

Belarus Headlines

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Belarusian Issue at NATO PA Session in Berlin

On May 24-27, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly held its spring session. This year, parliamentarians from the NATO member states and associate members, partner countries, representatives of inter-parliamentary assemblies and observers gathered in the German capital Berlin.

Many topics were discussed during the meetings of the Assembly's five committees and at the plenary session, including the cooperation of the NATO PA with Russia, questions about European energy security, the assembly's contribution to NATO's strategic concept, current military operations of the Alliance and contributions of members and non-member states to them, prospects of NATO enlargement, and many other key issues dealing with security.

There were no members of the Belarusian National Assembly present at the session. Belarus has not participated in the NATO PA since 1997, when the status of the Associate Member (granted in 1991) was suspended as a result of the increasingly undemocratic activities by the current government. The Assembly maintains contacts with representatives of the Belarusian democratic forces and the analytical community in the country. Director of the Office for a

Democratic Belarus, Olga Stuzhinskaya, was invited to attend the Berlin event as observer. This invitation allowed the ODB director to follow discussions in all committees of the PA and in the plenary sitting, as well as to meet representatives of different national parliaments, governments and the international analytical community.

Stuzhinskaya discussed with them the current situation in Belarus, the upcoming parliamentary elections, and, when speaking to parliamentarians and government officials from the countries of the Schengen agreement, raised the issue of expensive and inaccessible Schengen visas for Belarusians calling to pay attention to the issue and find ways to improve the situation.

Belarus came up during several discussions in various committees of the Assembly. Most of the coverage it received was at the joint meeting of the Committee on the Civil Dimension of Security and the Science and Technology Committee at the panel dedicated to the European energy security and the role of Russia.

In her presentation on energy security, Professor Margarita Balmaceda from the John C. Whitehead School of Diplomacy and International Relations (Seton Hall University, New Jersey, USA) concentrated attention on the domes-



tic processes in the Russian energy-dependent transit states—Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania and Moldova (full paper is available on the NATO PA web-site: <http://www.nato-pa.int/Default.asp?SHORTCUT=1503>). In her view, together with the question of Russia using its energy resources for pursuing foreign policy goals, the “domestic institutions, structures and conditions” that make possible expansion of the latter in Central and Eastern Europe should also be discussed. According to the researcher, such factors as protracted subsidies and easy accessibility of “rents of energy dependency” created a situation in which many of the major economic actors in the above mentioned countries had no real interest in ending energy dependence on Russia.

When speaking about nuclear dependencies – among other dependencies created and facilitated by Russia in the post-USSR period – Professor Balmaceda mentioned the recent, non-transparent and undiscussed in the society decision of the Belarusian Security Council to build a nuclear power plant. In her view, if the power

We on the Web

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plant is to be built and supplied by Russia, such a decision of the Belarusian government does not alleviate energy dependency, but rather presents a new way of attaching to the eastern neighbour.

In her conclusions and description of the unexpected opportunities that the current energy and political situation present, the analyst mentioned that the declining energy relation between Belarus and Russia and the end of the Russian subsidies to the economy of Belarus pose new challenges for the republic. If for a number of reasons the project of building

a nuclear power plant becomes a threat to the regional security, new opportunities might arise and Belarus could play an important role in a possible Black Sea-Baltic energy transit infrastructure: through a link with Odessa-Brody, for example. Contradiction between Belarus and Russia, according to Professor Balmaceda, may help to move Belarus to a more active conservation policy.

NATO Parliamentary Assembly, during its Standing Committee meeting in Ljubljana in May 2005 endorsed the initiative of the Lithuanian delegation to organise seminars on Belarus in Vilnius, Lithuania, and to address the is-

sues related to the current political, social and security situation in Belarus. Two such seminars took place in the fall of 2005 and 2006, during which developments in the country, relations between Belarus and its neighbours and the role of international organisations were discussed. The Assembly is committed to continue raising the issue of Belarus in formats suitable and relevant for the organization.

