

Belarus Headlines

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We on the Web

www.democraticbelarus.eu

EU Policy: Sharing Knowledge with Belarus. Third Visit of Belarusian Experts to Brussels



basis for the next White Paper on Transport. A lively discussion also took place on the problem of private and public ownership in transport system.

Mr. Alain Baron from DG-TREN, the Department of International Relations of Transport and Coordination of International Transportation, stressed that the goal of Trans-European Network is to create a smooth transport network and to eliminate boundaries, so that there are no obstacles and no isolated places. He also emphasized that Belarus is very important with regards to Berlin-Moscow route and that a Memorandum of Understanding is to be signed next month to coordinate work with Belarus, Russia and Norway.

At the meeting with Stefan Gewaltig from the Policy Coordination and Planning Department of the DG TREN, the delegation had an opportunity to get an overview of the importance of transport in the EU. Mr Gewaltig underlined that market opening, infrastructure policy, transport safety, re-enforcement of security policy, strengthening passenger rights and last but not least – making the transport sector more sustainable and energy efficient, remain the biggest challenges.

The given visit is part of a larger programme for Belarusian experts, which is being implemented by the Office for a Democratic Belarus in cooperation with the Foundation for Legal Technologies Development and supported by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). Topics for next seminars in Brussels include scientific cooperation and education. Candidates for participation in the programme are selected through an open call for applications. The organisers welcome participation of experts from both civil society groups and government-affiliated structures.

02/10/2009

Source: ODB

Photo by ODB

On the invitation of the Office for a Democratic Belarus (Brussels, Belgium) and the Foundation for Legal Technologies Development (Kyiv, Ukraine), a group of Belarusian experts on transport and transit visited Brussels on September 29 – October 2, 2009. The Belarusian delegation, which included representatives of the government institutions, media and research groups, took part in a training course, entitled “EU Transport Policy: Sharing Knowledge with Belarus”.

In the framework of the course, Belarusian delegates had a chance to get acquainted with the work of the EU institutions and meet with the key experts from the Council of the European Union and the European Commission working on the region and the transport policy, in particular.

Topics that were covered as part of the programme included urban transport, Trans-European Network, and Policy Coordination and Planning for International Transport.

Mr. Marcel Rommerts from the European Commission (DG TREN) gave the delegation an overview of how the EU “Action Plan for Urban Transport”, which now consists of 20 actions to be taken towards better urban mobility, was constructed. The Delegation from Belarus enquired about the new White Paper concerning passenger rights that would be issued in the near future. The EU expert informed the group about another document called “Future of Transport” that is going to be released next year and is serving as a

EU and Belarus

Eastern Partnership Projects May Be Launched in Belarus in 2010, Deputy Foreign Minister Says



Projects within the framework of the European Union's Eastern Partnership program may start being

carried out in Belarus as early as 2010, said Deputy Foreign Minister Valery Varanetski at a meeting of the House of Representatives' International Affairs Committee on September 22.

The projects that have been proposed by Belarus are mostly aimed at the development of the carriage infrastructure, the establishment of transport corridors and the simplification of customs procedures, Mr. Varanetski said.

Although these projects are currently discussed with Lithuania, Latvia, Ukraine and Poland, mechanisms for authorizing and carrying them out are not yet in place. According to the Dep-

uty Foreign Minister, the European Commission is devising such mechanisms.

The heads of the international affairs committees in the parliaments of the countries participating in the Eastern Partnership are expected to have a meeting in Stockholm this fall. Under discussion will be approaches to the organization of inter-parliamentary cooperation between the EU and the Eastern Partnership participating states.

It is necessary to decide on the "format" of Belarus' participation in the Eastern Partnership parliamentary assembly, noted Mr. Varanetski. He said that the European Parliament has suggested a "somewhat unconventional" format, which is not in line with Belarus' interests.

