

MAGAZINE FOR YOU

No. 12 (999), 2016
Беларусь. Belarus

BELARUS

Politics, Economy, Culture

ISSN 2415-394X

2016

2017

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ASSOCIATIONS OF GEORGY SKRIPNICHENKO

Беларусь. Belarus

Monthly magazine

No. 12 (999), 2016

Published since 1930

State Registration Certificate of mass medium No. 8 dated March 2nd, 2009, issued by the Ministry of Information of the Republic of Belarus

Founders:

The Ministry of Information of the Republic of Belarus

"SB" newspaper editorial office

Belvnesheconombank

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Беларусь. Belarus is published in Belarusian, English, Spanish and Polish.

Distributed in 50 countries of the world. Final responsibility for factual accuracy or interpretation rests with the authors of the publications. Should any article of **Беларусь. Belarus** be used, the reference to the magazine is obligatory.

The magazine does not bear responsibility for the contents of advertisements.

Publisher:

"SB" editorial office

This magazine has been printed at State Entertainment "Publishers "Belarus Printing House".

79 Nezavisimosti Ave., Minsk, Belarus, 220013

Order No. 3110

Total circulation — 1 941 copies (including 788 in English).

Write us to the address:

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Tel./Fax: +375 (17) 290-68-31

E-mail: belmag@sb.by

Subscription index in Belpochta catalogue — 74977

For future foreign subscribers to 'Belarus' magazine, apply to 'MK-Periodica' agency.

E-mail: info@periodicals.ru

Telephone in Minsk: +375 (17) 227-09-10

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Optimistic approach

As 2016 draws to a close, it's good to reflect on our achievements, and our continuing goals. The world economic crisis affected everyone, though some might have thought we'd avoid difficulties. Trade volumes of Belarus either dropped or failed to rise, with many investors appearing risk averse.

Nevertheless, new supermarkets have continued to open countrywide and hotel complexes have continued to launch. Construction is an index of economic vitality.

The political environment has been active, with the state remaining loyal to its principle of a multi-vector foreign policy strategy, as we explore in *Useful Endeavours*, examining Belarusian-Azerbaijani liaisons.

At the end of 2016, the European foreign political vector came to the fore, as we explore in *Neighbours Have Much to Discuss*. The tone of Belarusian-European dialogue is changing, with Poland finding itself at the forefront, as confirmed by the Marshal of the Polish Senate, Stanislaw Karczewski, during his visit to Minsk.

In his conversation with Alexander Lukashenko, he stated that Warsaw appreciates Belarusian policy of calm and balance, pursued domestically and abroad. The internal component is understood as a careful attitude towards international and inter-confessional concord, to which the Poles also adhere. It is no accident that Belarus is viewed as a place of stability and security within Eastern Europe.

Of course, 2016 has been the Year of Culture in Belarus, as Minister of Culture Boris Svetlov reminds us, in *Joining Efforts to Take the Next Step*.

In conclusion, I'd like to note an interesting fact that eloquently testifies to the cultural proximity of European states. At the 61st International Book Trade Fair, which has become an important event in Belgrade's cultural life, Belarus presented many innovations and held several key meetings. The Belarusian delegation, headed by the Minister of Information of Belarus, Lilia Ananich, attended meetings at the National Library and at the Ministry of Culture, as well

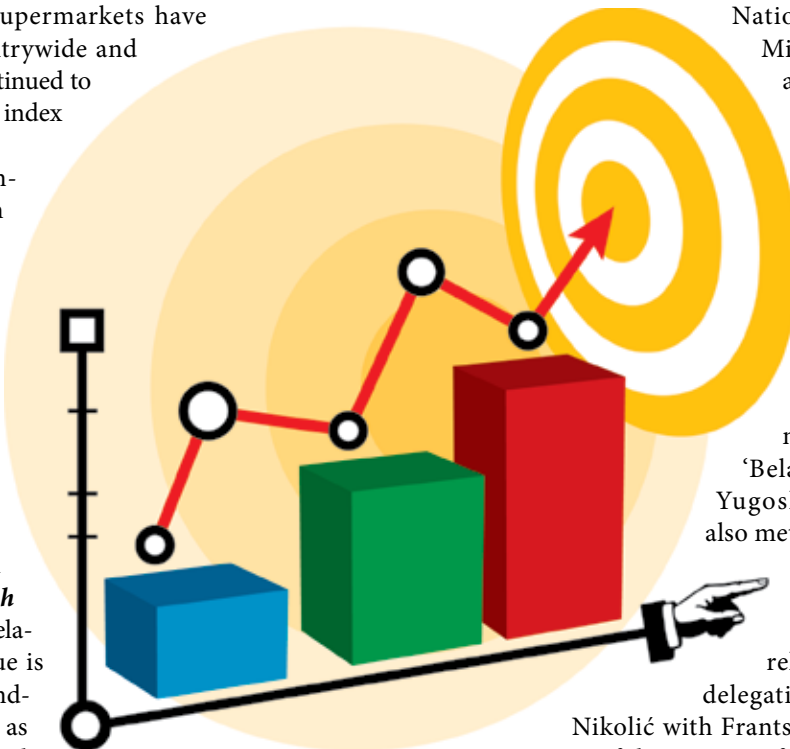
as at the Serbian Skupshchina (Parliament). Serbian parliamentarians discussed the development of relations with Belarus.

Meanwhile, a collection of fiction works were presented to the Serbian Parliament, as well as a promotional work entitled 'Belarusians on Serbia and Yugoslavia'. The delegation also met the President of Serbia, Tomislav Nikolić, discussing various aspects of Belarusian-Serbian relations. The Belarusian

delegation presented Tomislav Nikolić with Frantsisk Skorina in the Languages of the Nations of the World; among other translations, it contains a Serbian adaptation of universal truths about patriotism and respect for our roots. Mr. Nikolić read, in Serbian, words by Skorina from the foreword to *Judith*, which has relevance to both our nations. He read them with spirit and warmth, addressing Belarusians and Serbians together. Find out more in *President Nikolić reads Frantsisk Skorina in Serbian*.

I congratulate all our readers on the New Year 2017 and wish everyone's heart to be filled with positivity!

VIKTOR KHARKOV

▶ IAEA observers take example from Belarus

Experts of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) mission named Belarus as one of the most advanced countries among 'nuclear beginners'

The inspection assessing the regulatory infrastructure of nuclear and radiation safety (IRRS) was conducted in our country for the first time. "IAEA is ready to recommend the positive practices applied during the construction of the NPP in the Grodno Region to other countries," noted Petteri Tiippana, the Head of IAEA's IRRS mission and Director General of the Radiation and Nuclear Safety Authority of Finland (STUK). "Belarus is a country that is entering a new phase of nuclear engineering, and we see that here the adherence towards security strategy is present."

The observers assessed the work of all structures involved in the construction positively. "We liked the innovative mechanisms, the practice of constructing a healthy organisational culture, the strategy of knowledge transfer to the young, contests amongst employees with an opportunity to implement their proposals."



All the conclusions and recommendations of the group of experts will be available to the public, noted the Minister for Emergency Situations of Belarus, Vladimir Vashchenko, "We pay serious attention to security, since Belarus understands radiation threat more than anyone. The assessment of our work will be of interest to other countries, especially to our neighbours. This will allay their concerns regarding any station exploitation issues."



Meetings in Moscow

Alexander Lukashenko and Vladimir Putin congratulate Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, Kirill, on his 70th birthday, arriving at Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow, for solemn ceremony honouring the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church

The event was a landmark on the eve of a business conversation. Meanwhile, the presidents shared warm words with the Primate.

"You enjoy the highest regard and appreciation of the Belarusian people. Christians, Muslims and other religious communities, everybody knows you. This is the result of your work and kind regard for our country, as the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church," noted Mr. Lukashenko. "Under your leadership, the Orthodox Church has been promoting the consolidation of the spiritual unity of the Slavic peoples of Russia and Belarus, based on Christian values of mutual help, love of peace, humanism and justice."

Mr. Putin spoke also about the creative and uniting role of the church and the personal contribution of the Patriarch to this noble cause. The consonance of congratulations of the heads of the two closest states is symbolic.

Mr. Lukashenko presented Patriarch Kirill a Slutsk belt and a painting featuring St. Nicholas Garrison Church in Brest. In July 2015, 74 years after the beginning of the Great Patri-

otic War, Patriarch Kirill visited Brest Hero Fortress Memorial. He conducted a service in this church in memory of the defenders of Brest Fortress and all those who fell in the Great Patriotic War. He is personally connected with the tragic events of those days, since the Patriarch's uncle died in the fortress or near its walls.