27/05/2008

Prepared by ODB

Politics and Society

Moldovan President Meets Belarusian Ambassador



Photo: Vladimir Voronin

President Vladimir Voronin today met Belarusian Ambassador to Moldova Vasil Sakovich, according to the presidential press service.

The two countries discussed prospect of development in Moldovan-Belarusian relations and considered

mainly possibilities for boosting the economic cooperation. The officials stressed the need to capitalize the present potential, particularly in regard to the increase in exports of Moldovan goods - fruit and vegetable production and Moldovan wines - on the Belarusian market, implementation of cooperation projects in assembling Belarusian tractors and trolley busses in Moldova. The officials appreciated the positive dynamic of the economic

exchanges between the two countries over the last years, as well as the fact that Belarus ranks fifth among Moldova's trade partners.

Vladimir Voronin and Vasil Sakovich also tackled aspects of a forthcoming official visit to Belarus by the Moldovan president.

20/05/2008

Source: MoldPres

US Charge d'Affaires Visits Belarusian President's Administration



Photo: Jonathan Moore

U.S. Charge d'Affaires in Belarus Jonathan Moore visited the administration of the Belarusian president on

Wednesday.

He confirmed this but declined to pro-

vide details, saying he had to report them to the American government first. Belarusian-American relations deteriorated after the United States had imposed economic sanctions on Belarus' Belneftkhim company in November 2007.

The Belarusian Foreign Ministry re-

sponded by demanding that the staff of the U.S. embassy in Minsk be reduced to five people.

In May, 11 American diplomats declared persona non-grata left Belarus.

21/05/2008

Source: Itar-tass

CIS PMs Meet in Minsk on Strengthening Cooperation



Photo: CIS flag

Prime ministers of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) met in the Belarusian capital of Minsk Friday to discuss ways of consolidating cooperation and promoting integration. Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin attended the CIS Head-of-Government Council session, the first visit since he assumed the post. He proposed that the former Soviet republics prepare for the 65th anniversary of the allied victory in 2010.

Economic cooperation was on the top of the session agenda. Belarusian Prime Minister Siyrghei Sidorsky called on member states to complete the draft strategy on economic cooperation. He also pushed for a CIS re-structure to unify supervision and coordinate interests.

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Politics and Society

CIS PMs Meet in Minsk on Strengthening Cooperation (continuation)

Belarus will take over the rotating presidency of the CIS head-of-government council from Ukraine this year and it is tasked with submitting a CIS strategic development plan.

The CIS Head-of-Government Council meets four times each year, with the host country rotating among member states.

The next council meeting will be held in Moldova's capital Chisinau in October.

The CIS is made up of Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Kazakhstan, Russia, Uzbekistan, Ukraine, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

23/05/2008

Source: Xinhua

Belarusian Security Agency Files New Charges against US Lawyer



Photo: Emanuel Zeltser

A U.S. lawyer who is an expert on money laundering in the former Soviet Union faces charges of drug smuggling more than two

months after his arrest by Belarusian security agents, an official said Wednesday.

The case surrounding Emanuel Zeltser, a Russian-born lawyer whose clients include a Georgian billionaire and a Kremlin-connected official, has prompted protests from the United States, which says his health is failing. The 54-year-old was detained March 12 as he arrived in Belarus for meet-

ings with unnamed clients. He was initially charged with using false documents, for which he could get three years in prison if convicted.

Valery Nadochaev, a spokesman for the Belarusian KGB, said investigators determined that the medications confiscated from Zeltser cannot be used for treating his diabetes — as he and his lawyer have maintained.

Zeltser's defence lawyer Dmitry Garachka said the new charges could "finish off the man who already has difficulty walking and can hardly talk. "Zeltser is fading away before our eyes," he said.

Zeltser heads the non-governmental American Russian Law Institute in New York and is an expert on organ-

ized crime and money laundering, particularly in the former Soviet Union. His clients have included Pavel Borodin, a former Kremlin aide who was accused of money laundering by a Swiss court, and Badri Patarkatsishvili, the late billionaire who was a bitter opponent of Georgia's current administration.

