

Belarus Headlines

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EU AND BELARUS SIX MONTHS AFTER: ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES AHEAD

Discussions on EU-Belarus Relations Take Place in Brussels



Europe and Central Asia (COEST) that was held in the Slovak Representation to the EU on 2 March 2009, Belarusian experts said the guiding motive of

The measures undertaken by the Belarusian authorities during a six-month period of visa ban suspension have not resulted in significant progress towards greater political freedom in Belarus. The government showed no inclination to proceed with institutional and systemic reforms, and steps of liberalisation have hitherto been largely cosmetic and reversible.

Nonetheless, it is important to maintain and build on the positive dynamics created since the beginning of the Brussels-Minsk dialogue, and to give the Lukashenka regime some extra time by extending the visa ban suspension for another six months. This was the prevailing view among Belarus' civil society representatives who visited Brussels in early March to participate in the events organised by the Office for a Democratic Belarus and its European partners.

During a briefing for the members of the Political and Security Committee (PSC) of the EU Council and the Working Party on Eastern

the 'liberalisation' campaign is survival needs of the present regime and its search for Western aid and investment. However, they agree that the EU-Belarusian government dialogue has created new opportunities for the civil society to make its voice heard, and the continuation of this process should help sustain this positive trend.

On 4 March, representatives of Belarusian NGOs presented the results of their efforts to monitor recent developments in Belarus at the European Parliament. In a rare event that brought together Belarusian Ambassador to NATO, EU and Belgium Uladzimir Syanko, senior officials of EU Institutions, and Belarusian activists, Socialist Group Vice-President Jan Marinus Wiersma said political dialogue between Brussels and Minsk must include the democratic opposition. Wiersma said his Group does not op-

pose the EU's fresh policy towards Belarus, but emphasised that it is up to Minsk to show willingness to reform. 'There is an apparent interest in Minsk in intensifying relations with the EU. We should be ready to reciprocate. But that doesn't mean that anything goes. We expect clear and concrete progress, not just promises', said Wiersma.



Director of the Policy Unit of the EU Council, Helga Schmid, also made clear that the EU expects more profound and systemic changes from the Belarusian side. Yet she admits that 'democratic transition does not occur overnight'. 'One should recognise that there might be setbacks, but it is important that these setbacks are not dramatic, said Schmid. She noted some positive dynamics in recent developments in Belarus, including Minsk's constructive response to criticisms over the conduct of the 2008 parliamentary

Discussions on EU-Belarus Relations Take Place in Brussels (continuation)

elections and its decision to co-operate with the OSCE on the reform of Belarus' election law, and the Belarusian authorities' efforts to address recommendations of the ILO.

Hugues Mingarelli of the Commission's DG RELEX outlined some benefits Belarus could gain from participating in the Eastern Partnership Initiative but stressed that the future of EU-Belarus relations would depend

on policy choices and decisions of the Belarusian government.

Belarusian Ambassador Uladzimir Syanko said the EU should place no political pre-conditions for the discussions. He called the EU's decision to isolate Belarus back in 1997 counter-productive and one that resulted in a long period of missed opportunities. The Belarusian Ambassador also vehemently refuted the idea of including

civil society in the discussions between Minsk and Brussels claiming there is no such precedent in anywhere in the world. However, he confirmed the willingness of the Belarusian government to enter into a human rights dialogue with the EU, and said that there would be no topics off-limits for such discussions.

02-04/03/2009

Source: ODB

Exhibition of Belarusian Poster Opens in Granarolo and Toulouse



Two more European cities got the chance to see a travelling exhibition of Belarusian posters 'Visual code of the time: post-Soviet poster art in Belarus'. Since February 28 until March 5, 2009 thirty works of the well-known Belarusian designers were on display in Italian city of Granarolo. The exhibition was hosted by the local administration at the library named after Gianni Rodari. Posters of the ecology and Chernobyl thematic resonated with the audience the most, as each year this Italian city receives hundreds of Belarusian children from radioactively polluted areas of Belarus.

On March 11, the exhibition moved to a rose-bricked city of Toulouse in the South of France. The exhibition opened a two-week festival of Belarusian culture, organised by the French association 'Kolbasso'. The programme of the festival also includes screening of the documentary by Uladzimir Kolas 'Ada's Gallery', and a concert of Zmietser Vaitushkevich's WZ-Orchestra.

