

Belarus Headlines

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Office for a Democratic
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Belarusian Experts Visit Brussels



Strategic Studies (BISS), and Alena Tankachova, the chairwoman of the Foundation for Legal Technologies Development (FLDT) participated in a series of meetings with representatives of

the EU institutions, various think tanks and international non-governmental organizations.

In addition, on the initiative of the Permanent Representation of the Slovak Republic to the EU, a briefing on the current situation for COEST representatives under the title “EU-Belarus Relations: Post-

September Prospects” took place on June 11. Attendees of the event had a chance to hear about economic developments in Belarus, the current state of affairs in relations between Belarus and Russia and the upcoming parliamentary election in September 2008.

The Office for a Democratic Belarus expresses its gratitude for fruitful cooperation to the Pontis Foundation, the Slovak Permanent Representation in Brussels and the German Marshall Fund of the United States for the possibility to organise and carry out the visit.

13/06/2008

Source: ODB

On the invitation of the Office for a Democratic Belarus and the Bratislava-based Pontis Foundation, a group of experts from Belarus visited Brussels on June 11-12. Aliaksandr Chubryk as economist and researcher at the Institute for Privatisation and Management (IMP) and the Belarusian Institute for

How to Lower Schengen Visa Fees for Belarusians

**By Dzianis Melyantsou
and Vitali Silitski
(abstracts)**

Despite the fact that an increase in visa fees was caused by objective reasons (the accession of the new EU member states to the Schengen Zone, the introduction of a common electronic data base and a more complicated visa-issue procedure), this provoked a negative reaction from both official Minsk and the Belarusian civil society, a rare demonstration of consensus between otherwise divided political forces.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus immedi-



ately labelled this measure as an unfriendly action on the side of the EU and promised to take adequate measures towards countries of the European Union. Such measures were taken in February 2008, when Belarus raised costs of its visas for citizens of European countries that recently joined the Schengen Zone(1). At the same time the Belarusian Ministry for Foreign Affairs began consultations with neighbouring EU states to simplify visa issue procedures

for certain categories of citizens. The civil society of Belarus, for its part, also negatively reacted to the rise of visa fees, mainly because of the anticipation that this would bring about a reduction of contacts with the EU and, respectively, strengthen the isolation of Belarus. At the same time, substantial complication of visa-issue procedure at the embassies of countries frequently visited by the Belarusians, coupled with inadequate processing capacity at most of these embassies, has given rise to claims that people embarking on the process of obtaining Schengen visas receive ‘degrading treatment.’

While Belarusian officials accuse the European Union of building a new 'iron curtain' on its eastern border, civil activists and ordinary citizens are concerned that the EU position on the visa issue would damage the EU's image among the Belarusians, and may even result in the isolation of the country, and therefore would not facilitate its democratization. [...]

Dilemmas for Brussels – and for Minsk

As for the visa issue, the EU is confronted with a difficult situation in Belarus. On the one hand, the EU proclaims the goal of promoting democracy in Belarus by means that include intensifying civil contacts. On the other hand, it is forced to make some unpopular steps such as increasing visa fees, which contradicts its democratization goal. While striving to expand democracy and good governance to its immediate neighbour, the EU undermines its perception as an open entity.

All countries of the EU have to charge citizens of the third countries visa fee of 60 Euros, unless there are separate agreements on visa-free regimes or simplified visa regime (for instance, such agreements were concluded with Russia, Ukraine, and

Moldova). Belarus, while eligible for the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), has not signed an Action Plan with the EU. A fully-fledged participation in the ENP and the top-level negotiations will be possible only once Belarus fulfils the conditions specified in a "non-paper" 'What the EU could bring to Belarus'. But these conditions are very unlikely to be met by the current Belarusian authorities who consider them unacceptable. Therefore, some other way out of this situation has to be found.

One may wonder if there are any benefits for the EU to reduce visa charges for Belarus? The answer is far from simple. On the one hand, such reduction is compatible with the EU goal to democratize Belarus through the expansion of the network of contacts between ordinary citizens and the intensification of information exchange. The achievement of this goal is contingent upon the growing number of Belarusian citizens visiting the EU. Such visits could facilitate the mindset change and strengthen the pro-European orientation of Belarusians. But these effects are not apparent for the Europeans themselves. In a short run, a unilateral reduction of visa charges for Belarus could create a precedent to which other EU neighbours may appeal. However the

EU is not aimed at differentiating its neighbourhood policy.

