

Belarus Headlines

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*Office for a Democratic
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Conference: "Regional Cooperation in the Field of Energy Security: Challenges and Perspectives for Belarus" to Be Held in Minsk



Belarusian Institute
for Strategic Studies

biss



Foundation for Legal Technologies Development
Legal Transformation Center

On 29 October 2009, the Energy Club is going to hold its first session on Energy Security in Crown Plaza, Minsk. This event is part of a larger programme of the Club: meetings are scheduled to take place quarterly and carried out as one-day events, gathering local independent and government experts on energy, as well as foreign specialists in the field. The initiative received financial support from the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA).

The Energy Club is the project of the Office for Democratic Belarus, the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies, and the Foundation for Legal Technologies Development that grew out of the seminar 'EU Energy Policy: Sharing Experience' that was organized by these groups under the patronage of the European Commission Delegation in Minsk on 6-7 June 2009 and proved to be a great success. The seminar confirmed both the need for and the opportunity to pursue a constructive, focused, fair and open exchange of opinions on key issues in economic and social development of Belarus and on how Belarus' rapprochement with the European Union could serve the country's development goals.

The Conference is being held under the auspices of the European Commission office in Minsk and is jointly organized by the Office for Democratic Belarus (Brussels), BISS and FLDT in cooperation with the *Nashe Mnenie* portal and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation.

22/10/2009

Source: ODB

We on the Web

www.democraticbelarus.eu



Konrad
Adenauer
Stiftung

EU and Belarus

Milinkevich Meets with Czech Foreign Minister in Prague



On 12 October 2009, Belarusian opposition politician Aliaksandr Milinkevich met with Czech Foreign Minister Jan Kohout in Prague to discuss prospects for Belarus' relations with the European Union.

According to the press office of Milinkevich's Movement for Freedom, the meeting lasted 45 minutes.

Mr. Kohout promised that his country would continue next year to support people persecuted for political reasons in Belarus and would invite Belarusian students to study at its universities, the press office said. Prague also will increase its support for independent media, in particular the Euroradio station and the Polish-based Belsat TV channel that broadcasts to Belarus.

Mr. Milinkevich was in Prague to take part in the 13th Forum 2000 that is traditionally held under the auspices of the former Czech President, Vaclav Havel. The forum focuses on the development of democracy after the Cold War, human rights and multi-polarity, instruments of international influence and the economic crisis, and shifting values in capitalism.

12/10/2009

Source: BelaPAN, ODB

Syarhei Martynau Pays Visit to Finland



Alexander Stubb and Syarhei Martynau

On 13 October 2009, Foreign Minister of Finland, Alexander Stubb, met with his Belarusian counterpart Syarhei Martynau.

The talks between Stubb and Martynau focused on relations between Belarus and the EU and on bilateral political and economic relations between Finland and Belarus.

The two Foreign Ministers also discussed the prospects of co-operation within the framework of the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) and the

EU Northern Dimension initiative. In particular, Syarhei Martynau spoke in favour of a comprehensive participation of Belarus in the Northern Dimension.

"Finland intends to raise relations with Belarus to a new level. The concrete step will be to send Finnish diplomat to Minsk, the capital of Belarus. I also support the idea of including Belarus as a full member in the Northern Dimension," Foreign Minister Alexander Stubb told the press conference that followed his talks with the Belarusian Foreign Minister.

At present, the EU has called a timeout in its relations with Belarus, where the authoritarian government has taken small steps towards increasing political freedoms. Sanctions have been eased, and the EU foreign ministers will discuss their position in November.

According to Stubb, Belarus has pro-

gressed in the right direction. The EU awaits additional steps towards freer elections, alleviation of the restrictions on NGOs and political parties, and abandoning the use of capital punishment.

According to Foreign Minister Martynau, Minsk considers that progress has been made and expects that, in November, the EU foreign ministers will not decide merely to postpone the implementation of sanctions but will instead give them up altogether.

It is worth adding that the negotiations also covered co-operation between Belarus and Finland in international organisations, namely UN, OSCE, Council of Europe and Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly.

14/10/2009

Source: ISRIA, ODB

Belarusian Leader Warns EU to Be Patient over Reform

Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka warned the European Union on Monday, 20 October 2009, that Europe would have to wait patiently to see a new leader in the former Soviet republic he leads.

