

# Belarus Headlines

Issue XLI

May 26, 2009



Office for a Democratic  
Belarus

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On May 25-27, 2009 the Association of the Local Democracy Agencies (ALDA), Lev Sapieha Foundation (Belarus), and the Municipality of Monfalcone (Italy) organized an international conference *'The Millennium Development Goals and the state of art in Belarus. The role of initiatives from civil society and local authorities in order to promote a more equitable, open and democratic society'*.

2-3

The conference is part of the REACT Project (Reinforcing Actions of capacity building for civil society), which aims at strengthening the role of non-state actors and local authorities in the field of poverty reduction in the context of sustainable development, according to Millennium Development Goals and other internationally agreed development targets.

7-10

The speakers included ALDA President Per Vinther, Lev Sapieha Foundation Chairman of the Board Miraslaub Kobasa, Chief of the Mayor Cabinet of the Municipality of Monfalcone Lucio Gregorietti, ALDA's head of External



Relations Department Stefania Toriello, UNDP Resident Representative in Belarus Antonius Broek, INGO conference of the Council of Europe rapporteur Cyril Ritchie, and Director of the Brussels-based Office for a Democratic Belarus Olga Stuzhinskaya.

The speakers and the audience stressed the lack of knowledge on the potential role of non state actors and local authorities in providing sustainable development in Belarus as well as the lack of communication between them. During the discussions the participants stressed the need for building up specific skills and capacities of civil society organizations as independent and autonomous structures that can voice the concerns of communities and citizens and improve the quality of concrete actions at local level.

Belarusian speakers mentioned the main problems NGOs in Belarus face in their everyday work. These include denials of projects' registration, NGOs' negative image in state-run mass media – the issue that often makes their

cooperation with local authorities impossible; the pressure put on civil society activists, economic barriers for NGOs activities. In particular, the speakers noted that the existing regulations put civil society and business groups on the same shelf in terms of office rent, legal address, etc. At the same time, they mentioned that the space for cooperation has been slightly widening.



The representatives of Belarusian NGOs also explained that the system of power in Belarus is highly centralized. The local authorities have no need to create a positive image among the population as their success does not depend on voters but on their superiors. One participant stressed that it is of greatest importance to convince the local officials that cooperation with the most active part of society represented by NGOs' activists is of mutual benefit to all.

26/05/2009

Source: ODB

We on the Web

[www.democraticbelarus.eu](http://www.democraticbelarus.eu)

## EU and Belarus

### Belarusian President Visits Italy, Meets Pope and Berlusconi

On April 27, Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka held talks with Pope Benedict XVI in Vatican.

Lukashenka's first official visit to Western Europe since 1995 came after the European Union lifted its travel ban on the Belarusian President and other top Belarusian officials last October after Belarus bowed to international pressure and released several political prisoners in August 2008.

A Vatican statement made an indirect reference to the state of democracy and human rights in Belarus, saying the Pope and other Vatican officials spoke to Lukashenka about "certain internal problems of the country."

Lukashenka invited the Pope to visit Belarus, telling the Pontiff at the end of his 25-minute meeting, "Your Holiness, we hope to receive you on Belarusian soil, God willing."

Approximately 60 percent of Belarus' population is Orthodox Christian. However, its President has often described himself as an "Orthodox atheist." Belarus' Orthodox Church is an exarchate of the powerful Russian Orthodox Church. Lukashenka's invitation to the Pope to visit Belarus, whose Catholic community constitutes 14 percent of the population, is significant because relations between the Vatican and the Russian Orthodox Church have been tense since the Soviet collapse.

The late Pope John Paul did not visit Russia due to opposition from the late Orthodox Patriarch Alexy II who claimed that Catholics were "poaching" converts. Alexy's successor, Kirill, is seen as more liberal and open to contacts with the Vatican. The Vatican's Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone paid his first visit to Belarus in his official capacity in June 2008. He then met with Alyaksandr Lukashenka and the top clerics of the Roman Catholic and Russian Orthodox Churches in Belarus. The visit of Pope Benedict XVI should give a new impetus to the work on a cooperation agreement be-



*Lukashenka's 5-year-old son, Mikalai, giving the pope his ABCs book from school*

tween the Belarusian government and the Catholic Church, Leanid Hulyaka, the government's Commissioner on Religious and Ethnic Affairs, said at a roundtable discussion in Minsk on May 7.

Lukashenka's trip to Italy and the Vatican was not without controversy. An editorial in Italy's leading newspaper, *Corriere della Sera*, criticised the Berlusconi government for allowing the so-called 'Europe's last dictator' to break his isolation in Italy.

Italy's Foreign Minister and former EU Commissioner for Justice, Freedom and Security Franco Frattini responded with a letter to the newspaper saying the visit was part of a EU thaw.

Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka and Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi met on the same day, April 27, to discuss issues of Belarus' rapprochement with Europe.