It is hard to claim that Belarusian authorities are interested in the reduction of visa charges. On the one hand, the Belarusian Foreign Ministry lobbies in Brussels for the reduction of visa fees. On the other, it is a win-win situation for Minsk officials, as any success in lowering visa fees or in simplifying visa procedures can be credited to the authorities. Alternatively, the failure to achieve this will be used as a proof that the EU is hostile towards ordinary Belarusians. Besides, the Belarusian authorities understand that the less contacts there are between Belarusian and EU citizens, the easier it is to control the public opinion. The best option for them is to carry out this policy of isolation with the hands of the EU itself. This attitude of the Belarusian leadership is one of the key reasons why it does not hurry up to fulfil the twelve demands of the EU, as well as for periodical tensions in EU-Belarus relations. [...]

¹ "Беларусь повысила цены на визы для граждан Евросоюза и США". Информационный сервер "Хартыя-97", <http://www.charter97.org/ru/news/2008/2/19/3976/>

The full text can be found at

www.belinstitute.eu

03/06/2008

Source: BISS

Politics and Society

Belarusian and Russian Presidents to Meet in Belarus



Photo: Alyaksandr Lukashenka and Dmitry Medvedev

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and his Belarusian counterpart Aliaksandr Lukashenka are to meet in Belarus in two weeks, the Kremlin said on Tuesday. "The leaders of the two states came to an agreement to meet in Brest, Belarus, on June 22, Memory Day, which is observed in both countries," the Kremlin press service said.

Memory Day commemorates the 1941 attack on the Soviet Union by Nazi Germany, which caused the Soviet Union to join World War II.

Medvedev and Lukashenka met in Russia's north capital of St. Petersburg last week.

10/06/2008

Source: Xinhua

Belarus Parliament Backs New Press Law

Parliament in Belarus gave initial approval on Tuesday to a media law banning foreign funding and possibly tightening control over the Internet.

Many opposition publications have been closed down, leaving the Internet as the main source of information on the country's democratic opposition.

Please see the next page

Politics and Society

Belarus Parliament Backs New Press Law (continuation)



Photo: Belarusian Parliament in the Independence Square

Parliament, where opponents of President Alyaksander Lukashenka hold no seats, backed the bill on first reading after speakers said the text posed no threat to freedom of speech.

"There are no repressive provisions in this law which could significantly worsen the situation with the media," Yuri Kulakousky, head of a parliamentary commission, said in presenting the bill to the chamber. "The current law governing the press dates from 1995 and is very out of date."

Independent journalists in the country said they feared the new legislation could be used to clamp down on opposition websites.

"This law creates a legal basis to regulate in future the activities of Internet sites, one of the main sources of independent information in Belarus," said Andrei Bastunets of the Belarusian Association of Journalists.

17.06.2008

Source: Reuters

Belarusian Parliament Ratifies Agreement on the EU Commission Representative Office Opening in Minsk



The agreement on creation of a representative office of the European Com-

mission in Minsk has been ratified by the House of Representatives.

"The agreement was signed by Belarus in Brussels in March 2008. It is directed at the development and further consolidation of the cooperation with European association," said the deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Valery

Varanetski during his speech in the House of Representatives.

According to him, "the presence of a representative office of the European Commission in Minsk is the basis of organization of a direct dialogue between Belarus and the EU".