It is proposed that the Eastern Partnership parliamentary assembly, which is

called the EU-Neighbourhood East Parliamentary Assembly (EURONEST PA) or the Parliamentary Assembly for Relations with the Countries of the Eastern Neighbourhood, should consist of 60 members of the European Parliament and a 10-member delegation from each of the six post-Soviet states participating in the Eastern Partnership, namely Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

Five of the six delegations would consist of members of Parliament, but no decision so far has been made as to who will be on the Belarusian delegation, as the Belarusian legislature is believed to have been formed in a way that was far from democratic standards.

23/09/2009

Source: BelaPAN, ODB

Italian Foreign Minister Frattini Announces Berlusconi's Visit to Minsk



Lukashenka at the meeting with Frattini

Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi will pay an official visit to Belarus in October. The visit was announced by Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini during a meeting with Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka in Minsk. The exact date of Berlusconi's visit has

not been disclosed.

Minister Frattini said the two leaders would discuss a range of issues and that Italy would attempt to boost ties with Belarus. "Italy is pushing for rapprochement and creating an atmosphere of trust with Belarus in European structures," noted Frattini.

The Italian Foreign Minister also met with Belarus' Prime Minister Syarhey Sidorski. They discussed trade and economic cooperation, the establishment of the Belarusian-Italian enterprises and the joint trade and economy commission which is to systematise the relations between the two countries.

For the last two decades Italy and Belarus have been promoting humanitarian cooperation. Since the Chernobyl catastrophe Italy has been Belarus' key partner in the recreation of Belarusian children abroad. In 1991-2009, following invitations of Italian non-governmental organizations, 383,200 Belarusian children have enjoyed recreation in Italy, including 13,000 children in January-September 2009 alone. In 2008 Italy was Belarus' eighth biggest trading partner among non-CIS countries.

30/09/2009

Source: tvr.by, BelTA, ODB

Photo by BelTA

Jacek Protasiewicz Becomes Head of EP Delegation for Relations with Belarus

Polish MP Jacek Protasiewicz was elected head of the European Parliament's delegation for Relations with Belarus. His deputies are Lithuanian MPs Valdemar Tomaševski and Justas Paleckis.

For the first time Mr. Protasiewicz headed the delegation in January, 2008. Representatives of the EP delegation visited Minsk this February and met Ambassadors of EU member states, officials of the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and democratic opposition leaders.

30/09/2009

Source: ERB, ODB

Politics and Society

International Media and Press Freedom Organisations Call for Reforms and Removal of Restrictions on Media in Belarus



A group of international media and press freedom organisations called upon the Belarus authorities to bring the country's media environment into accordance with international standards, following the visit of a joint delegation to Minsk from 20 to 24 September 2009.

The group welcomed recent changes and recognised that pressure on media

and journalists has eased. However, this must be translated into a lasting commitment to ensure the rights of journalists and to undertake much needed reforms of the media environment. Such changes need to be far reaching and irreversible.

The delegation met with media organisations and with authorities of Belarus in Minsk to exchange views and assess the current situation of the media, press freedom, freedom of expression and access to information.

The members of the delegation named several conditions that hinder the de-

velopment of an independent and pluralistic media landscape or limit the journalists' right to information, or discriminate between state and non-state media in accessing information of public interest

The experts also provided recommendations on how to improve and strengthen the media environment in Belarus for state and non-state media, as well as enhance professionalism, pluralism and the role of media in a democratic society.

20-24/09/2009

Source: Reporters without Borders

Two Persons Cleared of Suspicions in Autuhovich's Case



Criminal proceedings were terminated against Yuri Lyavonau and Kanstantsin Ulanau.

Businessman Yuri Liavonau was arrested along with Mikalay Autuhovich and Uladzimir Asipenka, in February 2009 and released on his own recognisance in early August.

Lyavonau told journalists he received a copy of an order by the Ministry of the Interior's Organized Crime Prevention Department to close the case against him on September 24. "The authorities were forced to admit eventually that the criminal case opened against me collapsed," Lyavonau commented. "I have been talking about this since my arrest on February 8. Everything that they attempted to charge me with was lies

and provocation."