Referring to himself in the third person, he said "Lukashenka is not eternal" but the EU would have to be patient if they wanted a different leader for the country.

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EU and Belarus

Belarusian Leader Warns EU to Be Patient over Reform (continuation)

The EU has repeatedly demanded improvement on human rights in Belarus and called for regime opponents to be able to operate freely.

"If Europe wants someone other than Lukashenka in charge of Belarus, they must be patient and wait," he said.

"Lukashenka is not eternal, but at the moment Lukashenka is the president elected by the people and they (Europe) must be patient and engage with him."

The president was speaking as he received official credentials from 11

ambassadors, including representatives of EU countries, his press office said.

Relations between Brussels and Minsk have begun to thaw over the past year, with the EU lifting a travel ban imposed on Lukashenka over the country's human rights record.

Lukashenka said Belarus would only make further concessions to Europe if it was in its interests to do so, and rejected opposition calls for the EU to pressure



Minsk into democratic reform. "If you (the EU) think you can put pressure on Belarus and Lukashenka to cave to opposition de-

mands sent to Brussels, you should know that pressuring a country in the heart of Europe is abominable," he said.

19/10/2009

Source: eu.business

Foreign Minister of Estonia Visits Belarus



Alyaksandr Lukashenka and Urmas Paet

On 20 October 2009, Estonian Foreign Minister Urmas Paet arrived on a two-day working visit in Belarus. Mr. Paet participated in the opening ceremony of the Estonian Embassy in Minsk. He also met with the representatives of civil society, Foreign Minister Syarhei Martynau and President Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

During his visit the two countries signed an agreement for protection and facilitation of investments. According to Paet, "The agreement concluded between Estonia and Belarus helps to increase the feeling of security for entrepreneurs." He also added that Belarus is one of Estonia's top 20 trade partners.

At the meeting with the representatives of Belarusian civil society the Estonian Foreign Minister admitted that in order "to develop relations [with the EU], Belarus must continue to improve its human rights and freedoms record." He also noted that "this would require the strengthening of civil society." "Estonia has supported many projects geared towards developing Belarusian civil society," he added.

Paet underscored that Estonia and the European Union are interested in Belarus opening up to Europe step by step. "The European Union's Eastern Partnership offers many practical opportunities for co-operation between Belarus and the European Union," said Paet, adding that "the EU's technical aid and use of resources require a solid desire to co-operate on the part of Belarus."

The visit that took place from 20-21 October was the first visit to Belarus by an Estonian foreign minister since diplomatic relations with Belarus were established in 1992.

21/10/2009

Source: ERB, the Baltic Course, ODB

Minister Martynau Visiting Brussels

On 21-23 October 2009, Belarus Foreign Minister Syarhei Martynau is visiting Brussels.

Mr. Martynau is to hold talks with the Vice-President of the European Commission in charge of Justice, Freedom and Security, Jacques Barrot, and the European



Syarhei Martynau

Commissioner for Economic and Monetary Affairs, Joaquín Almunia.

The two sides are to discuss the prospects of easing visa formalities for Belarusian nationals, the cooperation in the field of border protec-

tion and illegal migration control. The officials will also discuss the prospects of enhancing credit and investment cooperation between Belarus and the European Union as well as the country's full-fledged participation in the EU's Eastern Partnership programme.

21/10/2009

Source: mfa.gov.by, ODB

Politics and Society

Belarus Opposition Protesters Dragged to Detention



A Belarusian policeman prevents a journalist from photographing the picket

Security forces using rough tactics have broken up a protest by government op-

ponents in the Belarusian capital. Police and men in plain clothes set upon a few dozen demonstrators about a minute after they gathered on a central square in Minsk. They beat some protesters and detained about 40.

Opponents of authoritarian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka try to protest on the 16th of every month, showing solidarity with political prisoners. They also want to call attention to the handful of opposition figures who have disappeared since Lukashenka came to power in the country in 1994.

During the demonstration the police interfered in the work of journalists to prevent them from taking photos or shooting video.

Opposition activists arrested in a police crackdown on a demonstration have been freed without charges after being held for several hours at a police station.

