

# Belarus Headlines

Issue XXVI

April 10 — 24, 2008



Office for a Democratic  
Belarus

## Inside this issue:

**Debates in the  
EP on Schengen  
visa costs  
reduction for  
Belarusians and  
Ukrainians**

**Interview with  
Jean-Louis  
Laurent (PACE)**

**PACE discusses  
Belarus**

**Hearings on  
Chernobyl in EP**

**Politic and  
society news**

**Economic news**

**Culture:  
Beavis and  
Butthead from  
Belarus**

**Belarus'  
Creative  
Opposition**

1

2

3

4

5

6-7

8

9

## Debates in the EP on Costs of Schengen Visas for Belarusians and Ukrainians



their strong desire to help the people of Belarus gain more access to the European Union. MEPs called on the European Commission to do all in their power to facilitate the visa regime. More travel opportunities for

ernment of Belarus, he said. However, the political situation might change in the future. It is also important to have an EU representation office on the ground. Such an office has recently been opened and will surely contribute to development of relations between Belarus and the Union.

21/04/2008

Prepared by the ODB



Say YES  
to cheaper visas  
for Belarusians

On April 21, at the beginning of the European Parliament's session in Strasbourg (France), the vice-president of the European Commission, Mr Jacques Barrot, presented a statement on cost of a Schengen visa for citizens of Ukraine and Belarus. His intervention was followed by a debate.

On Belarus, the Commissioner said that the current regulations will not be reviewed in the near future. "The opening of discussions on a possible facilitation of issuing visas is not envisaged at this point with Belarus," said Mr Barrot. The commissioner reminded that some exceptions can be made in individual cases. States adjoining Belarus may also negotiate agreements for facilitation of border traffic. For example, such negotiations have already started between Belarus and Poland, Mr Barrot said.

The majority of the parliamentarians who spoke during the debate expressed

Belarusian citizens would speed up the process of democratisation and create a better climate for a pro-European course of development in Belarus, members urged. "The isolationism of the Belarusian government should not turn into the isolation of the Belarusian people"

Elisabeth Schroedter from the Greens/EFA group called the Schengen policies in regard to Ukraine and Belarus inadequate and said they undermined the credibility of the EU external policy as a whole. Marek Siwiec, an MEP from Poland and former chairman of the Delegation on Relations with Ukraine in the EP, described the procedures for Ukrainians and Belarusians to obtain a visa as "below the level of dignity".

In his summing-up, Commissioner Barrot agreed that it is necessary to provide Belarusians and Ukrainians with better possibilities to visit the EU. The climate for negotiations on visa regime is more favourable in Ukraine, while it is difficult to speak to the gov-

We on the Web

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

## Jean-Louis Laurent: *Once the Belarusian government commits itself to openness and starts the process of democratization, negotiations can begin immediately*



Interview with *Jean-Louis Laurent*  
Director General

Directorate General of Democracy  
and Political Affairs

Parliamentary Assembly of the  
Council of Europe (PACE)

**ODB:** Mr. Laurent, currently there are two approaches towards Belarus in the Assembly, that of Mr. Pourgourides, known for his tough position regarding the current situation of human rights in Belarus, and that of Mr. Rigoni, who calls for more contacts with the government of Belarus. Which strategy do you favour?

**J-L.L.:** I am not sure there are two positions. The rapporteurs have different mandates within PACE. While the position of Mr Pourgourides is well-known, Mr Rigoni's draft report has not been presented yet, so it is too early to draw any conclusions. I personally do not see any fundamental contradictions in their assessments of the current state of affairs, it is rather that they have different approaches in how to deal with the situation while the objective is the same. The Council of Europe is not complete without Belarus. The question is how to extend the work of the organization to the people of your country.

**ODB:** The Commissioner for Human Rights, Mr Hammarberg, said during the session debate that not enough is being done about Belarus. Members of the Dutch delegation from the liberal group voiced their concern about the grave situation in Belarusian prisons and suggested to The Commissioner that a visit by the Committee on Prevention of Torture

(CPT) should be arranged. Do you think this would be possible?