Kanstantsin Ulanau, a 57-year-old veteran of the USSR's Afghanistan war, was notified of the police's decision to drop all charges against him on September 30. Ulanau was detained in Minsk by the officers of the above-mentioned department on July 7 but was released 10 days later.

Ulanau was formally suspected of involvement in offenses allegedly committed by Autuhovich. The two men met only once, when Ulanau visited Vaukavysk in 2005 to support Autuhovich, also an Afghanistan war veteran who was on hunger strike at the time.

Police searched Ulanau's apartment and country house but found nothing that could be linked to Autuhovich. They only seized a legally possessed hunting gun but gave it back to the man later.

Former business partners Mikalai Autuhovich and Yuri Lyavonau and their associate Uladzimir Asipenka were arrested in armed raids on February 8. Police said that they were suspected of

perpetrating a series of arsons and explosions targeting the property of local officials and of illegal possession of explosives and firearms. Opposition politicians and human rights activists condemned their prosecution as illegal and politically motivated.

Earlier Autukhovich and Lyavonau served 18 months in prison for alleged tax evasion and illegal business activities. They were both granted early release in January 2008.

Autukhovich insisted that he had been sent to prison because he had protested authorities' arbitrary rule. Amnesty International declared him and Lyavonau prisoners of conscience.

Autukhovich, who is a leader of a nascent association of veterans of Soviet wars abroad, was among civil society activists who petitioned the government in January to restore state benefits to veterans of the Soviet war in Afghanistan.

24/09-01/10/2009

Source: ODB, BelaPAN

Politics and Society

Zapad 2009 Rehearses Countering a NATO Attack on Belarus



Russian President Dmitry Medvedev with his Belarusian counterpart, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, observe Zapad 2009 joint military exercises

By Roger McDermott

On September 29 the Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and his Belarusian counterpart Alyaksandr Lukashenka attended the end of joint military exercises at the Obuz-Lyasnousky firing range in Belarus. The two stage "Zapad 2009" (West 2009) began on September 8, involving a total of 12,500 servicemen, including 6,000 from Russia, and 40 aircraft among 200 items of military hardware.

Medvedev said that such exercises will be held every two years in order to promote Russian and Belarusian military interoperability and form a high-quality joint defence system.

Minsk invited observers from Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine to attend the event. However, the exercise which was developed jointly between the Belarusian and Russian defence ministries was described by Medvedev as "purely defensive," though to many western observers it appeared to be a regressive step: the exercise scenario concentrated on repelling a NATO-led attack on Belarus (EDM, September 28).

A more plausible rationale was offered by Lieutenant-General Sergey Skokov, the Chief of the Main Staff of the Russian Ground Forces, who noted that the country faces "potential threats" from three strategic directions: the west, east and south. They each represent distinct type of threats ranging from facing a

mass conventional force on its eastern border to combating insurgents or terrorism from the south, to facing a highly technologically advanced "enemy" from the west. In describing the type of threat Russian might face on its western flank, he essentially described network centric warfare which is the hallmark of United States and NATO operations. [...]

What few Russian generals are saying publicly is that by abandoning the mass mobilization principle this year, and transferring to permanent readiness formations, it is harder to maintain the pretence that the military mainly exists to deter or repel a future attack from NATO.

According to General Skokov, recent Russian military exercises provide an opportunity for the "new look" armed forces to be evaluated and tested. [...] General Makarov was unequivocal about the objectives of Zapad 2009: "We have set a number of important objectives for these manoeuvres. First of all, we must test the transition to the new armed forces command system, mostly based on the move to network centric warfare. We want to see the new air defence and air force command system in action and also test the command system of the coalition force of the Republic of Belarus and Russia" (Interfax, September 29).

Indeed, given the recent turbulence in bilateral relations including Lukashenka delaying signing the agreement of establishing the new Collective Operational Response Force (CORF) under the aegis of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, as well as the differences relating to trade and energy issues, the exercise appeared partly aimed at strengthening the union state. The Belarusian Defence Minister Colonel-General Leanid Maltsau explained: "This exercise is a logical continuation of training during recent years. Its primary goal is to test the functioning of the joint defence system of the allied state and its capabilities of fulfilling the

task of maintaining regional and national security" (www.belta.by, September 29).