The exhibition has already been on display in five European cities including Warsaw, Berlin, Dresden, Brussels, and Trieste. It focuses on the works of mid 1980 and 1990s which according to the authors of the project, the Office for a Democratic Belarus and the Belarusian Union of Designers, most brightly illustrate the impact that important socio-political transformation taking place in the country at that time had on poster art. Each exhibition opening is followed by a presentation of catalogue featuring 44 copies of posters with explanatory notes in Eng-



lish, French, Italian, and Belarusian languages.

The Office for a Democratic Belarus extends its gratitude to the Robert Bosch Stiftung, the German Marshall fund of the United States and all other partners who helped make this project possible.

28/02 -11/03/2009

Source: ODB

More photos can be found on our web-site in Current activities section

EU and Belarus

Commissioner Ferrero-Waldner Reschedules Her Visit to Minsk



Benita Ferrero-Waldner, to Belarus.

The European Commission announced it has postponed the visit of its Commissioner for External Relations and

Ferrero-Waldner would have been the second high-ranking EU official to visit Belarus in a decade. In February, the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the Secretary General of the EU Council, Javier Solana, made a path-breaking visit to Minsk where he met with the Belarusian President as well as representatives of the opposition

and civil society.

Initially scheduled for Friday, March 13, the meeting between Ferrero-Waldner and Lukashenka would now take place in mid-April, says a brief statement of the Commission. While Brussels provided no specific reason for the postponement of the visit, some sources claim that the office of the

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EU and Belarus

Commissioner Ferrero-Waldner Reschedules Her Visit to Minsk

the Belarusian president said Wednesday, just one day before Ferrero-Waldner was expected to arrive in Belarus, that Lukashenka would not be in Minsk to welcome the Commissioner. According to Lukashenka's official web site, he travelled to Armenia to meet with President Serge Sargsian. The decision to travel to Armenia was ostensibly taken on Monday.

As rightly remarked by Stephen Castle of the *International Herald Tribune*, 'rescheduling changes at a very late stage are unusual, particularly with nations that have fewer high-level diplomatic contacts.' The Belarusian President's move therefore raises new doubts about how independent he is prepared – and willing – to be from Moscow. Analysts suggest that 'Belarus' rapprochement with Europe

is becoming a growing irritant to Moscow'. Lukashenka might therefore seek to avoid a closer engagement with the EU and would even prefer that, if invited, his country is represented at a less senior level than that of the head of state at an Eastern Partnership summit in May.

13/03/2009

Source: ODB, ec.europa.eu, the IHT

Council Conclusions on Belarus



On March 16, the Council of the EU decided to extend for one year the restrictive measures against certain Belarusian officials, provided for by Common Position 2006/276/CFSP, but at the same time to maintain the suspen-

sion of the application of the travel restrictions imposed on certain officials of Belarus for a nine months period.

Such a decision was taken to 'encourage the adoption and implementation of further concrete measures towards democracy and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms', reads the official document.

By the end of the nine months period, the Council will conduct an in-depth

review of the restrictive measures taking into account the situation in Belarus and, provided that there are further positive developments, it will be ready to consider the possibility of lifting the restrictive measures.

At any time, the Council may decide to re-apply the travel restrictions if necessary, in the light of the actions of the Belarusian authorities in the sphere of democracy and human rights.

16/03/2009

Source: consilium.europa.eu, ODB

EU Council Includes Belarus in Eastern Partnership



After weeks of fierce internal debate, EU leaders decided to put their seal of approval on a new outreach programme for ex-Soviet neighbours called the Eastern Partnership.

'Promoting stability, good governance and economic development in its Eastern neighbourhood is of strategic im-

portance for the European Union. The EU therefore has a strong interest in developing an increasingly close relationship with its Eastern partners, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. The European Union's proposal for an ambitious Eastern Partnership to be established with these countries serves this objective,' reads the declaration by the EU Council on Eastern Partnership.

There have been doubts that Belarus would ultimately be included in the programme alongside the five other intended target countries -- Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan.

The EU has yet to decide whether to

invite the country's autocratic leader, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, to the Eastern Partnership's 'launching summit' in Prague on May 7, along with the leaders of the other five countries.

Diplomats say a quick decision is unlikely.