At the talks the sides also touched upon such an important humanitarian issue as the adoption of Belarusian children by Italian families. In recent years, many dossiers of documents have unilaterally been frozen by Minsk, the Italian Foreign Minister said. However, according to Frattini, since the beginning of 2009, in there have been some encouraging signals that positive decisions might be reached on several dozen of specific cases.

Commenting on Lukashenka's visit to Rome and Vatican Vital Silitski, the Director of the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies, called it a 'breakthrough which may also prove to be a breakthrough in domestic politics'. According to Silitski, the fact that Luka-

shenka's audience with the Pope went down very well might have a positive impact on his popularity at home. According to independent opinion polls, opposition to Lukashenka among the country's two million Catholics is three times greater than it is among the country's Orthodox majority and nearly twice as great as it is among Protestants. In other words, Lukashenka may have managed to disarm the largest bloc of opposition to him in Belarusian society.

For much of his presidency, for political and geopolitical reasons, Lukashenka has acted as a buttress for Russian Orthodoxy. He suppressed the development of the Greek Catholic (Uniate) Church from its stronghold in Ukraine, pressurised Belarus' own Orthodox Church and adopted a repressive law on religion that discriminated against Protestant denominations. His championing of the Orthodoxy was symbolised in 2001, when he played host to the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church at exactly the same time that Pope John Paul II was paying a visit to Ukraine. However, Lukashenka has quietly pursued a policy of building up his political capital through ecumenism since at least 2002 - the time when he explicitly declared that he would like to bring the Catholic and Orthodox churches together.

In the months before Lukashenka's visit to Rome, he met the Catholic Archbishop of Belarus and paid a surprise visit to Patriarch Kirill. Viewed in the context of Lukashenka's strategy, it now seems clear that he was trying to secure Kirill's (and the Kremlin's) consent for a visit to Rome and to discuss the possibility of a meeting between Kirill and Benedict - and, since his return from Rome, Lukashenka has mused publicly about his meetings with the Pope and the Patriarch.

27/04-24/05/2009

**Source: BISS, Itar-tass, ODB, zenith.org**

**Photo by Reuters**

## EU and Belarus

### Eastern Partnership Summit in Prague



*Belarusian democratic forces representatives with Ferrero-Waldner*

On May 7, in Prague, the Eastern Partnership Project (EPP) was initiated with the participation of Georgia, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, and Belarus. Perhaps reflecting a response to the concerns of several European leaders, Belarus was not represented by President Alyaksandr Lukashenka or Prime Minister Syarhey Sidorski, but by Deputy Prime Minister Uladzimir Syamashka and Foreign Minister Syarhey Martynau. Moreover, several EU countries, including France, Spain, and the United Kingdom, were not represented by their leaders, suggesting that either the meeting was not a high priority or that these countries had reservations about the process.

In general, the meeting was exploratory, embracing issues such as energy cooperation, the creation of a free trade zone, adjusting laws to European standards, and exchanges on an academic

and cultural basis. The European Union has allocated approximately 600 million Euros to the partners for various projects until 2013 (Polish Radio, May 7). The small amount, as well as the wording of the initial draft of the partnership, which deleted the words "European countries" with reference to the six countries, and replaced it with "Eastern partners" (Daily Telegraph, May 7), implies that the association may be initially limited in its scope. The role of Belarus is the most ambiguous of all the participants, and was referred to by several opposition leaders who were also visiting Prague as a "Trojan horse" acting on behalf of Russia.

The newspaper Belarus' Segodnya (Sovetskaya Belorussiya, its former name is still on the masthead), Lukashenka's official mouthpiece, provided an in-depth report on Minsk's perception of the event. As well as the high-level meetings between the two Belarusian officials and EU leaders, it stated that there were numerous contacts and discussions with the aim of accelerating political links and promoting economic integration. The four key areas of concern are democracy, effective government, and stability; economic integration; energy security; and bilateral contacts. Belarus and the EU intend to create a large free trade zone, cooperate on an institutional basis, support free travel and visa lib-

eralization without compromising security, and strengthen energy cooperation allowing for a secure and long-term transit route for resources across Belarusian territory. The newspaper also maintained that the political direction pursued by the EPP began with the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989.

Martynau declared that an important issue for Belarus was the project of the so-called ninth Transit Corridor, which will provide a link between the Baltic and Black Seas, and entail a much higher level of EU investment in the long term. Martynau noted that Belarus has agreed to expand its connections with the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the European Investment Bank, and that both will have the right to open branches in Belarus. Several opposition leaders met with the Czech Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg, and there was a small protest against the policies of Lukashenka led by the leader of the Conservative Christian Party of Belarus, Zyanon Paznyak. Though supportive of closer Belarus-EU links, the Belarusian opposition leaders insist that it should be tied to the improvement of human rights in their country.

18/05/2009

By David Marples

**Source: Jamestown foundation**

### Lukashenka, Ferrero-Waldner Discuss Eastern Partnership



According to the Press Office of the Belarusian president, on May 12, Alyaksandr Lukashenka had a telephone conversation with European Commissioner for External Relations Benita Ferrero-Waldner.

