recent arrests of dissidents, and the violent break-ups of two opposition protests earlier this month. The two sides also discussed the situation on media freedom.

During his meeting with President Lukashenka, Solana noted that there is a consensus in the EU that Belarus is a European country and expressed hope that their talks would be 'productive and constructive' for EU-Belarus relations. Lukashenka, for his part, suggested that the two sides 'exclude [from their dialogue] any mediators, especially those who have unfriendly attitude towards the country'. On his return from Minsk, Solana reportedly told EU ambassadors that Lukashenka had made it clear that his country is 'looking to-

wards the EU'. Ostensibly, the Belarusian President had noted that Belarus' relations with Russia were better under Boris Yeltsin and had expressed serious concern about what he had called was growing Russian pressure.

According to some sources, the EU foreign policy chief believes Lukashenka should be invited to the Eastern Partnership summit in May. However, many EU officials stress that much will depend on whether Belarus recognises independence of Georgia's break-away regions. 'It is natural that Belarus [has] a sovereign parliament and the parliament of Belarus has its own decision [to make],' said Czech Foreign Minister Schwarzenberg, 'but if they would recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia it would create a very, very difficult situation for Belarus.' Those who advocate the country's inclusion in the new EU initiative say the stakes are too high to hesitate even if Minsk recognises these regions. Others, however, express concern that this might lead Georgia to pull out from the project.

19-23/02/2009

Source: RFE/RL, BelaPAN, ERB, BelTA

PACE Rapporteur to Propose Restoring Special Guest Status



PACE delegation at a meeting in Minsk

The rapporteur on Belarus of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), Andrea Rigoni (Italy, ALDE), has said he will propose restoring Special Guest status to a delegation from the country's parliament - provided a mechanism can also be found to associate representatives of the extra-parliamentary opposition.

Goran Lindblad (Sweden, EPP/CD), the head of a PACE delegation which has

just ended a four-day visit to the country, said: "The Assembly wants to bring Belarus closer to Council of Europe standards. Isolation has been tried and it has not worked. Mr Rigoni's proposal would allow the beginning of a structured dialogue, partly as a response to some positive developments in the country."

However he pointed out that any restoration of Special Guest status - if it was decided by the Assembly - should be temporary, and renewal will depend on Belarus making further progress towards democratisation. Contrary to an announcement by the Belarus state TV channel, there has been no decision to restore Special Guest status. There is only a proposal, which could be discussed by the Assembly as early as its June session, he added.

The three-member delegation also welcomed the release of all political prisoners, and expressed interest in the new Consultative Councils set up to allow a dialogue between civil society and the authorities. However, it remained concerned about freedom of association and assembly, and said that progress in developing media freedom - despite some limited positive steps - was essential. [...]

Finally, the delegation said it was keen to see the opening in the very near future of a Council of Europe InfoPoint in Minsk, which should be a starting-point for engaging with the Belarusian public at large.

18/02/2009

Source: coe.int
Photo by nn.by

EU and Belarus

EPP-ED Delegation Returns from Minsk



Laima Andrikiene, Jacek Protasiewicz

A Delegation of the largest political group in the European Parliament, the Group of the European People's Party and European Democrats, went on a fact-finding mission to Minsk, Belarus on February 20. The visit focused on the assessment of the latest political developments in Belarus, EU-Belarus relations, the human rights situation, and the freedom of the press.

The Members of the Delegation - Christopher Beazley MEP (UK, Head of Delegation), Laima Andrikiene MEP (Lithuania) and Jacek Protasiewicz MEP (Poland) acknowledged the positive steps taken by the Belarus authorities such as the release of the internationally recognized political prisoners, registration of 2 independent

newspapers, registration of the movement "For Freedom" and the non-recognition of the separatist regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. "We express our concern that despite the recent positive developments, human rights are still violated in Belarus and politically motivated pressure and harassment of democratic activists, independent newspapers and believers is witnessed in the country", declared Christopher Beazley MEP.

"An independent, secure and stable Belarus is the interest of the EU. The recent "European week" in Belarus is not only about the visits of the EU High Representative Javier Solana and the delegation of the EPP-ED from the European Parliament. This week is also about the repression against the democratic demonstrations of February 14 and February 16. It gives a clearer picture on the processes going on in Belarus. The EU has always took a firm stand in promoting and defending human rights, democracy and the rule of law – fundamental European values", underlined Laima Andrikiene MEP.

