

# Belarus Headlines

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Office for a Democratic  
Belarus

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## Belarusian Poster Art Travelling Exhibition in Berlin & Dresden Brussels is Next Stop



From October 24 to November 3, 2008, an exhibition of Belarusian posters, entitled “Visual Code of the Time: Post-Soviet Art in Belarus”, was on display in Berlin’s Für Fortgeschrittene gallery.

Berlin is the second European capital that hosted the travelling exhibition organised by the Office for a Democratic Belarus with the support of the Bratislava office of the German Marshall Fund of the United States and the Robert Bosch Stiftung. Prior to its arrival in Germany, the exhibition was showcased in Warsaw’s Zoya Gallery.

Those who came to see the exhibition on the first day had a chance to meet some of the artists whose works were on view. The opening ceremony featured a Belarusian artist Liudmila Kalmaeva and the Chairman of the Belarusian Union of Designers, Dzmitry Surski – the authors of the idea of creating a collection of Belarusian posters.

Dzmitry Surski said the project provides a great opportunity to introduce the European public to works of prominent Belarusian masters of the genre. He also pointed out that projects of this kind often receive support from national governments in countries such as Poland and Japan, as they are seen as an important instrument for promoting national culture and arts abroad.

Global themes and universal symbols used in the displayed works should also help the promotion of Belarusian art. In fact, the country’s masters of poster design have already achieved a great deal of success and critical acclaim at international specialised contests.

On November 5, the exhibition moved to Dresden and is now open to the public at the Aquarium Club (St. Petersburger Str.21 D - 01069).

Alongside the exhibition, which runs until the end of November, a series of events on Belarus are taking place as part of Rock4Peace Festival organised by Dresden’s *Kultur Aktiv*. The Festival’s programmes also includes a screen-



ing of a “For Freedom 1...2...3” documentary film, a reading of Artur Klinau’s novel “Minsk. The Sun City of Dreams”, and a concert of a Belarusian band, “Dzhambibum”.

The Office for a Democratic Belarus expresses its gratitude to the **Für Fortgeschrittene gallery, the Aquarium Club, Kultur Aktiv** and all other partners that helped make this project possible.

07.11.2008

Source: ODB

## Launch of the Project "EU policy: Sharing knowledge with Belarus" First Visit of Belarusian Experts to Brussels



On the invitation of the Office for a Democratic Belarus (Brussels, Belgium) and the Foundation for Legal Technologies Development (Ukraine), a group of Belarusian ecology experts visited Brussels on November 3-7 and participated in a training course "EU Environment Policy: Sharing Knowledge with Belarus".

In the framework of the course, the Bela-

rusian delegates had a chance to get acquainted with the work of the EU institutions and to hold meetings with key EU experts working on the region and issues related to the environment. The programme covered such topics as agriculture, energy security, and nuclear safety and environment.

The Belarusian delegation, whose members represent different sectors and work in fields related to environment, learned how the EU deals with ecological issues and how some of this experience, especially that of the new members states, could possibly be applied in Belarus. Experts encouraged the European Commission to carry out more

projects with/for Belarus stressing the need for assistance and expertise in their country.

This given training is part of a larger programme for Belarusian experts, which is being implemented by the Office for a Democratic Belarus and the Foundation for Legal Technologies Development. Topics for next seminars in Brussels include transport and transit, energy and energy-saving technologies, education. Participants for trainings are selected through an open competition. The organisers welcome participation of experts from both civil society groups and government-affiliated structures.

07.11.2008

Source: ODB

**Brief news for October 16 – November 10, 2008**

## Politics and Society

### Belarus Leader Blasts NATO after EU Concessions

President Alyaksandr Lukashenka denounced NATO's defence plans and possible further expansion, his first criticism of the West since the EU eased sanctions on Belarus this week.