**J-L.L.:** The mandate of the Commissioner is limited to members of the organization, and Belarus is not part of it. However, when there is the will to act, one can find ways. The question is whether such a visit would be accepted by the government of Belarus. In order to inspect Belarusian prisons, one has to have access to them. In addition, we have to act carefully and make sure such a trip would not be misused by the government and the state media.

**ODB:** As it happened to Mr van der Linden when he visited Minsk in January 2007?

**J-L.L.:** The former PACE President was himself critical of how the purpose of his journey and his messages were presented to the public by the Belarusian state media. To my mind, his visit was a courageous act, even if he did not achieve any real impact- at least in the short term. Experience shows how difficult it is to come to any agreement with your government. For example, we had to cancel a conference in Bratislava this spring because the conditions imposed by the Belarusian side were unacceptable. While conducting a dialogue, one has to assess the achievements and risks, and then decide if it is worth acting. In any case, we will continue our support for civil society in Belarus. Our programmes are open and serve the purpose of our organization: to promote democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

**ODB:** Are you excited about the opening of the info-point in Minsk? Can the agreement to implement this project be considered as success?

**J-L.L.:** Excited would be an exaggeration. I hope we will be able to provide more objective information about the Council of Europe both to the people of Belarus and the government. However, there are no illusions on our side. The info-point will be a very limited institution, based at the faculty of journalism of the Belarus State University (but not

itself part of the BSU). We shall try to make sure the project is not a static collection of books and other printed materials, but a dynamic programme describing our main achievements and campaigns. Free access for everyone was one of our key conditions when carrying out negotiations with the state authorities.

**ODB:** When presenting his report on Abuse of Criminal Law in Belarus, Mr Pourgourides pleaded to the Russian government to stop supporting the regime of Lukashenka. Would you add your signature to such an appeal?

**J-L.L.:** All efforts tend to show long-term benefit. Some members of the Assembly have more influence than others on various issues. Maybe this is the case.

**ODB:** Members of the Russian delegation voiced a suggestion to restore immediately the observer status of Belarus at PACE, without demanding compliance with any conditions. Is the Belarusian government lobbying for the same objective?

**J-L.L.:** Yes. In place of the fulfilment of conditions for a dialogue with us they suggest activities in areas of culture and education, but never mention human rights and democracy. Culture and education are very important, but they are not at the centre of the Council's activities. Once the Belarusian government commits itself to openness and starts the process of democratization, negotiations can begin immediately.

**ODB:** Is the Assembly planning any activities in connection with the parliamentary elections in Belarus due to take place this autumn?

**J-L.L.:** It would be a very clever move by the officials of Belarus to issue an invitation for an observer mission. Such action would show their attempt to be more transparent and open. In the end, what is the most important for us that the country should be ruled by fairly elected officials and the political leaders work for the good of the people.

Finally, I'd like to reiterate that it is the Belarus government's turn to act. The ball is in their court.

**By ODB**

## PACE Discusses Belarus



The situation in Belarus attracted considerable attention at the session of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) in Strasbourg last week.

Commenting on a Dutch delegate's question as to what approach should be used towards Belarus and those Belarusian citizens who face political repressions, German Chancellor **Angela Merkel** expressed, on behalf of her party (the Christian Democratic Union), full support for the Belarusian democratic opposition and political prisoners. She also called upon the international community to pay special attention to the situation in Belarus and provide all possible support to those imprisoned on political grounds, and to let them know that they are not forgotten and enjoy international attention.

The Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights **Thomas Hammarberg** (Sweden) likewise addressed the issue of political prisoners. He believes that Europe should build relations with Belarus in the hope that that the situation may improve in the future and Belarus can join the Council of Europe. The Commissioner expressed his concern over the poor conditions and treatment in Belarusian prisons. He promised to consider the suggestion voiced by some Assembly members to discuss with the Belarusian authorities a possible visit by the "Commission on Prevention of Torture". The Commissioner said his office had good contacts with the Belarusian human rights activists, but that very little had been done so far to improve the situation regarding human rights in Belarus.