"EU has a good will to help its neighbour to live during the difficult times, but initiative should not go only from the EU. Help us to find the arguments to help you", said Jacek Protasiewicz during the press conference with Belarus journalists. "In order to develop further the open dialogue between EU and Belarus there shall not be any further practices of repression against democratic activists, isolation of young activists by expelling them from universities and freedom restrictions and compulsory work sentences for democratic youth", said Member of the European Parliament.

The Members of the Delegation met the officials from the Foreign Ministry of Belarus as well as the leaders of the democratic opposition, the Ambassadors of EU Member States residing in Belarus and the representatives of the civil society.

23/02/2009

Source: EPP-ED press service

Politics and Society

New Media Law Takes Effect in Belarus



A new Media Law, which is described by some critics as draconian, took effect on Febru-

ary 8. The law was passed by the Parliament in June 2008 and signed by Alyaksandr Lukashenka on July 17.

The law bans media outlets from receiving money and any other resources from foreign citizens, legal entities as well as 'anonymous sources', and restricts the maximum share of foreign capital in a media outlet's capital stock to 29%.

In addition, the new legislation prohib-

its journalists from working for foreign media outlets without accreditation and provides for sanctions against 'the distribution of false information that may cause damage to state and public interests.'

The law has been criticised by media freedom advocates who have urged the government to bring it into line with international standards. Speaking at a news conference last week, Deputy Information Minister Liliya Ananich claimed that the new legislation would 'considerably' simplify the registration procedure for new media outlets and 'provide for a well-defined mechanism of responsibility'. Deputy Minister explained that now a media

outlet will be subject to specific regulations and not common laws. She also said 'there is an exhaustive list of grounds for issuing a warning to a media outlet or suspending its activity.'

Ananich told the audience that online news sources would not be required to apply for registration after the entry of the law into force.

The new Media Law was subject of a round-table conference attended by government officials, journalists, representatives of the OSCE and the European Commission office in Minsk on February 4.

09/02/2009

Source: naviny.by

Politics and Society

Formal Charges Brought against Vaukavysk's Dissidents



On 8 February 2009, former political prisoners Mikalai Autuhovich and Yury Lyavonau were arrested by a special police force in the Belarusian city of Vaukavysk.

The arrests were sanctioned by an order of the Prosecutor General of Grodno. The police conducted searches in the office of the company where the two men work as taxi drivers, in their apartments and even in their gardens. Despite the fact that no compromising evidence was found, Autuhovich and Lyavonau were detained and brought to a Minsk detention centre on the Akrestina Street. Later it was learned that one of Autuhovich and Liavonau's colleagues, Uladzimir Asipenka, was also detained. Reportedly, the searches were

also conducted in the apartments of other opposition activists in the town of Vaukavysk.

According to human rights activist Aleh Vouchak, Autuhovich and Liavonau have been suspected of committing a crime under Article 218 (Part 2) (i.e. intentionally destroying or causing serious damage to a property). This article carries a punishment of up to 5 years of limitation of freedom or 3 to 10 years of imprisonment. Vouchak explained that, in 2005, a house of a police officer (Katsuba) from Vaukavysk was set on fire. Two people have already been found guilty of committing this crime and imprisoned.

On February 18, the arrested have been issued formal charges. Autuhovich's lawyer Pavel Sapelka said his client faces charges under Part 3 of the Article 218, which provides for a punishment for deliberately destroying or damaging a property in a way that endangers public safety or causes a large-scale damage. If found

guilty, Autuhovich will receive a sentence of between seven and twelve years in prison. Sapelka said he would appeal against the charge.

Uladzimir Asipenka faces charges under Part 2 of the same article that carries a prison sentence of between three and 10 years, says his attorney Tamara Sidarenka.

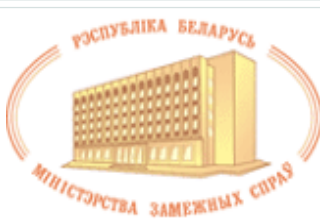
It was not immediately clear under what part of the article Lyavonau would face charges. He is currently in the state prison hospital in Minsk.

In July 2006, Mikalai Autuhovich and Yury Lyavonau have already been sentenced to three and a half years of imprisonment and were internationally recognised as political prisoners. In January 2008, as a result of the pressure from the international community the imprisonment sentence was replaced with corrective labour for both of them.