Belarusian authorities claim that fake documents Zeltser was carrying were tied to Patarkatsishvili's business interests. A Georgian court confirmed their authenticity.

The United States has urged that Zeltser be released on humanitarian grounds.

28/05/2008

Source: PR-inside

Economic News

US Tightens Sanctions on Belarus Petrochemical Group

The United States imposed sanctions on three units of a Belarus petrochemical firm in the latest move to step up pressure on the

country. The US Treasury designated three companies linked to Belneftekhim Concern, the country's largest petrochemical firm, which is controlled by Belarus President Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

The new sanctions cover Lakokraska OAO, Polotsk Steklovolokno OAO, and the Belarusian Oil Trade House.



Lakokraska is a subsidiary of Belneftekhim Concern and manufactures varnishes and paints, according to Treasury. Polotsk Steklovolokno OAO, also a subsidiary of Belneftekhim Concern, manufactures glass, silica fibers, and other related products.

The Belarusian Oil Trade House is "an enterprise of Belneftekhim Concern and acts as a clearinghouse for financial, contractual, and web-based transactions on behalf of Belneftekhim Concern and its subsidiaries," a Treasury statement said.

The actions are based on an executive

order that authorizes the Secretary of the Treasury "to designate individuals or entities that are responsible for undermining, or have participated in actions that undermine, democratic processes or institutions in Belarus," according to the statement.

The actions also may apply to firms or people linked to human rights abuses in Belarus or to senior officials or family members linked to corruption.

The move freezes any assets of these entities that are within US jurisdiction and bans transactions by Americans with the entities.

16/05/2008

Source: AFP

Economic News

Fishman and Partner to Build 550MEUR Minsk High-Tech Park

Fishman Holdings unit Svitland Ltd. will build two large-scale projects in Minsk. In one project, the company and a partner have bought land on which they plan to build a high-tech park. The joint venture paid 2.4 million euro for the 87.5-acre site. They plan to build 540,000 square meters of office, high-tech, hotel, and residential space, as well as the related infrastructures at an

estimated investment of 550 million euro.

In the second project, Svitland and a partner have set up a joint venture, which has bought a 10-acre lot in Minsk on which they plan to build a 100,000-square meter office complex. The companies paid 2.2 million euro for the land, half of which will be paid when the contract is signed

and the other half when the building permit for the project is obtained. Svitland will provide 55% of the development financing for the project. The company did not disclose how much was involved or the estimated proceeds and profit.

18/05/2008

Source: Globes Online

Belarus Eyes \$500 mln for Phone Operator Sale



Belarus hopes to net at

least \$500 million in selling state mobile phone operator BeST, with Turkish company Turkcell considered the most likely candidate to buy it, the country's economy minister said.

Turkcell has expressed interest in buying 80 percent of BeST, with the purchase taking place over time.

"I think we are talking here about a sum no lower than half a billion (dollars)," Nikolai Zaichanka told reporters on the sidelines of the EBRD's annual meeting.

"We are neither hurrying nor slowing down any deal. This is part of our plans. But I cannot give you a concrete date."

Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka first mooted the possibility

of fetching \$500 million from the sale last year.

Russian mobile operator MTS (MBT.N: Quote, Profile, Research) has also expressed interest in the Belarusian firm - Belarus' third largest mobile operator with three percent of the market.

19/05/2008

Source: Reuters

Iran, Belarus hold Second Industrial and Mine Committee in Minsk

Iran's Minister of Industries and Mining Ali Akbar Mehrabian and his Belarus counterpart Anatol Rusetskiy will chair the second meeting of the industrial and mine committee in Minsk.

"During Mehrabian's trip to Belarus articles cited in the first Iran-Belarus industry and mine committee which were signed in Tehran will be followed up," Iran's Ministry of Industries and Mines' Economic and International Affairs Department Chief Ali Asghar Ramzi said.