18.06.2008

Source: ERB

Foreign Ministries of Belarus, Belgium to Hold Consultations in Minsk Next Week



The foreign ministries of Belarus and Belgium will hold consultations in Minsk on June 23, Alena Shpakava of the Belarusian ministry's Europe department said at Tuesday's Belarusian-

Belgian business workshop. There have been no such consultations since 2001, Ms. Shpakova noted. Uladzimir Serpikaw, head of the Europe department, will lead the Belarusian delegation during the consultations, Ms. Shpakava said. Under discussion will be political, economic, and cultural cooperation between Belarus and Belgium and also

relations between Belarus and the European Union, she added. A delegation of Belgian businesspeople, which arrived in Belarus on June 16 on a four-day visit, took part in the workshop hosted by the Belarusian Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

18/06/2008

Source: BelaPAN

Top Vatican Official Visits Belarus

The Holy See's Cardinal Secretary of State Tarcisio Bertone arrived in Minsk Wednesday for a four-day official visit and talks with Belarus's political and religious leaders. According to the Belarusian Foreign Ministry, Bertone was due to meet with Belarus's President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, Foreign Minister Siarhei Martynau, as well as Belarus' Orthodox Exarch Metropolitan Filaret and representatives of Belarus's Catholic bishops' conference.

19/06/2008

Source: Focus New Agency



Economic News

Belarus Temporarily Introduced Customs Duty on Export of Wheat and Meslin at 40% of Customs Cost of Commodity

Belarus introduced customs duty on export of wheat and barley at a level equal to 40% of customs cost of commodity, effective until June 30, 2008, reported the press-service of President of Belarus. President's decree No 304 introduces the customs duty on wheat and meslin, exported outside the countries-participants of the Eurasian economic community, at a level equal to 40% of



customs cost of commodity, but no less than 105 EUR/t and that would be effective until June 30, 2008, stated the report of the press-service.

According to the press-service, this decree is intended to regulate the situation in wheat trade between Russia and Ukraine. New export duty is similar to the one introduced in Russia.

This norm would contribute to meeting the domestic demand in Belarus in gluten wheat and decrease import from Russia. Introduction by Russia of the export restrictions earlier has created given rise to concerns regarding possible deficiency for this product in Belarus, added representatives of the press-service of President.

06.06.2008

Source: agrimarket.com

Belarusian Gold and Forex Reserves up 7.2% in January-May



Belarus' gold and Forex reserves, according to national standards, came to

\$5.351 billion as of June 1, 2008 (up 7.2% since the start of the year) the National Bank of Belarus said in a statistical note.

Gold and Forex reserves increased 0.8% in May after a 3.8% decrease in

April and 1.2% growth in March. Belarus' gold and Forex reserves, according to International Monetary Fund (IMF) standards, rose 6.7% to \$4.46 billion.

It was earlier reported that Belarus' international reserve assets increased threefold (after going up 6.7% in 2006) in 2007 and came to \$4.182 billion as of January 1, 2008. According to national accounting standards, the country's gold and forex reserves increased 190% in 2007 and came to \$4.998 billion as of January

1, 2008.

For 2008, the National Bank of Belarus forecasts an increase in the country's international reserve assets, according to IMF standards of no less than \$280 million.

National Bank CEO Pyotr Prakapovich expects Belarus' gold and forex reserves to reach \$10 billion by 2011.

The National Bank of Belarus' current gold supply is estimated as 27 tonnes.

09/06/2008

Source: [Interfax](http://interfax.by)

Navistar Engine Group Expands Diesel Offerings for Belarus Off-Road Equipment

Future product plans to help Belarus manufacturers strategically grow sales in European export markets NavistarR Engine Group, an operating arm of Navistar Inc., today announced an expanded commitment to supplying off-road diesel engines to Belarus manufacturers of diesel-powered agricultural, construction and industrial equipment.

Presenting at the Belagro international agricultural exhibition here, the company unveiled its full line of off-road diesels across the 37 - 254 kW (50-340 hp) range. In addition to current InternationalR brand engine models that meet European Stage 2 emissions standards, Navistar showcased its new Stage 3 emissions-compliant MaxxFor-

ceT diesels that in the future will help Belarus equipment manufacturers strategically expand their businesses in European export markets.

"Working with Belarus government and industry, we have enjoyed 15 years of success in this country," said David LaPalomanto, sales and marketing vice president, Navistar Engine Group. "Today, we move from a niche player with two highly respected products to a broad-line diesel engine supplier to off-road equipment makers throughout the region." In Belarus, Navistar has long exported in-line six-cylinder diesels that power Minsk Tractor Works farm tractors and Gomselmash combine harvesters. Following Navistar's

2005 acquisition of leading South American diesel engine maker MWM Motores Diesel Ltda., the company now offers diesel power plants for a wider range of agricultural tractors, construction equipment and industrial power generation sets.