Staging this joint exercise, attended by both presidents, given the recent bilateral tensions and an apparent lapse in military cooperation, served to symbolically unite Minsk and Moscow, even if only against a hypothetical "western threat." Vladimir Evseev from the Centre for International Security of the Institute of World Economy and International Relations in Moscow observed: "This joint exercise will enable us to become closer in such a sensitive area as security" (Russia Today, September 28).

Neither the rhetoric surrounding Zapad 2009 nor the cautious response by the Russian government over U.S. missile defence plans has stressed too strongly an "anti-western" stance. Zapad 2009 appears to be part of an evolving and internal debate within the Russian defence and security establishment. As the structure of the armed forces was overhauled in 2009, progressing towards implementing the "new look" military, old thinking in relation to the Western threat is being adapted, but it is unclear whether this was intended to convey any aggressive foreign policy message to the West. Those arguing within the military that the West poses a possible threat to Russia, must now be gradually won over first to the view that the reformed military can be deployed against a NATO-led intervention in Belarus, while simultaneously the "Western threat" concept is being used as a means to maximize support for the reform and modernization of the Russian armed forces.

The full version of the article can be found at www.jamestown.org

29/09/2009

Source: Jamestown Foundation

Politics and Society

Belarus to Join CSTO's Rapid Reaction Forces



Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiy at an informal CSTO summit in July 2009 (front, left to right)

Belarus is in the process of joining the rapid-reaction forces of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka said on October 2 that joining the forces is "very important" for Belarus.

The decision to join the CSTO's military unit is a policy change for Minsk, as Lukashenka refused to sign the documents on joining the rapid-reaction forces at the June 14 CSTO summit in Moscow in protest over

Russia's ban on the import of Belarusian dairy products.

Lukashenka said Belarus is ready to fulfill all its obligations within CSTO and to join the forces.

The CSTO member states are Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

03/10/2009

**Source: Radio Free Europe
Photo by RFE/RL**

Lukashenka Says Russia Itself is to Be Blamed for Non-Recognition of Abkhazia, South Ossetia. Belarusian MPs to Carry out Objective Assessment of Situation in Break-Away Republics and Georgia



The Building of the Belarusian Parliament in Minsk

Russia itself is to be blamed for the fact that Belarus has not yet recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Alyaksandr Lukashenka told a group of visiting Russian provincial reporters in Minsk on Friday, October 2, 2009.

The European Union and the United States were informed that Belarus "is going to recognize those republics," said President Lukashenka. "But someone in Russia wanted very much to compel us to do that sooner or maybe they wanted us not to recognize those republics at all. Major media outlets [in Russia], which were obviously under the control of government officials, started baiting us for the non-recognition, explaining it was because \$500 million was denied, as if I

had to recognize those republics in exchange for that money. That wave [of media attacks] came when we were about to recognize. Your leaders admitted this to be true. That's why I said, 'Stop guys. This will not be the case in this situation.' I've recently told both of them [Dmitry Medvedev and Vladimir Putin]: 'Guys, you yourselves created this situation, that's why [you should] have patience.' This is a very painful issue, but I think we'll sort it out."

Last month President Lukashenka told reporters that the Belarusian parliament would consider recognizing the independence of the two Georgian breakaway regions this fall.

Chairman of the House of Representatives of the National Assembly of Belarus Uladzimir Andreichanka told reports that Belarusian MPs might be going to Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Georgia to carry out an objective assessment of the situation in these countries.

"While considering the recognition of independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia we should take into consideration two factors: the opinion of the

Belarusian people and the objective evaluation of the situation in these republics. The parliaments of Abkhazia and South Ossetia submitted their appeal to the Belarusian parliament last year. The Belarusian MPs thoroughly studied the issue," Uladzimir Andreichanka said.