17/10/2009

Source: The Associated Press, BelaPAN, ODB
Photo by nn.by

Ukraine's Foreign Minister is in Belarus on His First Visit after Appointment

Signs of coinciding of positions are seen in relations between Belarus and Ukraine, Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka said in Minsk to Ukrainian Foreign Minister Petro Poroshenko, who had arrived in Belarus on his first foreign visit following his appointment.

"Our cooperation is not meant to harm anyone, of course. You must have noticed that some are vexed by it. I don't think they should be," Lukashenka told Poroshenko.

Lukashenka said he was ready to discuss "all issues that interest Belarus and

Ukraine," adding, "there are things on which the interests of our states coincide absolutely."

Visiting Ukrainian Foreign Minister also met with his colleague FM Syarhei Martynau with Belarusian Vice Premier Uladzimir Syamashka.

The Belarusian vice premier announced that the country was ready to supply up to 100,000 tons of sugar to Ukraine. "We know that there are problems with sugar in Ukraine and are ready to supply up to 100,000 tons of sugar on terms that we have yet to agree upon," he was quoted as saying.

Mr. Syamashka also called for launching the production of Ukrainian caramel at Belarusian plants.

Mr. Poroshenko, for his part, said Ukraine would start buying more equipment from Belarus soon. "If today private banks are not able to provide loans to our farmers in full, the budget will take over some of these burdens," he said, adding that Ukraine would resume buying Belarusian-made tractors, buses and trolleybuses.

Petro Poroshenko paid a visit to Belarus prior to his trip to Moscow.

20/10/2009

Source: BelaPAN, Interfax, ODB

Lukashenka Signs Belarus up to Post-Soviet Rapid Reaction Force

The president of Belarus has signed documents on joining a post-Soviet regional security bloc's rapid reaction force, the secretariat of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) said on Tuesday, 20 October, 2009.

Alyaksandr Lukashenka had resisted signing the treaty establishing the Collective Rapid Reaction Force of the Collective Security Treaty Organization



amid economic disputes with Moscow earlier this year.

The CSTO comprises Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

Lukashenka did not attend the June summit in Moscow at which the agreement creating the force structure was signed, citing trade problems with Russia and Kazakhstan, while Uzbekistan has also held out against signing the pact, citing doubts over the force's

purpose.

The joint force on Friday finished a two-week exercise at Kazakhstan's Matybulak training grounds, with over 7,000 personnel from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan taking part.

According to the CSTO Secretariat, the exercise was aimed at practicing the deployment of the collective rapid reaction force in crisis situations on the territory of CSTO member states.

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Politics and Society

Belarus to Join CSTO's Rapid Reaction Forces (continuation)

Analysts say the creation of a powerful military contingent in Central Asia reflects Moscow's drive to make the CSTO a pro-Russian military bloc, rivaling NATO forces in Europe.

Russia's security strategy until 2020, recently approved by President Dmitry Medvedev, envisions the CSTO as "a key mechanism to counter regional military challenges and threats."

According to Russian newspaper Kommersant, Belarus is to contribute a contingent of some 5,000 to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)'s Collective Rapid Response Force (CRRF).

20-21/10/2009

Source: RIA Novosti, Kommersant

Presidential Elections in Belarus Scheduled for Early 2011

Elections of Belarus' President will take place at the beginning of 2011, while elections to local councils of people's deputies will take place in the second half of spring 2010, presumably in April. The terms were set on 20 October as President of Belarus Alyaksandr Lukashenka met with Lidia Yarmoshina, Chair of Belarus' Central Commission for Elections and National Referendums.

According to the press service of the Belarusian head of state, Alyaksandr Lukashenka decided that the two election campaigns would be held independently. In his opinion, presidential elections should not be combined with any other election campaign in order to avoid devaluating the essence of the former.

He also said he was ready to liberalize electoral laws, sending a new signal that the ex-Soviet nation was seeking better relations with the West

"If within the framework of these (electoral) laws we can ensure the most liberal climate ... then we must do it together with you," Lukashenka's press service quoted him as telling Central Election Commission Chair Lidzia Yarmoshina.