19/05/2008

Source: MehrNews

Lukashenka Meets with Russian Billionaire Deripaska



Photo: Alyaksandr Lukashenka at the meeting with Russian billionaire Deripaska

Alyaksandr Lukashenka on Monday met with Russian billionaire Oleg Deripaska who owns Basic Element, the holding company for a rapidly expand-

ing mining and manufacturing empire, said Belarusian state media.

The Belarusian leader was quoted as saying that "cooperation" with Russian Machines under Basic Element had good prospects.

"I know well about your proposals and an interest of Russian companies in the Belarusian machine building industry," Mr. Lukashenka was quoted as saying. "In order to receive the maximum benefits possible from projects and survive a tough competition it is necessary to work together, unite our efforts in our common interests. We are ready to build rela-

tions on the basis of market, civilized methods. I find the proposals that you made a year ago attractive."

Mr. Lukashenka said that "a deterrent to relations" was the fact that Belarus had then received "similar proposals" from Russian truck maker KamAZ.

"I am ready to take a decision if we agree on approaches and a common vision of prospects," he said. The report did not specify the proposals. It quoted Mr. Lukashenka as saying that the Belarusian machine building industry had recently been significantly modernized.

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Economics

Lukashenka Meets with Russian Billionaire Deripaska (continuation)

"In fact, we could compete on our own, but it should be understood that we will do more together. We will do this exclusively in the interests of Belarus, you will naturally do this in your own interests."

Earlier reports had it that Russian KamAZ sought to buy control of the

Minsk Automobile Factory (MAZ). "For us, a strategic issue is the need to identify our partners for the next 10-15 years in the context of increasing competition in international markets," Mr. Deripaska said. "That is why if there is an opportunity, it is necessary to provide customers with the best

conditions and take relevant decisions for this. Belarus and Russia will open new markets, which will be an important part of how we will compete with European manufacturers."

19/05/2008

Source: BelaPAN

Government to Consider Selling Stakes in Palimir, Naftan Industrial Giants



The Belarusian State Petrochemical Industry Concern (Belnaftakhim) plans to submit a proposal for selling stakes in the Palimir chemical company and the Naftan oil refinery to the cabinet

before the end of this year, Mikhail Asipenka, deputy chairman of the state conglomerate, told reporters in Minsk on May 20.

Both state-owned companies are located in Navapolatsk in Northern Belarus.

The official said that stakes in the enterprises would be sold to one investor. "We consider it expedient to view Palimir and Naftan as a whole as these companies were built for each other to a certain extent," he said.

Mr. Asipenka noted that the two enter-

prises would be merged before their privatization.

He acknowledged that investors were more interested in Naftan than Palimir. The official said that both enterprises would have their value appraised by international experts.

Naftan currently needs \$600 million and Palimir three times as much for modernizing their facilities.

20/05/2008

Source: naviny.by

Belarus' Belinvestbank Assigned 'E+' BFSR

Moody's Investors Service said it has assigned its 'E+' bank financial strength rating (BFSR) to Belinvestbank, citing the bank's relatively strong market position as the fourth-largest bank in Belarus by assets, capital and retail deposits, as well as acceptable asset quality to date.

Moody's (nyse: MCO - news - people) also assigned its 'Ba2' long-term and

'Not Prime' short-term local currency deposit ratings, and 'B2' long-term and 'not prime' short-term foreign currency deposit ratings to the bank.

The local currency deposit ratings reflect the assessment of a very high probability of systemic support in the event of a stress situation, which is based on the bank's 81.6 percent direct ownership by the Belarus government,

Moody's said.

The BFSR is constrained by the bank's modest profitability, capital adequacy and efficiency, as well as fairly weak corporate governance due to the high level of government interference in the bank's business, the rating agency said.

21/05/2008

Source: Thomson Financial

Gas Transportation via Belarus up 17.9% in January-April



In January-April 2008 Belarus transported 24.1 billion cubic meters of gas, up 17.9% from the same period last year, BelTA learnt from the Ministry of Statistics and Analysis.