Analysts said Lukashenka's new attack on the planned deployment of NATO anti-missile systems in Poland and the Czech Republic reflected concern that Belarus still had to negotiate terms for importing gas from Russia.

'What NATO is doing is practically drawing new lines of division in

Europe,' Lukashenka, quoted by local media, told a meeting of Belarus' Security Council. This amounts to NATO's military infrastructure being strengthened right near Belarus' border. Bases for U.S. forces are being placed in eastern European countries and boosting the bloc's offensive potential.' The West, he said, objected to Belarus' 'independent policies, its refusal to bow down before the powerful'.

Russia objects to the deployment of the anti-missile systems and NATO's pledge that one day ex-Soviet Georgia

and Ukraine will be granted alliance membership.

'The president's criticism of the United States and EU is a clear illustration that there is no real Western trend in Belarus' policies,' said independent analyst Alyaksandr Klaskousky. 'Minsk will undoubtedly continue dialogue with the West. Its policy will involve manoeuvring between Russia and Western states.'

16.10.2008

Source: Reuters

### Medvedev and Lukashenka Talk Energy and Financial Crisis

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev discussed bilateral ties, energy issues and the financial crisis on Saturday with his Belarusian counterpart, Alyaksandr Lukashenka. "The leaders were able to consider in detail different issues relating to bilateral ties," said Natalya Timakova, the Press Secretary of the Russian President. "The talks focused on preparations for the upcoming regular meeting of the Supreme State Council of the Belarus-Russia Union to be held in late November-early December." "Issues concerning energy prices were also discussed," added Timakova. It was also pointed out that the two presidents had touched upon the financial crisis, in particular joint measures that could be taken by Russia and Belarus to reduce its negative influence upon the economies of both countries.

25.10.2008

Source: RIA Novosti

## Politics and Society

### Belarus Activist Arrested



*Alyksandr Barazenska is Being Detained*

Alyksandr Barazenska fled to Poland after being ordered to stand trial for taking part in protests by small entrepreneurs last January.

A Belarusian opposition activist, who had been on the run in neighbouring Poland, was arrested after turning himself into police, the Viasna-96 rights group said on Tuesday (October 28).

Alyksandr Barazenska fled to Poland after being ordered to stand trial for taking part in protests by small entrepreneurs last January. He was taken into custody on Monday, Viasna said. Two participants in the protests were jailed and nine were put on probation. All have since been freed as part of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's efforts to

improve the country's ties with the West by releasing detainees considered to be political prisoners.

The European Union suspended a visa ban on Lukashenka in response to the releases, though some punitive measures remain in place after a parliamentary election that Western monitors said fell short of acceptable standards. Belarusian authorities were unavailable for comment on Barazenska's detention.

27/10/2008

Source: javno.com

### Belarus Court Upholds Sentence on U.S. Lawyer



*Emmanuel Zeltser*

one of several irritants in Washington's relations with the country.

Emmanuel Zeltser was convicted in August four months after arriving in Belarus to represent Josef Kay, a relative of the late Georgian businessman

The Supreme Court in Belarus on October 31 upheld a three-year sentence on a U.S. lawyer convicted of industrial espionage,

Badri Patarkatsishvili. Zeltser, also convicted of carrying forged documents, is in poor health, suffering from a back ailment.

"The sentence remains in effect, there are no changes," Zeltser's lawyer, Dmitry Garyachka told reporters. "We had hoped that the Supreme Court would take a considered decision and quash the verdict. I believe the verdict is completely unlawful. The defendant denies any guilt."

Zeltser was arrested at the height of a diplomatic row with Washington and his detention and closed trial

prompted U.S. protests.

Garyachka said it was up to Zeltser whether to appeal his case to the Supreme Court's chairman. He could also be subject to a presidential pardon, as occurred with opposition activists, including former presidential candidate Alyksandr Kazulin.

"If he does request a pardon it implies recognition that he is guilty of crimes he did not commit," Garyachka said.