20/10/2009

Source: BelTA, Reuters

Finance and Economics

Belarus to Liberalise Most Retail Prices

Belarus will abandon retail price regulation from 28 October, with the exception of 50 so-called socially important products, the Economy Ministry said on Wednesday.

The government will continue to control the price of many staple foodstuffs, such as low-fat milk, basic meat items, salt and sugar, the ministry said in a statement published in the government's Respublika newspaper.

The government will also retain control over tariffs on goods and services.

The Belarusian government sets price ceilings for products, limits the profitability of processing firms and imposes compulsory mark-ups for wholesalers and producers.

Wednesday's decision follows the government's earlier statements that it would give up control over prices in a gradual manner.

The International Monetary Fund, which has granted Belarus a \$3.5 billion standby loan, and other international organisations have long been advocating price liberalisation as a necessary step to make Belarus a market-oriented economy. Belarusian government had refused the notion in the past, claiming that price control allows affordable products for the people and makes exports competitive. It had also warned that leaving prices to market forces would spur inflation.

Consumer prices rose by 0.3 percent in September, and official forecasts see inflation at 9-11 percent this year.

14/10/2009

Source: Reuters



Finance and Economics

Latvian and Belarus Economy Minister Discuss Cooperation Issues



Valdis Dombrovskis, Mikalai Zaichanka.

On 15 October 2009, Latvian Prime Minister Valdis Dombrovskis met

with the Economy Minister of Belarus, Mikalai Zaichanka, to discuss the Latvia-Belarus intergovernmental committee meetings currently taking place, as well as cooperation issues.

During the meeting, Dombrovskis approvingly assessed the intergovernmental committee meeting, pointing out to the importance of expanding economic cooperation between Latvian and Belarus. On the other hand, Zaichanka pointed out that the meetings are constructive and productive, and that many economic is-

sues were discussed.

Furthermore, Zaichanka pointed out that it was good that the meeting was held in Liepaja (south-western Latvia) and that he could get acquainted with the city's special economic zone and port, as well as discuss future cooperation.

16/10/2009

Source: The Baltic Course

Franck Muller Group May Invest in Minsk Watch Plant



Alyaksandr Lukashenka visiting watch plant in Minsk

Alyaksandr Lukashenka is considering the possibility of creating a joint enterprise of Minsk watch plant and a Swiss company "Franck Muller".

Lukashenka promised that if an agreement was reached, the Swiss company would enjoy the most favourable treatment. "If you abide by agreements, you will not regret your decision to come here," he said. "We'll create conditions as good as those in Switzerland."

The Franck Muller Group plans to initially invest \$10 million in Minsk Watch Plant and build a "watch village" near Minsk in the future, which would include a watch plant and a watchmaking college.

17/10/2009

Source: BelaPAN, ERB

Customs Union at Latest Stage



A woman walks past trucks at the Belarusian border. Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan are to unify their Customs Code

The creation of a customs union between Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan has entered the home stretch, with a deal to be signed in late November giving the countries a unified

Customs Code, external borders and even import duties on cars.

The three countries' presidents will sign a package of documents creating the customs union in Minsk on 27 November, including unified customs rules and one duty for products that fall under restrictions on import and export, said Ihar Petryshenka, a Belarusian deputy Foreign Minister. Under the plan, the union will begin operating 1 January, and customs points will be removed on the Russia-Belarus border. On 1 July 2011, the customs inspections will disappear on Russia's border with Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan will finish installing cus-

tom posts on its southern border by the end of 2010, Kazakh Prime Minister Karim Masimov promised Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. Earlier, two Russian officials involved in the negotiations told Vedomosti that the government was concerned by the lack of demarcation along Kazakhstan's borders. A source in the Russian government said the main questions about creating the union have been resolved and that they were "working feverishly." On Wednesday, the union's commission has a meeting planned, and "a colossal number of additional decisions need to be approved," he said.

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Finance and Economics

Customs Union at Latest Stage (continuation)

The unified customs rates from 2010 will reduce Russia's annual revenue from tariffs by about 1 percent, said Deputy Economic Development Minister Andrei Slepnev. But there will be no changes on the country's main tariffs, he said. Import tariffs on foreign cars, for example, will be levelled off at the Russian levels.