**Christos Pourgourides**, vice-chairman of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights (Cyprus), well-known in Belarus as author of the report on disappeared persons and for his tough stance regarding dialogue between Europe and the Belarusian government presented an analysis of abuses of the criminal justice system in Belarus. He proposed a resolution that was approved by the majority of the Council's members: this urged the Belarusian authorities to abolish the article in the Criminal Code that criminalizes activities on behalf of an unregistered organization.

During the international conference of non-governmental organisations Belarusian civil society activists had the chance to speak about the repressions their organisations suffer in Belarus and the new amendments to the Belarusian legislation on NGOs. The conference participants discussed possible ways of supporting human rights and civil society activists in Belarus. One proposal was to hold with the PACE sub-committee on the Media a joint "Conference on Democratisation of the Mass Media in Belarus". The organisers plan to invite representatives of international civil society and human rights groups, media associations, and also official representatives from the Belarusian Ministry of information, Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the National Assembly of the Republic of Belarus (the Belarusian Parliament). Belarusian Association of Journalists chairwoman **Zhanna Litvina** also suggested establishing a standing committee for monitoring the situation of the media in Belarus; this should consist of journalists from the independent media and associations, international experts and the official representatives involved in elaborating and implementing the legislation on the media.

17/04/2008

By ODB (Photo: PACE official web-site)

## Belarus Rapporteur Appeals in the Belarus Press for a Moratorium on the Death Penalty



Andrea Rigoni, PACE special rapporteur on the situation in Belarus, has issued the following open letter to Vadzim Papow, Chairman of the House of Representatives of the Republic of Belarus, and to Henadz Navitsky, Chairman of the Council of the Republic of the National Assembly of the Republic of Belarus, calling

for a moratorium on the death penalty in Belarus. This letter reads:

*"Dear chairmen,  
Popular should be the basis of every decision but there are some issues on which the authorities of a country should assume the responsibility to lead the way. I call on you and the Institution over which you preside to lead the way towards the introduction of a moratorium on the death penalty in Belarus, as an intermediate step towards its complete abolition. I call on you to lead this battle with the greatest resolve, knowing that this process will require not only legislative initiative, not only a reform of the penitentiary system, not only a change of*

*attitude from the part of judges and legal professionals but also raising the awareness of the Belarusian citizens through an open, comprehensive and inclusive debate.*

*(...) The death penalty is the ultimate denial of human rights. It violates the standards and values of the Council of Europe. I ask you and the National Assembly of Belarus to make it political undertaking that nobody will be executed in Belarus anymore".*

Source: coe.int



## Hearing “CHERNOBYL TODAY” in the European Parliament



The Chairperson of the delegation on relations with Belarus Jacek Protasiewicz (MEP, EPP-ED) recalled that the Soviet authorities had concealed and minimized information about the disaster and that he himself had happened to learn of it only from Radio Free Europe thus stressing the important role of the independent media.

On April 17, on the initiative of Lithuanian MEP Dr. Laima Andrikiene, the EPP-ED group in the European Parliament organized a hearing “CHERNOBYL TODAY” on the situation in Belarus.

“A major theme of the hearing was the violation of human rights in Belarus, with special reference to the victims of the Chernobyl disaster, and in particular the so-called “liquidators” – the servicemen and civilian emergency workers involved in containing the disaster and subsequent clean-up operations”.

In his opening speech, the Vice-President of the European Parliament Alejo Vidal-Quadras emphasised that the liquidators who fought the consequences at Chernobyl were saving not only their own country and families but also the whole of Europe. He believes that the problems of the liquidators should be a matter of international concern.

The former President of Lithuania Vytautas Landsbergis began his speech with a moment of silence in memory of Chernobyl victims. He underlined that Belarus is a part of Europe and Chernobyl should become a common concern for the EU since Lithuania, Poland and Latvia also suffered from the consequences of the disaster.