Over the four months Belarus pumped over 29.4 million tonnes of oil, what makes up 97.7% as against January-April 2007.

Gas is transported via Beltransgaz networks and Yamal-Europe gas pipeline. Oil is pumped by Gomeltransneft "Druzhba" and the Novopolotsk Oil Transportation Company "Druzhba".

23/05/2008

Source: BelTA, photo bymedia.net

Economic News

Krynitsa Gets Two Golds at Beer 2008 in Sochi



The brewery Krynitsa got two gold medals at the exhibition-fair Beer

2008 that took place in Sochi within the 17th International Forum Beer and the festival A Sea of Beer in Sochi in late May.

Types of light beer, Krynitsa Ekspartnaye and Aleksandrya, were awarded

two golds for quality, BelTA learnt from the company.

The exhibition Beer 2008 displayed feedstock and brewery equipment, a wide range of beer from the leading companies, mini breweries, containers and packaging.

The forum and the festival were organized with the assistance of the Federal Agriculture Agency of Russia, the Agriculture Ministry of the Russian Federation, the Department of Agriculture

and Processing Industry of the Krasnodar Territory, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of the Krasnodar Territory, the Russian Academy of Agricultural Sciences and the Sochi Administration.

28/05/2008

Source: BelTA

Belarus PM Vows Change to Attract Foreign Investors

Belarus' prime minister on Friday pledged quick reforms to attract investment into the ex-Soviet state, accused by the West of clinging to Soviet economic practices.

The economy, which relies on oil refining, chemicals industry and machine-building, is currently ranked 110th in World Bank ratings gauging investment climate. Authorities have vowed quick action to propel the state into the top 30. "We make no secret of our ambitious programme for a comprehensive reform of our economy over three years," Prime Minister Syarghei Sidorsky told an investment forum. "Statistics for economic development confirm that our plans to get into the top 30 countries in terms of investment climate are completely realistic."

Authorities have in recent months repealed a "golden share" rule that allowed the government to control key enterprises, introduced tax breaks in small cities and simplified business registration procedures to attract investors.

Official statistics show that foreign direct investment into Belarus in the first quarter of this year totalled \$1.3 billion compared with \$700 million in the same period last year.

Government statistics project that domestic and foreign investment will rise to \$17 billion this year from \$12 billion last year.

The government has pledged to reduce the tax burden on businesses, introduce a single income tax rate of 12 percent and repeal restrictions on business practices.

"We believe reducing the tax burden is a good signal to investors," Sidorsky said. Since quarrelling with Russia last year over energy prices, Belarus has sought improved ties with the West, especially the European Union and called for an inflow of foreign investment to maintain high growth rates.

The authorities have pledged to proceed with selective privatisation and foreign borrowing, though Sidorsky said this month a planned maiden Eurobond had been put on hold.

Upcoming privatisations include those

of state bank Belinvestbank in which it will cede control to Germany's Commerzbank

AG within four months, and

giving up control of a second bank, Belpromstroibank.

Belarus also hopes to net at least \$500 million in selling state mobile phone operator BeST, with Turkish company Turkcell considered the most likely buyer.

It also plans to sell half of its Naftan oil refinery and the Polimir petrochemical company.

The economy of 10 million people has in the past year attracted several foreign investors, including Russian banks VTB and Vneshekonombank. Deputy Prime Minister Andrei Kabayakou told the forum that 30 percent of state companies would have share issues in 2008.

01/06/2008

Source: guardian.co.uk



Photo: Syarghei Sidorsky

Culture: Belarusian Singer Becomes Finalist of the Queen Elisabeth Competition



Photo: Yury Haradzetsky

For the first time Belarusian singer became a finalist of a prestigious Belgian music competition. The Queen Elisabeth Competition established in 1937 and is considered among the most prestigious in the world. Organizers of the competition are Belgian government, city of Brussels as well as private sponsors. Among the winners in different years are such famous musicians and composers as David Oistrakh, Vladimir Askhenazy, Arthur Rubinstein, Francis Poulenc. A young Belarusian tenor Yury Haradzetski took the fifth place in a singing competition. Last year he became an Honorary Diploma holder of the International Singing Contest «Francisco Viñas» (Spain).

