

Belarus Headlines

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*Office for a Democratic
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www.democraticbelarus.eu

Round Table Discussion “European Union Energy Policy: Sharing Knowledge” Takes Place in Minsk



On 8-9 June 2009, the Office for a Democratic Belarus (Brussels), the Foundation for Legal Technologies Development (Ukraine) together with the Delegation of the European Commission in Belarus, the Swedish Embassy in Belarus and the Belarusian Institute for strategic Studies organised a round table discussion in Minsk on European and Belarusian policies in the energy sector.

During the two-day event, entitled “European Union Energy Policy: Sharing Knowledge”, representatives of the EU Institutions, officials of Belarus’ Ministry of Energy, fellows of the Belarusian Academy of Sciences and independent experts discussed the prospects of co-operation between the EU and Belarus in the field of energy, the issues of alternative energy sources development, and the modernisation of the energy sector of Belarus. The participants had the opportunity to get acquainted with the EC’s energy project for Belarus that was developed within the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy. The project pays particular attention to the issues of energy efficiency and alter-

native energy development, as well as active citizen participation in the discussion of these issues. The

implementation of the €5 million project is planned to begin in 2010. It is worth noting that stronger for EU-Belarus cooperation on energy issues is also envisaged by the Eastern Partnership programme. The EU’s new initiative also provides for the development of sustainable energy potential of Belarus.

The event included presentations on the question of the legislative basis necessary for the effective development of the country’s energy sector (The Centre of the World Economy and International Economics Research of the Institute of Economy, the Belarusian Academy of Sciences); the macroeconomic aspects of the reform of the Belarusian energy sector (Institute of Privatisation and Management); the development of nuclear energy in Belarus (Department of Nuclear Energy, the Belarusian Ministry of Energy) and EU standards on nuclear safety (Wider Europe-BISS); the prospects of modernisation of the Belarusian energy sector (Ministry

of Energy) and the opportunities for investment in this sector (Ministry of Economy).

A representative of the Slovak Agency for Innovation and Energy delivered a presentation on Slovakia’s experience in the development of renewable energy sources. Attendees also discussed Belarus’ engagement in regional energy projects, such as the Odessa-Brody pipeline.



The event provided a platform for dialogue between experts who, for obvious reasons, had no such opportunity for many years. This conference is the continuation of a joint project of the Office for a Democratic Belarus and the Foundation for Legal Technologies Development which is being carried out with the support of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA).

10/06/2009
Source: ODB

EU and Belarus

Benita Ferrero-Waldner Reaches out to Belarus



With President Lukashenko

One of European Union's most senior officials, Benita Ferrero-Waldner met Monday with Belarusian President Aliaksandr Lukashenko and offered broad cooperation at a time of tense relations with Russia.

EU External Relations Commissioner told President Lukashenko "the EU has a lot to offer to Belarus in a wide range of areas of mutual interest." Lukashenko welcomed her visit and said Belarus "sincerely wants to build good relations" with the EU, "no matter whom that displeases." This was a nod to Russia's efforts to exert influence and control over Belarus and its economy, which is heavily dependent on cheap supplies of Russian oil and gas.

A Russian ban on Belarusian dairy products was lifted last week, but a potentially more troubling conflict is looming. Russia's state-controlled gas monopoly said Belarus owes more than US\$200 million and has demanded payment this week.

Lukashenko suggested that Belarus was hoping to receive new technology and economic assistance from the EU.

"You have financial resources - credit, financing - and this is extremely important for us," he said.

Belarus is desperate for cash, as the global financial crisis has drained its hard-currency reserves. Russia agreed to lend Belarus US\$2 billion, but the transfer of the final US\$500 instalment has been held up indefinitely.

"Belarus has taken steps in the right direction and we have recognised that," noted Ferrero-Waldner.

"If our relations are to deepen, we will need to see further moves to develop democratic freedoms, for example the possibility for civil society to work and hold meetings without fear of harassment or arrest," she added.

The EU commissioner also met with opposition leaders, who have pushed for closer ties with Europe and Belarusian Foreign Minister Syarhey Martynau.

At the beginning of the meeting, Martynau and Ferrero-Waldner exchanged texts of a memorandum of understanding on energy cooperation. The memorandum, which was approved at the Eastern Partnership summit in Prague on May 7, was thereby brought into force.