Information on the current situation in Belarus regarding the environmental situation and public health were presented by a number of Belarusian delegates, including researcher and prisoner of conscience, Dr. Yury Bandazheusky, member of the Belarusian Academy of Science Ivan Nikitchanka, former liquidator of the Chernobyl disaster, and president of the “Chernobyl” Union of Belarus Aliaksandr Vauchanin, lawyer Hary Paganaiila, first deputy chairperson of the Belarusian Popular Front Vintsuk Viachorka. In particular, they stressed the problems of Chernobyl

liquidators after the Belarusian government cancelled their social security benefits.

Among the proposals voiced during the discussion were:

- Abolishing visa requirements or granting free visas for Chernobyl liquidators;
- Establishing an international organisation to provide support for the liquidators;
- Establishing a research centre for monitoring the situation of radiation impact on the environment to prevent further tragedies.

The necessity of providing the population of the contaminated area with clean foodstuff particularly stressed during the debates.

The participants in the hearing adopted a final declaration stressing the need for the EU to monitor and research the continuing effects of Chernobyl on public health and the environment both in the EU member states and in neighbouring countries.

*For the photos please see Photogallery section on our web-site.*

18/04/2008

**By ODB**

## Information Evening on Belarus in the University of Ghent



On April 9, representatives of the Office for a Democratic Belarus took part in an information evening at the University of Ghent (Belgium) organized by a non-profit, non-governmental group “Pax Christi”. The ODB director Olga Stuzhinskaya presented to the students of the university’s Economics department a brief historical survey of Belarus and described its present political and economic situation. The guests of the evening were highly interested in what the investment

climate in Belarus is like, and asked questions about the current political situation, human rights issues, and the relations of Belarus with the EU and Russia.

The debate was followed by screening of the film *Ploshcha* (director: Yury Hashchavatsky).



## Politics and Society

### New Political Trials in Belarus



On April 22 Minsk central court has convicted 10 youth activists for their

part in a January protest over the government's moves to increase the burden on private business.

Twenty-year-old Andrei Kim was sentenced to 1½ years in prison while seven others got suspended sentences of up to two years. Two more were fined the equivalent of US\$1,700 (1,100 euro). Kim was convicted of attacking a policeman at a protest by

small entrepreneurs denounced by President Alexander Lukashenko. Jonathan Moore, the United States' charge d'affaires to Belarus, on Tuesday described Mr. Kim's sentence as a political decision.

The next day a judge of Minsk's Maszkowski District Court sentenced small business activist Syarhey Parsyukevich to 2 ½ years in a minimum security correctional institution, finding him guilty of beating up a policeman. Judge Uladzimir Awdzheyenka also ordered that Mr. Parsyukevich should pay 1,100,000 rubels (\$515) to the police officer in compensation for the "moral damage."

Mr. Parsyukevich, a retired police major who chairs the Sole Entrepreneurs' Council at Vitsyebsk's Smalenski market, insisted that he was brutally

beaten on January 21 by a jailer in the rank of police warrant officer in the detention centre on Akrestsina Street.



24/04/2008

**Source: Reuters, the Associated Press, BelaPAN**

### Belarus Eases Visa Rules for Tourists



Belarus has simplified procedures for single and double-entry tourism visas, the country's Foreign Ministry said.

Among other things, "the need for an alien to submit the original of a tourist voucher to a Belarusian institution abroad has been abolished," the ministry's press service said. The documents needed for a visa include a request from a Belarusian travel agency or from a medical (recreational) institution, or from a Belarusian individual licensed to provide travel services. In individual cases, a consulate official may be authorized to issue a visa. A copy of a document needed for receiving a visa may be accepted if the applicant is a citizen of a European Union country, the United States, Canada, Japan or one or other nations listed in a special register. Double-entry visas would be issued to those travelling through Belarus to visit a neighbouring country.

14/04/2008

**Source: Interfax**

### Belarus Tells US To Reduce Embassy Staff From 17 To 5

Belarus has asked the U.S. to further reduce its embassy staff, the ex-Soviet republic and the U.S. embassy said Thursday in an escalating diplomatic row over alleged human rights abuses.