30/10/2008

Source: Reuters

### Libyan Leader al-Gaddafi Visits Belarus



On November 3, Libyan leader Muammar al-Gaddafi met with Belarus' President Alyaksandr Lukashenka in Minsk. Both leaders attended the ceremony of signing of Belarus-Libyan agreements on customs and transport co-operation. During a joint conference, the parties expressed common views on important foreign policy issues and emphasised their readiness to proceed with strengthening ties between the two states.

Major General Abu Bakr Yunis Jaber, Libya's Secretary of General Interim Committee of Defence, also met with Leanid Maltsau, the Defence Minister of Belarus.

The two parties discussed means to boost bilateral relations and co-operation in defence matters. In addition, co-operation in training and expertise, military technologies and equipments were also under discussion.

03.11.2008

Source: kommersant, ljbc.net

## EU and Belarus

### European Parliament's Conference of Presidents Calls on Belarus to Lift Entry Ban on EU Politicians

The European Parliament's Conference of Presidents has called on the authorities of Belarus to lift their entry ban on EU politicians.

The leaders of the European Parliament's political groups demanded on Thursday that Belarus reciprocate the Council's decision earlier this week to lift travel restrictions on certain leading Belarusian politicians for a trial period of six months, said the press office of the European Parliament.

According to the press office, members of the European Parliament's Delegation



for Relations with Belarus are meeting in Vilnius, Lithuania, later this month because they are not allowed to enter Belarus. Belarusian opposition leaders

Alyaksandr Milinkevich and Alyaksandr Kazulin have been invited to meet the MEPs on October 28.

"The persistent refusal by the Belarusian authorities to issue visas to Western politicians is all the more objectionable as the Council has decided this week to lift the visa ban on certain Belarusian politicians. This

act by the Council should be met with a reciprocal measure from the Belarusians," said Hans-Gert Pöttering, the president of the European Parliament.

The EP delegation will also meet Belarusian students of European Humanities University in exile in Vilnius. In its resolution adopted on October 9, the European Parliament asked the EU Council and the European Commission to call on the Belarusian government to enable the European Humanities University to return legally to Belarus.

17.10.2008

Source: navy.by

### EU Cancels Several Quotas on Belarusian Textile Exports January 1, 2009

The negotiations on abolishing quotas on Belarusian textile exports to the EU have been completed. The European Commission passed a decision to cancel textile quotas regarding 13 out of 32 positions starting January 1, 2009, Deputy Foreign Minister of Belarus Andrei Eudochanka said on October 22.

According to Eudochanka, for the first time in fifteen years (the agreement

setting quotas has been effective since 1993) quotas on Belarusian exports to the EU have been abolished. "Exports of the goods that fall under these 13 categories will not be big. Yet, in the new context of Belarus-EU relations, this is a positive move," stressed Eudochanka. "It may be that this move is more about symbolism and politics rather than economy. But it is very important," Eudochanka said.

In accordance with the new protocol which Belarus will sign with the European Commission, the countries will start new consultations to liberalise further mutual trade in textile next year. Eudochanka informed.

22/10/2008

Source: BelTA

### Hugues Mingarelli Meets Deputy Prime Minister Kabyakou

On November 5, Deputy Director General of the European Commission's Directorate-General for External Relations Hugues Mingarelli met with Deputy Prime Minister Andrei Kabyakou.

Mingarelli pointed out that the EU plans to maintain a permanent dialogue with the Belarusian authorities in the next half a year. "We'll do everything possible to use the next six months for the development of cooperation in sectors such as energy, transportation, environmental protection, and customs affairs," he said. "We also intend to initiate cooperation with Belarus in three new areas. These are product quality and standardisation, financial management, and food security. We also could take steps to make it easier for people to move across the border, and to support people-to-people contacts."

Mingarelli said the European Commission has a serious political intention and the will to develop relations with Belarus so that the country will eventually be able to get fully involved in the European Neighbourhood Policy.