The fact that Russia was demanding to keep the high import tariffs on light vehicles was also announced by Anatoly Vaskov, chairman of the Eurasian Economic Community's interparliamentary commission. "Tariffs are tariffs, but you need to protect your producers. For Russia that's very important," he said. Russia's import duty on new cars is

currently 30 percent, but not less than 1.2 euro to 2.8 euro per cubic centimetre of engine capacity. For cars that are three to five years old, it is 35 percent but not less than 1.2 euro to 2.8 euro per cubic centimetre. For cars older than five years, the rate is 2.5 euro to 5.8 euro per cubic centimetre.

Belarus and Kazakhstan have lower import duties, Slepnev said, adding that it was possible that there would be a transition phase during which each state would keep its own duties on cars. The current tariffs in Russia will expire in mid-2010, and it is unclear what will happen after, he said.

The creation of the customs union won't have much of an effect on trade ties among Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus, which already have a free trade zone,

said Sergei Prikhodko, managing director of the Institute for the Economy in Transition.

Russia has never particularly placed much value on real integration, says political scientist Mikhail Vinogradov. "Just look at our 'friendly' relations with Belarus lately. Every time the Russian authorities say the latest 'yes' on some matter, it means, in essence, 'no.'" Maxim Medvedkov, director of the Economic Development Ministry's department for World Trade Organization accession, told Vedomosti that the three countries could announce a restart to entry talks Thursday.

20/10/2009

Source: The St. Petersburg Times
Photo: Bloomberg

Lithuania, Belarus and China Sign East-West Transport Corridor Declaration

Lithuania, Belarus and China will cooperate in expanding East-West Transport Corridor initiative. A joint declaration signed by the Ministers of Transport and Communications of the three countries, highlighted the importance of strengthening the cooperation between Asia and Europe, expanding the transport infrastructure and taking the transport policy measures grounded on transparency, mutual trust and non-discrimination principles. Highlighting the economic importance of the East-West Transport Corridor, the ministers confirmed their objective to establish the transport system connecting Asia and Europe by the means of a competitive transport and logistics chain. The aforementioned ministers are to meet at the first ever organised Asia-Europe Transport Development Forum in Vilnius, Lithuania, reports ELTA/LETA.

Transport Development Forum will analyse the principal trends of global economy and its impact on transport and logistics. It will discuss the attitude of business toward the demands of transport infrastructure linking Europe and Asia, as well as in regard to investments required for the development of this infrastructure, and explore the opportunities of public-private partnership in the sector.

20/10/2009

Source: The Baltic Course

IMF Approves US\$699.5 Million Loan to Belarus

The International Monetary Fund on Wednesday, 21 October, approved a loan of US\$699.5 million to Belarus, following its second review of the economy under the Stand-By Arrangement program. This brings the total amount disbursed so far to US\$ 2.23 billion. In June, the lender agreed to increase the financial assistance to US\$ 3.63 billion.

The IMF's Deputy Managing Director Takatoshi Kato said Belarus made good progress in adjusting its policies to weather the global crisis, with the economic contraction being relatively moderate compared to other credit-hit countries. Exchange rate adjustments moreover helped to reduce external vulnerabilities. "The adjustment has been supported by a tight fiscal policy, with revenue shortfalls offset by spending cuts, and by an interest rate policy that has kept market rates high in real terms", Kato said.

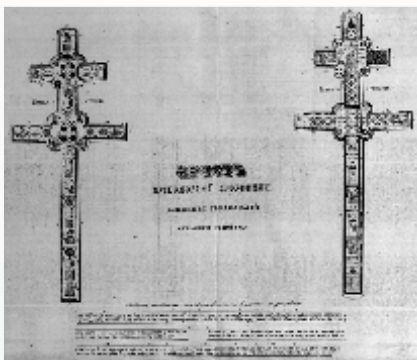
Further, the country made good progress with regard to structural reforms, aimed at improving the business climate and facilitating private sector development. The Executive Board also welcomed the financial sector reforms made.

22/10/2009

Source: RTTNEWS

Culture

Tracing the Lost Treasure (Continued from the issue XLVI)



Lazar Bogsha weighed a small golden Orthodox icon on his palm, scrutinized it carefully from all angles, and smiled. The icon's colourful enamels were just perfect. Anybody would easily mistake it for a Byzantine work. Anybody, but him. After all, Lazar Bogsha created it himself.