The ministry said it had told the U.S. ambassador to "carry out the recommendation of the Belarusian Foreign Ministry on mutual cuts of the American diplomatic presence in Minsk and that of Belarus in Washington."

23/04/2008

**Source: AFP**

### Belarus Interested in Dialogue with the Council of Europe

Belarus is interested in development of a dialogue with the Council of Europe, Belarusian Deputy Foreign Minister Valery Varanetski said at the opening of a joint conference of the Constitutional Court of Belarus and the Venice Commission in Minsk on Thursday.

"Belarus is open to dialogue and cooperation," he said. "Our conference offers a practical opportunity to look at all aspects of this topic, identify problems and find solutions"

24/04/2008

**Source: BelaPAN**

## Economic News

### Turkcell Confirms Planning Bid for Belarus GSM Network



Turkey's Turkcell has announced that it plans to bid in the forthcoming sale of state-owned Belarusian mobile operator BeST. Last year, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka said that the government would sell the GSM network operator and is seeking bids of around US\$500 million.

On March 5, 2008, Turkcell announced that, as part of its efforts to evaluate investment opportunities in the region, it was conducting studies in Belarus. However, at that time no definitive decision had been taken regarding these studies.

In a statement, the company said that it "has decided to conduct the necessary studies to submit a proposal directly, or through one of its subsidiaries, to the shareholders of the Belarusian Telecommunication Network (BeST), based in the Republic of Belarus, to purchase the majority of shares of the company."

Late last year, Telekom Austria paid EUR730 million (US\$1.04 billion) to

acquire a 70% stake in the Belarus GSM network operator, MDC. According to statistics from the Mobile World, MDC ended last year with some 3 million customers - compared to a mere 181,000 subscribers for BeST. Based on the enterprise price paid by Telekom Austria - on a per customer basis the most that BeST could be worth is just US\$72 million.

11/04/2008

Source: cellular-news.com

### Belarusian Government Increases Share In 28 Indebted Companies

Under a directive issued by the Council of Ministers, 28 companies, mainly subsidiaries of the Belarusian State Light Industry Concern and the Belarusian State Food Industry Concern, are to hand over part of their stocks to the government in exchange for Minsk's use of public coffers to pay the interest on some of the companies' loans. The loans, obtained in 2007, went mainly toward modernizing the companies' production facilities.

12/04/2008

Source: Radio Free Europe

### Heineken N.V. Interested in Acquiring Stake in Rechitsapivo Brewery

Heineken N.V. would like to acquire a stake in Rechitsapivo brewery, BelTA was told in the Belgospishcheprom concern.

The negotiations with the potential investor are underway, Belgospishcheprom informs. For example, the company can acquire the share of the Lithuanian shareholder of the brewery and purchase some part of the shares which are in municipal ownership. The investor would like to buy a majority stake.

Heineken N.V. also intends to pur-



chase shares of other Belarusian breweries: for example, Lidskoye Pivo Brewery.

"However, the negotiations there have been difficult so far," Belgospishcheprom said. Belarus is interested in the involvement of Heineken NV in the country's brewing industry,

Alyaksandr Lukashenka said while meeting with the Dutch brewer's top executives on April 15.

Heineken NV bought the Babruysk-based Syabar brewery, the owner of Belarus' second-largest beer brand, for an undisclosed amount in late 2007.

"We are ready to offer you comprehensive support as if to our company," Belarusian official information sources quoted Lukashenka. "What matters most is that you should set us technological tasks that meet the world's highest standards."

Jean-François van Boxmeer, chairman of the company's Executive Board, for his part, said that Heineken NV was interested to work on the Belarusian market.

He said that the Dutch company would consider buying more breweries in Belarus in the future.

15/04/2008

Source: BelTA, naviny.by



## Economic News

### India to Invest in Potash Mining in Belarus



India plans to invest in the extraction of potash fertilizers in Belarus, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of India to Belarus,

Rajendra Kumar Tyagi stated during his working visit to Grodno on April 23.