Lukashenka and Ferrero-Waldner have reportedly discussed the Eastern Partnership programme, Belarus-EU relations and the details of the European Commissioner's planned visit to Minsk.

According to Ferrero-Waldner's press-secretary, the details of her trip to Minsk are being worked out. However, no date has been set yet.

At the same time, the Commissioner's press secretary has refused to comment on the telephone conversation that allegedly took place between Lukashenka and Ferrero-Waldner.

13/05/2009

**Source: ERB**



## Politics and Society

### Iran and Belarus Sign Two Agreements, Express Hopes for Further Cooperation



Iran and Belarus Justice Ministers signed two documents and a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on judicial cooperation, transfer of prisoners and extradition of criminals.

Iran's Judiciary Chief Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, the former Iranian Minister of Interior Mostafa Pourmohammadi, and Justice Minister Gholam Hossein Elham arrived in Belarus on April 28 with a three-days visit to explore the ways for bilateral cooperation.

During a meeting with Belarus' President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, Shahroudi said Iran was willing to increase economic cooperation with the country by US\$1 billion annually and turn Iran-Belarus relations into a strategic partnership.

Iran-Belarus commercial cooperation reached US\$83.9 million in 2008, increasing by 34.1 percent compared to 2007.

Lukashenka said his country remained committed to its obligations towards Iran and believed that the agreed plans would meet interests of the two sides. He described Iran as Belarus' major regional partner.

Iran's Judiciary Chief also held talks

with Speaker of the Belarusian Parliament Barys Batura and the Mufti of Belarusian Muslims, Ismail Varanovich.

At a meeting with journalists Shahroudi said that the Presidents of Iran and Belarus were likely to meet in the near future.

He also told reporters the summit may take place after a majority of Iran-Belarus joint projects are implemented.

"The Belarusian President and high-profile authorities and delegations from Belarus are always welcome in Iran," stressed Shahroudi.

Alyaksandr Lukashenka, for his part, noted he would like to implement top-level agreements with the government of Tehran.

"We will sacredly fulfil our agreements with Iran President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and expect more activity in projects earmarked for joint implementation," President Lukashenka said in a message handed to the Iranian Judicial chief.

An article published by Ria Novosti said that the swiftness of relation-building between the two states is an indication that Belarus' leader is selling the short-range missiles to Iran. The report comes shortly after Iranian Defence Minister Brigadier General Mostafa Mohammad-Najjar visited Moscow to push for further military cooperation with Russia.

Iran is also interested in Russia's sophisticated air defence missiles, the S-300 surface-to-air system, to enhance its defensive prowess against a potential Israeli attack on the country's nuclear infrastructure.

Speaking during his visit to Homel voblast of Belarus on May 8, Lukashenka denied the rumours that the country had any plans of selling weapons to Syria or Iran.

"As far as S-300 and Iskander [missiles] are concerned, these complexes cannot be exported without my approval. There is not a single contract or project related to these systems that I have been asked to approve. This is utter nonsense," the President said.

The latest version of the S-300 family is the S-300PMU2 Favorit, which has a range of up to 195 kilometers (about 120 miles) and can intercept aircraft and ballistic missiles at altitudes from 10 meters to 27 kilometers.

The Iskander-M system (NATO reporting name SS-26 Stone) is equipped with two solid-propellant single-stage 9M723K1 guided missiles with 'quasi-ballistic' capability.

28/04/-08/05/2009

**Source: ISNA, Tehran News, Ria Novosti, ODB**

### Belarusian and Ukrainian Presidents Meet for Talks

On May 6, Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka and Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko met in the Belarusian city of Homel. The Ukrainian delegation also included the country's Foreign Minister, Deputy Head of the Presidential Secretariat, First Deputy Fuel and Energy Minister, Deputy Finance Minister, National Bank Chairman and Chairman of the Security Service. The tête-à-tête talks lasted for four hours. Other members of the delegations joined the negotiations later.

Summing up the results of the talks with his Ukrainian colleague, Lukashenka said that the prime-ministers of the two countries should meet by the end of May to work on the implementation of different economic and humanitarian projects. He believes that before this meeting the Belarusian-Ukrainian commission on trade and economic cooperation should gather for a session.

Victor Yushchenko said the meeting focused on a wide range of issues, including regional cooperation in energy sector. He expressed hope that both parties could finalise the implementation of the reached earlier agreements during Lukashenka's next visit to Ukraine.

06/05/2009

**Source: Itar-Tass, Kyivpost, ODB**

## Politics and Society

### Lukashenka Criticizes Russia ahead of Putin Visit



Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka has criticized Russia for failing to carry out decisions on integrating the two states, a week before Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin is due to visit Minsk.

The two countries have talked for more than a decade about a "union state" bringing the countries closer together

even though Lukashenka has sought a rapprochement with the West after years of isolation and accusations of human right abuses.