If one could find a 12th century parchment listing all Polatsk goldsmiths, the name of Lazar Bogsha would be at its very top. The city where he lived stood on the Dzvinia River, which made up an important part of the trade route between the Baltic and the Black seas. It was the Great Silk road of Eastern Europe connecting Vikings with the Byzantium via lands of Baltic and Slavic tribes. Polatsk markets were full of fancy foreign goods, but it was masterpieces of Byzantine goldsmiths that fascinated Lazar the most. For many years he perfected his skills until he was able to match the level of artists from Constantinople...

A figure of a nun appeared in the doorway of Lazar's workshop. Her earnest look told the goldsmith that the matter was of utter importance. "Please be so kind to follow me. Mother superior would like to see you"...

Having returned from the convent, Lazar Bogsha shut his workshop for visitors, put aside the unfinished jobs, cancelled all appointments and submerged in work. Eufraiminnia, mother superior of the Polatsk convent, asked him to create an elaborate cross, a reliquary, which would

occupy a central place at the Church of the Saviour. She provided Lazar with valuable relics which were sent to her from Constantinople and Jerusalem. There were parts of the Saviour's cross, a piece of stone from the tomb of Virgin Mary, relics of other saints as well as all kinds of jewels, pearls and gold. On his part, Lazar contributed his skill and artistic taste.

When the people of Polatsk first saw the six-point cross on display at the Church of the Saviour in 1161, they were fascinated by its beauty and splendour. The cross was more than half a meter long. Its cypress wood body was coated with gold and silver. A line of fine pearls ran along its rim. Miniature enamel icons of Jesus Christ, Virgin Mary, and saints intermingled with sparkling jewels. A menacing warning was etched along the edge of the cross. It prohibited anybody from taking the cross outside of the convent. Those who disobeyed would be cursed forever and meet the fate of Judas.

The Judas came soon.

The hunt for the cross began at the end of the 12th century, when the dukes of Smolensk (a city situated half-way between Minsk and Moscow, a centre of an independent principality at that time) took the cross out of the Polatsk convent.

In 1514 Muscovite Tsar Vasily III occupied Smolensk and brought the cross to Moscow. As a rule, religious trophies were supposed to go into the treasury of the bishop of Moscow. However, the cross was so beautiful that the Tsar decided he would rather keep it to himself.

By this time Polatsk land had already become part of the powerful Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which bordered on the Moscow Duchy. Both countries were engaged in constant wars against each other. Another Moscow Tsar, the notorious Ivan IV (the Terrible) launched a large-scale offensive against the Great Duchy of Lithuania. He saw Polatsk as the key to his domination in the region. However, Ivan the Terrible was as brutal as he was pious. Prior to his Polatsk

campaign the Tsar pledged to restore the cross to its righteous place if the city would "return under his fatherly rule". Ivan the Terrible kept his promise and returned the cross to Polatsk.

However, the city paid a high price for that. The siege of Polatsk ended in a bloodbath in 1563. By some accounts, more than 20 000 people died and about 50 000 were captured and sent to Moscow lands as slaves.

In 1574 Eufraiminnia became the first woman to be canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church. Stapan Batura (Stephan Batory), the ruler of Rzeczpospolita (united state of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Polish Kingdom) liberated Polatsk from the Russian troops. The cross was transferred to the Sophia cathedral, which towards the end of the 15th century became a united church (United or "uniat" church retained its Eastern rituals but reported to the Pope).

In 1812 Polatsk was occupied by the Napoleon army. Basilian order monks hid the cross in one of the cathedral's niches behind a layer of bricks. In 1814, when Polatsk was part of the Russian empire, the cross found its place in the Church of the Saviour.

Soviet ideology ignored St. Eufraiminnia. A prominent religious figure and a member of aristocracy, she was a double sinner in the eyes of the Bolsheviks. However, despite their contempt towards St. Eufraiminnia, Communists were not too squeamish about getting their hands on her cross. The treasure was confiscated and seemed to have disappeared. In 1928, a special expedition organized by Vatslau Lastouski, Director of the Belarusian State Museum, discovered the cross at a local department of the Soviet Finance Ministry in Polatsk. The cross was brought to Minsk and a year later it occupied a place at the History Museum in Mahiliou.