(Continued on page 5)



## EU and Belarus

### Hugues Mingarelli Meets Deputy Prime Minister Kabyakou



*Hugues Mingarelli*

Belarus dialogue and expects the EU to make adequate moves in response to

Kabyakou pointed out that his government "realises the need to continue working on the so-called homework stipulated by the EU-

that." "Belarus is interested in full-scale and pragmatic cooperation with the EU with an emphasis on the economic dimension," said Kabyakou.

He further added that "the recent steps by Belarus and the EU open a new page in bilateral relations." "In our opinion, these steps were timely, as the level of external economic relations speaks for itself."

It was also stressed that the EU accounts for 32 percent of Belarus' foreign trade and 44 percent of Belarus' exports.

"Barriers to cooperation between Belarus and the EU have recently started being removed and we hope that this process will gain momentum," said Deputy Prime Minister.

05/11/2008

Source: BelaPAN

## Finance and Economics

### Latvia Invests \$150mln in Belarus Annually



Alyaksandr Gerasimenka said at the 4th Belarusian-Latvian Investment Forum in Minsk, reported Belta. According to Gerasimenka, Latvian

Latvia invests around \$150 million in the Belarusian economy annually, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Belarus to the Republic of Latvia

companies show big interest in the Belarusian market. Latvia is also among Belarus' top ten investors .

Belarus Minister of Economy Mikalai Zaichanka said, there are quite a few companies in Latvia with Belarusian capital. "We are considering our participation in various economic sectors including in seaport infrastructure." The Belarusian-Latvian unified council for co-operation has been set up recently. This non-governmental organization aims to expand the areas of

mutual cooperation.

On his part, the Economy Minister of Latvia, Kaspars Gerhards, specified that there are more than 300 companies in Latvia with Belarusian capital. They are mainly engaged in construction, trade and manufacturing. According to him, the Latvian side would like Belarus to increase transit, trans-shipment of its cargoes through Latvian ports.

17/10/2008

Source: BelaPAN

### Lindab AB Wins EUR8m Building Systems Order in Belarus



Swedish sheet metal products group Lindab AB (OMX Stockholm:LIAB) said on Tuesday (28 October) that its Building Systems division has received a EUR8m building systems order in Belarus.

The order covers building systems for a railway wagons manufacturing plant 60 kilometres south of Minsk.

"This is a positive sign of continued economic development in the CEE&CIS. The demand for high quality buildings is strong in the region and Lindab Building Systems' one-stop shop capability to deliver complete solutions for complex projects is highly appreciated by our customers," said David Brodetsky, president and CEO of Lindab.

Lindab, headquartered in Grevie, Sweden, develops, manufactures and markets sheet metal products and system solutions for the construction sector. The group has 5,000 employees in 30 countries, and reported sales of SEK9.28bn in 2007. One British pound (GBP) is worth approximately 12.38 Swedish kronor (SEK).

28/10/2008

Source: Trade Market

## Finance and Economics

### Belarus Seeks Loan 'Cushion'



*Andrei Kabyakou*

Belarus is promising to reform its economy and sell off some state assets as it holds talks with the International Monetary Fund on a possible

\$2bn (£1.2bn, €1.5bn) loan as a "security cushion" in case of further turbulence from the global financial crisis.

Minsk has used about 10 per cent of its foreign currency reserves, which now stand at about \$4.9bn, over the last month as it tried to support the Belarusian rouble.

Belarus, which has a relatively under-developed financial sector, was not affected by the initial shock of the crisis, but it has been hit by turmoil in Russia, its main trading partner, and neighbouring Ukraine.

"In the first phase Belarus was only minimally affected. But in the second phase, with terms of trade becoming worse, we anticipate certain problems will confront our exporters," Vasil Matyusheusky, the deputy chairman of the central bank, told reporters yesterday.