According to him, Belarus is the major potash fertilizer supplier of India. Belarusian potash fertilizers are of high quality. India intends to partake in the development of new potash mines in Belarus and in this respect "is ready to

put several billions of dollars in it".

In 2007, India invested nearly \$50 billion in various joint projects overseas, the diplomat said.

23/04/2008

Source: BelTA

### Belarusian President Suggests Further Increases in Food Prices



President Alyaksandr Lukashenka said on April 22 in Hrodna voblast that food prices in Belarus should be brought into line with those in neighboring countries, Belapan reported. "Prices in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and European Union countries will be more or less the same," Lukashenka said. "They are a bit lower here today. We are keeping price caps, but

this is wrong and paves the way for [disadvantageous] sales of products abroad. There is no other way for us; we will have to raise food prices to prevent products from being washed away to neighboring countries." According to the government statistics office, retail food prices in Minsk rose by 17.6 percent year-on-year in the first three months of 2008.

24/04/2008

Source: Radio Free Europe

### More than 300 Companies from 18 Countries to Take Part in Belarusian Industrial Forum

More than 300 companies from 18 countries will take part in the Belarusian Industrial Forum, which will be held in Minsk on May 13-16, Aliaksandr Malaletau, chairman of the foreign and economic relations department of the Belarusian Industry Ministry told at a press conference in Minsk.

The programme of the forum will include: the international symposium "Technologies – Equipment – Quality"; exhibitions "Belpromexpo – up-to-date plant"; "Energy and Resource-Saving Technologies"; "Welding". The 5th international contest of energy and resource-saving technologies and equipment and the 4th national contest of welders will take place. Some 14 seminars and round tables for specialists will be held within the framework of the forum.

According to Aliaxandr Malaletau,

the Belarusian Industrial Forum is an important event not only for the Ministry of Industry but also for many ministries and governmental departments of the country. It is a traditional display of up-to-date innovation technologies and equipment. The forum will pay special attention to problems of energy-saving and energy efficiency. This issue will be discussed at a plenary session of symposium called "Technologies – Equipment – Quality".

International specialized exhibition "Energy and Resource-Saving Technologies" will include two sections. Thus, the section "Stop Waste of Energy" will present the up-to-date approaches to the use of local fuel types and combustible wastes at boiler-houses and technological installations. Section "Energy Saving in Construction" will talk about energy efficient technologies and construction materials.

Exhibition "Belpromexpo – up-to-date plant" is expected to be popular. The exhibition will display technological equipment not only for big plants but for small companies as well. On the initiative of the Ministry of Industry a workshop will be organized with the assistance of subsidiary production unit of ZAO Atlant.

This year expositions of all the oblasts of the country and free economic zones will be presented at the Belarusian Industrial Forum for the first time. Display "Regions of Russia" will introduce the products made by companies in Volgograd, Samara and Novgorod oblasts of the Russian Federation".

24/04/2008

Source: BelTA

## Culture

### Beavis and Butthead from Belarus



Having the flu is not a pleasant experience. You cough, your body aches, and you have fever. However, if, despite all of these symptoms, you can smile and make jokes, then your recovery is just around the corner. With multiple chronic ailments, Belarus is a heavy patient. Still, our fellow Belarusians haven't lost the ability to poke fun at themselves; which is a very good sign.

In 2002 the audience of the "First Music Channel" (a Belarusian version of MTV) were surprised to see two weird characters named "Sasha and Sirozha" appear on their screen. In contrast with the ever-glamorous VJs, Sasha and Sirozha were much more like clowns or tramps. The program was called "Kalyhanka dlia daroslyh" ('lullaby for grown-ups'). It was a talk show-- in the sense that Sasha and Sirozha did all the talking. Or, to put it another way, talking was just about all they did. But -- it was fun! They told funny, scary or simply weird goodnight stories, usually giving some absurd or provocative advice to their audience. On one hand, these two strange dudes with swollen noses, weird hats, and explicitly tasteless clothes were analogous to MTV's "Beavis and Butthead". On the other hand, "Sasha and Sirozha" were not just doing stupid stuff, but creating political and social satire, which associates them more with the popular American animated series "South Park".