During her visit to Minsk, Commissioner Ferrero-Waldner has also announced the allocation of an assistance package of €10million to improve food safety and quality in Belarus.

Background on the assistance package:

This year's Annual Action Programme concentrates on the improvement of Belarusian food safety and quality. As a result of the explosion on the Chernobyl nuclear station, some 23% of Belarus' territory remains contaminated to this day. Therefore, food safety is a very important issue. The programme aims to bring about a gradual alignment of the country's Quality Infrastructure System with the relevant EU and international regulatory and administrative practices. The assistance package will, for example, seek to strengthen professional organisations and business associations and support the establishment of the Belarusian market surveillance system. In addition, aims to support the development of a civil society movement for the protection of consumer rights.

Of the €10 million, €8.5 million are reserved for the quality infrastructure / food safety support, and €1.5 million will be allocated more generally to enhance the capacity of Belarusian institutions to implement the ENPI Annual Action Programmes. This year's allocation is a significant increase compared to €5 million allocated in 2008.

22/06/2009

**Source: The Associated Press, BelaPAN, ODB, delblr.ec.europa.eu
Photo by BelTA**

EU and Belarus Discuss Human Rights

EU2009.CZ

On 16-17 June 2009, the European Union and Belarus held the first round of human rights dialogue in Prague.

The dialogue was held in a constructive and open atmosphere.

The dialogue allowed an exchange of views on the human rights situation both in Belarus and in the EU, focusing in

particular on freedom of assembly and association, including labour rights, freedom of expression and information, freedom of thought, conscience and religion, combating different forms of intolerance and hate crimes, rights of migrants and persons belonging to minorities, combating trafficking of human beings, protection of different vulnerable groups, situation in prisons and detention facilities, death penalty. Several areas of future cooperation

and for further in-depth discussion were identified.

The day before the meeting a special session was dedicated to functioning of national institutions for the protection of Human Rights. This meeting featured the Office of Ombudsman in the Czech Republic.

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EU and Belarus

EU and Belarus Discuss Human Rights (continuation)



During the talks, both sides raised individual cases of concern related to specific human rights issues in the EU and Belarus. These included freedom of media, expression, association and assembly.

The EU and Belarus discussed human rights cooperation within different international organisations, in particular the UN Human Rights Council and the UN General Assembly but also vis-à-vis the OSCE. They also addressed prospects for a rapprochement of Belarus to the Council of Europe.

In keeping with the EU's practice of incorporating the voice of civil society into its meetings on human rights with third countries, the EU met with representatives of Belarusian NGOs and international NGOs prior to the consultations.

18/06/2009

Source: consilium.europa.eu

Politics and Society

The Council of Europe Opens an Information Point in the Belarusian Capital



The Information Point, which is intended to inform Belarusians about Council of Europe activities and convey European values and standards, particularly in the areas of human rights, democracy and the rule of law, will be housed in the Institute of Journalism at the Belarusian State University.

It was opened by Syarhei Martynau, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, Samuel Zbogor, the current Chair of the Committee of Ministers and Slovenian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Maud de Boer-Buquicchio,

Deputy Secretary General, Andrea Rigoni, PACE rapporteur on Belarus and Syarhei Ablameika, President of the Belarusian State University.

The Information Point will be charged with organising Council of Europe activities and events in Belarus and hence establishing closer co-operation with the local and national authorities and civil society. It will also be responsible for promoting the Council of Europe's awareness-raising campaigns, particularly those against trafficking in human beings, against discrimination and intolerance and for the abolition of the death penalty.

On 26 May 2009, the Political Affairs Committee of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe backed the idea of restoring the Belarusian Parliament's special guest status, which has been suspended since 1997, with the aim of engaging in "a political dialogue with the authorities" while supporting "the strengthening of democratic forces and civil society in the country". The Assembly is due to adopt a position on this question at its next part-session (Strasbourg, 22-26 June).

08/06/2009

Source: coe.int

Turkmenistan and Belarus Sign Documents on Cooperation

Following talks between Turkmenistan's President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov and his Belarusian counterpart Alyaksandr Lukashenka in Ashgabat on June 18, governments and agencies of the two countries signed a set of documents.