The IMF has already agreed to loan Hungary \$25.1bn and Ukraine \$16.5bn. An IMF delegation arrived in Minsk on Sunday and is holding talks with the Belarusian government.

"It is needed to safeguard against any shocks or stresses," said Andrei Kabyakou, the deputy prime minister, adding that if the economic situation improved Belarus might end up not needing the loan.

Belarus, one of Europe's last authoritarian states, has long been one of Russia's closest allies but in the last year has been cautiously opening itself to the west.

In September it increased the permitted foreign stake in local banks to rise from 25 to 50 per cent. The government is planning to sell off four state owned banks and other state-owned

enterprises.

"We are taking steps to improve the business climate of our country, to ensure a continued inflow of foreign direct investment," Mr Matyusheusky said.

Belarus is in the final stages of negotiating a \$2bn loan from Russia, which supplies Belarus with most of its oil and gas.

Mr Kabyakou denied that the terms of the loan were tied to Belarusian recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, two break-away regions of Georgia that Russia says are independent states.

"The Russian loan is not linked to the global economic crisis, although in today's situation it is coming just in time," he said.

The Belarusian economy grew by 8.2 per cent last year and the government said it expected growth this year to be at least 10 per cent.

30.10.2008

**Source: The Financial Times**  
**Photo by BelTA**

### Belarusian Oil House Will Soon Open in Poland

Belarus' oil trade house is expected to open in Poland in early 2009, Pavel Latushka, who has recently completed his mission as Belarus' Ambassador to Poland, told journalists within the framework of a Belarusian-Polish economic forum.

"The Belarusian oil trade house will be able to work in Poland early next year," Latushka said.

The diplomat stressed that there were no restrictions on the activity of the Belneftekhim concern in Poland.

"Belarus is an important partner of Poland on the deliveries of oil products and petrochemicals," Latushka said.

04/11/2008

**Source: IStockAnalyst**

### S&P Confirms Belarus' Sovereign Ratings, Changes Outlook From Stable to Negative

Standard & Poor's confirmed on November 3 sovereign ratings assigned to Belarus, but changed the outlook on sovereign ratings to negative from stable.

S&P said in a press release that it had confirmed the 'B+' long-term foreign currency and the 'BB' long-term local currency ratings. In addition, Belarus' Transfer and Convertibility (T&C) assessment was confirmed at B+'. The outlook was revised given growing external pressure. S&P experts think that the Belarusian economy will undergo negative influence given the worse international economic situation and financial environment.

05/11/2008

**Source: Interfax**

## Finance and Economics

### JSC BTA Bank (Kazakhstan) ups its stake in CJSC BTA Bank (Belarus)



Kazakhstan's largest bank, has upped its participation in the authorised capital of CJSC BTA Bank (Belarus) from 48.94% to 99.29% by acquiring shares previously owned by other shareholders. As a result, BTA Bank has now assumed full control of BTA Bank (Belarus).

"We view Belarus as one of the most attractive markets in the CIS. Its advantageous location, dynamic macro-economic improvement and vibrant consumer market point to a great future for banking in that country. The Belarusian bank's consolidation into the BTA group is a major step in this direction", said Kazakhstan BTA Bank's Chairman of the Management Board Roman Solodchenko.

As a result of the acquisition, CJSC BTA Bank (Belarus) has now become a BTA Bank subsidiary. The deal was

part of the consolidation plan and one of the principal steps in the implementation of Strategy 2015, which foresees BTA claiming up to 5% of the Belarusian banking services market. JSC BTA Bank is a leading banking network within the CIS.

At the end of the first half of 2008, BTA's consolidated assets were equal to 3,356 billion tenge (US\$27.8 billion); capital, 474 billion tenge (US\$3.9 billion). BTA's H12008 consolidated net profit amounted to 27.83 billion tenge (US\$231 million).