The persons behind the masks of Sasha and Sirozha were Aliaksey Khatskevich, free artist from Minsk, and Siarhey Mikhalok, frontman of "Lyapis Trubetskoy", the rock-band, which had become tremendously popular in the post-soviet period. Several years ago Khatskevich created a video clip to one of the songs by "Lyapis Trubetskoy", which was the beginning of the long-lasting fruitful co-

operation of Mikhalok and Khatskevich.

A key secret of the duo's success was the language they used. Sasha and Sirozha spoke "trasyanka", which is a mix of Belarusian and Russian, found practically everywhere in Belarus. The most prominent person speaking "trasyanka" is president Lukashenka himself (although he will not admit this publicly). No wonder, the audience of the state-owned "First Musical Channel" nearly fell off its chairs at the first sounds of Sasha and Sirozha. It seemed as if they were mocking the president. However, the artists themselves continually denied doing so, and for a good reason. Indeed, their characters never criticized or mocked the establishment directly. In fact, they appeared to be average Belarusians. Sasha and Sirozha enjoyed simple things like baked potatoes stolen from a nearby field, a good strong drink and women. At the same time they wanted justice and better life. The duo attempted to make the world a better place, but in trying so hard, it always resulted in various catastrophes. For example, having heard about the campaign aimed at promoting new technologies, Sasha and Sirozha decided to reorganize a local state-owned pig farm. They substituted old brutal methods of slaughter with brand-new psychological pressure. Instead of using a knife, they drove pigs to commit suicide by influencing their sub-consciousness with various tactics, including video. The results were so good, that they decided to apply for a Nobel prize. It's funny yet also horrible. You'll never prove any direct relation between this sketch and present-day Belarus, but you will always be able to find the parallels, if you give it some thought.

No matter how brutal this may seem, Sasha and Sirozha are not aggressive. They are natural-born losers, but their attitude helps them to survive in this crazy world. They have fun no matter what chaos is happening around them, because of their laid back attitude.

The show spent several months on the "First Music Channel" after which Sasha and Sirozha moved to the First National TV Channel, which is a major source of the state-produced information in Belarus. In 2003 they suddenly disappeared

from Belarusian television screens. A direct result of too many limitations and controls being imposed on them. Unlike most Belarusian artists in a similar situation, they didn't go to Moscow. Instead, Khatskevich and Mikhalok headed straight to Kiev, where they began sending out promotional versions of their program to Ukrainian TV producers. As a result, the major Ukrainian music TV channel "M1" agreed to put "Sasha and Sirozha" on air. "The first two months were kind of sad -- no one understood what this program was really all about", says Aliaksey Khatskevich. Five months later the "Sasha and Sirozha" talk show became the most highly rated show of "M1", having even surpassed "the Simpsons" in popularity. In 2004, the Ukrainian magazine "FHM" acknowledged them as the best entertainment program of the year.

Nevertheless, after many successful years as television stars, Khatskevich and Mikhalok shut down their Ukrainian TV show in March 2007. They decided to put more effort into creating their own internet television project <http://www.sa-si.tv/>. Additionally both artists are now actively pursuing their own projects. "Lyapis Trubetskoy", the band of Siarhey Mikhalok, recently won several prestigious music awards for its music video "Capital". The clip mocks the world's dictators by showing them as glamorous pop-culture icons. Aliaksandar Lukashenka also appears in the video, which resulted in the video being banned from Belarusian television. Aliaksey Khatskevich is actively working as an artist -- recently he organized a personal exhibition in Minsk.

Meanwhile, "Sasha and Sirozha" continue to exist -- now on the first independent Belarusian satellite channel [BelSAT](http://www.belstat.tv/). You can also find their comic strips in the Belarusian magazine "pARTisan" and in the internet-version of the currently shutdown independent newspaper "Solidarity".

Sasha and Sirozha are still making fun of themselves and more importantly, still show no signs of giving up.