At the government level, Belarus and Turkmenistan signed agreements on cooperation in the following fields: science and technology, mass media and



information, sports and tourism, international passenger and freight transportation, customs affairs and tax laws.

The heads of relevant ministries of Turkmenistan and Belarus signed an agreement on cooperation in the economic sphere, on cooperation in the field of education, as well as health and medical science. The two sides also agreed to cooperate in the field of culture.

President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov and Alyaksandr Lukashenka also signed a joint communique and a Protocol to the Agreement signed on 17 May 2002 between Turkmenistan and the Republic of Belarus on the long-term cooperation in the supplies of agricultural equipment to Turkmenistan, including trucks, tractors and buses.

18/06/2009

Source: Turkmenistan.ru

Politics and Society

Medvedev Hopes Milk Row Will Not Impede Russia-Belarus WTO Bid



Russian President Dmitry Medvedev said on Sunday that he hoped the recent dispute with Belarus over dairy supplies would not impede the countries' joint bid to join the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan earlier agreed to form a customs union and seek joint accession to the WTO.

"I hope this situation will not impede the development of normal cooperation in the agrarian sector, and our coordinated efforts to join the WTO. This is why we have created a special Customs Union with Belarus and Kazakhstan, and will now be joining the WTO together," Medvedev said in an interview to the Russian TV Channel One.

22/06/2009

Source: RIA Novosti

Lukashenka Pursues Old Tactics



Despite its overtures to the EU and a recent row with Russia, Belarus isn't going to turn away from its big neighbour any time soon. Instead Minsk is merely continuing with a long-established strategy.

For someone not necessarily known for his openness toward the West, Alyaksandr Lukashenka made a somewhat unusual plea to his guest. "We honestly want to forge good ties, even if this may not be to somebody's liking", the Belarusian president told Benita Ferrero-Waldner, EU Commissioner for External Relations, during her visit to Minsk on Monday, 22 June 2009. Lukashenka was, of course, referring to Russia, his country's long time ally, which doesn't want Minsk to get too chummy with Europe. While Russia and Belarus had, at some point, even planned to form a union, relations between Moscow and Minsk have recently turned sour.

In a move that angered Russia, Belarus has refused to recognise independence of Georgia's breakaway provinces South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Russia, for its part, stopped all Belarusian

dairy products at its border on June 6. The ban was supposedly initiated over health and regulatory matters, but Russia has often used such trade barriers as a weapon in broader geopolitical disputes.

On June 17, after conducting negotiations with Belarusian officials, a senior Russian health official, Gennadi Onishchenko, told reporters that Belarus had satisfied Russia's health and regulatory concerns. To speed up the resolution of the issue Belarus even had to briefly impose tough customs controls on border crossings with Russia (June, 17), but cancelled them later the same day. Earlier, Russia froze a \$500 million loan to the country. Its Vice Prime-Minister and Financial Minister Alexei Kudrin said Minsk was on the brink of insolvency. Furious, Lukashenka stayed away from a security summit in Moscow.

On June 14, the summit of the Organization of the Collective Security Treaty, or CSTO, went ahead without Belarusian President and his delegation.

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and the other leaders signed an agreement creating a joint rapid-reaction force that could bolster the power and prestige of the seven-nation alliance, seen largely as an ex-Soviet answer to NATO.

Russian officials shrugged off Belarusian claims that any deals clinched at the meeting would be illegitimate

without a consensus.

While the dairy dispute has been settled, the other issues remain unresolved. Russia wants to scale down its subsidies or get more in return while Lukashenka clearly wants to survive as an independent player.

In fact, Gazprom, Russia's energy giant, opened a new front by demanding \$230 million for gas supplied in January – April in back payments from Belarus. The debt was accumulated due to the difference in price set in the contract. The agreement says a thousand cubic meters of gas costs Belarus US\$210, but Alyaksandr Lukashenka and Dmitry Medvedev agreed to lower the price to US\$150 due to financial problems in Belarus. The agreement, however, was never put to paper, and technically Russia is not obliged to stick to it.

Lukashenka is, no doubt, the most experienced of all the leaders of the former Soviet republics at pitting Russia against Europe for his own political purposes. However, he couldn't just break away from Russia even if he wanted and Russian actions may underscore the notion that Moscow may have lost patience with Lukashenka.