"Our long-range goal is to be a fully integrated partner with Belarusian vehicle and equipment makers," said LaPalomanto. "Local sourcing of engines that meet tightening global emissions standards will allow them to profitably market their products throughout Europe and Asia."

10/06/2008

Source: [IStockAnalyst](http://IStockAnalyst.com)

Economic News

Belarus Hopes to Get 2-Billion-Dollar Loan from Russia



Photo: Andrei Kharkavets

Minister Andrei Kharkavets said on Tuesday.

Belarus hopes to get a Russian loan of 2 billion dollars this year, First Deputy Finance

"We have held negotiations since the beginning of the year. The talks are now focused on evaluating our ability to draw and repay the Russian loan," he told the media.

About the likely terms on which the loan could be taken, Kharkavets said "we have not had more favourable conditions for a long-term loan so far."

The Belarusian finance minister said this very effective resource would be

used for financing foreign trade settlements in the first place.

About a likely date when the loan may become available, Kharkavets told Itar-Tass the Belarusian side would seek early agreement with the Russian partners to have the loan before the end of the year.

10/06/2008

Source: Itar-tass

Belarus Biofuels Sector Looking for Foreign Investment

By Giles Clark, London

Belarus has unique and attractive conditions for producing biofuels and for foreign investment in the industry according to Mr. Ivan Danchenko, chairman of Belgospicheprom. Speaking at an FO Licht-organised conference on biofuels in central and eastern Europe in Warsaw today (12th June), Danchenko restated the Belarus Government's policy of achieving a share of 25% of total energy use for alternative energy sources, including biofuels, within the next five years.

He told the delegates that several policy measures have already been instituted to encourage foreign investment in biofuels, including a new and more favourable tax policy, announced earlier this year, and flexible measures to make foreign direct investment in the sector simpler and more straightforward.

Danchenko stressed the availability of large expanses of arable land to produce biomass crops for biofuels, and pointed out that almost one-third of Belarus' territory is covered in forest, a positive factor for forthcoming cellulose-to-ethanol second generation technology (CTE).

On biodiesel, he said the provision for production of rapeseed oil in 2008 is over two million tonnes, that methanol is available in quantity to finish the product, and that foreign investors will find they can produce biodiesel in very competitive circumstances.

With regard to bioethanol, Danchenko pointed to the proposed Greenfield



Ethanol Mozyr plant as an example of what can be done. Apart from grains, he said, from one to 1.5 million tonnes of sugar beet are available annually as feedstocks for first generation ethanol production, with vast quantities of biomass available for CTE production both from crop wastes and other sources, but above all from the lands contaminated by the Chernobyl nuclear accident.

He added that, in an ironic development, global warming has now made it possible to grow corn (maize) in Belarus. Six hundred thousand tonnes were grown in 2007, with 700,000 tonnes projected for 2008.

Mr. Danchenko told the delegates: "We have several programmes to cultivate bio-crops and biomass on the affected lands for biofuel production. Our studies show that the fruits of the

plants are free of radioactive substances. Traces remain in stems and waste, and is thus under control as far as storage and waste is concerned.

"We need your technology to develop this industry, potentially a huge one given the circumstances in Belarus. We have the land and the raw materials, including wood waste for biomass. We have a tax regime and a legal framework favourable to foreign investment. So, it's simple - we invite you to come to Belarus, examine the facts and evaluate what we offer. We are sure you will decide that investing in our biofuels development is a very good investment."

Danchenko was speaking at 'Biofuels in Central and Eastern Europe', a two-day conference organised by leading biofuels and agribusiness consultants FO Licht, at which over 70 delegates will hear leading industry figures and policy makers explain the prospects for the biofuels sector in the area.

Speakers include representatives of several governments, the European Commission, transport companies, biofuels producers and technology experts, and industry analysts. The conference continues on Thursday 12 June, when it will hear a presentation by Michael Rietveld, chief executive of Greenfield Project Management Ltd, on the development of the company's projects to build bioethanol refineries in Belarus in a public-private partnership with Belbiopharm.