The network of BTA's partner banks extends to Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan and Turkey. BTA's representative offices operate in Russia, Ukraine, China and UAE. The bank has one of the largest branch networks in Kazakhstan (22 branches and 277 service outlets) along with an extensive chain of ATMs (778) and self-service terminals (160). BTA serves more than 1.3 million retail and

100,000 corporate customers. In 2008, BTA received more than a 100-notch uplift in the rankings of the world's best banks by "The Banker", from the 295th position a year before to the 173rd this year. In 2006 and 2007, BTA was named the "Bank of the Year in the CIS", based on a poll of the Commonwealth's leading financial experts by the influential *Itogi* magazine, and the "Best Bank in Central Asia" by *Euromoney*. The Oxford, UK-based European Business Assembly awarded to BTA its 2007 "Best Enterprise of Europe" in the banking sector of Eurasia.

As at October 1, 2008, CJSC BTA Bank's assets stood at US\$119.6 million, 37.6% more than at the turn of the year. Loans were up by 44.8% reaching US\$85.9 million, the bank's capital amounted to US\$15.4 million, up by 45%. Deposits grew by 43% to US\$48.2 million. BTA Bank (Belarus) ranks 15th among Belarus' 29 banks.

06/11/2008

Source: **Finchannel.com**

### Senior Officer of International Monetary Fund Arrives in Minsk for Loan Talks



Minsk on November 8.

Kahkonen will participate in talks of the IMF visiting mission about the possibility of issuing a big loan to Belarus. The National Bank of Belarus requested a \$2-billion stand-by loan from the IMF in October, saying that it was needed

Juha Kahkonen, deputy director of the International Monetary Fund's European Department, arrived in

for replenishing the country's gold and foreign exchange reserves.

The mission arrived in Belarus in late October and was expected to wrap up its work on November 6 but has reviewed its plans and will hold more negotiations.

IMF Managing Director Dominique Strauss-Kahn said after Belarus' had asked for the loan: "The global financial crisis has adversely affected the Belarusian economy and its access to

external finance. At the same time, changing conditions in trade have negatively affected the country's balance of payments." The amount of Fund financing under a Stand-By Arrangement has yet to be determined," he said.

Belarus' international reserves dropped by \$130.4 million year-on-year in the first 10 months of this year, according to the National Bank.

08/11/2008

Source: **BelaPAN**

### Oil Export Duty Rate Decreases by \$85 in Belarus

The oil export duty rate was lowered from US\$372.2 for a ton to 287.3 in Belarus on November 1.

The rate has been corrected in connection with the corresponding decrease in Russia. The mineral oil duty rate has also been decreased to correspond to the Russian rate. The light oil duty rate is US\$206 for one ton instead of 263. The rate of black oil is US\$11 for one ton (the old rate is 141.7). Let us remind you that export duty rates for oil and mineral oil are equal to Russian rates in Belarus. It is regulated by a Belarus-Russian intergovernmental agreement.

10/11/2008

Source: **ERB**



## Culture

### Scary Belarus



#### A literary journey to the shores of Lake Neshcharda with Yan Barsheuski

With the recent celebration of Halloween, one might find of interest an article touching upon some creepy subject. There is no such holiday as Halloween in Belarus. Yet the country has enough in stock to get you scared. In fact, there are plenty of stories, which could (and maybe some day will) eclipse the fame of Dracula and other well-known frightening myths. What about meeting Vargin the Cat King, which secretly fills people's heads with wasps when they listen to his purring? Or seeing Nikitron, the evil spirit, which lives in every sparkle of fire? Or swimming in the lake, which is full with all kinds of beasts and spooky creatures? If you are brave enough, let's travel all the way up to Lake Neshcharda in northern Belarus, near the border with Russia and Latvia. Your guide will be Yan Barsheuski, the writer, whose set of stories "Nobleman Zavalnya, or Belarus in Fantasy Stories" (1844-1846) is sometimes called "the Belarusian Thousand and One Night".