22/06/2009

Source: deutsche-welle, RIA Novosti, ODB

Finance and Economics

Belarus Railways to Be Partly Privatized

Vladimir Yakunin, President of Russian Railways (RZD), said at a press conference in Minsk that RZD may participate in the privatisation of Belarus Railways.

Yakunin said it is possible that the company will participate in the privatisation process.



He also suggested that Belarus Railways may want to buy a package of Russian Railways shares, too, as both Belarus and Russia belong to the same transport corridor. According to Yakunin, regardless of the whether Russian Railways is a co-owner of the Belarus Railways infrastructure or not, the two sides have to work out a

single tariff and a common technological policy.

Speaking about the prospects of cooperation of the two railway authorities, Vladimir Yakunin added that the railways of Belarus and Russia may soon be able to arrange the circulation of new trains with automatically adjusted track gauge to and from Europe.

31/05/2009

Source: Steelguru

Linpac Packaging Considers Belarus Factory



Global packaging group Linpac wants to expand manufacture in Eastern

Europe with tentative plans for a new food packaging materials plant in the former Soviet Union state of Belarus.

Linpac Packaging, part of the UK-based Linpac Group, stated it is in initial talks with the Belarus authorities on establishing a fresh unit to serve the growing food packaging market in Central and Eastern Europe. The pack-

aging firm already operates a plant in Poland.

The Belarus plant is set to produce expandable polystyrene food trays for meat, fish and other foods and packaging film in an industrial development zone in Homel. Linpac Packaging is expected to create 140 jobs locally.

The Homel administrative authority said Linpac Packaging of Knottingley, Yorkshire, has already signed a letter of intent jointly with the local authorities to proceed with the investment project. But a Linpac spokesman insisted talks are still at an early stage. Commenting on the expansion plan,

Linpac Packaging's president and managing director Ralf Wunderlich said: "Belarus is well located for serving emerging markets in Central and Eastern Europe. We are currently considering building an additional manufacturing site in Belarus and have initiated preliminary discussions with the authorities there.

"Depending on the outcome of these discussions, and further market research, we will make a decision about whether to proceed with this facility," he explained.

03/06/2009

Source: PRW.com

IMF to Lend Belarus an Additional \$1 Billion



The International Monetary Fund said Wednesday it will lend an additional \$1 billion to cash-strapped Belarus, bringing the total provided by the

Washington-based institution to \$3.4 billion.

"This increase is justified because Bel-

arus' financing needs arising from the global financial crisis have increased, and because the government and the central bank are making strong efforts to solve their problems," the IMF said. It said among those efforts is agreement on a tighter monetary policy, which will help the Minsk government keep the exchange rate stable and inflation low.

The IMF said Belarus also was continuing to pursue a balanced budget, even in the face of greater revenue

losses from the global downturn.

The next step is for the IMF's executive board to approve the increase, a move the statement said would take place "in the coming weeks." Belarus' cash needs escalated recently when Russia withheld a \$500 million loan instalment, the last quarter of a \$2 billion loan.

10/06/2009

Source: The Associated Press

Finance and Economics

Additional Privileges for Investors Drafted in Belarus



Additional preferences are to be granted to investors in Belarus, said Raman Shyrma,

Head of the Central Office for Fuel, Energy, Chemical, and Pharmaceutical Industry of the Belarusian Economy Ministry, at a roundtable session held on June 8 to discuss Belarus-EU cooperation on energy.

According to the official, a draft decree has already been worked out. It provides for a mechanism to determine requirements for an investment project. It also defines preferences and regulations for investment activities. Preferences are supposed to be stipulated for every project on the basis of the investment agreement with Belarus.

In order to acquire a status of national importance an investment project has to be of €15 million in value and unique in nature (e.g. (create high-tech enterprises or implement unique architectural solutions using cutting-edge technologies).

A working group has been set up this year with a view to amending the Investment Code. The group has been working on regulations concerning the signing of concession contracts, authorisation of oblast administrations and the Minsk City Hall to assess investment projects.