16/06/2008

Source: Biofuel.com

Economic News

Polish-Belarusian Economic Forum 19 June



The Polish-Belarusian economic forum will take place in Hajnowka, eastern Poland, on June 19. According to the

Belarusian Foreign Ministry, it will be a good occasion to establish trade relations between the two countries. Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Andrej Papou, assured that Belarusian businessmen are interested in co-operation with Polish partners. He stressed that Belarus wants to discuss improving the

regional co-operation in the border area during the summit, as well as increasing Belarusian export to Poland.

17/06/2008

Source: The News.PL

Belarus Counts on New Economic Projects with Turkey



Photo: Andrei Kabyakou

Belarus expects to implement new economic projects with Turkey, Vice Premier Andrei Kabyakou said at a meeting with a parliamentary delegation of the Republic of Turkey in Minsk. The Turkish delegation was headed by chairman of the group of interparliamentary cooperation "Turkey-Belarus" Reha Camuroglu. Andrei Kabyakou noted that mutual relations between the two countries have intensified over the recent years. He expressed confidence that "Belarus will start receiving new mutually beneficial proposals on trade and economic cooperation from the Turkish business".

The Vice Premier assumed that the parliamentarians had arrived in Belarus to "assure themselves in gravity and reliability of our intentions to improve the investment climate and

availability of the proposals". Andrei Kabyakou said that Belarus "is eager to see further development of the relations with Turkey not only in the investment and trade area but also in tourism". The Vice Premier invited Turkish guests to visit Belarus and see its sights. According to him, the two countries have an untapped cultural potential in the bilateral cooperation.

Chairman of the group of interparliamentary cooperation "Turkey-Belarus" Reha Camuroglu briefed the interest of Turkey in developing relations with Belarus in all areas. This visit opened new sectors for the bilateral cooperation. The matter concerns the development of the cultural links including literature. Turkey is ready to publish the works of the Belarusian writers. Belarusian readers will be able to get familiar with the literary heritage of Turkey. According to the Turkish parliamentarian, Belarusian and Turkish literature "will play an important role in the development of the relations between the countries".

Trade and economic relations between Belarus and Turkey have seen great progress in development. In January-April 2008, the bilateral trade more than doubled from the same time last year to reach \$133.7 million. The exports made up \$75.2 million (295.8%), imports - \$58.1 million (152.4%). For

the recent five years, Belarus has registered trade surplus of \$17.1 million in January-April 2008 (as against trade deficit of \$12.4 million in January-April 2007).

Belarusian exports to Turkey are diversified and include nearly 60 descriptions of the products. Oil products account for 2% of the whole export structure.

The bulk (90%) of the Belarusian exports to Turkey in 2007 was stock steel, potash fertilizers, flax linen, synthetic and artificial thread, synthetic fibre.

In 2007, Turkey exported feedstock, materials, machines and equipment (80% of the total exports) to Belarus. An increase of the Turkish import is, first of all, related to the intensification of the production and investment activity of the Belarusian companies. Turkey is one of the most visited by Belarusians country. According to the Turkish official statistics, in 2007, nearly 100,000 tourists from Belarus visited Turkey, with an annual growth standing at 30%. Almost 20 Belarusian travel agencies present at the tourist market of Turkey. The bilateral interaction in the tourist area is regulated by the 1996 intergovernmental agreement on cooperation in tourism.

19/06/2008

Source: News agency Trend Capital

Belarus, Russia central banks to Consider Banking System Performance

The 28th session of the Interbank Currency Council of the central banks of Belarus and Russia will take place in Mogilev on June 20. The session will highlight the bilateral balance of payment and the summary balance of Belarus and Russia in 2007, development of retail payment systems, including the use of charge cards, their possible integration based on the unified rules and standards. The participants to the meeting will consider development of the endowment insurance system in Belarus and Russia, international reserves and liquidity in the foreign currency of the central banks of the two countries based on the notions used within the IMF Special Data Dissemination Standard.