Despite talks of adopting the Russian rouble for trade, Minsk has been frustrated by what it sees as unequal access to Russian markets as both ex-Soviet countries grapple with the global economic downturn.

"Everything that we agreed, that we discussed at the supreme state council, the appropriate documents that we signed - all of this has been blocked," the official BelTA news agency cited Lukashenka as saying.

"If we are going to be blocking each other on such issues and Russia starts denying us access to its markets, then

who needs this so-called integration process? "The presidents take decisions, and the Russian government fails [to implement them]."

He said he would discuss these issues when Putin visits next week. The two are also expected to discuss the release of a \$500 million Russian loan to Belarus and the idea of a currency swap, to allow Belarus to move to the rouble in its trade accounts.

Lukashenka has to perform a balancing act between Russia, the traditional ally which is kinder to Lukashenka's style of rule and supplies Belarus' energy, and the European Union, which can offer modernization and investment.

24/05/2009

Source: Radio Free Europe

### BAJ Concerned about Bill That Would Establish Punishment for Extremist Materials



The Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) has appealed to the House of Representatives against an amendment to the Administrative Offenses Code that would establish punishment for the distribution of extremist materials.

The new legislation would allow "law-enforcement agencies, above all the State Security Committee (KGB), to arbitrarily declare an unlimited number

of materials extremist," the Association said in a statement that it adopted at its seventh convention held in Minsk. The BAJ expressed concerns that the bill contains a "very ambiguous and vague definition" of the word "extremism."

The production and distribution of extremist materials is currently punishable only under criminal laws. The BAJ criticized the country's extremism prevention law, saying that it restricted the freedom of expression, running counter to Belarus' international commitments. However, it warned, the new legislation could make the situation even worse.

The Association called on the lower parliamentary house to reject the bill and introduce instead an amendment to the extremism prevention law that would define clearly extremist activities as recommended by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, BelaPAN says.

25/05/2009

Source: axiglobe.com

### Israeli Foreign Minister to Visit Belarus



Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman is to arrive in the Belarusian capital Minsk on May 27, following up on his request for a meeting with President Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

About a year ago, Israeli-Belarusian relations became strained after Lukashenka made an anti-Semitic remark.

Lieberman is to arrive in Minsk after a two-day visit to Moscow. He will meet with senior defence officials, the Foreign Minister and Jewish community leaders. It will be Lieberman's second visit to the city since he was appointed foreign minister. His first visit, a private one, was in February, a few days after the Knesset elections.

Lieberman has visited Belarus several times in the past. As infrastructure minister in Ariel Sharon's government,

Lieberman asked that the Foreign Ministry receive special funding to reopen the Israeli Embassy in Minsk. He also sought the appointment of veteran diplomat Ze'ev Gur-Aryeh as ambassador to Belarus. Gur-Aryeh is currently Lieberman's adviser on the countries of the former Soviet Union.

26/05/2009

Source: axiglobe.com

## Finance and Economics

### First Belarusian Trade Mission Opens in Manila

The Belarusian Chamber of Commerce and Industry is sending a trade mission to the Philippines on May 5-9. The delegation, which will be composed of representatives of top Belarusian companies, will be led by Vasil Ramanau.

Ramanau and his delegation were invited by the Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industry in coordina-

tion with Belarus Honorary Consul of the Philippines Anna Marie Ablan. A cooperation agreement is scheduled to be signed by the two chambers. The PCCI has organized a business forum on trade opportunities and business matching with the different members of the delegation.

Included in the delegation are representatives of Minsk Tractor Works,

the world's 7th largest exporter of tractors; Belshina, one of the biggest tire manufacturers in Europe; Technoshans Inc.; DB Radar, an exporter of radar, EW equipment and R&D products; Vitebsk Carpets, maker of carpets and flooring, and LEMT Research & Development.

04/05/2009

Source: [business.inquirer.net](http://business.inquirer.net)

### National Bank of Ukraine Settles Procedure for Payments in Hryvnias between Ukraine, Belarus under Export-Import Agreements

National Bank of Ukraine settles procedure for payments in hryvnias between Ukraine, Belarus residents under export-import agreements

The National Bank of Ukraine (NBU) has settled the procedure for making payments in hryvnias between residents of Ukraine and Belarus under export-import agreements, which are to go through correspondent accounts of Belarusian banks opened in Ukrainian credit and financial institutions, according to an NBU letter to banks.

According to the letter, the procedure is stipulated in NBU resolution of April 30 No. 266, which came into effect from the moment of its signing. "Banks transfer funds from one correspondent account of Belarusian banks in hryvnias to another correspondent account of Belarusian banks under the instruction of Belarusian banks only to fulfil commitments of Belarusian residents to Ukrainian residents under [trade] in hryvnias," reads the letter.

The decision was made in line with a memorandum signed on January 20, 2009 between the Ukrainian cabinet, the NBU, the Belarusian government and the National Bank of Belarus on the elaboration of a set of measures to boost bilateral trade and economic cooperation in conditions of the global financial and economic crisis.