Raman Shyrma also said there are plans to hold a presentation of Belarus' investment policy review in Geneva in late 2009. The event will contribute to improving the country's image

09/06/2009

Source: BelTA

Gas Transportation to Europe via Belarus to Up by 30bln cu.m



According to Deputy Chief of the Information-Analytical Department of the State Secretariat of the Belarusian Security Council Kanstantsin Burak, Belarus plays an important role in ensuring Europe's energy security and over 50 billion cubic meters of gas and 60 million tons of oil is transported via its territory each year.

"The reliability of the Belarusian

energy supply route to Europe has been repeatedly proved. Moreover, the uninterrupted transit of additional volumes of gas to the EU was provided without a signed contract in the well-known situation in early 2009 [i.e. the time of gas conflict between Ukraine and Russia]," Burak said at a conference on "Energy Security: Challenges and Opportunities" organised by the Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry and NATO in Baku.

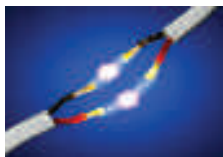
Burak further noted that the country's transit potential is not fully used and its further development meets not only the interests of Belarus but also the interests of the entire region. Thus, according to

expert estimates, the construction of additional branches of the Yamal-Europe gas pipeline through the territory of Poland and Belarus is much cheaper and technically easier than the North European gas pipeline projects and South Stream. Considering that the part of the infrastructure already exists, this project can be implemented within two years. The project can increase the pumping of gas to Europe through Belarus to 30 billion cubic meters.

10/06/2009

Source: Trend News

Ukraine Resuming Electricity Exports to Belarus



Ukraine will resume electricity supply to Belarus on Friday,

Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko said after meeting her Belarusian counterpart Syarhei Sidorsky.

Earlier, Ukraine planned to start elec-

tricity exports to Belarus on June 1, 2009, at the monthly amount of 100 million kilowatt/hour. The issue was discussed by Presidents Viktor Yushchenko and Alyaksandr Lukashenka in January.

Ukraine suspended electricity exports to Belarus in late June 2007 because of uncoordinated pricing.

The delivery of Ukrainian electric power to Belarus would be the first step towards the eventual exports to the Baltic republics.

12/06/2009

Source: Itar-Tass

Finance and Economics

Belarus-Germany Economic Council Meets Again after 13-Year Hiatus



Alyaksandr Lukashenka and Berndt Pfaffenbach

Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka presided personally at a meeting of a top level German-Belarusian economic development council, which convened on Tuesday (16 June 2009) for the first time in thirteen years. Berlin broke off participation in the Belarusian-German Council of Economic Cooperation, an inter-government group promoting trade between the two countries, in 1996, after Lukashenka took total control of Belarus in a constitutional coup.

The renewal of talks attended by senior businessmen and politicians from both countries was, according

to Lukashenka, grounded in long-standing trade between Germany and Belarus and mutual economic interest.

"It has taken more than a decade but the Belarusian-German Council of Economic Cooperation has met again," Lukashenka said. "We have been cooperating with

Germany for a long time. We have excellent trade."

Berndt Pfaffenbach, State Secretary of Germany's Ministry of Economics and Technology, and Klaus Mangold, Chairman of the Eastern Committee of the German Economic Council, headed the German delegation.

"We have always understood our role to act as a bridge between Belarus and the European Union," Pfaffenbach said. "If a normal (working) framework is created, and we have the impression Belarus is working towards this end, we certainly can make (new) important and concrete projects a reality."

European Union governments have long

shunned Lukashenka for his poor human rights record, and in recent years Brussels even banned his travel to the EU.

Since his falling out with Russia two years ago, Lukashenka has worked to improve relations with the EU by enacting some market reforms and exhibiting more tolerant attitude towards the opposition.

The Belarusian leader's limited gestures towards Europe have nonetheless produced results, including a lift of the travel ban, and an invitation to the Eastern Partnership Summit in Prague. According to some Belarusian observers, Russia's increasingly poor relations with the EU have helped Minsk improve relations with Brussels. Germany is one of Belarus' largest trading partners. The volume of trade between the two countries grew by 24 per cent to the equivalent value of 3.6 billion dollars in the last year.