"The one who travels southwards in the direction of Belarus, sees huge villages, which resemble small towns, white stone churches and mansions of noble houses" begins his story Yan Barsheuski. "But when a traveler reaches the borders of Sebez and Nevel lakes, he faces vast dark

woods, which hang over horizon, like heavy clouds. In the midst of the woods, there are straw roofs of poor houses; once in a while the traveler notices an iron cross of the moss-covered chapel, with two or three bells on top of pine-wood pillars in front of it, and grave-stones scattered all over its grounds. Poor villages are filled with sad silence. Very rarely one can hear the song of a reaper or ploughman. And if you do, then you shall easily understand his anxious thoughts, because bad harvest often fools the expectations of local people".

This is where Yan Barsheuski was born in 1794, two years after the Russian empire finally annexed Belarusian lands. Before that Belarus was part of Rzeczpospolita, the union state of the Polish Kingdom and the

Great Duchy of Lithuania, which was later torn in three pieces by Russia, Prussia and Austro-Hungarian Empire. As brutal as it was, the Russian regime couldn't reshape the new lands in an instant. For a long time Belarus remained covered with a network of estates of "shlyachta", local noble families, whose ancestors received their aristocratic titles and coats of arms in return for defending their country in numerous wars. Most of "shlyachta" families were far from being rich. A popular joke of that time told that: the only difference between a peasant and a nobleman was that the latter ploughed his small field while wearing his sabre.

Yan Barsheuski was born in a village on the shore of Lake Neshcharda into a noble, but quite poor, family. Provincials, the Barsheuskis were never part of high society. This helped them to preserve their old gentry traditions and the way of thinking. They valued dear legendary memories of the "golden days", when they lived in a freedom-

loving "aristocratic republic", very different from the authoritarian czarist Russian empire of the 19th century.

As a boy, Yan Barsheuski was sent to study at the Jesuit College in Polatsk. There he quickly gained popularity as a talented poet. This, as well as his orator talent and skills in drawing landscapes and funny sketches, turned Yan into a local showman, who was a welcome guest at gentry parties throughout Polatsk region. Even though he spoke Polish, a usual thing for Belarusian gentry,

Yan especially enjoyed writing poems in the "common" Belarusian language, and even dedicated one of them to a girl he fell in love with.



After the college, Yan wanted to enter Vilnia (Vilnius) University but realized that he couldn't afford it. Then, with a pitiful dozen rubles in his pocket, the young man went to Saint Petersburg, the capital of the Russian Empire, where he earned his living by coaching state officials in Latin and an-

cient Greek. Yan's adventurous spirit brought him to France and England. The old duchesses, whom he tutored in Latin, even took him along on a journey to Italy. Yan Barsheuski was acquainted with Adam Mitskievich and Taras Shevchenko, and established a literary magazine Niezabudka (Forget-me-not), which united a small circle of Polish-Belarusian writers living in St. Petersburg.

Every Summer Yan Barsheuski left the capital walking home by foot for many miles and collecting folk stories on his way. "Many legends wander around these lands among common folk. Many of them recall actual historic events. Others are nothing more than fruits of fantasy and melancholic spirit, which is so characteristic of the inhabitants of these wild wooded areas. By nature they have a vivid mind, capable of creating unusual pictures", he once wrote. As a result, in 1844-1846, Yan Barsheuski published a set of four books under the title "Nobleman Zaval-



## Culture

### Scary Belarus

The book tells the story about Pan Zavalnya (in Belarusian, “Pan” was an equivalent of “Sir”), a moderately wealthy aristocrat, who lived on the southern shore of Neshcharda lake.

Pan Zavalnya was a stay-at-home type. Instead of travels, he enjoyed listening to stories told to him by many guests who visited his estate. As the winter loomed, the lake Neshcharda froze and turned into an improvised road with most travelers willing to take a short cut across it. Most of them saw a welcoming candlelight in Sir Zavalnya’s window, and paid their toll in stories in return for a warm bed, supper and straw for horses.