Having congratulated Patriarch Kirill, the presidents went to the Kremlin for a tete-a-tete conversation.

Mr. Putin began by talking about the decline in bilateral trade, noting his conviction that the situation is temporary. He believes that mechanisms of the trade-economic cooperation created between our states guarantee the overcoming of difficulties. Moreover, mutual investments are increasing, while cooperative ties are expanding.

Mr. Lukashenko asserted, "We're experiencing rather stormy times, with various crises coming from different sides. We aren't alone in this. Issues require rapid solutions."

Mr. Lukashenko expressed gratitude that, as previously, together with Mr. Putin, they would reach the best decisions.

Useful Endeavours

We can judge the level of relations between Minsk and Baku via the number of meetings by our heads of state. Alexander Lukashenko has been to Azerbaijan three times on official visits and once on a working visit. Meanwhile, Ilham Aliyev has paid four official visits to Belarus, with the exchange coming more regularly in recent years.

Our presidents meet at least once a year, either in Belarus or Azerbaijan. Moreover, they are in contact at international events. Such active dialogue corresponds to our level of strategic partnership.

Undoubtedly, the November visit of the President of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, to Baku, will support this partnership.

From the first minutes of their meeting, the presidents of Belarus and Azerbaijan spoke about their intention for more active cooperation. Addressing his colleague, Mr. Lukashenko noted, “You can rely on us as your closest friend. If we can be useful to you in any way, we’ll always come to help. You know well our capabilities. You’re a great friend of Belarus... We have no closed topics, liaising across all areas; we’ll continue doing so. We don’t harm anyone by our collaboration; we’re open and we’ll continue to

be open, to publicly discuss the most burning of today’s issues.”

Ilham Aliyev echoed this sentiment, saying, “Relations between our states are the closest and friendliest. We’re aiming to continue our collaboration with Belarus, across all avenues. Today’s bilateral format covers most spheres of life. We’re gaining cooperation in traditional spheres while determining new areas. We’re friends and partners. We’ve always supported each other and continue to do so in all spheres. I’m confident

It’s clear that the current visit of the President to Azerbaijan has enjoyed intensive business consent. The two heads of state have signed a package of documents, covering cooperation across various spheres, including an action plan to implement a programme of socio-economic cooperation between the states until 2025. A comprehensive programme of cooperation was signed for the agro-industrial sector for the same period. Various documents tackle liaisons in sports, tourism and education

that the current visit will inspire the development of our collaboration.”

Trade-economic cooperation was a major topic of negotiation. Since 2015, trade turnover has been falling tangibly, largely due to the unfavourable situation in the world economy. However, this doesn't mean that partners will stop seeking ways of improving the situation. Joint work in the oil sphere is one such focus; recently, Azerbaijan supplied a batch of oil to Belarus as a one-time deal. Naturally, the President has suggested studying opportunities for further cooperation.

With the reconstruction of two oil refineries, Belarus is achieving refining depth of up to 90 percent. Meanwhile, its prox-

imity to the European market makes transport convenient. Azerbaijani companies can easily find much of interest.

The oil business is important but is not the only instrument for the prompt increase of trade turnover between our countries. Hopes are also pinned on the development of production cooperation, with Baku and Minsk aiming to create favourable conditions for economic, financial and investment activity. The sphere of mutual interest covers transport and transit, as stipulated by a joint statement by our presidents, signed after the official talks.

The document also specifies political priorities, in particular, the intention of expanding co-ordination in foreign policy, bilaterally and within international organisations.

The goal for mutual trade turnover is \$700 m, to be facilitated by the opening of trade houses: of Azerbaijan in Belarus and of Belarus in Azerbaijan. The presidents expressed their belief that the current visit of the President of Belarus should raise interstate cooperation to an even higher level.

On the last day of his Baku visit, Alexander Lukashenko laid a wreath at the Tomb of the first President of sovereign Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliyev. The Belarusian Head of State also laid flowers at the monument in the Avenue of Martyrs.

The business element of the schedule involved a meeting with the Azerbaijani Prime Minister, Artur Raszizade, with



Alexander
Lukashenko
and Ilham Aliyev

BELTA



Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan

major attention paid to implementing agreements reached during top-level negotiations.

Production cooperation and mutual investments are to the fore, with the alliance between the Ganja Automobile Plant and the Minsk Automobile Plant as the most convincing illustration of mutual benefits from collaboration. This year, 2,000 Belarusian tractors are to be assembled with Ganja Automobile: the largest manufacturer of 'Belarus' tractors outside the Eurasian Economic Union.

Other promising machine building projects include assembly of Belarusian buses in Ganja and of agricultural machinery in Sumqayit.

New areas of cooperation are also interesting. Belarus has proposed cooperation in the production of carpets and cotton goods, since Azerbaijan's agro development strategy envisages considerable increases in cotton production. This opens up prospects for closer interaction with the Baranovichi Cotton Production Association.

The President of Belarus told Mr. Aliyev that Minsk welcomes Azerbaijani businesses taking a share in the capital of this enterprise. The same model has been proposed for production of Azerbaijani carpets in Belarus.

Belarus aspires to construct agricultural enterprises in Azerbaijan

and to open new joint medicine production. Meanwhile, Baku is keen to unite the transit and transport-logistics potential of the two countries. Both proposals are being met with eagerness.

Making cooperation in the oil sphere more systematic is an interesting prospect. Modernisation of Belarusian oil refineries is nearly complete, with the final goal being to reach over 90 percent yield of light oil: an attractive proposition for suppliers of crude oil. Processing may be set up on a give-and-take basis, as sales markets for ready-made goods are close to hand.

It's clear that the current visit of the President to Azerbaijan has enjoyed intensive business content. The two heads of state have signed a package of documents, covering cooperation across various spheres, including an action plan to implement a programme of socio-economic cooperation between the states until 2025. A comprehensive programme of cooperation was signed for the agro-industrial sector for the same period. Various documents tackle liaisons in sport, tourism and education. The spheres of mutual interests are vast and diverse.

By Vasily **Kharitonov**

Award

Ilham Aliyev has awarded Alexander Lukashenko the Heydar Aliyev Order — a rare award bestowed upon foreign citizens for outstanding service to Azerbaijan. It is given for special services rendered in the course of implementing the Azerbaijani idea, for reinforcing the unity of Azerbaijanis all over the world, and for special accomplishments in establishing political, economic, scientific and cultural ties between Azerbaijan and other countries



Silk Road partners

Belarus, with observer status at Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, supports integration of the EAEU and SOC



So the Prime Minister of Belarus Andrei Kobyakov, speaking at SOC Heads of Government Council session in Bishkek, notes.

As far as economic interaction is concerned, we are in accord with Russian partners regarding close integration for the EAEU and SCO. Belarus is supporting the Chinese Silk Road Economic Belt project, creating a platform of cooperation for industry, transport and communications, innovative and financial collaboration and IT.

The PM voiced interest in expanding partnerships with SOC states, naming production cooperation with member states as a major priority, taking into account our current experience of establishing joint ventures on various continents.

Good opportunities exist for consolidating efforts to produce new and competitive machine building goods, while ensuring proper service and after-sales maintenance. The agro-industrial complex is another area of mutually beneficial collaboration. According to Mr. Kobyakov,

partnerships in industry and agriculture should be reinforced via constant development of logistics and transport elements. It's hoped that participation of Belarus in an agreement between the governments of SCO member states could become an important step in creating favourable conditions for international automobile transportation.

Belarus is ready to cooperate with SCO countries in the sphere of security provision, with Mr. Kobyakov stressing that last year saw more interaction between power and law enforcement departments than ever before. He noted, "Belarus is ready to liaise in counteracting international terrorism and crime, in the spheres of IT and illegal trafficking of narcotic and psychotropic substances

across SCO state borders. All these negative manifestations are of transboundary nature. It's only possible to efficiently struggle against them by uniting our efforts."

As a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, Belarus is advocating for expanded interaction between the CSTO and the SCO Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure, strengthening security and stability, including for information sharing, counteraction of religious extremism and illegal migration.

The PM called collaboration at interdepartmental level 'promising', saying, "The Emergency Ministry of Belarus is ready to join events under the SCO aegis, to prevent and tackle emergency situations in 2017."