07/05/2009

Source: [Kyivpost](http://Kyivpost)

### Belarusian Foreign Trade Deficit Skyrockets in Q1

Belarus saw its foreign trade deficit balloon some 565% in the first quarter of 2009 to \$1.445 billion, the National Bank said on its website.

The foreign trade deficit for goods totalled \$1.78 billion in the quarter, while the foreign trade surplus for services reached \$335 million.

Belarusian exports declined 46% to \$4.839 billion in the first quarter with

exports of goods falling 48.9% to \$4.116 billion and the export of services dropping 21.5% to \$723.6 million.

Imports to Belarus fell 31.6% to \$6.284 billion in the period with imports of goods declining 32.2% to \$5.896 billion and the import of services decreasing 20.2% to \$388.6 million.

Belarus had a foreign trade deficit of \$4.4 billion in 2008, while the government had predicted a deficit of \$1.4 billion-\$1.42 billion. In 2009, the government has set the goal of lowering the deficit to \$1.47 billion-\$1.5 billion.

08/05/2009

Source: [Interfax](http://Interfax)

### Gas Becomes \$100 Cheaper for Belarus within a Day



According to Deputy Prime Minister of Belarus Uladzimir Syamashka, the

price of Russian gas for Belarus will be US \$102 or 103 per one thousand cubic metres starting from July 1. The

day before he claimed that the gas would cost between US \$200 and 205. Deputy Prime Minister did not explain why the price had changed so quickly.

Syamashka mentioned that the price of Russian gas for Belarus was US\$210 for one thousand cubic meters in the first quarter of 2009 and thereafter the country paid only

US\$147. He stressed that Belarus had no debts for the current supply of gas, adding that the country would have to pay for the gas received in April by May 23.

22/05/2009

Source: [ERB](http://ERB)



## Culture

### Maryja Martysevich: FeminEast Writer



One simply can't help putting some shine on his shoes before meeting Maryja Martysevich for an interview. This young lady who is sipping on her coffee ("No sugar, please!") in one of the cafés in downtown Minsk is known for her unflattering attitude towards Belarusian men. "The reason of my fondness towards Belarusian men can be easily explained: throughout my whole life I have been non-pragmatically and irresistibly attracted to losers," she writes in her essay "The Men We Choose". Paradoxically, many if not most of Maryja's readers embraced this characteristic and flocked to her readings.

Who is Ms. Martysevich? An essayist, poet, translator, journalist, blogger, or all of the above? She prefers to call herself a "creative writer". Born in 1982, Martysevich is now writing up her thesis at the Department of Philology of the Belarusian State University. She also works as a journalist for a liberal Minsk-based newspaper "Novy Chas" and writes essays for an art magazine "Partisan".

Maryja entered the world of literature with her translations. In her heart, she has a special place for central- and east-European literature. Most recently, in 2008, she published her translation into Belarusian of the novel "The Sky Under Berlin" by Czech-German writer Jaroslav Rudis. Maryja's fondness for trans-

lation is the key which helps decrypt her first book of poetry and essayistic writing "Dragons Fly for Spawning" (Logvinau Press, Minsk, 2008). As a translator, she crosses borders which separate different literatures. Maryja is also a keen traveller - she has just received a new passport because her old one was fully stamped with visas. No wonder her book is heavily saturated with the motive of cross-

ing borders. "I can't stand spending too much time away from home, but I also become bored soon after I return," she admits. "The fact that my parents were born in two different corners of Belarus comes in very handy. It gives me a chance to visit relatives in faraway regions and change my setting in an instant". In Maryja's book there is a whole set of poems titled "Border Stories", obviously inspired by her travel experiences. She writes about an unlikely romance between a Belarusian border guard officer and a Philology Department female graduate who meet in a train compartment during the midnight border crossing; about a distressed girl who hitchhikes back home with a friendly hauler who "drives his truck like a cathedral"; about a student who smuggles a bottle of beer into Belarus and rejoices when he gets through the customs unnoticed. In these poems, Maryja is fascinated with the borderland universe. On one hand it separates different countries, but on the other hand it helps to erase borders between people for a moment.

Maryja is eager to deconstruct national icons (or, better to say, reconstruct them the way she desires). A good example is her treatment of Branislau Taraskevich, one of the most prominent figures of the Belarusian national movement who helped Belarusian People's Republic to its feet in 1918 and the author of the first grammar book of the modern Belarusian language. Taraskevich was demonised by the Soviet propaganda machine and idealised by the nationally conscious intelligentsia. But Maryja calls him

"Bronik", in a buddy-buddy way, and generally treats him without pity, albeit not without adoration. "Bronik is Belarusian James Bond and George Washington. His portraits will appear on our euro bills. He made up the whole state. He has written *Belarus*, which became a school textbook we use in our classes, unable to close the file or turn the page", she writes in her essay "Bronik As We Love Him" (in Maryja's book the title actually appears in English).