'As for Lukashenka's invitation to Prague will depend on the situation in the country for the next several weeks,' said the Czech Foreign Minister Schwarzenberg

20/03/2009

Source: consilium.europa.eu, Radio Free Europe, ODB

Politics and Society

Human Rights Advocate Yana Palyakova Committed Suicide



Human rights advocate Yana Palyakova was found dead Friday night in her apartment in a southern Belarusian town of Salihorsk. Ms Palyakova was only 33. Ukraine-born Palyakova received a law degree from the Belarusian State University. She worked for 'Legal aid for people' and the Belarusian Helsinki Committee for Human Rights.

Palyakova was an active participant of many political campaigns in Belarus. During the 2008 parliamentary elections, she was a member of Volha Kazulina's campaign team. During the

registration period of election candidates, Palyakova was summoned to the police station; she was asked to hand over the list of signatures that had been collected in support of Kazulina's candidacy. Having refused to accede to their demands, she was allegedly beaten by police officers. Following the incident, Palyakova filed a request for investigation of the case to the local Prosecutor's office. Although her petition was accompanied by a medical report that provided evidence of physical assault, the Prosecutor's office refused to consider her case and said there was no misconduct committed by the police officer.

While her complaint was pending, Palyakova was attacked several times. The assaulters demanded she withdraws her complaint. But Palyakova was determined to seek justice. Having received no reply from the regional Prosecutor's office, she forwarded her petition to the Prosecutor General in Minsk. However, in January 2009, the authorities launched a criminal case against Palyakova accusing her of providing

false information about the police officer's actions. On 3 March, the court of the Salihorsk district found Palyakova guilty under Article 400 (Paragraph 2) of the Criminal Code for a false denunciation. She was sentenced to 2.5 years of limitation of freedom and fined 1 million Belarusian rubles (approximately US\$300). On 6 March, a state owned 'Soviet Belarus – Belarus Today' newspaper published an article that was full of humiliating remarks about 'a lawyer from Salihorsk'. Yana's friends say she was very much disheartened by the unfairness of the trial and the fierce campaign that was launched against her.

Local prosecutors in Belarus say they do not plan any further investigation into the apparent suicide of Belarusian human rights activist Yana Palyakova. A spokesperson for the Salihorsk prosecutor's office told RFE/RL's Belarus Service that the investigation had ended and that there was no evidence that Palyakova was driven to suicide by her conviction in court.

08-18/03/2009

Source: ODB, Radio Free Europe, Belapan

Belarus May Conduct Referendum on Death Penalty Abolition



According to the Chairman of the Belarusian Constitutional Court, Pyotr Miklashevich, the issue of the abolishment of the death penalty can only be decided at a referendum. 'This is required by the country's Constitution,' he told journalist at the press-

conference on Wednesday, March 11.

'The Belarusian Constitution contains regulations for abolishing the death penalty' explains Miklashevich. It stipulates that the death penalty is an exclusive measure that can only be applied under a court's ruling. Nowadays, Belarusian courts issue two or three death sentences per year, com-

pared to up to 50 such rulings about a decade ago,' Miklashevich said.

Let us remind that Belarus remains the only country in Europe which uses capital punishment.

11/03/2009

Source: Interfax

Belarusian Journalist Harassed, Denied Press Accreditation and Fined

The Committee to Protect Journalists called on Belarusian authorities to renew work credentials for Andrzej Poczobut, a local correspondent for Poland's largest daily, Gazeta Wyborcza, and to investigate recent harassment of him and his family in the western city of Hrodna. Poczobut's credentials were pulled after he reported on the policies of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka and the activities of the Belarusian security service.

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Politics and Society

Belarusian Journalist Harassed, Denied Press Accreditation and Fined (continuation)

Poczobut had applied for a continuation of his press accreditation with the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs; his current one expired on February 24. When he called the Ministry to check on the progress of his application, a press secretary told him it had been denied because he had insulted Lukashenka in a series of articles published in the *Gazeta Wyborcza* last month, Poczobut told CPJ. The denial came after an anonymous threat of retaliation if he did not stop his critical journalism, coupled with similar phone calls to his family.

Poczobut's allegedly insulting articles covered a recent police initiative to enforce the fingerprinting of male residents; the deportation of three Polish Catholic priests; new criminal lawsuits launched against recently released po-

litical prisoners; and talks between Lukashenka and the European Union officials. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared the articles biased and insulting to the president, according to local news reports.