By Alexey Fedosov

■ **The SCO is an active regional international organisation uniting China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, with six countries possessing observer status: Afghanistan, Belarus, India, Iran, Mongolia and Pakistan. The decision to enhance the SCO status of Belarus to that of observer was adopted on July 10th, 2015, at the SCO Heads of State Summit in Ufa. Before this (2011-2015), Belarus took part as an SCO dialogue partner.**

Neighbours have what to discuss

As the tone of Belarusian-European dialogue changes, Poland finds itself at the forefront

As the tone of Belarusian-European dialogue changes, Poland finds itself at the forefront, as confirmed by Marshal of the Polish Senate Stanislaw Karczewski, on his visit to Minsk, negotiating with heads of the Belarusian Parliament and meeting the President of Belarus.

Talking to Mr. Lukashenko, Mr. Karczewski stated that Warsaw appreciates the Belarusian policy of calm and balance pursued domestically and abroad. The internal component is understood as careful attitude towards international and inter-confessional concord, to which the Poles also adhere.

Belarus is viewed as a place of stability and security within Eastern Europe, and is known to have always adhered to these principles, despite this being previously overlooked by some partners.

Even issues dealt speculatively by some politicians, and which have previously contributed to tensions, are now being discussed calmly.

The Marshal agreed with the President of Belarus, saying, “With the interests of Poland and Belarus in mind, we have nothing to quarrel about. We’ve always lived in friendship and concord, and have shared history. Poland may have questioned our common history

The Marshal also supported Mr. Lukashenko’s judgement that political interaction should match that of business collaboration. The two countries have long been implementing successful joint projects, in Poland and in Belarus, creating dialogue of mutual understanding.

Stanislaw Karczewski:

Warsaw appreciates the Belarusian policy of calm and balance pursued domestically and abroad...

Belarus is viewed as a place of stability and security within Eastern Europe

and aspects relating to our population, but I’d like to assure you that we’ll always be ready to respond openly to queries.”

Mr. Karczewski continued, ‘History shouldn’t be changed to please politicians, or because of current events. We must comprehend our history as accurately as possible so that we cannot be accused of ignoring the lessons of our past.’

Minsk and Warsaw agree that trade-economic relations could be more intensive. The guest suggested using Polish tactics of conducting regional forums with partnering countries. During such events, regional heads set up contacts with many representatives of business circles.

Mr. Karczewski also tackled topics raised recently by the Deputy Prime



Meeting Marshal Stanislaw Karczewski in Minsk

Minister of Poland, Mateusz Morawiecki, during his visit to Minsk: joint Belarusian-Polish transport and infrastructure projects, including as part of the Silk Road Economic Belt Chinese concept.

Clearly, these initiatives are well-considered, being part of Warsaw's long-term dialogue with Minsk. Belarus is in favour, as the President told his guest, asserting that all topics are open for discussion between neighbours, and that constructive initiatives are welcome.

The Marshal of the Polish Senate visited Belarusian colleagues and took part in a session of the Council of the Republic. Senators ratified an agreement between the Belarusian and Polish government, regarding education cooperation.

The Council of the Republic and the Polish Senate signed a joint dec-

laration on cooperation in Minsk, with both upper houses eager to develop inter-parliamentary dialogue, to strengthen friendly relations between the two nations.

The Chairman of the Council of the Republic, Mikhail Myasnikovich, speaking about the visit and the results of negotiations, announced, "We've brought our views closer in many respects, finding mutually beneficial solutions. The most important thing is that we've agreed to maintain regular contact. We hope that constructive interaction between Belarusian and Polish parliamentarians will have a positive effect on the development of National Assembly contacts, and with parliaments across the EU"

He added, "In 2017, our country will host a range of important international events, including a session of the PA

OSCE. As the host, we're preparing for these forums and have initiative proposals. We believe that our voice will offer a constructive contribution to pan-European issues. Europe is our common home and we take shared responsibility for its security and prosperity"

Mr. Myasnikovich underlined that Belarus is seeing intensified political dialogue with Poland, "With mutual interest this year, we've managed to achieve much in the sphere of political contacts and economic collaboration. We're ready to expand interaction across all areas," he asserted.

The parliamentary delegation of Poland headed by Stanislaw Karczewski also met the Chairman of the House of Representatives, Vladimir Andreichenko, and toured the National Academy of Sciences.

By Dmitry Kryat

The logics of modern relations

Marshal of Senate of the Republic of Poland, Stanislaw Karczewski, gives a brief overview of our nations' cooperation



I'm delighted that my visit crowns a year in which we've resumed relations and are back on track regarding cooperation and building of trust. I'd like to note the actions of Poland's new government which took the first step in March, when the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Witold Waszczykowski, visited Belarus. I fully agree with his statement that neighbours should be engaged in dialogue, even if they differ in their points of view on some matters. Over the past few months, we've not only engaged in dialogue, but have sought areas that unite us; there are more of these than we may realise. Poland sits on the EU border, while Belarus does so for the EEU. We share one transport route, from east to west, with much potential for benefit. There's nothing wrong in wishing to generate income, or having our own position. On the contrary, it would be strange if we didn't take this into consideration.

Our peoples and countries are close, culturally and linguistically, and we share several centuries of history, without major conflict.

It's said that intensified Belarusian-Polish relations are thanks to dialogue between Belarus and the European Union. Isn't it logical for sovereign states, including Poland, to determine relations with closest neighbours against a European context?

For 25 years, Belarus has been a sovereign state, and we need to respect its choices, even if we don't agree or consider these to be controversial. The European Union is currently living through a crisis, as its elite appear not to hear or see the concerns of ordinary people. It's not solely a European phenomenon, as this year's presidential election in the United States proves. Simultaneous crises (including the escalation of terrorism and religious fanaticism that has entailed a flow of immigrants, as well as the economic recession and financial crisis) have led to traditional, democratic institutes no

longer being able to address all social problems. The state should return to basics: public security, freedom of action and a helping hand to those in need.

Vice-Speaker of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland Ryszard Terlecki, who recently paid a visit to Minsk, told me, "The position of Belarus is important. We, in the European Union, are interested in participation of Belarus in certain decisions in Europe." Which situations require our input and is Warsaw ready to consider our opinion?

Minsk recently showed its capacity to contribute to securing stability and security in this part of Europe. I regret that some Minsk agreements regarding the conflict in Ukraine are yet to be fulfilled. I'm confident, however, that the situation would be much worse without these agreements. Belarus demonstrates a certain model for the meeting of cultures of East and West, which can be implemented in harmony and peace. Belarus needs to take advantage of

this in its international and regional activity.

While the rest of the world is constructing economic free trade megazones, cooperation between the east and west of Europe could be better. What are your thoughts on the 'integration of integrations', as put forward by the President of Belarus?

Cooperation and integration are valuable. The EU has, so far, followed the principle of maximum integration. However, these days, it's important to be flexible. I prefer that we cooperate where possible and beneficial. I do not, however, view this matter as dogma. People are the most important element; as far as I know, President Alexander Lukashenko often says the same thing. It's an approach that appeals to me.

Recently, in Minsk, at the Belarusian-Polish forum, Deputy Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki declared the economic openness of Belarus. Your visit demonstrates political openness, but what can we expect to follow?

We need success stories showing that our meetings are not just high-level contacts or visits, but bring real benefits and results for our two nations. The major aim of my visit to Minsk was the Council of the Republic's ratification of the agreement on cooperation in education signed this summer. The agreement will deliver real benefits and launch new opportunities for both sides. It will regulate the arrival of Polish teachers in Belarus and provide a chance for youth exchanges between our countries, strengthening inter-university cooperation. Joint economic projects are planned, as the basis for integration, bringing our nations closer than a hundred words could do. It's the logical progress of modern international relations. We just need to gradually put this into practice.

Thank you!

By Nina **Romanova**



The foundation of the good is known

Businesses from the two states have long been acquainted and successfully cooperating, as is evident from our trade turnover (nearing \$1.4 bn). However, only recently have certain economic contacts been signed, as if in parallel with Warsaw's official line.

Businesses from our two states have long been acquainted and successfully cooperating, as is evident from our trade turnover (nearing \$1.4 bn). However, only recently have certain economic contacts been signed, as if in parallel with Warsaw's official line.

Economic interaction was encouraged behind-the-scenes, as benefit was obvious. However, Polish authorities didn't speak of it publicly. Now, with a changed tone of dialogue with Europe, Minsk-Warsaw economic discussions are moving to state level. Recently, President Lukashenko met with the Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers, the Minister for Economic Development and Finance of Poland, Mateusz Morawiecki.

The Polish Deputy Prime Minister arrived in Minsk to take part in a session of the Belarusian-Polish Commission on Economic Cooperation (as co-chairman) and attended the 20th Neighbourhood joint forum. Around 150 Polish business-

men came to Minsk for the event, showing that Warsaw supports its business circles in liaising with Belarus and is ready to act to stimulate further contacts. During his meeting with the President, Mr. Morawiecki spoke about this, doing so again at major business events that followed.