Maryja's interest in Branislau Tarashkevich also stems from the fact that it was a border crossing that decided his fate in a radical way. Tarashkevich lived in the time when territory of Belarus was divided in two after a Polish-Soviet treaty of Riga (1921). While the eastern part, already the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic, enjoyed a short period of national flourishing under the policy of Belarusification, western Belarus struggled under Polish police crackdowns. For the sake of justice, one should admit that both countries regularly jailed political prisoners. Later they exchanged them like hostages on a narrow wooden bridge connecting two countries at a border crossing Kolasava (now a small train station in the centre of Belarus). Maryja calls this "an absurd theatre", where Belarusians were traded for Belarusians. As a Polish political prisoner, Tarashkevich eagerly agreed to be traded for a Soviet-held political prisoner Frantsishak Aliahnovich, his old friend, who got into the hands of GPU (predecessor of KGB). Maryja recreates their meeting on a narrow bridge. "Bronius, where are you going?" desperately asks Aliahnovich. This did not stop Tarashkevich who naively believed that Soviet Belarus was a promised land or at least the land of big promises. He was bitterly disillusioned some years later, facing a Stalinist firing squad in 1937. Branislau Tarashkevich is one of the charming losers Maryja both adores and pities.

Maryja is one of the most popular Belarusian-language bloggers. This is also reflected in her book that takes the form of "Barbara Radziwil's Livejournal".

## Culture

### Maryja Martysevich: FeminEast Writer

According to Maryja, this is a set of poetic entries written by Barbara Radziwil, Belarusian mid-16<sup>th</sup> century femme fatale for her internet blog. Mixing past and present into a postmodern cocktail is a favourite trick of Maryja.

“Palesse Chronicle” is a diary of a different kind. Maryja borrowed its title from a novel by Ivan Melezh, prominent Soviet-time prose writer. In “Palesse Chronicle” she describes a visit to her grandparent’s village in the south-western Palesse region, the lost paradise of her childhood. There, she wants to work on her translation of a new novel. The pictures of village life she writes about are closely familiar to any Belarusian in their 20s or 30s: “There is nobody here except of “our own people” – aunt Many, uncle Kolya, and Belarusian television anchors. There is no Internet, and my mobile phone catches the signal only when I put it in front

of the icon of St. Nicholas. This half-isolation (the house has been recently connected to the telephone landline) from civilisation is, undoubtedly, the advantage of paradise”. Maryja’s parents migrated to Minsk from the countryside. She belongs to numerous second-generation Minsk citizens who once in a while return to villages where they have never really lived but have nonetheless always felt part of.

In her essay “The Men We Choose” Maryja presents a rather critical and non-traditional view of Belarusian men. According to the author, they are habitual and hopeless losers. This is the reason of many past and present national troubles – after all, men pose themselves as statesmen and policy makers in this patriarchal land. Noteworthy, the essay was written in the aftermath of major opposition protests, which erupted in March 2006 after the rigged presidential elections.

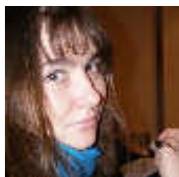
The miserable charm of Belarusian men both irritates and touches Maryja. She is not a misanthrope, quite the opposite. It’s just that the Belarusian universe, at least its masculine part, doesn’t quite live up to her modest expectations. Maryja is not alone in this attitude – many Belarusian women tend to think along similar lines. They try to change their men, then fail, sigh, and carry on with their lives. During the last reading of her book, Maryja bought a big bouquet of roses and presented them to her fans – mostly male who, of course, came to her performance without flowers. In Maryja’s interpretation, Belarusian women are **feminEast**s. Leaving men to play around with their illusions of superiority, they earn money, raise kids, and, once in a while, write books.

21/05/2009

By Ales Kudrytski for the ODB

### Interview with Maryja Martysevich:

#### “Our Literature Mafia Speaks Belarusian”



#### Maryja Martysevich: “Our Literature Mafia Speaks Belarusian”

**Ales Kudrytski:** Please, tell our readers about your book “Dragons Fly for Spawning”.

Maryja Martysevich: This book appeared because it had to. I want to create literature in the future, although I still don’t know exactly which one. In the world of Belarusian literature one can only make his claim by writing a book. The feeling that I must write a book came in a very natural way. I have been choosing texts very carefully. These are essays in poetic and prosaic form. Two main concepts of the book are the concept of borderland and the concept of birth.

**A.K.:** How would you describe yourself – as a writer, translator, journalist, critic or someone else?

M.M.: That’s a tough question. I don’t know.

**A.K.:** Do you feel the need to categorise yourself at all?

M.M.: I think it could be possible. However, when I find a definition for myself, I will immediately get bored and betray myself with another role.