The Speaker said that the permanent commission for international affairs will put forward this matter for consideration by the council of the chamber. "After we study the opinion of the population and the relevant documents adopted by the European Union and the Council of Europe we might send a parliamentary group to Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Georgia to carry out an objective assessment of the situation. According to Uladzimir Andreichanka, Belarusian MPs will meet with deputies of the State Duma of the Russian Federation". He added that only after that the recognition of Abkhazia, South Ossetia independence might be included in the agenda of the session of the House of Representatives.

02-05/10/2009

Source: BelaPAN, BeITA, ODB

Finance and Economics

EBRD Funds Belarus Wood Processing and Furniture Firm



The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development is lending

\$15 million to ZAO Holding Company Pinskdreu, Belarus's largest wood processing and furniture group. The financing will support modernisation of its production lines, increase energy efficiency and improve environmental impact. This will help the group cut unit production costs and increase competitiveness.

"The group is already recycling wood waste created by its manufacturing processes to produce steam and heat in-house. The EBRD loan signed in Minsk today will allow the introduction of metering and moni-

toring systems to rationalise control over energy use. The EBRD will fund an energy audit to identify other potential efficiency gains. In addition, as part of the corporate governance measures to which the group has committed, Pinskdreu will appoint an independent director to its Supervisory Board," EBRD informs.

This is showcase transaction for Belarus which has the potential for demonstrating how much can be achieved when a company decides to modernise its production lines, improve its corporate governance and rationalise the use of energy, said Mark Webber, the EBRD's Head of General Industries in the region.

The privately-owned Pinskdreu is a vertically integrated group engaged in the whole process chain from wood harvest-

ing and saw milling to furniture production. It is located in Pinsk, a town in the south of the country, and is the largest employer in the region employing 6,000 people. It was privatised in 1992. The group accounts for nearly a quarter of Belarus's furniture exports, selling mainly to Russia, Germany and Kazakhstan.

The EBRD is working on a new three-year strategy for its operations in the country which is expected to be submitted to the Bank's Board of Directors before the end of 2009. The EBRD's net cumulative investments in Belarus total 292 million euro (\$408 million).

18/09/2009

Source: The Financial

Belarus Central Bank to Narrow FX Band, Cut Rates in 2010

Belarus will set its currency trading band at 5 percent next year, reversing this summer's widening which was done to secure cash from the International Monetary Fund, the central bank chief said on Saturday. The ex-Soviet economy has been hurt by a recession in neighbouring Russia, and is counting on a \$3.5 billion credit line from the IMF to help it weather the crisis.

To meet IMF requirements, Belarus devalued its rouble by 20 percent at the beginning of the year and pegged it to a basket of currencies, originally

in a band of plus/minus 5 percent. In June, it widened the corridor to 10 percent in either direction in a bid to secure the next tranche of IMF cash.

"The stability of the exchange rate of the national currency will be ensured by a corridor of fluctuations with limits of plus/minus 5 percent," central bank Chairman Pyotr Prakapovich told a government meeting on forecasts for next year.

On Friday, the official exchange rate against the basket of dollars, euro and the Russian rouble was set at 1,008.42 Belarusian roubles.

Prakapovich also proposed cutting the refinancing rate to 9-12 percent during 2010 from 14 percent currently.

The budget for next year, discussed at Saturday's government meeting, features economic growth of 2 percent and a deficit of 1.5 percent of gross domestic product.

The Finance Ministry wants to raise the value added tax to 20 percent from 18 percent to compensate for the planned scrapping of other levies.

26/09/2009

Source: Reuters

Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan to Jointly Accede to WTO

Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan plan to join the World Trade Organization (WTO) simultaneously and on identical terms as a single entity, the Customs Union, Russian First Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov announced on Saturday.

"It is our principle that we should accede [to the WTO] as a single customs territory. In response we have been told to formalize our membership on a bilateral basis, in other words formally, legally, Kazakhstan, Belarus and Russia will join the WTO on identical terms Shuvalov told international television and radio company Mir.