The guest especially underlined the role of the Belarusian-Polish alliance within the Chinese concept of the Silk Road Economic Belt. Belarusian diplomatic successes in the Asian direction are already transforming into economic and political dividends in the Western vector.

The President called on our neighbours to claim a higher level of interaction, saying, "This standard should be set very high; if we hope for closer relations with our closest neighbour, we need to create the foundations for these relations. Only economics can do so. We don't need to arrange barriers to the economic sphere. We're ready to see normal development of our relations with your country which is very close to us."

At present, Poland isn't benefiting from the sanctions between Russia and the West, and nor are we. The greater our dynamics of bilateral cooperation, the more we'll compensate for losses in other directions. The guest completely agreed with the President, saying that trade should become the foundation of a new level of inter-state relations, and announced a target for bilateral trade turnover of \$4-5 bn.

By Vladimir **Velikhov**



Services? Online

The creation of e-government in Belarus has been discussed for several years, with steps now being taken to bring the idea to life. Many of us already pay utility bills or submit our tax declaration online. We might make an appointment with the doctor, or buy a ticket to the cinema or a plane journey. We can even talk to officials in virtual space: all are initial elements of e-government.

Within five years, it's expected that all administrative procedures will be available online, with use of digital signatures. The convenience is obvious, saving public time visiting diverse offices and agencies, and also saving state cost (while avoiding human error/influence). In theory, the administrative system is becoming more open and accessible. What about in practice?

According to the UN, our country is placed 49th (out of 193 states) in world rankings for e-government development. As of August 1st, 2016, Belarus is up six positions on its ranking of two years ago. The trend looks positive but experts are cautious, with experts viewing our high ranking not as the result of wide penetration of electronic services but the availability of advanced telecommunications infrastructure.

"Individuals have access to only a small number of e-government procedures so far," Vadim Mozheiko explains, of the Liberal Club. "Belarus is now at the information stage of e-government development. State agencies simply provide people with information via the Internet unilaterally."

We now need to shift to the next — interactive — level, whereby public services will be fully available online and information will be stored in large databases. For utility services, consum-

ers need to see not only the final cost but the real costs detailed by category, allowing them to analyse efficiency and see where communal workers are underperforming.

Human Constanta advocacy initiative expert Andrey Sushko mentions Estonia as an example. You can register a legal entity in just seven minutes online, open a bank account or start a business. For contracts, digital signatures can be used with partners.

The convenience is obvious, saving public time visiting diverse offices and agencies, and also saving state cost

In Georgia, the Houses of Justice offer a range of public services online, including issuing identity cards and marriage certificates and registering a business or property. Each operator in the House of Justice serves as an information broker, determining what a citizen needs. They also accept documents, converting them into digital form, for onward delivery.

All these services can be obtained online, sitting at your home computer. In Estonia, this is done using a universal identification card (like a passport) to

login to websites of banks, governmental organisations and hospitals. Citizens can access four thousand services, including to purchase a fishing license or pay for public transport. To interact with the state and with each other, the government has enabled digital signing of documents, resulting in almost 200 million such virtual signings so far.

A similar system operates in South Korea, where an ID-card acts as a single electronic key: its holder is determined by scanning a fingerprint. Using this card, it's possible to access public service centres and self-service terminals.

The biggest obstacle to the development of e-government in Belarus is conservative thinking. According to statistics, only 2.5 percent of the population quickly master innovations and study electronic services. However, the realisation that innovations make life easier can convince people. At present, ministers and heads of governmental agencies are being encouraged to blog.

"Public institutions' use of social networks to answer citizens' requests is a major step towards developing e-government," Mr. Mozheiko says. "It's important for state bodies to be open and transparent with citizens. Officials need to understand that taxpayers' money is funding their work, and communication with ordinary people is an integral part of their job."

By Yevgeny **Kononovich**

Good mark with appreciation

The World Bank's Doing Business ranking can be compared to 'Oscar': some are pleased to receive a golden statue, while others simply enjoy walking down the red carpet. Belarus has now rocketed to the 37th place, ahead of EAEC partners Armenia, Russia and Kyrgyzstan.



We have two reasons for pride. Firstly, the country has risen by 13 positions. Secondly, according to the World Bank, it has joined the top ten leading countries in the world for reforms favourable to business. In fact, when a new ranking is published, previous results are corrected. The 2016 report placed Belarus in the 50th position rather than 44th. Therefore, the present surge can really be called a breakthrough. The Head of the World Bank

Office in Belarus, Yang Chul Kim, praises 'the Government's successive efforts to improve the regulatory environment for businesses' — which have improved the country's position in the report.

Belarus has preserved or progressed its position in the categories of 'Registering Property' (5th place against 7th last year), 'Getting Credit' (101st against 109th), 'Trading Across Borders' (30th in both rankings), and 'Enforcing Contracts' (27th against 28th). Significant progress has been observed in 'Protecting Minority Investors' (42nd against

62nd) and 'Resolving Insolvency' (69th against 95th). Meanwhile, 'Getting Electricity' demonstrates a significant jump for the second year in a row: in this ranking, the country is 50 points higher (shifting from the 74th to 24th place). Two years ago, Belarus was 148th in this parameter. Belenergo cannot hide its joy: finally, the banking experts have taken into account all changes introduced last year.

However, the country has also lost some positions: Belarus has dropped in 'Starting a Business' (31st from 30th), 'Dealing with Construction Permits' (28th from 25th) and 'Paying Taxes' (99th from 95th). According to the average calculations of the World Bank, one point in the Doing Business rating brings around \$500-600 m investment to the country. As a result, it's easy to calculate Belarusian hypothetical gain as \$6.5 bn - \$7.8 bn.

This year, the three leading countries with the most favourable conditions for doing business are New Zealand, Singapore and Denmark. Interestingly, Singapore has dropped from the first place for the first time in the decade.

By Polina Konoga

Verbatim



Minister of Economy Vladimir Zinovsky:

This year, we've seen a pretty good result: 37th place in the ranking. This is the result of the Government's meticulous work to implement the President's orders. You know about them: by 2020, Belarus should have entered the top thirty countries for doing business. The current result is satisfying but we won't rest on our laurels; we must keep moving forward. We have potential for much more. In particular, we're preparing legislation to assess the regulatory impact on businesses. We want to convert state agencies' services to electronic form; this is very important. Of course, we also need to improve our taxation issues, simplifying them as much as possible.



A hundred business ideas.

Grants to the best

Electronic Cactus' air ioniser, a mobile robot for monitoring reservoirs, unique nano-composite dressing and wind pumps for pumping water from wells while repelling moles and birds are among the bright new ideas presented at the annual national startup competition 100 Ideas for Belarus. The event has been organised since 2014 and has seen over 2,000 projects proposed.

Over 7,500 talented young men and women have used the event to showcase their ideas, including Belarusians living in Russia, Moldova, the Republic of Bashkortostan, Canada and even Argentina.

The Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRYU), which acts as the organiser of the event, selects and evaluates the best projects. This year, 116 were chosen, covering such diverse spheres as medicine and space technology.

The winners are determined by the advisory council, which includes representatives of the State Committee for Science and Technology, the Ministry of Economy, the Presidential Administration and the Academy of Sciences. The top dozen projects receive grants from the Belarusian Innovation Fund, worth up to Br 12,000.

A hundred ideas

'100 Ideas for Belarus' is one of many forums encouraging innovation. Startup Weekend has been held regularly since 2009, at the initiative of the business community rather than state officials. Developers establish contacts with private investors, with around 10 percent of projects receiving financial support. The number of such events is annually growing in Belarus, including those organised by the High-Tech Park and major universities. Since 2014, the Belarusian National Technical University has run its own Startup Centre.

Desk jobs

Experts agree that ideas are plentiful. However, those ready for investment are few and far between. Special startup schools opening across Belarus aim to remedy this, helping with training and experience. Six establishments opened in Belarus in September: three in Minsk and one each in Grodno, Vitebsk and Brest. Each student will gain the chance to launch

TOP 5

successful Belarusian startup projects

- MSQRD (Masquerade) application, which changes appearance;
- The World of Tanks — an online game, having 145 million users;
- An application for Internet telephony and Viber messenger;
- MAPS.Me service for downloading maps into mobile devices and
- Apalon applications: weather, alarm clock and notebook.







VADIM KONDRASHOV



Sometimes promising development looks like children's construction sets and is created by rather young people

Who has more?..

his or her own business (this will be a focus of regional startup schools). Meanwhile, Minsk's educational programme is to focus on the development of production and student research projects.