**A.K.:** What is your view of the relationship between the Soviet and “independent” tradition of Belarusian literature?

M.M.: I don’t think the canon of Soviet Belarusian literature will perish even in the next twenty years. School curriculum and mass culture must ensure the general rethinking of the Belarusian classic literature. It is already happening, albeit very inconsistently. Until such rethinking takes place, the qualitative progress of Belarusian literature and culture in general will not be possible. The scene of contemporary Belarusian literature exists not owing to but in spite of what is being taught at schools. We must change the mainstream. We must change the way people see the classics.





## Culture

### **A.K.: How was such a literary canon developed?**

M.M.: In spite of repressions, the Belarusian language hasn't seized to exist. Belarusian literature developed itself more or less proportionately to any literature of other European nations. We had traditionalistic as well as modernistic developments.

"Owing" to the Stalin's purges in the 1930's a very powerful correction took place. All modernists were mown clean, and only traditionalists were allowed to stay alive. In the following decades the "harmony and balance" were maintained in order not to let modernism raise its head.

The purpose of a school programme is not only to get children acquainted with literature, but also to impart some ideological guidelines to them. Looking at our school programme, one can't help thinking that Belarusian authors wrote only about love towards their native tongue, motherland, nature, and their hatred towards the Nazis. Some female writers were also allowed to write about love. As a result, the people who will never be professionally connected with literature in their future lives, but who, potentially, would be interested to attend some literature reading, tend to think that the entire Belarusian literature is like that. The most troubling thing is that our writers notice that such works are in demand by schools, state authorities, officials who distribute literary prizes, and state-owned publishing houses. As a result, they begin to write accordingly. This literature is insincere. I am convinced that this canon has to be changed. In my view, literature of any country cannot avoid being influenced by ideology. Every state tries to impose its values through literature. However, the contents must change, at least thematically. In Belarus, however, as a result of a recent reforms in education, the programme was purged of the last remaining interesting works.

### **A.K.: Who is to be blamed of such a state of Belarusian literature?**

M.M.: Mafia! The blame is on the

"literature officials", *apparatchiks* dealing with literature. These are academic institutes, university professors, critics... I don't want to say that they must board some kind of "philosophers' ship" and leave the country. This is not a problem of generations; this is a problem of discourse. Some young people have exactly the same mentality.

In Lithuania or Poland modernist and provocative writers, just like green party activists, have filled offices in parliaments and serious newspapers. Here, in Belarus, they are either already dead or ruined by drinking. Many of them don't have anything to do with literature anymore. Our system is so skilled at nipping everything in the bud, that it would do an invaluable job by using the same energy in stifling Colorado beetles on our potato fields.

### **A.K.: Does Russian-language Belarusian literature exist?**

M.M.: As long as there are people who claim that they are Belarusian writers who write in the Russian language, such literature does exist. This is similar to a population census: if someone calls himself an elf, this is the way he should be noted in the form. The lack of understanding between Russian- and Belarusian-speaking people was an acute issue in the 1990s. The generation of twenty- or thirty-year-old people has outgrown this problem. My Russian- and Belarusian-speaking peers are politically correct and polite in their communication with each other. Today, Belarusian- and Russian-language literatures coexist, complementing each other without fusing into one. The division runs along aesthetic, not linguistic lines.

### **A.K.: How well developed is Russian-language Belarusian literature?**

M.M.: I wouldn't say that there are no vivid Russian-speaking writers; it's just that there are not too many of them. If a person living in Belarus decides to do creative writing in Russian, then he or she finds it more logical and pleasant to communicate with Russian-speaking colleagues from Russia and Ukraine. Why? Here in Belarus Russian-speaking authors are often regarded as a minority. This is a major paradox of our situation

— despite the fact that the majority of Belarusians are Russian-speaking, our "literature mafia" is Belarusian-speaking. This is a very special phenomenon. Many Belarusians who speak Russian in their daily lives choose to create literature in Belarusian. Personally, I haven't had this choice. I have never written in Russian simply because I didn't want to. I knew I would do poor job writing in Russian. The problem is that the Belarusian language has lost its communicative function in our society. "Thanks" to the Soviet policy of russification the Belarusian language was forced into the purely ornamental role — songs, folk fests, festive speeches. Today, for Belarusians, their mother tongue is a sacred matter. Its aesthetic function is hyperbolised. The one who creates literature in the Belarusian language applies it as a precious tool, as a material, which is very scarce. That is why their works turn out to be better than they could have been otherwise.

### **A.K.: What are the prospects for the Belarusian language? Will it survive?**

M.M.: The Belarusian language is still being developed as a means of communication. I deeply respect young men and women who translate interfaces of popular websites like Google into Belarusian, create dictionaries, and renew the communicative function of our language. I think, in about fifty years everything will be fine in Belarus in terms of the language situation.

### **A.K.: What will happen if Alyaksandr Lukashenka decides to launch a policy of Belarusification?**

M.M.: I like to put labels on people. Once I have said, that everything Franak Viachorka, one of our youth opposition leaders, does, in the end turns into publicity stunts. I have also said that everything Adam Hlobus, one of our controversial writers, does, turns into a scandal. Well, everything Lukashenka does also turns into something — but I still can not find the right word to describe it. I wouldn't like to see Lukashenka pursuing Belarusification. The result would be the same as we see it with his recent policies of promoting sports, reviving villages, and building new national library — miserable. He better not!