This is not the first time Poczobut has faced harassment and obstruction. On February 6, someone cut the leather upholstery of his Hrodno apartment's door, and stuck in a note that warned the journalist to stop his critical reporting or face retribution, he told CPJ. In the next days, people repeatedly called his family, including his 8-year-old daughter on her mobile phone, asking questions about his whereabouts and not giving their names. "She refused to talk to them, but was frightened," Poczobut said. The harassment coincided with Poc-

zobut's work on an investigative report for *Gazeta Wyborcza* about the activities of a high-ranking Belarusian security service official. When he reported the harassment to the police, they called it "hooliganism," Poczobut said. On March 17 Andzej Poczobut was fined (148 euro) for reporting on the meeting of the Union of Poles in Belarus.

'That is a pretty light sentence,' stated Poczobut after the trial ended. According to him, such a light sentence is a result of the attention his case got in the international press.

17/03/2009

Source: CPJ, Polskie Radio

Dmitry Medvedev Met with President of Belarus Alyaksandr Lukashenka



The Russian-Belarusian high-level talks held at Zavidovo on Thursday (March 19) focused on additional measures and mechanisms that Moscow and Minsk could employ to ease the effects of the financial crisis on both economies, Russian president's press secretary Natalya Timakova told Interfax.

'In particular, the parties discussed 'the possibility of employing additional financial instruments to minimize the negative trends in both countries' economies caused by the worlds financial crisis,' said Timakova.

It was agreed to hold a collegium meeting of the Russian and Belarusian

finance ministries on March 20 'to further discuss future loans and other forms of economic cooperation.'

At the same time Russian newspaper 'Kommersant' reports that Russia is reluctant to give Belarus a loan of 100 billion Russian rubles.

'The money that they are expecting from us should go toward the payment of pensions and allowances', the newspaper quotes an unnamed source in the Kremlin. 'We are not happy at all that the Belarusian authorities used populism at our expense. I think that we won't give them any money.'

The Kommersant reports that the Russian delegation to the Thursday talks 'persuaded Alyaksandr Lukashenka that a decision to provide the loan should be taken with regard to the situation in the world.'

The newspaper also reports that Minsk continued to pay for supplies of Russian natural gas at the old price of \$128 per 1000 cubic meter in the first two months of this year, 'pretending that it did not notice that the gas price

had increased from \$128 to \$210'. 'As a result, Minsk owes a debt of some \$70 million to Gazprom over the two winter months, which annoys the Russian monopoly', says the newspaper.

Following the Thursday talks, Gazprom CEO Medvedev said the delegations had 'reached an agreement on all matters', with the newspaper suggesting that the statement means that Minsk agreed to pay \$210 per 1000 cubic meters of Russian gas.

According to the newspaper, the participation of Russian capital in the privatization of Belarusian dairy plants also was on the agenda of the negotiations. 'A working group that will compile a list of attractive companies for Russian businesses can get down to the work as early as the beginning of April', notes the newspaper. 'The true worth of the victory can be appreciated only by those who know how sensitive Alyaksandr Lukashenka is about Belarusian property.'

20/03/2009

Source: Kyivpost, Kommersant, ODB

Finance and Economics

Serbia and Belarus to Form Free Trade Agreement



During his visit to Serbia on March 2-6, Belarus' President Alyaksandr Lukashenka met with Serbia's Prime Minister Mirko Cvetkovic. The two politi-

cians discussed trade and economic cooperation and considered the possibility of a bilateral agreement on free trade that would include setting up joint ventures for assembling Belarusian tractors, buses, automobiles and other machinery.

The two countries will also establish a business cooperation council, which will be further discussed when Serbia's Deputy PM Mladjan Dinkic visits Minsk later this month as a head of a large business delegation.

In 2008, trade between the two countries reached nearly 65 million USD, which is 20.3% more than in 2007. Belarus recorded trade surplus of US\$18 million surplus in the exchange, as its exports totalled 41.4 million USD, including mainly fertilizers, cotton cloth, linen, artificial thread, synthetic fibers, steel wire cord, tractors, bearings and washing machines. Serbia's main exports to Belarus are raw materials.

06/03/2009

Source: BBN correspondent

IMF: Belarus' Economic Challenges More Difficult



The economic situation in Belarus has worsened since the country signed a \$2.46 billion loan agreement with the International Monetary Fund in January, the IMF said Tuesday.

'The fall in demand in major trading partners, including Russia, has hit

Belarus' exporters hard,' Chris Jarvis, the IMF's Belarus mission chief, said in a statement following a weeklong visit to Minsk.