09-18/02/2009

Source: BelaPAN, ODB, Nasha Niva

Russia and Belarus in Diplomatic Row



Russia and Belarus were caught in a diplomatic row after

Minsk said that it would not send its troops into combat as part of a new regional security accord. Belarus responded angrily to comments made Saturday by Russia's ambassador to Minsk that inter-governmental agreements carry greater legal weight than domestic law, which Belarus says bars its troops from joint-combat missions.

"Firstly, I would like to emphasize that it will not be for ambassadors of other countries to interpret relevant elements of the Belarusian legislation, foreign ministry spokesman Andrey Papou said. "Secondly there is a law of our

country on that subject and it will be rigorously implemented."

Belarus, normally seen as a close ally of Russia, signed on as a founding member to an accord last week creating a rapid military reaction force based in Russia.

The Collective Security Treaty Organisation, seen as an ex-Soviet counterweight to NATO, is comprised of Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

But Belarus appeared to be backing away from one of the key provisions of the agreement, namely that it would contribute soldiers if necessary to take part in cooperative security actions.

"I want to emphasise with all certainty that our lads don't fight in 'conflict zones', and that they aren't going to fight," Foreign Minister Syarhei Martynau said in an interview on Belarusian state television Saturday.

"All of our laws on this theme will be followed to the letter, and of this no one should have any doubt." Public reaction from the government in Moscow to the news has been muted but conciliatory.

One possibility floated by the Kremlin is for Belarusian troops to serve in a non-combat capacity. "The Belarusian constitution, indeed, forbids its military forces from serving in military operations for a foreign power," a foreign ministry spokesman told the Kommersant newspaper.

11/02/2009

Source: AFP

Politics and Society

Belarus, Germany Agree on Belarusian Children Recuperation in Germany



Siarhei Martynau and Frank-Walter Steinmeier during the meeting

On February 11, Foreign Minister of Belarus, Siarhei Martynau's, and his German counterpart Frank-Walter

Steinmeier exchanged notes constituting the intergovernmental agreement on recuperation of Belarusian children in Germany. The exchange of notes took place during Martynau's official visit to Germany.

The talks highlighted a wide range of items on the bilateral agenda, including EU-Belarus relations, regional and international policy. Siarhei Martynau also signed the Statute of the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), whose statutory documents are deposited in Germany.

The Foreign Minister of Belarus also visited Potsdam, the capital of the Federal State of Brandenburg. Martynau and the Prime Minister of Brandenburg, Matthias Platzeck, discussed potential areas for co-operation, including economy, energy and culture.

Syarhei Martynau presented his report "Belarus-EU dialogue: New Prospects" at the German association for foreign policy.

12/02/2009

Source: Trend News

Belarusian Police Disperse Protests



Belarusian police have forcibly broken up a rally of about 100 opposition demonstrators.

The activists were rallying to protest against politically motivated arrests of three entrepreneurs. They held banners saying «Freedom to Lyavonau, Autuhovich, Asipenka!» and «No to Political Terror!»

Riot police quickly dispersed the protest Monday, beating some of the demonstrators with truncheons. At list two people are reported to have been beaten severely.

Earlier Belarus' annual opposition rally on Valentine's Day was broken up violently by police this year.

Since the late 1990s, youth activists in Minsk have protested on February 14, with some of them sending cards to Brussels -- a symbol of their support for Belarus joining the European Union.

This year, thousands of activists from Belarus' Youth Front movement and

other youth organizations gathered on Minsk's Yakub Kolas Square on Saturday afternoon. (Photos here from our Belarus Service.)

Activists tried to march towards Independence Avenue with the banned white-red-white Belarusian flags and posters saying "Action of Love."

But police blocked their way to the avenue and used force to disperse the gathering, beating many of the activists.

14-16/02/2009

Source: PR-inside, RFE/RL, ODB
Photo by Reuters

Trial of Belarusian Youth Activist Set



Artyom Dubski

The trial of a leader of Belarus' un-registered Youth Front movement has been scheduled for March 3.

Belarusian authorities on the Belarusian-Ukrainian border detained Artyom Dubski on February 13 as he was headed to Minsk to take part in an annual opposition rally on Valentine's Day.

Dubski faces charges of illegally leaving his town once last year.