Soon after that the museum "accommodated" an office of the local Communist Party branch. The cross and many other museum valuables were hidden in a special vault room behind an

Culture

Tracing the Lost Treasure (Continued from the issue XLVI)

iron grating and a 15-cm-thick metal door. It stayed there until World War II broke out and the Nazis approached Mahiliou. This is where we meet our old acquaintance – driver Piotr Paddubski.

When the Red Army liberated Mahiliou from the Nazis, the museum vault was found empty. It is very much likely that the cargo which Piotr Paddubski took to Moscow in 1941 was in fact the exposition of Mahiliou history museum. If this is the case, what else could have been there except the cross of St. Eufrosinina?

In 1944 Ivan Migulin, former director of the Mahiliou History Museum, drew up a list of the vault room contents. The treasures that were hidden there were enormous. There were: the Cross of St. Eufrosinina; golden and silver keys to the city of Mahiliou (symbolic signs of the city self-governing right); hand-written Gospel of Slutsk; numerous Orthodox icons with golden and silver frames, decorated with diamonds; all kinds of precious church utensils; jewellery; ancient weapons and armour; hand-copied books and old prints, paintings, and even Napoleon's sleigh, which the French emperor lost in Belarus on his flight to France after the collapse of his Russian campaign. The list of valuables had 89 lots, with many of them corresponding not to single items but to whole collections such as "Belarusian national clothes", "large ornithological collection", "one hundred and fifty 13th-18th century icons by Belarusian masters", etc. The riches were enormous both in their tangible and cultural value.

The museum's director was immediately made responsible for the loss (even though he was not present in Mahiliou most of the time during the war). Ivan Migulin was found guilty of "negligence which resulted in the loss of socialist property". The intimidating verdict notwithstanding, the director was punished with... a

strict reprimand. Basically, it meant "make sure you behave yourself and never do this again". It is worth noting that it was still Stalin's era and people were routinely shot for much pettier crimes.

The treasure was lost, the culprit was punished, and the case was closed. No further search was needed. At least not until Belarus declared its independence from the Soviet Union in 1990. The new government soon learned that Belarus held only 1% of its cultural possessions, which it officially had before the WWII. Ninety nine percent of the country's treasures were either destroyed, taken by the Nazis or "evacuated" to mainland Russia, where they consequently vanished without any trace.

The Ministry of Culture of Belarus established the "Viartanne" ('Return') commission, whose task was to search for the lost valuables and attempt to return them to Belarus. It turned to specialists in Moscow and St. Petersburg, asking them to provide information about whereabouts of the Mahiliou treasure. "Most likely in the United States", was the answer. Allegedly, the cross was seized by the Nazis and sold at an auction somewhere in Western Europe after the war. The treasure was said to be concealed in the collection of the Morgan family in New York.

Adam Maldzis, head of "Viartanne", visited Pierpont Morgan Library in 1990. Belarusian diplomats even delivered an official letter to the foundation in which they asked its director to shed light on the fate of the treasure. The reply came in two months. The Morgan Foundation denied that it possessed the cross.

Further conversations with Russian museum officials persuaded Adam Maldzis that he was being misled, perhaps even on purpose. The American trace was not plausible enough. Other researchers, including journalist Aliaksandr Lukashuk, who had a rare opportunity to study FBI archives on the topic, also found no sign of American connection in this case. The Mahiliou treasure also

never appeared on the meticulous lists of Alfred Rosenberg's Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories, which was responsible for robbing material values from the lands it oversaw.

When Adam Maldzis was visiting New York, a number of Belarusian newspapers published articles about the fate of the lost treasure. These publications resulted into most interesting replies from the readers. One of them, Mr. Kavaliou from Mahiliou, claimed he knew a person, who evacuated the city's museum treasures – more than 2000 items – to Moscow! Driver Piotr Paddubski was another person who replied. He described in detail his strange assignment at the Mahiliou history museum. The recollections of Mr. Panamarenka, wartime head of the Belarusian Communist Party, who accompanied Paddubski on his secret trip, also pointed out, albeit indirectly, to Moscow as the place where the cross was being hidden.