19/06/2008

Source: BelTA

Belarusian Youth

Belarus' Creative Opposition: Green Gloves vs. Red Tape



Iryna Vidanava, *editor-in-chief of CDMAG, an independent student publication in Belarus*, presents sketches of some of the most creative young people in Belarus. What is unique about them is their way of using culture to promote activism among Belarus' youth, who generally display apathetic attitude towards politics. In the previous issue she told you a story about a Belarusian producer Vital Supranovich. Today, she presents to you another personality—Jenia.

Jenia is a 23 year-old private entrepreneur, the owner of a youth fashion boutique in Babrujsk, a city of 220,000 in eastern Belarus. Jenia says she has always been an active student, just not politically active. Yet during her last year, she was expelled from the State Economic University for missing a few classes. She had made the mistake of going on an international student exchange trip on EU expansion. "I've visited parliament in six European countries, but not in Belarus, because it's closed to the general public" — she says. Despite all her problems, Jenia completed her studies through distance learning, but instead of looking for a job in the state sector, she decided to start her own business. Always fashionable with a unique sense of style—she was wearing fancy green gloves with plastic cuffs when I interviewed her—it wasn't hard for Jenia to figure out in which field she'd like to apply her entrepreneurial ambitions. "It's very hard to

find stylish and affordable cloths in Belarus, almost impossible," — she says. "I really love second-hand stores. Finding something nice is like searching for treasure." Like most young people who want to be mod, Jenia prefers to buy her clothes abroad and makes frequent shopping trips to Lithuania and Poland.

She gets ideas for her own clothes from magazines, movies and designers' websites. So it was natural that she decided to open a boutique for young people. And since she carried back the first batch of clothes from Lithuania in a big bag, Jenia called her store "The Suit-case." Opened three months ago, "The Suit-case" is already a popular destination in Babrujsk,

and not just for youth. The female-owned store is the exception in a country where business is dominated by males, and its bright and daring foreign fashions stand out. But Jenia is not sure how long it will survive. At the beginning of December, her cozy boutique was almost closed down by local authorities, because she was a day late in putting Christmas decorations in store windows, as required by municipal regulations. "The legislation and attitude concerning small business is horrible. State officials treat us like we

are second class citizens." Commenting on a new restrictive law against small business, which sparked a nationwide strike paralyzing 80 percent of the open-air markets and malls last week, Jenia believes that "the choice the authorities offer to small entrepreneurs is a quick death by guillotine or a slow death by hanging." She doesn't think that regime can force people to buy Belarusian products by stopping private entrepreneurs from importing foreign goods. "People will always find a ways to buy what they like. You can't create a ghetto in the middle of Europe nowadays."

Despite all the problems, Jenia is sure that the experience she gained was useful and will help her with future projects. "Just making money is not so inspiring and interesting. I want to use my communications skills and knowledge to make the world a better place." She plans to help some promising Belarusian bands and artists — her friends — in taking part in international festivals. "There are so many talented young people around, with great ideas and projects, but, unfortunately, most of them don't speak English and can't network on their own. But they are very entrepreneurial, have a European outlook and challenge our grey reality

with their creativity and positive action. They might not be ready for open political protest, but they want to change the situation in the country. They, too, need attention and some help."



Jenia

By Iryna Vidanava
Source: Transitions Online
Photo of Iryna Vidanava by ODB

Culture

Genius by Correspondence

Have you ever tried to learn a foreign language with the help of a distant learning course? Then you should have noticed, how difficult it is to begin speaking and writing fluently without any native speakers around. It takes a lot of determination and many long hours in the library. Bearing this in mind, one can't help but admire Maxim Bahdanovich. Having lived his whole life deep in the mainland Russia, he not only learned Belarusian on his own, but also became one of the corner stones of Belarusian literature – this stone, which, at a closer look, shines like a precious jewel.



Maxim Bahdanovich

Actually, Belarusian language wasn't quite foreign for Maxim Bahdanovich. He was born in Minsk on December 9, 1891. However, on the dawn of the Czarist rule, the intellectual circles of Belarus preferred to speak Russian, looking down on their own "folksy dialects" with despise. This was also true for the western Belarusian city of Hrodna (Grodno), where Maxim Bahdanovich spent his early childhood. At the age of 5 Maxim went to the Russian city of Nizhni Novgorod with his father and two brothers (his mother died shortly beforehand). Where, in 1902, Maxim Bahdanovich enrolled into a gymnasium.