The course offered is intensive, covering all aspects within just nine and a half weeks. Ten teams will compete for prizes in the finals and enjoy financing, as well as media coverage and participation in the Investor Day.

"We hope that, by the end of the year, sixty business ideas will have been approved, each becoming a successful business," the staff at the Society for Promoting Innovative Businesses, note. It is their work that has made the startup school project a reality.

Support for the startup movement is vital to the development of entrepreneurship in Belarus, as formulated in the socio-economic development programme for the next five years.

In line with the 2016 plan approved by the Minister of Economy Vladimir Zinovskiy, 174 startup events are to be held countrywide, aiming to help small and medium-sized businesses flourish. This should, in turn, create new jobs. The Economic Ministry is collating details, for further distribution to regional and city executive committees.

Joining CIS space

This April, the National Library of Belarus hosted the 100 Ideas for the CIS contest for the first time. Young innovators from six CIS states presented their unique developments in the fields of industry, science, education, culture, medicine and IT. The contest — organised by the Belarusian

Republican Youth Union — received a great response. Now, it has been decided to hold the forum every two years, with guests of honour (investors from CIS countries) invited.

"We'd like the initiative to be expanded. Young people from various countries could jointly create more interesting projects, also searching for solutions to global problems," the Minister of Education of Belarus, Mikhail Zhuravkov, underlines.

One good example should be mentioned. After the competition, the Belarusian Medical Academy of Postgraduate Education, which won the project, launched its Clinics of Belarus website to promote medical tourism.

By Kristina **Khilko**

Verbatim

Mikhail MYASNIKOVICH, Chairman of the Council of the Republic of the National Assembly of Belarus:

■ *Traditional economy needs renewal. It's necessary to form new production and technological modes, not instead of old but as an addition to them. Therefore, all proposals which tackle, for example, biotechnology have great potential. Studying projects at '100 Ideas for Belarus' contest I was pleasingly surprised. It seems that it's difficult to invent something new in some areas, but young people still find some successful solutions. In the Council of the Republic we'll be supporting and developing the young people's initiatives, enabling their ideas to shift from a toy to actual good that can be sold domestically and on the world market.*





UN Resident Coordinator in Belarus Sanaka Samarasinha and Chairman of the Grodno Regional Executive Committee Vladimir Kravtsov

A project for those who are not indifferent

What is inclusion? Has Belarus achieved its goals of sustainable development? How can we overcome barriers to achieving equality for all vulnerable groups of the population? The UN in Belarus regional campaign 'Inclusive Belarus: Leaving No One Behind in Reaching Sustainable Development Goals' endeavours to answer these questions.

The campaign aims to achieve long-term reduction in inequality, uniting the work of representatives of international organisations, public and private institutions, civil society and representatives of vulnerable groups of the population. Every journey requires us to set goals. Major projects across the regions have seen organisers tackle the dissolving of barriers and overcoming stereotypes, helping the most vulnerable members of the population gain

a voice and access to equal opportunities. Every citizen should be able to participate in the social, economic and political life of society.

UN agencies dealing with issues of development, health care, rendering assistance to children, refugees, migrants and the elderly have joined forces with partners from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Internal Affairs, Transport and Communications, Education, Information, Labour and Social Protection and Healthcare, as well as with regional and city executive committees.

The Belarusian Society of People with Disabilities, the Office for the Rights of

People with Disabilities, the Republican Association of Wheelchair Users, the Belarusian Association of Assistance to Children and Young People with Disabilities, the Belarusian Society of People with Sight Disability, the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, the Belarusian Association of Journalists, the Belarusian Association of UNESCO Clubs, the Belarusian Movement of Medical Workers, the Refugee Counselling Service and the Belarusian Red Cross Society are all partners in this endeavour, alongside organisations 'Human Libraries', 'Gender Perspectives', NGO 'Otkrovenie and Positive Movement'.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has been approved by heads of states and world governments, including the President of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, on September 25-27th, 2015, at the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit in New York. 'Inclusive Belarus' campaign, organised by the United Nations Organisation in Belarus and the Government of Belarus, in cooperation with state and non-state organisations, with assistance from members of the business and international community, is a logical continuation of the 'UN 70 Express' initiative in Belarus. It aims to fulfil Sustainable Development Goal No. 10, to reduce inequality and promote fuller discussion of related issues

One idea for all

On October 24th, 2016, the world celebrated the 71st anniversary of the largest international organisation, the United Nations. On the UN Day, Belarus held a series of events in honour of the 71st anniversary of the UN and the launch of 'Inclusive Belarus: Leaving No One Behind in Reaching Sustainable Development Goals' campaign, promoting sustainable development and issues of inclusion.

The day began with the planting of a tree devoted to the anniversary of the UN and 'Inclusive Belarus' campaign, with the participation of the UN Resident Coordinator/UNDP Resident Representative in Belarus, Sanaka Samarasingha, and the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, Valentin Rybakov. The tree grows in Loshitsa Park, alongside the one planted last year, by Sanaka Samarasingha and the President of the Republic of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, marking peace and sustainable development.

An exhibition opened, dedicated to the aims of sustainable development, and there was a concert, hosted by the Palace of the Republic. This began with welcoming speeches from Sanaka Samarasingha and another Deputy Minis-

ter of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, Yelena Kupchina.

Ms. Kupchina announced the adoption of the first national plan on human rights, which is a key direction for UN work in Belarus, aiming to improve the human rights situation and promote close cooperation with international and national partners. The concert was truly inclusive, featuring the United Nations Development Programme Goodwill Ambassador Darya Domracheva, Alexei Kalyuzhny, advocate of the United Nations Population Fund, the United Nations programme on HIV/AIDS Goodwill Ambassador Svetlana Borovskaya and well-known Belarusian athlete Melitina Stanyuta, who supports the work of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in Belarus.

They discussed the need to end domestic violence, while promoting gender equality and creating equal conditions for people with disabilities, and HIV/AIDS and for those with refugee status.

Regional direction

Grodno was the first regional centre to launch 'Inclusive Belarus' campaign, following Minsk's lead. Campaign events took place in ten venues across the city, with eight UN agencies introducing their innovative approaches to

developing inclusive society in Belarus, working towards sustainable reduction of inequality.

The campaign in Grodno primarily focused on barriers facing vulnerable groups in daily life, seeking solutions to eliminate these barriers: physical and psychological. 'Galaktika' youth centre was the main host venue, introducing a number of interesting and innovative, inclusive activities, with the support of the UN Development Programme in Belarus.

Everyone received the opportunity to participate in a mini-championship of blindfolded table tennis, responding to the sound of the bouncing ball. A mix of classic table tennis and air hockey, the guests of honour were professional tennis players with impaired vision, skilled in this game, of rapidly growing popularity. The competition was organised with the support of the Belarusian Society of People with Sight Disability.

'Revelation' youth public association held a training session entitled 'Inclusion or Illusion', aimed at destroying barriers to involvement for people with disabilities. Organised by Natalia Byakovaya and Natalia Susko, who have disabilities, 'Leadership Without Limitations' course teaches understanding of inclusion, to promote harmonious interaction of all people in society. Participants consid-

ered the concepts of ‘inclusion’ and ‘integration’, defining the differences. The most lively discussion was inspired by possible paths to inclusivity, with focus on personal understanding of ‘inclusion’. The exhibition stand of ‘Revelation’ was full of artworks, demonstrating that disability is no obstacle to creativity.

The Women’s Leadership School, organised with the assistance of the Belarus-ian Union of Women and the Academy of Public Administration, under the aegis of the President of the Republic of Belarus, is offering training countrywide, as a part of ‘Inclusive Belarus’ programme. It offers for discussion the theme of women’s career building, looking at corporate culture, and how best to motivate women to develop their leadership qualities and to apply for executive positions.

In her opening speech, Ekaterina Paniklova, UNDP Deputy Permanent Resident in Belarus, focused on the erudition and professionalism of Belarusian women, as an important precondition to successful career management. She stressed the importance of society changing its negative perception of women’s professional ambitions.

For the first time in Belarus, as part of ‘Inclusive Belarus’, there is civil society dialogue in the Grodno Region, discussing our participation in the work of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis

and Malaria. Representatives of religious confessions of the Grodno Region have taken part in this dialogue, notes Lyudmila Trukhan, Secretary of the Country Coordinating Committee for Cooperation with the Fund.

She comments, “It’s been several years since religious confessions first became involved in receiving grants from the Global Fund, though there is huge experience of public associations liaising with state structures. They feel separated when they are excluded from receiving grants. During our dialogue, we discussed how best to ensure representation of religious confessions in application for funding for projects aiming to treat and prevent HIV.”