Additionally, 'the devaluation of the ruble on January 2 and the peg to a basket of currencies have reduced Belarus' vulnerability to the external shocks it is facing,' Jarvis said. The IMF already has disbursed \$800 million in loans to Belarus. The re-

mainder is scheduled to be disbursed by early 2010.

'We believe that with the right policies Belarus can meet the challenges it faces,' Jarvis said.

IMF officials are scheduled to return to Belarus in late April or early May.

10/03/2009

Source: Dow Jones News Wires Washington

Belarus Reduces Oil Refining 1.5% in January-February



Oil refineries in Belarus refined 3.621 million tonnes in January-February 2009, down 1.5% if compared to the same period of 2008, the Belarusian Statistics Service (Belstat) told Interfax.

Belarusian refineries refined 1.704 million tonnes of oil in February, which is 4.1% less than in February 2008 and 11.1% less than in January 2009.

Gasoline production at Belarusian refineries was down 0.9% to 0.583 million tonnes in the two months, diesel fuel output fell 1.2% to 1.156 million tonnes, fuel oil production declined 3.8% to 1.144 million tonnes and lubricant output dropped 38.7% to 18,680 tonnes.

In February, Belarusian refineries produced 276,900 tonnes of gasoline (4.6% less year-on-year), 545,900 tonnes of diesel fuel (8.5% less), 531,000

tonnes of fuel oil (13% less) and 9,900 tonnes of lubricants (19.7% less). A total of 3.358 million tonnes of crude oil was delivered to the refineries in the two months, 11.2% less than a year earlier. They are scheduled to receive a total of 21.5 million tonnes for the full year.

Oil refining at the two Belarusian refineries (Naftan and Mozyr) totalled 21.305 million tonnes in 2008, down 0.2% from 2007. Supplies from Russia totaled 21.132 million tonnes (5.4% more than in 2007) and domestic producers supplied 1.74 million tonnes.

10/03/2009

Source: Interfax

Finance and Economics

Chinese, Belarusian Central Banks Agree On Currency Swap



On March 11, the Chinese central bank and its Belarusian counterpart established a bilateral currency swap facility. The arrangement is worth 20 billion yuan (\$2.93 billion) or 8,000

trillion Belarusian rubles with a term of three years.

In a statement, the People's Bank of China and the National Bank of the Republic of Belarus said the arrangement was meant to promote bilateral trade and investment for economic development of the two countries. The deal could be extended by agreement between the two nations.

According to the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, Belarus imported \$1.415 billion of goods from China in 2008,

and exported \$624 million of goods to China which is up 22.5 percent higher than in 2007.

China had also established a three-year currency swap deal worth 80 billion yuan with Malaysia in February. A similar deal, worth 200 billion yuan, with Hong Kong was agreed with in January 2009. In December last year, the country inked a 180 billion yuan three-year swap deal with South Korea.

11/03/2009

Source: RTTN News, unian.net

Rosselkhozbank Opens Office in Republic of Belarus in Minsk 15



Rosselkhozbank (Russian Agriculture Bank) opened an office in Minsk, the press service of the credit institution said.

The bank's office will be providing assistance in the establishment and development of business ties between Russian and Belarusian companies. Its tasks also include the promotion and support of Russian investment projects with the participation of Rosselkhozbank in Belarus.

The office will be developing relations with state bodies and representatives of the business community of Belarus, as well as with international organisations operating on the Belarusian territory.

15/03/2009

Source: Itar-tass

Seven Belarusian Projects to Receive Grants from World Bank's Social Development Fund



Seven projects of Belarusian public organizations have become the winners of the contest of World Bank's Social Development Fund. They will receive grants of \$8,000 for implementation of their projects, BelTA learnt in the World Bank Office in Belarus.

One of the grants will be given to the Centre for Support and Development of Youth Entrepreneurship which developed the Business-Atlants project. Owing to the project, some 500 Belarusian students will be able to get experience in business.

Among the winners of the contest are the projects on assistance for business activities in rural areas of the Cherven region of the Minsk oblast and on promotion of consumer cooperatives of financial mutual assistance in Belarus.

In 2009, some 45 projects were presented for the contest of World Bank's Social Development Fund. The annual programme of the Social Development Fund for the public organizations of Belarus has been carried out since 1999. In this period, some 68 projects worth of \$420,000 were funded.