## Culture

### **A.K.: You call Belarusian men losers. How do you live in this country?**

M.M.: Oh, it is very difficult. I thought I would offend men with my essay, but their reaction showed me that I was wrong. All men formed two big groups. One of them felt insulted by this text, another one agreed eagerly: “yes, we are losers!” I have just as many grudges against the group which agreed, as against the ones who protested. Perhaps, this essay was too emotional. However, the very concept of a nation of losers, outsider nation, is worth serious consideration. Today I plan to go to a concert in the company of my friend, young man from Poland. Some time ago he called me in order to ask which clothes he should wear. He didn’t want to wear jeans if I don’t, and vice versa. I was so impressed and even shocked by this attitude. Would any Belarusian men ask me which clothes should he wear in order to match mine? Never! I think something is definitely rotten in terms of men in our society. That is why aged Italian men and Turkish exchange students have much more success among our girls than Belarusian boys. However, I wanted to write that I really love losers, because a person who couldn’t care less which clothes to wear for a party is still much closer to me than any other.

### **A.K.: If Belarusian men are losers, then how would you describe Belarusian women?**

M.M.: They are feminists. FeminE-asts, better to say. These are women who adapted an Eastern model of feminism. The whole world sees them as oppressed women; however, they are much more feminist than any western gender equality activist. I have often noticed, also on the example of my relatives, that Belarusian men would never make it without their women. Seeing that a man fails in his life, our woman overtakes his role. My grandmother married the most promising guy in her town. He was a communist, military officer, war veteran with a big salary.

However, it took him just one year to ruin his image, mess up the collective farm he was a director of, and cheat on his wife with an agronomist. He was thrown out of the Party with a “wolve’s ticket” – he could not work anywhere in the region where he lived. In order to bring the life of her family back to normal, my grandmother took all the functions of a family head in her hands. She raised two kids, became a popular local council leader in a faraway village where she found a refuge with her family away from humiliation. She was a hero woman. I think Belarusian women are much more feministic than anyone, including themselves.

### **A.K.: Are you also like that?**

M.M.: I think I am. Perhaps, this is due to peculiarities of my family upbringing. All my familiar lines show obvious signs of matriarchy.

### **A.K.: How would you describe a typical reader of Belarusian-language literature?**

M.M.: These are very strange people. So far this is only a subculture, unfortunately. From what I see these are mostly students with interest in humanities. For these people, reading contemporary Belarusian literature is a sign of being European.

### **A.K.: Is it possible to live from professional writing in Belarus?**

M.M.: Speaking about poetry, it is just as marginal here as anywhere in the world. Poetry is like a sect which attracts a special kind of people. The majority of poets can not earn their daily bread with poetry, because it is unremunerative. In order to live from literature, you must be either a star poet, who is internationally famous, or become a prose writer who produces novels of specific genres and sizes, which fit the demands of the book market. Due to the language situation in Belarus, such a novel wouldn’t sell. It is unprofitable. All attempts to write prose fail here because of banal economic reasons. The ones who still write are either altruists (which doesn’t automatically make them good writers) or people like Alhierd Baharevich, who found the opportunity to live from literary fellowships. He also

had to sacrifice something in order to be a Belarusian writer.

### **A.K.: Which type of book do you lack in Belarusian literature the most?**

M.M.: I would like to see something like “Gone With the Wind”.

### **A.K.: Don’t you have a temptation to write such a book yourself?**

M.M.: Of course, I do, but I also realise that in order to write such a book one has to be a housewife, not some bohemian chick. So, there’s no chance of me writing it!

### **A.K.: How has our society changed in the course of these 15 years of authoritarian rule?**

M.M.: I don’t know what to say. We don’t have our own South Korea which could show us what Belarus could look like if it had a different regime. I think that during the first decade of authoritarianism Belarusians were in a state of shock. In terms of literature, the most popular cultural projects were rock bands like N.R.M. and their analogues in literature. However, Belarusians eventually got used to this situation. As a result, now there is a widespread tendency to abstract away from reality. Although, foreign observers tell us that this is not possible, because we still consider the political situation, even if it is not present in our literary works directly. In general, the development of Belarusian literature doesn’t deviate much from the universal trends. We have a problem of aesthetic, not political censorship. The state policy may change, but if the people with the same aesthetic model come to power, the cultural situation will remain the same. In this regard, the conservative part of the opposition is not much different from the authorities. What we need is a nationwide liberalisation of consciousness. Similar to the regime of Lukashenka, the opposition of the 90s has compromised itself with its inclination to totalitarianism. However, I also see a new literature of young writers emerging. I call it “new age literature”. These are authors like Paval Kastsiukevich, who writes about Israel, but tells us about Belarus in his books.