The Education for Sustainable Development organisation aims to promote understanding among young people, encouraging empathy. It works towards goal number ten, of reducing inequality. At its seminar, discussion centred on the future of inclusive education and prospects for strengthening the inclusive potential of the region.

A highlight of the ‘Inclusive Belarus’ campaign in Grodno was a staging of the well-known Russian fairytale about Kolobok, by kindergarten No. 45, with the focus on the hero learning about energy efficiency. Kolobok helps his grandparents to save light, heat and water in their house, aided by forest

creatures. It was a delightful performance, featuring song and dance, drawing not only parents but children with varying degrees of disablement and psychophysical development, as the audience. The hall ensured full wheelchair access and used sign language to ensure those with hearing impairment could enjoy the show. At the end of the performance, all the young actors received a gift of a board game, on the theme of energy efficiency.

The UNDP ‘Developing an Integrated Approach to a Stepped-Up Energy Saving’ project helped in writing the script, as part of ‘Energy Efficiency in Schools’ project. The staging was first shown in Grodno as part of ‘UN 70 Express’ campaign, last year, with the assistance of the Belarusian Red Cross and the Belarusian Children’s Fund.

The day ended with a solemn concert hosted by the Grodno Region Puppet Theatre, featuring such popular Belarusian performers as ‘Da Vinci’ and ‘UZARI’ groups, and those from ‘Art-Platforma’ centre. Also taking part were gymnast Melitina Stanyuta, variety studio ‘Art-Talant’, jazz singer Berta and ‘Shade of White’, alongside wheelchair-user Alexander Avdevich, who cycled across Europe, visually impaired singer Alexander Krivitsky and wheelchair dancing duo, ‘Magic Girls’, who are double championship winners.

Centre open to teenagers

Irina Lukanskaya, the head doctor of polyclinic No. 1, in Grodno, tells us, “Many teenagers come to us for advice; others without particular reason. Previously, it was difficult to receive consultation from a psychologist or other experts, as rooms were located in different parts of the polyclinic. Now, all are in one place. UNICEF has donated a SURGITRON, for radio wave surgery, which allows us to treat the neck of the womb without resorting to cicatrisation. Belarus has fifty-five centres which are ‘teenager-friendly’. We hope that we can develop together, exchanging experience.”





The inclusive concert in Brest

On western borders

Brest was the next to take up the mantle of 'Inclusive Belarus' campaign, with its State Centre of Youth Creativity hosting most events.

"I want to thank the administration of the region, and the city, for helping us carry out 'Inclusive Belarus' campaign in Brest," said UN Resident Coordinator/UNDP Permanent Representative in Belarus, Sanaka Samarasinha, at the grand opening. "Before we sign the Declaration to Adhere to Sustainable Development Goal No. 10, I want to note the work being done in Belarus and in the Brest Region in tackling inequality. Let's look at each other differently and become stronger together."

The Deputy Chairman of the Brest Regional Executive Committee, Mikhail Serkov, added that the Brest Region is working towards long-term goals of inclusion.

The Centre hosted an exhibition of projects and initiatives by the UNDP, showing its work towards sustainable development by 2030, in Belarus.

The exhibition introduced an unusual mobile and web application, called 'De-standable', designed to improve interaction with people with impaired hearing. The application teaches sign language, and was created by a group of five students from the Belarusian State University, as a part of a UNDP supported project.

The Women's Leadership School was organised as a part of the UNDP's 'Strengthening Inclusive Local Governance in Belarus', financed by the Dan-

ish International Development Agency (DANIDA). Although Belarus occupies sixteenth place worldwide for gender development, this remains under focus, as Belarusian women continue to spend the majority of their time on housekeeping chores, rather than on education or public works. Training continues to be of relevance; seminars are planned country-wide, with the support of the Academy of Public Administration (under the aegis of the President of the Republic of Belarus) and the Belarusian Union of Women.

The Brest Regional Library together with UNDP and Education for Sustainable Development Association, and the Republican Scientific and Technical Library, held a seminar looking at the challenges facing children with special needs and other vulnerable groups.

Participants shared their success stories on techniques of diagnosis and correction of deviations in child development, including speech defects, and the results of inclusion within school of children with autism.

Questions of how best to involve elderly people in an active social life were also discussed, with particular reference to school pupils taking part in sharing their computer expertise.

Meanwhile, the small grants programme featured staff from Sporovsky Reserve showing visitors how to create a homemade shelter for marsh owls.

The Belarusian Children's Hospice featured some cheerful puppets, which people enjoyed having their photo taken with, and

Institute of third age

Galina Yermolaeva, who works for the Territorial Centre of Social Services for Brest, tells us, "Brest residents, including pensioners and elderly people, can come to us to take fitness or dance classes, to study languages or fine arts, to take part in volunteer activity or try their hand at crafts such as needlework, embroidery and sewing. We liaise closely with the Association of Social Workers, who bring us people struggling with mental health problems, who need support in socialisation. Our institute currently works with about six hundred people, including large families, and people with hearing and visual impairment."

She continues, "In Belarus, there's a big gap in life expectancy between women and men. Retirement can aggravate illness if you feel unwanted and no longer of importance in society. We advertise our lessons and hold various exhibitions to encourage people to continue learning, and to be interested in the world around them. Those who attend tend to feel better, and develop a more positive attitude. We particularly want those of pension age to enjoy an interesting life."

'#AistDom' programme invited visitors to sign up to help build a summer house for volunteers at the hospice, and to make a financial donation.

Donations were also invited for the Belarusian Children's Hospice during an evening concert. This completed 'Inclusive Belarus' campaign in Brest, headlined by Belarusian singer Sasha Nemo, who received many encores from the audience.

By Vladimir **Mikhailov**

P.S. The route of the 'Inclusive Belarus' campaign in other regions of the country is to be described in the next issue of the magazine.



No one wants to live in a smog-filled city, but transport is essential. Clearly, we need to address the issue of harmful emissions and one answer is electric transport, following the global trend.

Supply and demand

In 2015, there were 1.26 million electric vehicles worldwide, with China and the USA leading and Europe making its way.

The number of such vehicles is ever growing, with sales expected to comprise 30 percent of the total by 2030. Many cities are moving towards 'clean' transport, with electric taxis now the norm in Beijing, Madrid, Barcelona, Dublin, Kiev, Kharkov, Moscow and Sochi.

Internal combustion engines, burning precious hydrocarbon fuel, work at just 30-40 percent efficiency, while eco-friendly electric vehicles gain 90 percent efficiency. In December, the first Vitovt electric buses will appear in Minsk

streets, assembled at Belkommunmash. Meanwhile, specialists at the Joint Institute of Machine Building, at the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, are developing the first domestic electric car. We have the expertise necessary.

The NAS Joint Institute of Machine Building is the central figure and consolidator, bringing together experts in developing electric transport, with eco-goals. It's

a global trend that Belarus is delighted to follow.

A domestically-produced electric vehicle is to be assembled using BelGee's Geely passenger car as the basis, explains Candidate of Technical Sciences Sergey Poddubko, Director General of the Joint Institute of Machine Building. He notes, "Creating a commercial electric vehicle is economical, as almost all manufacturers have discovered: Volkswagen, Citroen and Peugeot. They all produce passenger vehicles using electricity, in pure form and as hybrids [running on traditional fuels and electricity]."

BelGee is assembling vehicles at its enterprise in Borisov, and a large factory is being constructed to produce cars between Borisov and Zhodino. The Belgee Electro shares the same design but bears the logo of a green leaf. Structurally, all electric vehic-



The car used as the electric taxi basis

les are similar, using an electric motor, a control system and a battery. However, each producer adds 'secret' expertise.

Mr. Poddubko tells us, "We've developed our own complex algorithms for the control system: multi-level, intellectual and using micro-circuit systems. We've created our own electric motor and are set on creating our own battery, too, in cooperation with the Scientific and Practical Centre for Materials Research at the National Academy of Sciences. We're using graphenes and already have a prototype battery which looks promising, demonstrating high efficiency in the lab, at a lower cost than analogues. So, the domestic electric vehicle will be purely Belarusian-made."

This is important, since the legislation of the Customs Union set conditions for industrial assembly, demanding at least 70 percent localisation of components. The Belgee Electro certainly fulfils these criteria.

Our electric vehicle will be able to achieve speeds of 90 km/h, with one charge allowing 150 km driving. It's quiet, which is actually as much of a problem as an advantage, since pedestrians tend not to hear such cars approaching. Noise is being added artificially to compensate. Naturally, such cars are cheaper to run than petrol or diesel cars, and are easier to maintain. Components are hermetic, not requiring labour-intensive technical maintenance.