27/05/2008

Photo by the Belarusian Opera

Belarusian Youth

Belarus' Creative Opposition: Rockin' in the Free World



Iryna Vidanava, *editor-in-chief of CDMAG, an independent student publication in Belarus*, presents to you sketches of some 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 colorful and interesting place.

Rockin' in the Free World



Vital Supranovich is a 28 year-old producer of Belarusian music. He has helped dozens of bands make it to the main stage, but prefers to remain backstage himself. As a teenager, he co-founded the Belarusian Music Alternative Group (BMA Group) in 1996 because he wanted to promote the Belarusian rock that he loved. Since then, BMA has released almost a hundred albums and organized hun-

dreds of concerts.

Independent music in Belarusian is a key political statement in this authoritarian and russified country. Over the last decade, musicians and fans have come and gone, but Vital says that a core group of independent rockers has remained. More importantly, crowds are still screaming "Long Live Belarus" at concerts, even though people can be arrested for openly displaying their desire to see a free and independent Belarus. Organizing a concert in Belarus is difficult, expensive and risky. A dozen special permits must be obtained from various state agencies and even if all the papers are in order, the authorities still can shut down a concert at the last moment without any explanation, apology or compensation for expenses. According to Vital, this is one of the main reasons why there are only a few producers working with independent musicians. He explains his own successful career by making it clear that his job is his passion, and that for him, Belarusian music is not just a business, but a way of life. "It's very hard to make long-term plans in our country, where the rules of the game are always changing. I just try to do my best in any given situation," – Vital says. Before a number of leading rock bands were banned from performing in Belarus by the authorities, BMA mostly released the albums and organized the concerts of these bands. After the ban was imposed three years ago, Vital had to start from scratch in finding and promoting new names, as well as coming up with new forms of activities for those on the black list. In 2006, BMA put together and released "Songs of Freedom" a compact disc of protest songs produced in cooperation with the "For Freedom" civic campaign, which became the best selling album of the year; it was followed by two more successful editions. In September 2007, together with the student initiative "StudFarmat," Vital organized a Belarusian rock festival, "The Right to Be Free" in Lutsk, Ukraine. A concert which Vital put together in December to celebrate the

10th anniversary of one the most famous Belarusian records ever – "Narodny Albom" (The People's Album) – sold out and became the cultural event of 2007.

Vital believes that neither ordinary citizens nor musicians can remain apart from the country's political issues. He works closely with a number of democratic initiatives and promotes civic activism through music. He is now trying to organize a "Songs of Freedom" fan club to unite and encourage the activism of the thousands of owners of these albums. Along with commercial rock concerts, he organizes folk music events, which are rarely profitable, because it is important for him to promote Belarusian culture in all its forms. As



Presentation of the project 'Narodny Albom'

an expert on music, Vital thinks that some of the up and coming bands, especially those playing heavy metal and hard rock, such as "Tovarisch Mauser," "B:N:" or "Indiga," also have a real chance to become popular in the West, if they can somehow reach foreign publics. "It's crucial for musicians to feel that their music is wanted, but it's not always easy in Belarus," – Vital says. This is why he dreams that one day he will launch his own FM radio station, which will play Belarusian-language alternative music, the kind of music he likes best.