In 2008, he was found guilty of participating in an unsanctioned protest and his freedom was restricted for two years, which includes a ban on leaving his town.

He later fled to neighbouring Ukraine to avoid other criminal charges against him.

19/02/2009

Source: Radio Free Europe

Politics and Society

National Council on Labour and Social Matters Approves Government's Plan for Implementing ILO Recommendations



The National Council for Labour and Social Matters has approved the government's plan for implementing recommendations of the International Labour Organization (ILO).

The council includes government officials and representatives of trade union associations and employers.

The plan was devised in Minsk on January 22 in co-operation with a group of international experts, said Labour Minister Uladzimir Patupchyk at the council's meeting on February 20.

The group included Guy Rider, Secretary General of the International Trade Union Confederation, and Kari Tapiola, the ILO's Executive Director for standards and principles.

On January 21, Messrs. Rider and Tapiola took part in a workshop on the implementation of the ILO recommendations.

The ILO Commission of Inquiry adopted the 12 recommendations for the Belarusian government in late 2004, after considering a 200-page report compiled by a special commission formed to probe the government's alleged interference in the activities of trade unions.

In particular, the Commission suggested removing obstacles to freedom of association, amending laws to allow workers to organise freely, respecting independent unionists' civil rights, and guaranteeing protection to labour organizations that are subject to harassment. This concerns the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions and several other organisations.

In December 2006, the EU decided to suspend Belarus' trade benefits under the Generalized System of Preferences as punishment for Minsk's failure to respect independent trade unions' rights and carry out the ILO recommendations.

22/02/2009

Source: naviny.by

Finance and Economics

Galt & Taggart Securities Takes Top Belarusian Position

Galt & Taggart Securities solidified its leading position on the Belarusian market, taking the top spot on the Belarusian Currency and Stock Exchange (BSCE) by trading volume in January 2009, according to the BSCE monthly report.

"Galt & Taggart Securities has been the undisputed leader on the Georgian stock market over the past five years, and last year we established ourselves as a Top-5 broker in Ukraine, so I'm very pleased to see that our Belarus team was able to make such big

strides, grabbing the top spot in Minsk after less than one year in operation," commented Nick Piazza, CEO of Galt & Taggart Securities.

After receiving its securities trading license in Belarus in August 2008, Galt & Taggart Securities led trading on the Belarusian stock exchange in January with more than BR7.4bn (US\$ 2.79 mn) in volumes.

Aleh Gud, director of Galt & Taggart Securities' Belarusian office, was pleased with the result. "We believe

that this is just a sign of things to come. We have big ambitions for the local market and look forward to increasing our volumes as time goes by. Volumes significantly increased at the beginning of this year as the Belarusian government made steps to liberalize the local trading environment in 2008. The government cancelled its right to a golden share in state-owned companies, as well as the ban on trading shares acquired on preferential terms or in exchange for "Property" checks.

05/02/2009

Source: [The Financial](http://TheFinancial)

Inflation at 4.1% in January in Belarus



According to the National Statistics Committee, in January 2009, inflation in Belarus ran at 4.1%. In January 2008, it was 2.5%.

In January 2009 the Consumer Price Index (CPI) increased by 15.1% from January 2008. In 2008 inflation reached 13.3%.

11/02/2009

Source: BelTA

Finance and Economics

Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus Stepping up Co-operation in Energy Sector

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Volodymyr Ohryzko expressed his country's readiness to supply electricity to Lithuania via Belarus during talks in Vilnius. He participated in a meeting between Ukrainian, Lithuanian and Belarusian foreign ministers and spoke at a trilateral meeting of energy experts.

Ohryzko said that the implementation of this project had already been supported by the presidents of three states and was foreseen in a roadmap for the development of Ukrainian-Lithuanian partnership for 2009-2010, the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry's press service reported. For this purpose,

Vilnius hosted talks between the experts of three countries on the technical and technological aspects of implementing "this mutually beneficial, trilateral project."

The participants in the talks also discussed trilateral co-operation on the realisation of infrastructure projects in the energy and transport sectors, as well as the issues of creating the Baltic-Black Sea economic space. Ohryzko also stressed the importance of realising the project of transporting Caspian oil, using the Odesa-Brody-Plock-Gdansk pipeline, to Europe, including Lithuania.