26/09/2009

Source: Kyivpost

Finance and Economics

Software Industry Cooperation Agreement between Serbia, Belarus Signed

The Serbian Investment and Export Promotion Agency (SIEPA) today stated that the Serbian Software Cluster (SSC) and the high-tech park HTP from Minsk signed an agreement on cooperation between Serbian and Belarus software companies.

The Serbian Investment and Export Promotion Agency (SIEPA) today stated that the Serbian Software Cluster (SSC) and the high-tech park HTP from Minsk signed an agree-

ment on cooperation between Serbian and Belarus software companies. The agreement will enable joint participation in consortiums for the realisation of European Commission projects and the placement of Serbian products and services on the Belarusian market.

SIEPA IT Advisor Andrija Bednarik pointed out that this agreement is a stepping stone for future cooperation between Serbian and Belarusian information and communication technology (ICT) companies and institutions. Dur-

ing its visit to Minsk, the SSC delegation met with the Vice President of HTP, as well as representatives of ten software and five embedded systems companies.

By providing information, education and financial assistance, SIEPA will continue helping Serbian companies to make contacts and successfully export their products, concludes the statement

28/09/2009

Source: EMPortal

India's BHEL Gets \$56 Million Belarus Contract


Indian power equipment maker Bharat Heavy Electricals Ltd (BHEL.BO) said on Wednesday it had won a 2.7 billion rupees (\$56 million) contract in Belarus to build a 120 megawatts power plant.

The company said it was also setting up a marketing office in Kazakhstan with the aim of establishing a long-term presence in the Commonwealth of Independent States countries. (\$1=48 rupees)

30/09/2009

Source: Reuters

Beltelecom Incribed in Privatization Plan for 2009



According to the Belarusian Council of Ministers' resolution N0 1256, the Belarusian landline communication monopoly Beltelecom has been inscribed in the privatization plan for 2009.

All in all, within three years, more

than 500 state-run Belarusian companies are supposed to be privatized and reorganized.

Earlier, on 23 September, Information Technologies and Communications Minister Mikalai Pantyalei noted that Beltelecom is expected to be incorporated. According to the Minister, Beltelecom does not need privatization

for the sake of attracting investments. "However, in view of Belarus' accession to the WTO we will most likely have to comply with all requirements concerning the liberalization of the Belarusian market of telecommunication services," explained Mikalai Pantyalei.

02/10/2009

Source: ISRIA

MAZ-MAN Begins Manufacturing Trucks with Hydraulic Manipulators Made by Austria's Palfinger

Minsk-based SP ZAT MAZ-MAN has begun manufacturing trucks with hydraulic manipulators made by Austria's Palfinger. Hydraulic manipulators will be mounted on the chassis of MAZ-MAN and MAN trucks at the request of customers, the Business Relations Agency quoted Deputy Director General Stanislaw Ivanyushenka.

At least five such trucks will be featured at an exhibition to be held at the BelExpo center in Minsk between October 20 and 23, said Ivanyushenka.

Palfinger is Europe's largest manufacturer of hydraulic manipulators with locations in Austria, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, France, Italy, Slovenia and the United States.

MAZ-MAN was founded in 1998 by Germany's MAN Nutzfahrzeuge AG, Belarusian Automobile Factory (MAZ) and Belarus' Lada OMS Holding. Austria's II&V GmbH currently holds a 48.2-percent stake in the company, whereas 44.43 percent belongs to MAZ, and 7.37 percent to Belarus' Trustbank.

02/10/2009

Source: BelaPAN

Culture

Tracing the Lost Treasure

On a hot summer day of July 13, 1941 a dust-laden truck pulled up to the main door of an imposing building in the centre of Mahiliou. A former history museum, it hosted headquarters of the local Communist Party branch. However, this was just about to change. The air was filled with the distant sounds of explosions and the muffled racket of machine-gun fire. The Nazi army was quickly advancing, closing its grip on this strategic city on the Dnepr River. Despite of fierce resistance, the fall of Mahiliou was a matter of days.