**By Ales Kudrytski for the ODB**



## Culture

### Belarus' Creative Opposition

Belarus is often called 'Europe's black hole' and is best known for its dictator Alexander Lukashenka and the 1986 Chernobyl Disaster. Indeed, with its statues of Lenin, KGB, socialist realist buildings and collective farms, time seems to have stopped in Belarus, where the Soviet Union is still alive. But behind the country's closed borders, an exciting and vibrant youth scene is alive and well, producing alternative culture underground in dorms, music clubs, informal groups, artistic communities and cyberspace.

Most experts on Belarus write about the country's political or civic opposition. Only a few articles have appeared on the cultural opposition. This is unfortunate, given the key role played by the creative opposition in many authoritarian countries. It is impossible, for example, to understand the revolutions of 1989 without studying the impact of independent elite culture, including Vaclav Havel's plays, Adam Michnik's essays, or Gaspar Miklos Tamas' philosophical tracts, or alternative popular culture, like the psychedelic rock of the Plastic People of the Universe in Czechoslovakia and the anarchist 'happenings' of the Orange Alternative in Poland. The Soviet bloc was full of underground rockers, writers, artists, poets, religious believers, film-makers, environmentalists, hippies and punks. They were important because, in the 1980s, many Central Europeans were inspired by alternative culture to take up alternative politics, paving the way for political change.

The same thing is happening today in Belarus. One interesting difference is that the creative opposition in Belarus is largely made up of and driven by young people. This article is about a few young movers and shakers from the country's cultural scene. Each is a dynamic, unique individual who is not afraid to be different. Together they represent thousands of active and creative young Belarusians who, unlike the government, love their country and its unique culture.

Like kids everywhere else, young Belarusians are crazy about the internet, fashion, music and popular culture. But unlike in the West, where all of this is readily available, in Belarus access to anything independent is controlled by the authorities. Here, in the middle of Europe, youth activists are arrested, imprisoned, expelled from universities and fired from jobs. Independent schools have been closed down, youth NGOs dissolved, youth publications seized and alternative bands banned. The Lukashenka regime tries to control practically every aspect of youth life, because it fears any free ideas, whether home-grown or from the West. A 'state ideology' course is taught during the early school years and is compulsory for all first year undergraduates (freshers). All state employees must take a special ideology exam as a part of the hiring procedures. A new regulation requires that all college applicants wanting to study journalism, international relations and law, must obtain letters of recommendation from their local authorities. The Ministry of Culture decides what kind of music private FM radio stations should play and the Ministry of Education sets the official guidelines for youth fashion. But, of course, the main decisions are made by the President, who a couple of years ago ordered that only Belarusian models should appear on advertising billboards.

The authorities can try to restrict, impose, threaten and repress, but they really can't determine what young people wear, listen to, read or watch. As was the case with jazz in the 1950s and jeans in the 1960s during the Soviet era, what is forbidden today in Belarus becomes even more fashionable and desirable. Young Belarusians are no different than other youth who respond to restrictions and regulations with creative forms of dissent.

Thanks to the regime, the youth coun-



terculture is alive and well in Belarus. When peaceful meetings are broken up, young activists stage flash mobs and street performances that ridicule the absurdities of the government. When concerts are banned, youngsters go to underground night clubs, to outdoor festivals and to neighbouring countries to listen to their black-listed bands. When there is no officially approved venue to show their works, young artists, photographers and designers go to alternative art galleries and post their works online. Independent writers and journalists publish samizdat (underground) newspapers and magazines, create online communities, and spread information through blogs and home-made documentary films and videos. 'New media' and street art are becoming more and more popular in a country that finds itself near the bottom of every ranking of freedom of expression.

In the next issue we will present you some sketches of a few of the most creative young people in Belarus. What is unique about them is how they are using culture to promote activism among Belarus' youth, who are generally apathetic about politics. Someday, they will be the leaders of a free and democratic Belarus in Europe. But today, they are making "Europe's last dictatorship" a much more colourful and interesting place.

Text by Iryna Vidanava

Photo by Andrei Liankevich

**Source: Transitions online**