The ministers also stressed the need to improve trilateral interaction on the functioning of the combined transport train 'Viking'. The implementation of this project will help improve the transport system of the Baltic-Black Sea economic space and extend the geography of cargo transportation.

Lithuanian Foreign Minister Vygaudas Usackas, for his part, said that after the negotiations, experts could draft an agreement on the transit of Ukrainian electricity to Lithuania via Belarus by May 2009.

16/02/2009

Source: Ukrinform

Chery Auto Mulls Plan To Produce Cars In Belarus



China's Chery Automobile and Belarus' MAZ are set to develop a business plan for the production of passenger vehicles in Belarus this April, *Prime-Tass* reports.

"We are in talks at government's level. Belarus' First Deputy Prime Minister

Uladzimir Syamashka, representatives of the Industry Ministry and top management of MAZ and Chery Automobile are participating in the negotiations," says Syarhei Varyvoda, the chairman of the Council of Distributors of Chinese cars in Minsk.

He believes there would be a huge demand for locally built Chinese cars in Belarus, referring to the survey

which shows that the number of Belarusians willing to buy Belarus-built Chinese vehicles is 18 times as big as the number of those in favour of imported ones.

In 2008, a total of 800 Chinese vehicles were sold in Belarus, up 77.8% year-on-year.

20/02/2009

Source: theautochannel.com

Deputy PM Visits Belarus

Poland's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for the Economy, Waldemar Pawlak, is on a visit to Belarus. He has already been holding talks with Belarus' Prime Minister Syarhey Sidorski and his deputy Andrey Kabyakou.

The agenda included trade exchange, the participation of Polish companies in the privatisation of Belarus' fuels-and-energy and banking and insurance sectors as well as improved access to the Belarusian agricultural market.

Speaking to the *Polish Radio* Pawlak mentioned that his country supports the Belarus-EU dialogue. 'This is part of

both the Eastern Partnership project and the cooperation with the European Union. We can always ask a simple question: is it better if Belarus is closer to or farther away from Poland and the EU. I am convinced it would be much better if Belarus had better and closer relations both with Poland and the European Union.'

Waldemar Pawlak also said that the two sides discussed co-operation in liquid fuel supplies. 'We are in favour of implementing joint projects in the area of power engineering, gas, and liquid fuel,' noted the Minister. He also spoke in positive terms about the

implementation of the joint project for building a coal-fired cogeneration plant in Zelva in co-operation with a Polish company *Kulczyk Holding*.

Pawlak is accompanied in Minsk by Poland's Deputy Ministers of Economy, Agriculture and Finance. This is the first visit of such a high ranking Polish official in Belarus in six years.

In 2008, Polish exports to Belarus grew by 43% (and exceed US\$1.6 bn), while import increased by 15% and now stands at US\$1.3 bn.

23/02/2009

Source: Poland.pl

Culture

Cracking the Francysk Skaryna Code



A woodcut by Skaryna featuring the author, 1517

This man studied and lived in several countries, shuttled across Europe, went in and out of prison, worked as a publisher, doctor, gardener, with his interests ranging from the art of woodcut to translation, and, possibly, even Kabbalah. Now, here is the best part – he managed to do all these things five centuries ago without any Internet, budget airlines and time management courses. His name was Francysk Skaryna, the man who printed the first Belarusian book in Prague using the knowledge and skills he acquired in Poland and Italy. Indeed, he made a very good use of the “Renaissance globalisation”.

If you come to Polatsk today, you will see a rather pleasant medium-size town, with a fair amount of preserved landmarks, nice river, and the air of an ancient capital, which now humbly accepts its status as a provincial centre. This is where Francysk Skaryna was born. The exact dates of his birth and death are unknown; the two most probable estimates are 1485–1540 and 1490–1551.

Luka, the father of Francysk, was a respectable merchant who traded in furs. Francysk probably received his

first schooling in Polatsk, and then went off to Krakow University. Most likely, it was in Krakow where Skaryna first saw a printing machine (the city’s first print shop had been set up in 1496). He received his bachelor’s degree in 1506, and about seven years later gained his doctorate in medicine at the University of Padua in Italy. In the interim time he became secretary to king Hans of Denmark (1481–1513) and acquired a thorough knowledge of liberal arts, the Classical languages, botany, astronomy, law and heraldry. Skaryna also mastered the south German style of woodcut and studied printing in northern Italy. There he moved in circles which enjoyed the protection of the Habsburg Emperor Maximilian. It is therefore very possible that his path could have crossed with Albrecht Dürer and many of his other famous contemporaries. According to one hypothesis, Raphael depicted Francysk Skaryna in his fresco “The School of Athens” in Vatican. The fresco contains Raphael’s self-portrait together with an unknown person right next to him. If you look into the plump features of Skaryna on his own woodcut self-portrait, and compare it to the unidentified image on Raphael’s fresco, you may think that the hypothesis might not be groundless.