Men in plain clothes shuttled between the building and the truck, loading it with obscure boxes and bags. The driver, whose name was Piotr Paddubski, rolled a cigarette and idly observed the bustle. "What a nice cross!" said one of the workmen, marveling over something he saw in a package.

Finally, the truck was fully loaded. Piotr started up the engine. Suddenly, a man slung himself onto the passenger's seat. Paddubski's heart gave a jolt when he saw his face. It was Panteleymon Panamarenka, almighty head of the Communist Party of Belarus. "We must get this load to Moscow at any cost", ordered the party boss. The truck roared and set out on a long and dangerous journey. It was joined by two other trucks, carrying the valuables from Mahiliou's banks. The convoy managed to evade constant bombings and arrived in



Moscow two days later, unloading its cargo at the Red Army headquarters. The fate of the load and its exact nature is still shrouded in mystery. However, it is very much likely that it contained most valuable treasures of the Belarusian nation.

What you have just read is only a short episode of a breathtaking story, which began about 850 years ago in Polatsk. Today, this is a mid-size town in northern Belarus. A thousand years ago, however,

Polatsk was the center of a powerful principality. It united most of the Belarusian lands and part of Latvia under its rule. In a sense, Polatsk became the first capital of Belarus. The principality reached its peak under the rule of the legendary Usiaslau Charadzey ('the Wizard'). At some point, he even challenged the mighty principality of Kiev. Having lost a battle against Kiev, Usiaslau was captured and thrown into prison. However, the fate of the Duke of Polatsk threw an unexpected curve. He was released by the inhabitants of Kiev and elected as their ruler. Having spent some time as a governor of Kiev, he returned to Polatsk with triumph. People said Usiaslau could change into a hawk to cover long distances in an instance or into a wolf if he needed to escape imminent danger.

In 1101 a girl was born into the family of Usiaslau's youngest son,

Sviataslau. She was given the name Pradslava. As the little girl grew up, she witnessed many events of this turbulent age. She saw dukes climbing to power and being overthrown, court intrigues ignited, the Polatsk army going to wars. At times, the constant fighting brought Polatsk glory and new lands and sometimes it caused devastation. However, no war passed without bringing deaths and suffering to the people of the land.

As a young girl of noble descent, Pradslava might have dreamt about a happy marriage to some young and powerful duke. After all, she was already 12 – just the right age to get married at that time. Noble suitors sent their matchmakers to Pradslava's father, willing to wed the beautiful member of the glorious Polatsk dynasty. However, the glamorous life was of no appeal to Pradslava. Polatsk's land was just about to be christened. The pagan culture was omnipresent, especially among the common folk. The nobility, however, was already embracing the new Christian culture. Pradslava was fascinated by books and studies, which the monks of the Polatsk monastery provided. One day her parents decided that she should accept what they saw as a very good marriage proposal. The girl refused and declared that she wanted to take the veil. Unwillingly, the parents had to bow to their daughter's decision.

Pradslava took the Christian name Eufraiminnia and occupied a cell in a majestic Polatsk church of Holy Sophia. There, she became a scribe. It was highly unusual for a woman to take on the hard labour of a scribe, which was normally a task of monks. The money earned from the sale of books copied by was distributed among the poor.