17/06/2009

Source: AFP

Photo by BelTA

Beltelecom to Use Verimatrix Content Security for IPTV



Belarus' national PTO Beltelecom has selected Verimatrix to provide it with content security technologies to protect its IPTV service. Under the agreement the vendor will deploy its Verimatrix Video Content Authority System (VCAS) offering an integrated content security solution for the telco's IPTV service which runs on a ZTE-supplied ZXIV IPTV Eyewill platform. Verimatrix says its VCAS for IPTV secures a wide range of interactive services offered, including time-shift TV, video-on-demand (VoD) and parental controls,

along with broadcast channels, delivered over the 10Gbps network.

16/06/2009

Source: telegeography.com

Belarusian Ruble Now More Flexible

The National Bank of the Republic of Belarus has loosened up the exchange rate of the national currency, increasing the limit from 5% to 10%, NBRB Chairman of the Board Piotr Prakapovich told the media on June 22.

According to the NBRB Information Office, the bank deemed it feasible to change the variation range from 5% to 10%. In real terms the variation totals Br864-1,056, or Br48 up. The NBRB Board passed the relevant resolution on June 22, 2009.

23/06/2009

Source: BelTA

Culture

Fairy Tales for Frustrated Adults



nations and human communities; I like individual people – just a few of them”.

Alhierd Baharevich was born in Minsk in 1975 and spent most of his life in the “concrete-walled villages” of

The Port of Hamburg is filled with hoots of ferries and the seagulls’ screeches. A young man with high cheekbones and narrow prickly eyes is looking at the scene, smoking his favourite pipe. If he were a captain, his ship would carry the carefully packed cargo of books (preferably by Joyce, Kafka and Nabokov) and paintings by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. However, this young man, whose name is Alhierd Baharevich, is not a ship captain, but a writer. Actually, he would rather prefer to be called a magician.

“Isn’t it a miracle that one combination of words can drive a person into a suicide, and another is forgotten in a minute? Can this phenomenon be rationally explained? Especially, if you keep in mind that the story, which was described using these words, had been made up by its author from the beginning until the end? Here he is, a good writer, magician, grown-up narrator of fairy tales,” writes Alhierd in his personal Internet blog.

In Belarusian intellectual circles, there is no unilateral opinion about Baharevich. Some say he is the most talented and exciting contemporary Belarusian prose writer; others call him an intellectual snob full of psychological hang-ups which he (allegedly) pours into his books. Is this a problem for Baharevich? Probably, not. After all, he neither wants to be liked nor intends to like others. “Indeed, I don’t like Belarusian people,” said Alhierd Baharevich in one of his interviews. It is rather insane to like ten million people who are complete strangers to you. I can only repeat the words by great Jonathan Swift: I don’t like

the city’s depressive high-rise residential suburbs, populated by factory workers, alcoholics and police officers. Today, he enjoys the freedom of being a world citizen. His stay in Germany began in 2007 as some form of creative exile from the country where he “couldn’t breathe anymore”. “I hate the regime of Lukashenka and will never forgive its crimes, the main of which is the murder of my dreams. I find this regime aesthetically vulgar and semi-fascist in political sense. A dangerous plague has grown ripe in Belarus and it poses a threat not only to the Belarusians,” reveals Alhierd in his blog <http://bacharevic.livejournal.com/>.

Those who are repelled by Baharevich’s misanthropy usually condemn the writer for the things he says in his interviews. However, those who praise him, mostly do so for the things Baharevich writes in his books. This suggests that the critics are not always willing or able to cope with Baharevich’s prose. The books by Baharevich are, indeed, not an easy read; although, if you catch their tune, they read smoothly. Most of his heroes are either “homo sovieticus” – post-Soviet people mesmerized into numb happiness or blind violence – or lonely souls who cannot find their place in the sticky atmosphere of authoritarian insanity. Sometimes they are a mix of both. The “Natural Colouring” from Alhierd Baharevich’s book published in Minsk in 2003, tells us a story about Stakh, a young man who abandons his literary endeavours, which he deems useless, and gets a job as a common house painter at the omnipotent Enterprise. Eventually, he finds his happiness in this primitive work. He likes to be a part of a naive and passive giant called proletariat. “Stakh found pleasure in feeling to be part of this giant; even if he was not

the giant’s hand, not even a finger, but he surely was at least a capillary somewhere on its wrist,” writes Baharevich.