Later Maxim Bahdanovich looked back at his life in Hrodna as the happiest years of his life. Perhaps, these memories fed his interest for Belarusian culture. Maxim's father, Adam Bahdanovich, was a professional teacher and a passionate folklorist, who collected and analyzed Belarusian folk culture masterpieces, which, in a way, also influenced his son's interests. However, the father was not a supporter of Maxim in his cultural endeavors. Adam Bahdanovich was an average man for his time, influenced by the Czarist propaganda. For him, the Belarusian folklore was nothing else but a deviation from the Russian culture, which aroused his curiosity, but not admiration. In his study "Remains of the Ancient World-

view among Belarusians" published in Hrodna in 1895, Adam Bahdanovich wrote that "it would be fair to put Belarusians, according to their spiritual development, lower than their brothers from the great Russian family". No wonder, the father couldn't approve his son's interest in "Belarusian stuff." He valued Belarusian culture as a folklorist, but didn't take it seriously. Adam Bahdanovich was indeed convinced that he was ensuring his son's future success by keeping him away from his unpromising passion, but in hindsight he simply suppressed his talent.

Without his father's approval and support, Maxim studied the Belarusian language on his own – by analyzing dictionaries, ethnographic notes made by his father, and by reading the few available books and old prints. Eventually, Maxim began to write poems in Belarusian. He engaged into a letter exchange with "Nasha Niva," the first and only Belarusian-language newspaper of that time, published in Vilnia (Vilnius).

In the beginning, some editors of "Nasha Niva" wanted to "bury" Maxim's poetry in the archives. For them his poems seemed too "decadent," as opposed to the "social" poetry that was so popular at that time. Maxim Bahdanovich described the beauty of life, rather than the daily struggles of people. It made him somewhat of a stranger in the Belarusian literary community. Most of these poets stylized their verses as folk songs. Bahdanovich, however, instead of rehashing the folklore, brought it to a new artistic level. Moreover, he even found pleasure in describing urban landscapes, admired the winding streets of Hrodna and brownstone churches of Vilnia. This was so unlike other poets, who openly disliked crowded multicultural cities and praised the village as a cradle of the Belarusian nation.

Fortunately, other editors of "Nasha Niva" recognized the talent of Maxim Bahdanovich right away and stood up for the young poet. The good taste gained victory, and

Maxim Bahdanovich became an author of "Nasha Niva" in 1907.

Passionate unrequited love may break one's heart, but for a poet it also fuels his talent. In Yaroslavl, where his family moved in 1908, Maxim Bahdanovich got acquainted with Anna Kokuyeva, daughter of a well-off Russian nobleman. She became Maxim's first big love, which, as some literature scientists believe, inspired him to write a poem "Veranika" as well as many other verses.

In 1911 Maxim Bahdanovich visited Belarus on an invitation from "Nasha Niva". By this time his talent was already undisputed. When the famous Professor Shakhmatov from St. Petersburg University inquired to "Nasha Niva" about naming a prospective candidate for a chair in Belarusian studies, the newspaper proposed Maxim Bahdanovich. He was excited – even more so since Anna Kokuyeva was going to study in the St. Petersburg conservatory. However, Maxim's father ruined his plans by prohibiting him from going to St. Petersburg, and suggesting that the son enroll in the Yaroslavl law lyceum instead. Maxim protested, but had to bow to his father's will.

He found refuge in poetry. Maxim Bahdanovich challenged those who, similarly to his father, believed that Belarusian language was poor in vocabulary and didn't have enough forms of expression. He deliberately tried complex poetic forms, and grew very fond of writing sonnets in Belarusian. Maxim was striving to prove that the Belarusian language was just as suitable for poetry as any other.

However, it would be a mistake to say that Bahdanovich was only interested to write about pure beauty. Many poems by Bahdanovich were no less political than beautiful – even now, almost a century after they have been written, they sound surprisingly topical for Belarusians. For example, in his sonnet titled "In the Sands of Egypt's Land" Maxim Bahdanovich writes about a seed, which was found in an ancient Egyptian grave. Despite being several thousand years old, the seed sprouted. "This is your symbol, my forgotten native land", - wrote Maxim Bahdanovich, foretelling the rebirth of the nation.