20/03/2009

Source: BelTA

Culture

Writing on one foot



Paval Kastsiukevich

In his short stories Paval Kastsiukevich ties Israel and Belarus into an elaborate knot.

Paval Kastsiukevich is the Woody Allen of Belarusian literature. This, of course, may not be the most exact comparison, but it was certainly a good one to pull a string. Now that I have your attention, let's take a look at a slim book that contains twelve short stories by this young Israeli-Belarusian writer who made the year 2008 so much more fun, even despite of the looming recession. Translated from Belarusian, the book's title reads 'Edifying Conversations for Summer Cottage Owners'. Its cover shows a young man in an empty kitchen. The window is dark, revealing a faceless urban landscape. The young man is warming his hands over the ghostly blue light of a gas oven. He is searching for some warmth and comfort in the lonesome surrounding. In his stories, Paval Kastsiukevich manages to find the unexpected in the most banal things, taking the reader into a grotesque parallel world, albeit not completely unlike ours.

Paval spent the last third of his nearly 30 years of life in Israel. In 2008 he displayed considerable courage or even recklessness, if you like. First, he returned to Belarus for good; second, he got involved into a risky business of Belarusian-language culture. Now he works as a cultural columnist for the weekly newspaper Nasha Niva and does translations from Hebrew into Belarusian.

Most Paval's short stories are short indeed. He says he writes them

"while standing on one foot". There is an old legend about rabbi Hillel. Once, a heathen challenged the wise man by asking him to explain the Torah while standing on one foot. Hillel wisely replied, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That's the whole Torah. The rest is the commentary. Go and learn." Since then, if you try to put a maximum of sense and wit into a minimum of words, you do it "while standing on one foot".

Paval also makes regular sallies into translation of Hebrew literature into Belarusian. His translation of a story book by Etgar Keret "The Bus Driver Who Wanted To Be God" and a set of 15 short stories by assorted Israeli writers "The Man Who Stole the Western Wall" have recently been published in Minsk. Actually, many Israeli writers, who have been given a Belarusian voice by Paval, also adhere to this "one-foot approach". In his foreword to 'The Man Who Stole the Western Wall' Paval writes that, 'Israeli writers lure their reader with story titles, the same way advertisements do. Also, consider their juicy language. The additional bait for readers is the twist of a plot line, influenced by surrealism and absurdity, so fashionable nowadays. Still, what we get in the end is literature, not advertisement.'

Geographically and mentally, Paval's stories are centred neither in Belarus nor in Israel, but somewhere in between, or in both countries at the same time. In the short story "The Heart of a Tank" Yura, a Belarus-born repatriant in Israel takes a guided tour of an Arab-Israeli war museum. At some point the guide points out a group of damaged Soviet-built tanks, formerly used by Arabs. For Yura these are old friends, not "machines of the enemy". As a former tank engineer, he is swept by nostalgia. Yura crawls into a tank and shuts himself inside, alarming the prime minister's motorcade (passing nearby), with guards confusing Yura for a terrorist. However, all Yura wanted, was to take a gulp of his youth again, sing a song inside of a tank, the same way he used to do it when he worked at a tank construction plant in Minsk. The machine reminded him 'of the tipsy

odours of spring: egg-stuffed pies (4 Soviet coopecks a piece); a pair of jeans, sewn by hand by seamstresses in Hrushauka; last year's leafage in quite corners of the Botanical garden, the rustling of which was such a good accompaniment for kisses. All these odours mixed with the smell of oil paint, emitted by the tank, which was exhibited at a the workshop on experimental redesign. The magical formula of a rare perfume "Minsk, 1970s" conjured itself up in the air".

A Belarusian reader would immediately notice Jewish intonations in Paval's short stories, just as a Jewish reader would probably say, "That sounds kind of Belarusian". Indeed, Paval writes while standing on one foot. But he does so in both countries at the same time.

In another story, titled "The Map", a young man from an out-of-the-way kibbutz listens to its oldest dwellers, Chaim and Tzipi.