Alhierd writes in Belarusian, but he doesn’t have even a slightest illusion about the prospects of his language choice. “Being known as a writer in Belarus only means that you are familiar to a small circle of readers who are able to comprehend Belarusian-language texts,” he says. But he enjoys it: “If there were no Belarusian language, one ought to have made it up. It is always more interesting to write in your own, mysterious, rare language, which has such a strange fate and such an unpredictable future”.

In his short story entitled “Belarusians on Crystal Balls” Alhierd Baharevich describes a small boy who sees a TV commercial about a circus that features a rare number – Belarusians on crystal balls. “When his eyes got accustomed to the ever-changing light, the boy finally noticed human shapes above the rings. Dressed in strange, greenish, streaming clothes, the people strolled high above in the burning air, drowning in the light up to their ankles. This was so beautiful, that the boy’s eyes began to hurt.” The boy becomes obsessed with the idea to see the circus performance by the Belarusians. After some hesitation, his parents finally agree to buy expensive tickets and take their child to the show. “It was just like in the advertisement, only million times more beautiful”, Baharevich writes. “The graciousness of the Belarusians was enchanting. There was an eerie and inexpressible feeling that the whole world was just about to come down crashing on the boy’s head. “Can you believe the way they schooled ’em?” someone said loudly behind the boy’s back... The Belarusians were walking, slowly rolling the balls with their paws, without a trace of constraint in their movements”. After the performance the boy catches the moment when his parents are not watching him and sneaks behind the curtain. “The Belarusians were all wet and much less beautiful when one looked at them from up close but that was OK, that’s the kind of job they have.

Culture

Fairy Tales for Frustrated Adults



The boy approached them. “Can I pet them?” he asked, trembling with impatience. “How did you crawl into here?” moaned the trainer in surprise. How-

ever, he was a really kind person, who liked animals as well as children. The boy was allowed to feed the Belarusians through the cage”.

The story could have been a cheerful memory about a cloudless childhood, if it was not for the exotic speechless creatures called Belarusians. “This is a metaphoric tale, a parable about the historic way of Belarusian nation – at least its conscious part, the intelligentsia”, writes Baharevich in his correspondence with writer and philosopher Yuras Barysevich.

However, it would be a mistake to think that Baharevich sees his task in actually criticising Belarus in his books. Rather than that, he constructs a new reality based on the Belarus-made material. In this fictional world moral slavery and authoritarian way of life are driven to the absurd. This reveals the ugly (and, much rarely, beautiful) side of every human being. “Literature studies the phenomena of human existence, constant things like death, love, life, freedom, power, sex, greed, fate, despair, envy... The only thing true literature borrows from reality is scenery decorations,” says Alhierd in an interview to the web-portal TUT.by.

Baharevich’s first books were a mixture of short stories, where characters and settings intermingled creating some kind of literary hypertext. However, with every new book Alhierd comes closer to writing a major novel.

The main character of Baharevich’s book “No Mercy to Valiantsina G.” (Minsk, 2006) is Hadok, a young man working as a poetry page editor at some obscure newspaper. He has a duty of supervising a group of literary amateurs, whose creations he is obliged to print. It brings suffering to Hadok, a person of good taste. One of such scribblers, Valiantsina G., is a handicapped woman, ready to do anything to get her works published, no matter how untalented they are. She turns into a merciless stalker, who haunts the life of Hadok.

Untalented scribblers are often target of Baharevich’s contempt. “The number of writers per capita in Belarus is so enormous, that one can only envy such a country... Why are there so many people in Belarus who dream of becoming writers? Why are there such hoards of people who actually call themselves writers? Probably, because by doing so they try to gain back at least an illusion of personal dignity, which was taken from them by the state,” Baharevich writes in his contribution to the Radio Liberty website.

In Baharevich’s books, journalists are competing with scribblers in terms of their negative image. “For me, only the works which are based on fiction and author’s fantasy can be called literature. Everything else is nothing but workmanship, damned journalism,” tells Alhierd Baharevich, former reporter himself, in his interview to the Minsk-based magazine “pARTisan”. However, the writer once confessed that one of his earlier journalistic experiences was writing a long boring article about a cinema theatre in Minsk. Perhaps, this is where the idea for his other book, “Capital’s Damned Guests” (Minsk, 2008), is rooted. The plot rotates around a movie theatre situated in a nameless capital city. None of the strange characters of this book can sincerely call this city their home; all of them are only limited-time guests in this city as well as in this life in general. They are all damned because the very air of this capital city makes them suffocate. “Heroes of my books are people in the state of perma-

nent asphyxia,” confesses Alhierd Baharevich. In a sense, Baharevich have always been such guest himself. “The city similar to Minsk became the setting for all my books. Sometimes this city saved me, sometimes it lured me into traps. Most of the time it pretended to be my home,” Alhierd writes in his Internet blog. Today, living in exile, Alhierd retains this guest status. He even confesses that now there is no city on this planet where he could feel at home.