Nevertheless, there are two significant disadvantages hampering development worldwide: the lack of

infrastructure for a network of charging stations and current high prices.

"At present, electric vehicles cost more: a commercial Belgee costs around \$13,000 while its electric variant is about \$30,000. The considerable difference is explained by the application of new technologies and materials, and the absence of mass production of components. However, their price is quickly falling. Batteries are improving, as are the engines themselves," Mr. Poddubko notes.

He believes that, when production reaches a commercial scale, the cost will become affordable, adding, "Electric transport abroad is often manufactured to order, for example by cities wishing to reduce pollution. There are often tax preferences offered at state level for such transitions, alongside subsidies and cheaper costs for charging, to stimulate the development of this type of transport. Unfortunately, we don't have such a practice yet. I hope to see that change in the future."

Those initiating the innovation are keen to see cities support fleets of electric taxis, using domestic electric vehicles, offering preferential terms and setting up a network of charging stations.

Minsk is already taking steps, having purchased

around a dozen buses running on gas-motor fuel, which release less harmful emissions. Electric cars with good characteristics are vital. Vehicles are being assembled by the end of this year, for trial in spring 2017. If everything goes according to plan, by late 2017, these will be launched to the public.

Offline

An ordinary socket can be used to charge an electric vehicle, but urban 'charging' infrastructure is essential and currently lacking in Belarus. Only a few charging stations are operational as yet: a free station in Minsk and those at fuelling stations in Oshmyany and Gomel, as well as at the 57th kilometre of M6 motorway. This makes it impractical to take a longer journey in Belarus by an electric car.

Belenergo has been studying various scenarios, since the development of electric transport would help integrate the Belarusian NPP (nuclear power plant) into our energy system. Legislation isn't imposing any restrictions, and commercial charging can be established by anyone. However, the existing tariffs for electricity and absence of preferences make it unprofitable.

By Sergey
Poddubko



On the subject

Vitovt ready for work

Belkommunmash has already made two Vitovt electric bus models, for use in Minsk, with charging at final stops. They will appear in December, with twenty buses in use by late 2017.

Convenient alternative movement



Today's fast, convenient buses, trolley-buses and trams run on time and provide a viable alternative to taking a car. Digital displays show arrival times to the minute.

The Minsktrans website shows not only schedules but route maps for public transport, from point A to point B. There are even mobile applications for tracking desired routes.

Minsk metro simplifies the lives of passengers, allowing them to travel even without money. You can pay via SMS, sending a message to 2255 and scanning your e-ticket directly from the screen of your handset onto a special ticket barrier.

Following in European footsteps, Minsk is taking measures to encourage the use of public transport, and deter private car use in the centre. In Sweden, car parking in the city centre can cost up to \$15,000 annually. Drivers have to pay to gain entry not only in Stockholm but in London.

Meanwhile, electric-powered vehicles are being promoted, since they are more eco-friendly. Prices have dropped considerably, with some models costing just 12,000 Russian roubles

Trustworthy bicycle

There are about 50 km of dedicated cycle tracks in the city, with special markings and traffic lights. New paths are being laid and new rental stores are appearing. This summer, 37,700 people made use of their services.

“Fewer than one percent of Minsk residents use a bicycle to get around the city, and very few people travel to work by bike. In the Netherlands and Sweden, every third person does so,” says Yuri Vazhnik, Chairman of the Belarusian Association of Experts and Transport Surveyors. “However, statistics looks encouraging. Over the past five years, the number of bikers has tripled. Today, we have 250 km of bicycle track in Minsk. For full coverage, we’d need 600 tracks.”

The Minsk State Tourism and Environmental Centre for Children and

Youth has launched Ecovelik project: a network of cycling paths through the capital and suburbs. The number of accidents has reduced to about thirty, thanks to cycle paths, and only one person loses life on a cycle track so far annually.

In the capital, you can rent a bike for free, through Good Rover project. You register online, gain a special code and collect your bike from a specific location, for return within twelve hours to any parking location.

“To make cycling popular, a bicycle parade was organised in the city, and nine thousand people took part,” says Pavel Gorbunov, head of the Minsk cycling community. “We also held an international festival in Chablis: Velo-miss-2016 contest. We attract primarily pupils and students. It’s vital that we encourage a healthy and active lifestyle from an early age.”

By Elvira **Goroshko**



▶ Legend is retiring

Belavia Airline announces the date of the last flight of Tu-154s, the legend of Soviet aviation industry, carrying around 150 oil workers from Novy Urengoy to Gomel, on December 29th, before being replaced by Boeing-737s on charter programme to Siberia

“We’re deciding what to do next with the aircraft,” Igor Cherginets, Belavia’s Director General, comments. “Most likely, our three Tu-154s will be pensioned off. They could become museum exhibits but no one has yet applied to us with such a request. One such exhibit is already on display near the National Airport.”

What will happen with the current crew of twenty-two? According to the commander of Belavia’s air detachment, Oleg Saltovsky, some will retire, due to age, and some will take land-based positions. Five, including one commander, will be retrained to pilot the Boeing aircraft, while some plan to move to other companies, to pilot Il-76s and An-74s.

The new ‘cornflower’ Boeing 737-800s (delivered from Seattle) have already replaced aircraft of Soviet times on Belavia flights. The third such aircraft will arrive in late December. Within the former USSR, only Yakutian Alrosa Air continues to use Tu-154s to transport passengers.

In addition

Ride to your heart’s content!

For the past five years, an oncological surgeon from the Minsk Oncology Centre has cycled to work

“From end to end, Minsk stretches only 20 km, so you can use a bike as your main means of transport for most of the year; public transport should be for occasional use only,” says Mr. Kiselev, who is a surgeon and well-known activist for Minsk cycling and the environmental movement.

Mr. Kiselev, aged 50, is well-respected. His off-road cycle stands near his house, covered with dust.

“I have three bicycles,” he says. “I’m currently mostly using a Dahon folding bike, which I keep under the desk. It wasn’t cheap, but it paid for itself long ago.”

Every day he covers 10 km and tries to extend his journey home through Minsk’s beautiful parks.

“My health has definitely improved, which is something money can’t buy!” he asserts. “Thanks to this hobby, I’ve met some great people. We’ve travelled the length and breadth of Russia, St. Petersburg, Moscow, Poland and the Baltic states. In the near future, we plan to visit Smolensk.”

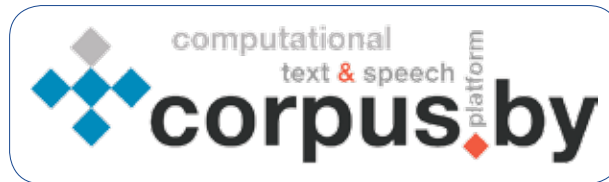


Rostislav Kiselev gave up driving and recommends everybody do the same

Intellectual pursuits

Interdepartmental Centre for Artificial Intelligence exhibition sees academic institutions, universities and private businesses present such innovations as a 'smart stop' card, new methods of cancer diagnosis, a boost for those with hearing impediment and monitoring systems for emergencies.

The Artificial Intelligence Centre was established a year ago, as a part of the Joint Institute of Informatics Problems and the National Academy of Sciences Institute of Physiology. The unifying platform for experts in the field of intelligent technologies is headed by the



General Director of the Joint Institute of Informatics Problems, Alexander Tuzikov (a corresponding member of the NAS).

Petralex software, presented by the Belarusian State University of Informatics and Radioelectronics' Department of Electronics, aims to help those with hearing problems. Using ordinary headphones, a tablet or a mobile phone, the software tests hearing by generating various tones, determining the frequencies at which the user can hear. It then uses them to alter incoming aural information through the

'Smart Stop'



mobile phone, applying optimal settings for the user.

Maxim Vashkevich, an Associate Professor of the Department, says the application has versions for iOS and Android and is already used by over 300,000 people globally. It can be downloaded through the app store.