The University of Padua still cherishes the memory of Skaryna. His portrait can be found in the Room of Forty, where other pictures and memorabilia pertinent to forty most prominent alumni are exhibited, including the chair of Galileo, who taught in Padua from 1592 to 1610.

After his graduation, Francysk Skaryna began to practice medicine, but he never abandoned his dream of printing books in his native language. At that time book printing was like a dot-com boom of 1995–2000 (except that it never turned out to be a bubble). Northern Italy resembled some kind of Silicon Valley where adventurous young entrepreneurs were massively setting up print shops like software development garages. Having learned that the Czechs had their first book printed in Venice in 1506, Skaryna thought, “The time has come”. As a result, the Belarusians became the second

people in the Slavonic world, who had their Bible printed in their own language. In 1517, Francysk Skaryna established a printing press in Prague, where he published his first book entitled “The Psalter” in the old Belarusian language on August 6, 1517.

Skaryna spent two years in Prague, where he translated and printed the Psalter and some 22 books of the Old Testament. These were magnificent books. He used a handsome typeface interspersed with rebuses and illustrated with a series of woodcuts and arcane decorated initials. In total, he printed about 10 000 books in his print shop (one book amounted to about 500 printed copies). For the Belarusian nation, it was an enormous leap forward. The Bible was becoming understandable and affordable. Before that, only the richest aristocrats and monasteries were capable of buying hand-written books. Skaryna was also a very practical innovator. He printed his Bible in a handy “tabloid” format – four times smaller than the traditional size, which made it more comfortable to read.

Around 1522 he moved to Vilnius and established the first print shop in the Great Duchy of Lithuania, his native country. Owing to Skaryna, Belarusians received an opportunity to buy and read the affordable printed Bible in their own language even before Germans, English, French did. Skaryna was working ahead of time – perhaps, too far ahead in some cases. For example, he took a big batch of his books to Moscow, proposing local authorities and church to establish the first print house. For Skaryna it was also a smart business project: he would have been the first to tap into the enormous market of the Russian Empire – compare it to becoming the first Internet provider in modern Russia. However, the Moscow authorities were not ready for such a proposal, and made a spectacular fire out of Skaryna’s “devilish” books. Only about half a century later, Ivan Fedorov (arguably, also a man from Belarusian lands) set up the first print shop in the Russian Empire.

Skaryna also laid groundwork for the development of the Belarusian language. Actually, he called his Bible “Biblia Ruska”,

Culture

which often leads to misunderstandings. In the Great Duchy of Lithuania the term “Ruski” referred to the local Slavic proto-Belarusian culture, while people living in what later became Russian Empire were called “Muscovites”. In any case, even the most biased linguist would not deny that Skaryna’s Bible is printed in an Eastern Slavonic language, which is heavily saturated with genuinely Belarusian lexis.

Skaryna did not merely translate the Bible – he also extensively interpreted it. He wrote elaborate and yet precise and clear prefaces to each book he printed. He also provided in-depth margin commentaries, explanations and translations of complicated and foreign words. Combined, his remarks form some kind of book hypertext. He would have probably created a multimedia Bible, if he had a chance to put it online.

Historians estimate that the Inquisition could have burned Skaryna not less than 13 times for heresy. Not only had he added prefaces and comments to the Holy Script, but he also included his full-size self-portrait! It is probably no coincidence that Skaryna began to print his Bible the same year Martin Luther hammered his Ninety-Five Theses on the door of a church in Wittenberg. Skaryna was a true man of Renaissance and Reformation. He never mentioned which branch of Christianity he adhered to, preferring to describe himself as a Christian, rather than a Catholic or Orthodox.