By Iryna Vidanava

Source: Transitions Online

Photo of Iryna Vidanava by Andrei Liankevich

Culture

Literature's Womanly Face

This woman is one of the most (if not *the* most) published contemporary Belarusian authors. Her books have been translated and printed in more than 20 countries. However, today most of the new editions of Svetlana Alexievich's works first see the world through publishing outside of Belarus. If you had a chance to look into the informal blacklist, drawn up by the Belarusian official ideologists, you would definitely find her name somewhere near the top. Nevertheless, in spite of being blacklisted, writing in Russian, and living in Sweden, books by Svetlana Alexievich occupy a distinguished place on a shelf with the most worthy items of modern Belarusian literature.

In her autobiography Svetlana calls herself "Belarusian prose writer, writing in Russian". She was born on May 31, 1948 in Ivano-Frankivsk (Ukraine). Her father, native Belarusian, was a military officer; her mother was Ukrainian. Svetlana's family spent several years in Ukraine and then decided to permanently move to Belarus. Svetlana Alexievich surrendered to her craving for creative writing and went to Minsk to study journalism. After graduation she changed from one newspaper to another until she finally got a job at the literary magazine "Neman."

Svetlana was looking for her own path in literature. She wrote short stories, essays and journalistic reports. According to Svetlana, it was Belarusian writer Ales Adamovich, who had a decisive influence on her creative style. She was struck by his books *I Come from the Fiery Village* and *Blockade Book*, which documented the tragic fate of people, who survived WWII atrocities in the burnt-down villages of Belarus and during the Leningrad blockade.

"For a long while I have been searching for the literary genre, which would be in harmony with the way I see the world. Finally, I began to record people's voices. I look out and listen to my books on the streets. In my books real people tell about the

main events of their time – war, collapse of the socialist empire, Chernobyl. Together, these events compose the history of a country. And every single voice tells its own tiny history of a human fate," writes Svetlana Alexievich in her autobiographic notes.

In 1983 Svetlana completed her first book *War's Unwomanly Face*. For two years it collected dust in a state publishing house. The book consisted of narratives of women, who fought in the Red Army during WWII. Contradictory to the Soviet clichés of the time, they not only saved soldiers as sisters of mercy – many of these women were sharpshooters, pilots, tank drivers... They had to kill – and so they did. The women told Svetlana about their rage mixed with pity towards those, who were killed on both sides, about battlefields, full of corpses, and their attempts to shed away the memories of the war after it was over. They also trusted her with their bitter experiences of lacking acknowledgement of their input into victory – the typical WWII hero in the Soviet Union was usually depicted as a male soldier... Soviet ideologists immediately accused Svetlana of smearing the image of Red Army. Fortunately, the Perestroika period broke out in 1985, and *War's Unwomanly Face* found its way to the reader. The book was published in several major Soviet literary magazines as well as a separate edition, with the total of more than 2,000,000 copies. She published her second book *Last Witnesses (100 Non-Children Stories)* the same year. It contained children's stories from WWII. As Svetlana puts it, "War seen with children's eyes becomes even more awful".

Zinky Boys, perhaps the most famous book by Svetlana, appeared in 1989. Here is an excerpt from the review, published in the magazine "Publishers Weekly": "The 1979-1989 Soviet war in Afghanistan, as Russian author Alexievich remarks in this oral history,



A picture of Svetlana Alexievich archive

wrenched boys from their daily life of school or college, music and discos, and hurled them into a hell of filth. She conveys that hell here through the grotesque memories of infantrymen, helicopter pilots, tank crewmen, medical corpsmen and political officers who survived the ordeal, plus those of widows and mothers of fighters--zinky boys brought home in zinc coffins." According to Svetlana, "this is a book about the criminal Afghan war, which has been hidden from people for a decade." In order to write this book, Svetlana traveled many thousand miles across Soviet Union, interviewing the ex-soldiers and mothers of the killed. She also flew to Afghanistan, to see the war with her own eyes. *Zinky Boys* had an effect of an exploded bomb. An attempt to bring Svetlana before the court for "defaming the heroic international help of Soviet Army to the people of Afghanistan" was made, but the process died out after numerous protests of native and foreign intellectuals.