Culture

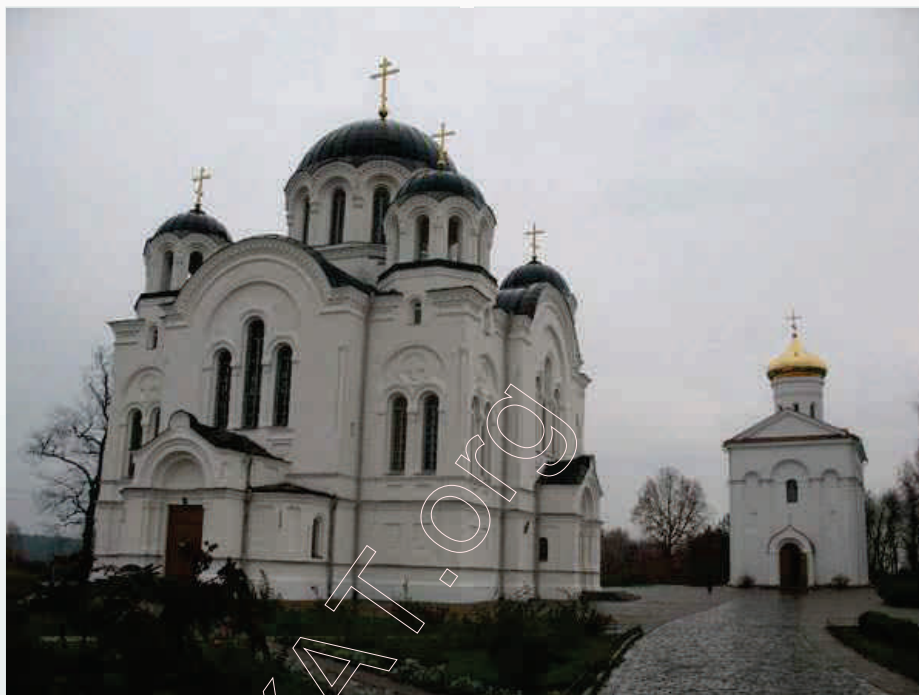
Tracing the Lost Treasure

One night Eufrasinnia had a dream. She saw an angel who took the young nun by her hand and brought her to the village Syaltso near Polatsk, where a modest wooden church stood. "Here you should be!" the angel told her. The dream repeated three nights in a row. The same time Polatsk bishop Ilya had a similar dream about Eufrasinnia. Sensing a miracle, bishop Ilya summoned Duke Barys, the ruler of Polatsk, Eufrasinnia and her father Sviataslau, as well as many other respected Polatsk noblemen. The bishop declared that the village of Syaltso and its church would officially pass under the protectorate of Eufrasinnia.

There, she founded a convent and a monastery. Soon afterwards both sisters of Eufrasinnia and two nieces joined her at the convent. The parent's attempts to stop their daughters were in vain. With so many nuns coming from noble families, the convent flourished.

The authority of Eufrasinnia was enormous. Dukes and the popular assembly of Polatsk citizens took her opinion into account. Eufrasinnia often acted as an unbiased judge in disputes among aristocrats, appealing for peace between neighbouring principalities.

Although coming from the ruling Polatsk dynasty, Eufrasinnia shaped the course of Belarusian history not by military victories but by turning Polatsk into a major cultural centre. The convent and the monastery she had founded became important education hubs of the principality. There were schools where children could learn to read and



The Polatsk Holy Saviour church

write, study arithmetic, sing church anthems and learn to decipher notes of music books. Elder children were offered courses in Church Slavonic and ancient Greek languages, nature, medicine, rhetoric, and history – not only universal, but also their native history of the Polatsk land. Eufrasinnia also founded libraries with scriptoriums, icon-painting and goldsmith workshops. She contributed to the spiritual literature by writing sophisticated prayers and sermons.

Eufrasinnia also influenced the national style of architecture. She ordered to rebuild the old wooden church of the Saviour in Syaltso. Interestingly, instead of inviting an architect from Greece, she commissioned the work to a local Polatsk architect Iaan. As a result, a new stone church was erected in just 30 weeks. With its elegant features, the Polatsk Holy Saviour church became the masterpiece of architecture, a true jewel, which has fortunately survived into our days. One can visit

it and admire ancient frescos, hoping to find the portrait of Eufrasinnia.

Eufrasinnia went on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, where she died in 1167. Her relics were transferred to Kiev and later on to Polatsk. However, shortly before her last journey, Eufrasinnia initiated the creation of one of the most important, valuable, and mysterious symbols of Belarus ...

to be continued

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By Ales Kudrytski for the ODB



The portrait of Eufrasinnia

(by one of the versions)