Skaryna’s edition of the Bible turned out to be a splendid book with numerous woodcuts and rich vignettes, which are not just beautiful, but also full of mysteries and symbols. One should not forget that he printed his books in Prague, not too far away from the Altneuschul (Staronová) Synagogue, with Golem’s heavy ceramic pieces hidden somewhere in its basement. It was a famous centre of allegory and cabbala studies, a fashionable trend among young educated Europeans of that time. It turns out, that Skaryna followed the fashion and actually experimented with encoding encrypted images into his Bible illustrations.

Rygor Ravyaka, Associate Professor at the Belarusian State University of Informatics and Radio Electronics, scanned the woodcuts of Skaryna’s Bible and ran them through a special computer program which made it possible to reveal hidden images. Professor believes that Skaryna used the “mirror trick” in order to hide information. If you hold a mirror perpendicularly to the picture, in some places new images are formed out of chaotic lines and dots, with one half of the image visible on paper, and another one in the mirror. For example, Professor Ravyaka discovered a human figure concealed in an ornamental pattern; a miniature with the letter “P” contained a reversed picture of a two-headed eagle, possibly symbolising the Russian Empire which was then not too successful in its military endeavours; Skaryna included the portrait of Kanstantsin Astrozhsky, his rich patron, into the letter “A”; and in the letter “M” one can discover the image of Medusa, a beast from the ancient Greek mythology, which was defeated by Perseus who avoided Medusa’s deadly stare by looking into his (sic!) mirror-polished shield.

“The printed word has power”, said Martin Luther, prominent contemporary of Francysk Skaryna. However, not only Belarusian historians like to create hypotheses about possible encounters of these two great people. In the 1990’s a play “Vita Brevis, or the Pants of St. George” by Belarusian playwright Maxim Klimovich was staged at the “Volnaya Scena” theatre in Minsk. Traditionally, Skaryna is shown as an idealistic and devoted national hero. This frivolous piece, however, depicts not only theological debates between Luther and Skaryna, but also their romantic adventures with various women. Oh well, it was the period of Renaissance...

Skaryna probably valued a good sense of humour; otherwise, it would have been too difficult for him to go through such a turbulent life. In 1529, his brother Ivan died in Posnan, Poland, while trying to launch a leather-trading business. Skaryna went to Posnan in order to return the money his wife invested into his brother’s failed enterprise. However, in a strange twist of fate Francysk was thrown into Posnan’s prison. A rich merchant from Warsaw who is referred in archival documents under the name Old Moses (Moses Antiquus) demanded his arrest until he repaid a debt of his brother. However, when the King Sig-

ismund I found out that Skaryna was jailed, he ordered his release and even granted him rights that made the publisher immune to further prosecution.

Francysk Skaryna spent the last years of his life in Prague, working as a gardener in the Royal Botanical Gardens. However, the seeds he had been planting in the Czech capital gave their best crops at home, where new book printers – and readers – were emerging.

The name of Francysk Skaryna has a tremendous weight in today’s Belarusian culture and national conscience. Perhaps, fearing it may eclipse his own, President Lukashenka made a strange and abrupt move by ordering to rename the main Minsk street – Skaryna Avenue – into the Avenue of Independence in 2005. A number of protests took place. People took to the streets with self-made printouts from Skaryna’s Bible. Fortunately, one does not need to set up a print press to make them anymore – a computer printer will do. As usual, police chased people away, which, sometimes, led to anecdotic incidents. Thus, during a flash-mob on May 10, 2005 the police unit stopped a group of protesters. A banner that was confiscated contained the most well known patriotic abstract from Francysk Skaryna’s preface. To a great delight of the crowd, the poor policeman, holding a walkie-talkie to his mouth, had to read out the whole passage in the old Belarusian language to his chief: “From their birth, the beasts rambling in deserts know their holes, birds flying in the air know their nests, fishes swimming in the sea and rivers sense their whirls, bees and the like defend their hives - and so do people. Where they were born and raised with God’s will, they take much liking to that place”. For the Russian-speaking police officer that passage was a tongue-breaker, but also a very nice example of practical education. It turned out, that Francysk Skaryna had a talent of bringing wise words to all kinds of people – from Kings to cops. “What should I do with these people?” asked the police officer in bewilderment after he had finished the reading. “Bravo! Wish’em good luck”, the commander’s voice in the walkie-talkie grumbled.

More pictures including some copies of woodcuts by Skaryna can be found on our website in “cultural review section”

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By Ales Kudrytski for ODB