"I was often asked one question – why do you write so much about war?" confesses Svetlana Alexievich. "The reason is that we haven't had any other history but war. Our whole history is a military one. That is why blood is being so easily shed on the lands of the former empire".

In 1993 Svetlana Alexievich published a book "Taken up with Death," a set of stories of people, who committed suicide or attempted to take their own lives, having failed to cope with the disappearance of the socialist ideas.

Culture

Literature's Womanly Face

"It's a book telling the story of us recovering from anaesthesia of the past, from the hypnosis of the Great Fraud... From the murderous Idea..." says the author.

In 1997 a new book by Svetlana Alexievich was published under the title

The Chernobyl Prayer. "This is not a book about Chernobyl, this is a book about the world after Chernobyl," explains Svetlana. "After Chernobyl we live in another world. Two catastrophes coincided – a cosmic one, which is Chernobyl, and a social one, when the whole socialist continent sunk. This, second crash was more understandable for us, and it overshadowed the first one. What happened in Chernobyl is unique; we are the first people on Earth who are going through something like that."

Now the writer is working on her new book *A Wonderful Deer of Eternal Hunt*. The author doesn't reveal all secrets, but it is already known that the book will present stories about love between men and women of different generations. "It's a book about a Russian person who wants to be happy, but constantly fails," writes Svetlana.

Rather than recording the naked history of facts and figures, Svetlana Alexievich is aiming at creating the history of feelings. "You can also call it the missed history", she says. Svetlana spends 4-7 years working on each book, interviewing about 500-700 people. "My chronicles begin with the stories of people who remember revolutions, who lived through wars, Stalin concentration camps, and, finally, it reaches our time", explains Svetlana. "The time-span is about 100 years. This is a



A picture of Svetlana Alexievich archive

history of a great and horrible communist Utopia, which ideas are not yet extinct in Russia as well as in the rest of the world. They will continue to tempt people's minds in devilish ways".

On one hand, Svetlana enrages official ideologists with her critical stance towards the present political regime. On another, she also somewhat estranged many freethinking Belarusian intellectuals from herself by actively pointing her belonging to the Russian culture. More generally, Svetlana positions herself as a universal, cosmopolitan writer. But many of her Belarusian colleagues, also blacklisted, believe that someone so closely connected with Belarus cannot afford such a position today, when the neo-Soviet regime in Minsk is suppressing national Belarusian culture on all fronts. These contradictory viewpoints came to light in the polemics between Svetlana Alexievich and Valiantsin Taras, published in September 2007, in the independent Belarusian weekly newspaper *Nasha Niva*. Valiantsin Taras, another renowned Belarusian writer, who was a soldier during WWII, recently changed from writing Russian to Belarusian. For him, writing in Belarusian is like a yellow Star of David, which the Danish King wore on his clothes during the Nazi occupation, a sign of solidarity with the culture, which experiences something close to a genocide. Of course, Sviatlana Alexievich

is well aware with the suppression of national culture in Belarus. However, she argues that Belarusians shouldn't put too much faith into nationalistic romanticism, which can lead them into a dangerous temptation. According to her, in the times of globalization, Belarusians should be flexible if they want to survive as distinctive people in the world, which is more and more prone to the influence of mass culture.

One shouldn't be misguided by this disagreement. For Belarus, where the authoritarian regime is striving to impose one single opinion on the whole nation, having such arguments is an important sign of vitality of the country's free-thinking culture. Intellectuals argue, but they also listen to each other, fueling the cultural development with their discourse.

"We ought not to become hostages of Lukashenka, of his intellect, worthy of a soviet collective farm director", said Svetlana Alexievich in her recent interview to Radio Liberty. "It is especially important for intellectuals to escape from his captivity, from under his hypnosis, to feel themselves in the world, not only in *Belarus*. I shall repeat it once more – in the world, as Belarusians, but – in the world."

by Ales Kudrytski

For the ODB

Photos from www.alexievich.info

The books by Svetlana Alexievich can be found at <http://www.alexievich.info/booksEN.html>



At a meeting together with readers