In his “Capital’s Damned Guests”, the writer uses one of his favourite tricks – turning the characters into involuntary show participants. At one point, Baharevich describes the theatre full of people who are being fooled by a group of travelling salesmen into buying a mythical cure



“Capital’s Damned Guests”

“Panatsen”. But none of them knows that the whole scene is being observed by other people hiding behind a mirror wall, sitting in comfortable armchairs with a glass of wine. This is reminiscent of “Natural Colouring”, where the people working at the Enterprise turned out to be nothing but chess figures for the masters of the Enterprise.

The title of Baharevich’s latest book – this time a fully-fledged novel – is borrowed from the famous painting by Pieter Bruegel Senior. “The Magpie on the Gallows” (Minsk, 2009) is a life story of Veranika, “nymphomaniac-narcissistic girl”, who lives in a country, which is slightly reminiscent of Belarus. There she works in the administration of a concentration camp. The narrator not only tells us the story of Veranika but also that of himself.

Culture

Fairy Tales for Frustrated Adults



He is, very much like Baharevich, an exile in a German port city. According to literary critic Yan Maksimiuk, “Baharevich creates the world reminiscent of dreams by Kafka and Nabokov. However, structurally, “The Magpie on the Gallows” is a mosaic, written in the style of Julio Cortazar. This is a splendid literary affinity, which not only proves the author’s ambitious attempt to join the greatest magicians of literature, but also shows that the creative standards he sets for himself are getting higher with his every new book”.

“The Magpie on the Gallows” is dramatically different from other books by Baharevich in style. In fact, Baharevich values style – “the unique voice of an author” as he calls it - much higher than plot. In this book, the voice of Baharevich becomes much more flexible and consistent. The author abandons his experiments with the language and turns into a true narrator of a modern fairy-tale, which would definitely give its reader a sleepless night. Baharevich is working hard on becoming the Belarusian Grim Brothers of the 21st century. It does not come as a surprise that now he is working on a translation of “The Cold Heart”, fairy tale by Wilhelm Hauff. Alhierd

Baharevich plans to publish this book later this year with his own creative alterations and complements (their nature and intentions remains a mystery).

Baharevich is disdainfully intolerant towards “homo sovieticus”, the people who have passively surrendered to the authoritarian way of life and thinking. A devoted individualist, he also has a deep contempt towards any form of collective human activity. However, Baharevich’s books have a strangely soothing effect on many Belarusian intellectuals who find it unbearable to live in the authoritarian state. Alhierd loads his books with everything what is worth to be hated in people. By doing so, he unloads his readers’ frustrations, which, in the end, lets them breathe easier.

The misanthropy of Baharevich is probably a myth. If you carefully read into the personal internet blog of Alhierd, you will see that he is a genuinely kind and polite person, with a great measure of respect towards the people he encounters – as long as they have respect towards other people and themselves. He is also a loving husband and a father, who lets his daughter paint his face in the morning, then forgets to wash it and can’t understand why people are staring at him on the street. Baharevich might not like people, but he surely is able love them. This love is probably the most hidden layer behind the thousands of words he has carefully constructed into books.

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By Ales Kudrytski for the ODB

The interview with Alhierd Baharevich can be found at the ‘Interview (Face to Face with Belarus)’ section of our web-site.

His short story “The Art of Being a Stutterer” can be found on our web-site at ‘Cultural review’ section. It was first presented to Brussels’ public on March 26, 2008 at the event organised by the Office for a Democratic Belarus and Hanse-office in Brussels.



Alhierd Baharevich is reading his ‘The Art of Being a Stutterer’ in Brussels, March 26, 2009



“No Mercy to Valiantsina G.” (Minsk, 2006)



“The Magpie on the Gallows” (Minsk, 2009)