"Haim and Tzipi dislike each other, that is why they spend most of their time together. The aversion results from the clash of two rather different mentalities. Tzipi comes from Kastsiukovichy, Russia. Chaim was born in Pruzhany, Poland. There are such European countries in Europe, you know. Tzipi and Chaim tell me a lot about this Europe, about the cities of their childhood. Let's take Pruzhany, for example. This is a huge megalopolis, much larger and more beautiful than Warsaw. As for Kastsiukovichy, Tzipi says, comrade Lenin even wanted to make it a capital instead of Petrograd. However, rather than coming straight to Kastsiukovichy, comrade Lenin ordered the locomotive driver "We shall take another route in order to fool Czar's gendarmes". The driver took comrade Lenin to Moscow, deep into Russian province. As a result, there was not enough coal left to reach Kastsiukovichy and that is why they decided to remain there and established the capital in Moscow".

A Belarusian is well aware that both Pruzhany and Kastsiukovichy are smalltowns deep in Belarusian

Culture

province. For Chaim and Tzipi, however, they are situated in two completely different universes. They never noticed or realised that Pruzhany or Kastsiukovichy stood on Belarusian soil. While quarrelling, Chaim and Tzipi lash out at each other in the dialect spoken in the Belarusian countryside, which Yiddish-savvy linguists from Tel Aviv are unable not only to understand, but even to classify. Chaim and Tzipi remind us of so many people in Belarus who continue to live in universes of their own illusions or memories. By the way, a narrator, the young kibbutz dweller, eventually checks out the map and discovers a whole new country called Belarus. However, he applies the traditional Jewish chronology to the modern map (which reads "Belarus, 2004"). As a result, he believes that the country existed 3761 years before. He also thinks that Minsk, the capital of Belarus, is an enormous city, since Pruzhany and Kastsiukovichy are just small dots compared to it. He wished they all could live in this forgotten promised land called Belarus. Perhaps, if that would be the case, young people wouldn't leave their kibbutz for bigger cities like Tel Aviv...

In his stories, Paval is being introspective without turning neurotic. He is reasonably extraverted while remaining a careful observer. Compared with Etgar Keret's texts, for example, Paval's prose often seems to be more intuitive and spontaneous. Kastsiukevich's stories are ironic, but some of them are also sad on the verge of desperation. 'The Midnight Sun of the Avenue', for example, has been inspired by a horrific, post-Kafkaesque experience of the author's visit to Minsk in winter. The narrator is strolling along the main city's avenue and having strange encounters.

"...Since then I began to walk along the avenue alone. Winter was nearing its end. A thaw tickled my nerves in the morning, birds babbled, and, as the evening approached, the frost was stepping up its pressure. Be-

tween "Park Tchaluskintsau" and "Maskouskaya" metro stations, on the outskirts of a park, a man fell flat, his face buried in snow. The moment I looked I understood the truth about all people, which I had previously vaguely sensed about myself only – that every person is two persons.

This is how it looked on the example of this bloke. The first person, embodied, lay drunk, insensitive to the frost, and slept. Another man, invisible, stood beside the body and intently watched the first one. The snow-covered face of the first man expressed frivolity, mildness of character, simplicity and slight foolishness. The other person looked quick-witted, much smarter than the first one; he was a strategist, without any trace of compassion. I instantly realised that the "strategist" was patiently waiting for his own death. He was capable of waking up the body, but didn't do it, sticking to his own plans, unclear to me. He felt no mercy, although he also was this very bloke lying on the ground".

As the stroll continues, the winter sun rises ("a rather small sun, not more than a couple hundred metres in diameter"). Its thorny rays touch the enormous mosaics on the facades of concrete blocks of flats, depicting Francysk Skaryna and World War II partisans. Suddenly, the images begin to change into menacing pictures of Egyptian desert gods. Usually, most people, who hurry to the nearby metro station "Ushod", barely look at these Soviet-time mosaics. For them they are just relics from the past. We needed someone like Paval Kastsiukevich to see the glitter of the Sinai desert sun touching the walls of snow-covered Minsk...

If there were some kind of literature Academy awards for the best tragicomedy in Belarus, Paval Kastsiukevich would have all the chances to get the golden statue.

And the Oscar goes to...

Paval, have you really been standing on your foot this whole time?!

16/03/2009

By Ales Kudrytski for ODB

- 1 Copeck – a small Soviet coin.
- 2 Hrushauka – a neighbourhood in Minsk.
- 3 Petrograd – old-fashioned name of St. Petersburg.



A story book by Etgar Keret 'The Bus Driver Who Wanted To Be God' translated into Belarusian by Paval Kastsiukevich



'Edifying Conversations for Summer Cottage Owners'

by Paval Kastsiukevich