The book begins with the visit of Yan, the narrator, to his uncle Pan Zavalnya. The young nephew recites him “Odyssey” in the manner of a true Jesuit college alumnus. The listeners’ reaction is puzzled: “That’s kind of a twisted fable, can’t remember a word of it”. The next evening it’s time for the young man to get acquainted with the stories which are told here, in the northern Belarusian woods. When the night comes, Pan Zavalnya, his nephew and servants come together in order to listen to a new story told by a new guest...

This article is way too short to tell you about all the stories in this book. Let’s choose one... Perhaps, the story of a Grass-snake Crown? Here it is – as a short summary:

A hunter called Syamion got an order from his master to hunt down some game for a fancy dinner. “But he couldn’t find any birds, just the wind, which whistled in the trees”. The hunter cursed his day and even thought that he could praise the Devil, if he had any luck. He barely thought this, as a huge black silent

dog appeared before Syamion. “The hunter was overwhelmed with unease, the site gave him shivers”. Then a creepy old man came out of the thicket, and advised Syamion to go to the faraway Elk Mountain.

So he did. The mountain turned out to be fully covered with grass-snakes. The biggest of them was the Grass-snake King. Syamion bowed to him, and the beast gave the hunter his crown as a present. After that, the horrible black dog never left Syamion, showing his

new master where the game was. Syamion brought full loads of prey each time he went to the woods. However, local people, seeing Syamion, whispered to each other: “He must be an evil sorcerer”.

It all went well for Syamion until he decided to marry Marysia, a young girl from a nearby village. “People say you practice sorcery, and I’m afraid of that” she told him hesitantly. “Dear Marysia, I’ve never done such lousy disgusting things,” assured her Syamion. In order to prove that he wasn’t lying, Marysia held out her little catholic cross, which she wore as a necklace. Syamion eagerly kissed it – and a huge grass-snake immediately appeared from the grass, peering into Marysia’s face. The girl screamed, and Syamion threw a stone at the beast. Hissing, it disappeared, so did the black dog. Barely alive of fear, Marysia returned home.

After that, the hunter’s luck abandoned Syamion. The game he hit turned into rotten stumps, and his home was filled with grass-snakes. Desperate, Syamion reached for the box where he kept the magic crown of the Grass-snake King – but instead of gold he saw a wreath of withered birch-tree leaves...

The plots by Yan Barshcheuski could be a great source of inspiration for the Hollywood screenplay writers working on a

horror movie. However, it would be a mistake to believe that the book about Pan Zavalnya is poor entertainment. Yan Barshcheuski published it when the very word “Belarus” was prohibited for use in official documents. Nevertheless, the author not only called Belarus by its name and inserted many Belarusian-language passages into the text – he also

encoded appeals to the enslaved Belarusian people into his stories. For example, a short but very powerful and symbolic story “The Son of Storm” tells us about a vagabond, whose father spent his whole live in

chains as a prisoner, and his mother – in crying over her bitter lot. Their son, the Son of Storm, suffers because neither his parents nor himself are truly free and happy. When you read this story, you can’t help thinking that it forestalls the newly emerging modern Belarusian literature in the early 20th century. It was filled with similar ideas that the enthralled Belarusian people would become happy only when they shed their chains.

The stories by Yan Barshcheuski are a mix of sadness and optimism. The good nearly always overcomes the evil (especially with the force of faith and prayer), and even if it doesn’t, then it’s the good lesson for those who hear the story: beware! No matter how gloomy the story is, the writer always brings you back to the warm and cosy chamber of Sir Zavalnya, where the good company is gathered around a fireplace. Pan Zavalnya marvels over extraordinary things he has heard and orders to pour the storyteller another cup of a hot drink. It’s scary, but it’s also homey.

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