Today, many Belarusian researchers are inclined to think that the treasure is to be searched for in Russia, either in museums or private collections. They have a rather exotic ally on this quest – Belarusian KGB. The Mahiliou branch of the Belarusian secret service is also pursuing the search through its channels. However, despite the otherwise friendly relationship, their Russian colleagues are still not too eager to provide access to its secret archives.

The story of the cross of St. Eufrosinina made another twist somewhere around 2002.

...An Orthodox priest knocked on the door of a modest apartment. An old lady, lying in bed, stretched her weak hand. She wanted to make her confession, which would also be the last one in her life.

After the ritual was over, she asked the priest to lean closer. "You are so kind", she whispered into his ear. "I would like to give something to you and the Church – as a present".

Culture

Tracing the Lost Treasure (Continued from the issue XLVI)

The book she gave to him was not just old – it looked truly ancient with its ornate Cyrillic lettering. The experts who examined it discovered a stunning fact. It was the famous Gospel of Slutsk! Yury Alekavich, Duke of the history-rich Belarusian town of Slutsk, copied it by his own hand in 1581.

As stunning as it is, the discovery appears even more mysterious if you skip several paragraphs back and read the list of treasures, which were hidden in the vault of the Mahiliou history museum. Bingo! The Gospel of Slutsk was one of them.

The Gospel was the only piece of the lost Mahiliou treasure, which surfaced since its disappearance. But, if the Gospel was in Belarus, isn't it possible that the rest of the treasure is also hidden somewhere in the country?

There is more to it than this. As you would remember, the Cross was brought from Polatsk to Mahiliou by Vatslau Lastouski, head of the Belarusian state museum in 1928. In his description of the Cross Mr. Lastouski pointed out that some jewels were substituted with the pieces of glass. Moreover, he wrote that the Cross was made of oak wood, although it was common knowledge among historians that it was made of cypress. Was it just a mistake of Lastouski? Unlikely.

It is possible that with this description Vatslau Lastouski was giving a signal that the Cross, which he had in his hands, was a fake. But why didn't he write it directly?

Perhaps, Vatslau Lastouski knew where the original cross was, but wanted to send a fake to the Mahiliou history museum. As an intellectual and a true patriot of Belarus

he couldn't help noticing that the Soviet regime could not be trusted. What if he simply wanted to save the original from greedy red commissars?

...

In 1993 it was already obvious that the Cross would not be found easily. The Orthodox Church in Belarus decided to follow the steps of St. Eufrosinnia. It commissioned a copy of the cross to be made by Mikola Kuzmich, one of the top Belarusian goldsmiths. The task was ultimately difficult. He had to reconstruct Byzantine enamel techniques the same way Lazar Bogsha did eight centuries ago.

It took Mikola Kuzmich five years to recreate the cross. Metropolitan Philaret, head of the Belarusian Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church went to Jerusalem to get holy relics for the cross. The Belarusian state financed the work.

The new cross is not considered to be a copy, but rather a masterpiece created "after the image and likeness of the Cross of St. Eufrosinnia". In a sense, the lost cross returned to Belarus – even though the original had not been found yet.

It was not the only return of the Cross of St. Eufrosinnia. In 1991 its shape appeared on "Pahonia" ("the Chaser") the new state emblem of independent Belarus. The knight rider sported the six-pointed cross on his shield. The cross also decorated the flagstaff of the national white-red-white banner.

As a result of the dubious state referendum of 1995, "Pahonia" was substituted with the Soviet-type wreath. National flag turned green and red, with a star on top of its flagstaff. Belarusians lost their holy cross again. This time, however, they did it voluntarily (at least according to the ruling regime).

The fate of the Cross of St. Eufrosinnia is similar to the fate of Belarus. It was lost, but also recreated. Some day, we



*"Pahonia" ('the Chaser')
the new state emblem of
independent Belarus.*



A new cross by Mikola Kuzmich

hope, the Cross of St. Eufrosinnia will return to Polatsk, the ancient capital of our land. We'll keep you posted on the developments of this exciting story, which will surely come in the future.

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By Ales Kudrytski for the ODB



*The cross also decorated the flagstaff of
the national white-red-white banner.*