Culture

Genius by Correspondence

Another great example is “Pahonia,” perhaps, the most famous poem by Maxim Bahdanovich, and one of the last ones he wrote. In the early 90’s it was seriously considered as a possible national anthem – until the regime of Lukashenka adopted the refurbished version of an old Soviet one. “Pahonia” is the ancient symbol of the Great Duchy of Lithuania, a horseman with the bared sword. In his poem, Maxim Bahdanovich is looking at “Pahonia” bas-relief on Vastrabramskaya church in Vilnia, watching the horseman, who is “not to defeat, not to stop, not to hold back”. One can’t help thinking Bahdanovich wrote a prophecy. In 1918 “Pahonia” became the national coat of arms of the newly established Belarusian People’s Republic, then banned by Bolsheviks, but in 1991 re-established as the symbol of the independent Republic of Belarus. Today, “Pahonia” is officially banned in Belarus – thus history repeats itself. But when you read the poem of Bahdanovich, you firmly believe that “Pahonia” will be back – because it is simply “not to stop.”

In his poems Maxim Bahdanovich defended beauty’s right to exist. His blank verse “Apocryphal” imitates the Gospel style. It tells about Jesus Christ returning to Earth, and visiting Belarus. Everyone in the land was busy with work, and only a singer came to Jesus and told him that he was ashamed of doing nothing. But Jesus set the singer’s mind at ease by reassuring him that the song is something that accompanies people throughout their lives. This thought is supported by a parable about a farmer, who was working in the field, and saw a cornflower in the grain. He knew the grain could have risen where the flowers grew, but decided not to pull the cornflowers up, because they filled his heart with joy. “It’s good to be an ear of rye, but the one who is born as a cornflower is truly happy. For why would we need ears if there were no cornflowers?”

In 1914, in Vilnia “Vianok” (‘garland’)

the first book of Maxim Bahdanovich was published. He dreamt of publishing more books of his poetry, and even moved to Minsk in 1916, but his plans never came true. Tuberculosis was tightening its grip over the poet. “Don’t wonder that my writing is like a child’s – I write in bed. The temperature is running at 40°C and 39,5°C as usual” he wrote in a letter to “Nasha Niva”.



First and the only published book of Maxim Bahdanovich “Vianok”

In 1917 Maxim Bahdanovich went to the city Yalta on the shore of the Black sea – and never came back. He exchanged letters with his father, but their relations were somewhat strained.

For some reason, Maxim’s father couldn’t find time to visit his son, even though he was living in Simferopol, fairly close to Yalta. “Meanwhile Maxim was living out his last days in complete loneliness,” bitterly wrote Adam Bahdanovich after his son’s death.

Anna Kokuyeva, the beloved of Maxim Bahdanovich, married another man; but, as her son later recalled, the book of the poet’s poems was one of the things she kept close to her in the last years of her life. Despite many tragic moments in his life, Maxim Bahdanovich created poetry, which radiated with a mixture of light sadness and heartwarming optimism. In his short 26 years, which were given to him, Maxim Bahdanovich created so many unprecedented masterpieces that not only enriched, but also shaped the future of Belarusian literature.

If you go up to the top of the majestic Opera building in Minsk, you will see the place where the monument to Maxim Bahdanovich once stood, a tall man, cast in bronze, holding a small bunch of cornflowers in his hand, looking at the looming church towers of the old city. Now this place is empty. A new fountain for the present Belarusian regime that will be built in front of the Opera, has greater

value than the author of “Pahonia,” whose monument was dismantled. Allegedly, it will be moved into the shade of a nearby park. Still, no matter how long Minsk authorities are looking for a place for Maxim Bahdanovich, he has already found his rightful place not only in schoolbooks, but also in the hearts of Belarusian people.

by Ales Kudrytski



Maxim Bahdanovich



Dismantling of the monument to Maxim Bahdanovich in Minsk

For the ODB

Poems by Maxim Bahdanovich translated by Vera Rich can be found at

<http://www.ocf.berkeley.edu/~makayed/viersy.html>