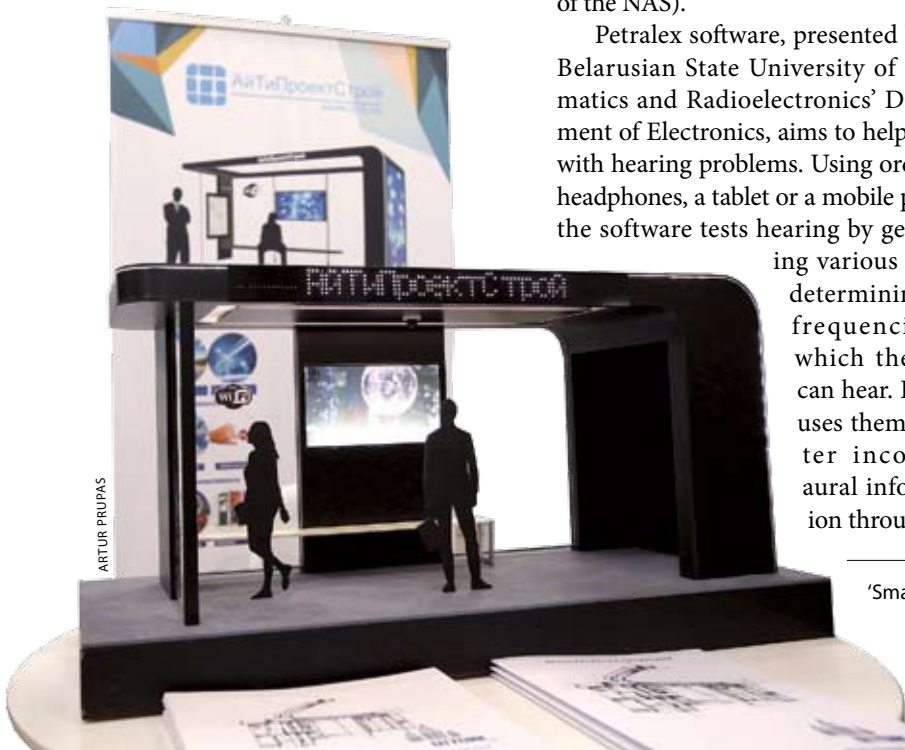
The Brest State Technical University presented a mobile robot for monitoring reservoirs, while the BSU demonstrated a 'smart stop' card, which is an electronic certificate, a digital signature carrier and a means of payment. The 'smart stop' card, developed by ITProektstroy (a private company) is a part of 'City Code' project operating at Gomel's 'Fabrika 8 Marta' public transport stop. This features solar panels (as an alternative energy source), three monitors (one touch screen with a city map for planning routes and two advertising screens), a menu for standby transport and video CCTV.

Wi-Fi is also planned. Interestingly, 95 percent of all components involved are domestically produced. Mogilev and Grodno are soon to receive similar transport stops.

Sergey Gerasyuto who heads the Joint Institute of Informatics Problems Robotics Department, notes that 4G Internet development is allowing mobile robots to be managed from anywhere in the world.

Other developments on show were an online platform for processing text and speech called Corpus.by, a system for remote monitoring of crops (forecasting harvests) and a system of biomedical image analysis.

By Yulia **Vasilishina**



Belarusian doctors perform simultaneous heart and lung transplant for the first time



Life goes on...

Our Belarusian transplantologists can rightly say that nothing is beyond their skill. Truly, Belarus leads in the field of transplantology in the CIS: in just eleven years, the number of annual operations has risen 55-fold. Our doctors are real teachers; even personnel in the regions can conduct such operations. Recently, they completed their first 'heart-lung' transplant, for Alexey, aged 32, who is making a good recovery.

Belarusian best surgeons, from the Cardiology Republican Scientific-Practical Centre, led by Mr. Ostrovsky, and including Sergey Spiridonov and



PAUL CHUYKO

Now this peak has been reached, too: the unique heart-lung complex transplant. Alexey, aged 32, is making a good recovery

undergoing rehabilitation. On the waiting list since March, his congenital heart disease led to pulmonary hypertension, with numerous related complications.

Vladimir Andrushchuk, were involved in the nine-hour operation, which they admit was a technical challenge. They are relieved that the outcome is perfect.

"We've been technically preparing for a longtime, learning from foreign colleagues," Mr. Spiridonov comments. "It was very important to find a proper donor, to coincide with the recipient across such parameters as height, weight and state of organs. It's been a long process."

Alexey is now undergoing rehabilitation. On the waiting list since March, his congenital heart disease led to pulmonary hypertension, with numerous related complications.

Accordingly, only a double transplant would do.

Another fifteen patients are on the waiting list for similar surgeries. According to Mr. Andrushchuk, they are unlikely to live longer than a year without an operation.

In 2009, a team led by Professor Yuri Ostrovsky conducted their first heart transplant; since then, over 250 operations of the kind have been performed, and a team of strong cardio-surgeons has been trained.

Some patients, in need of a single organ, are obliged to wait for some time, since more complicated intervention is needed. No more than a hundred such surgeries are registered annually, involving precise mastery and exceptional teamwork.

The surgical team includes specialists who have been nominated for the State Award for their creation of the National Transplantology Service, which provides a step forward for our medicine.

By Olga Savitskaya



President Nikolić reads Frantsisk Skorina in Serbian

The 61st International Book Trade Fair becomes an important event in Belgrade's cultural life

As is traditional, Belarus presented many innovations. According to guests and participants, our stand was one of the most interesting, with editions about the country and its heroic past attracting the greatest attention, alongside illustrated albums describing the modern development of Belarus. A wide range of books has been translated from Serbian into Belarusian.

The Belarusian delegation, headed by the Minister of Information of Belarus, Lilia Ananich, organised several meetings at the National Library and the Ministry of Culture, as well as in the Serbian Skupshtina (Parliament), where representatives of the deputy group gathered, promoting the development of relations with Belarus. Fiction and promotional works by Belarusians about Serbia and Yugoslavia (recently published in Minsk) were presented in the Serbian Parliament.

The delegation met the President of Serbia, Tomislav Nikolić, discussing various aspects of Belarusian-Serbian relations, and Mr. Nikolić especially

noted the warmth and mutual understanding his country enjoys with Belarus. He thanked Alexander Lukashenko for his support for the Serbian people during difficult times for Belgrade, despite obstacles.

During the meeting with the Minister of Information of Belarus, the Serbian President paid much attention to the unity of Belarusian and Serbian positions in counteracting the destruction of spiritual and moral foundations in society. As an example of interference, he cited a book by Nobel Prize winner Ivo Andric, a Serbian prose writer who created *The Bridge on the Drina*, about Ottoman invaders taking sons from their mothers, inculcating new values in them and demanding obedience. Of course, eventually, the Serbians rebelled. History's lessons should not be forgotten.

During her meeting with the President, Lilia Ananich said that information is often destructive in nature and that it's time we counteracted this, taking steps to strengthen the information space between Belarus and Serbia. She explained, "Belarus suggests playing an

active role by uniting all efforts. The time has come to think about a joint Belarusian-Serbian media project."

The conversation also tackled a landmark date for Belarus and the whole Slavonic world: in 2017, our country is celebrating the 500th anniversary of the national book printing. A joint scientific-practical conference is planned and, undoubtedly, at Belgrade's next book trade fair, there will be discussion on the enlighteners and scientists of the two states, looking at Slavonic book printing and the role of Frantsisk Skorina in its development.

The Belarusian delegation presented Tomislav Nikolić editions of *Castles of Belarus and Frantsisk Skorina in the Languages of the Nations of the World*; among other translations, it contains a Serbian adaptation of universal truths about patriotism and respect for our roots. Tomislav Nikolić read, in Serbian, words by Skorina from the foreword to *Judith*, which has relevance to both nations. He read them with spirit and warmth, addressing Belarusians and Serbians together.

By Kirill **Ladutko**

► In the tolerant land

New Cathedral Mosque in Minsk gathers Muslims and academics for communal prayer

Academics have joined heads of Muslim communities from Belarus, Russia and Kazakhstan for a round table discussion entitled Dialogue of Religions and Cultures in the Context of Modern Trends in the Development of Islam and Contemporary Challenges.

The meeting included the screening of a documentary, Islam — A Peace-loving Religion, while researcher and collector Vladimir

Lihodedov presented an exhibition of old photos and his book entitled Belarus and the Muslim World.

“100,000-120,000 Muslims currently reside in Belarus,” the Mufti of Belarus, Abu-Bekir Shabanovich, notes. “Vladimir Lihodedov’s Belarus and the Muslim World is a wonderful gift, often presented to top officials of Arab states during official visits by the President. It has been presented to the US Congress Library and highly praised. The edition, in Russian, English and Turkish, tells the

history of Tatar settlements in Belarus in the 14th and 15th centuries, through until the present day. The project wouldn’t have been successfully completed were it not for Vladimir Peftiev, to whom I’m very grateful for allowing us to use his personal collection and for having helped us in preparing the exhibition and the release of the book.”

Mr. Lihodedov comments, “Our lands have always been known for their tolerance towards various beliefs. My book displays unique photos, collected from various countries. Each picture is more than a hundred years

old. I was lucky to find a true rarity — a photo depicting the only Muslim who lived in Polotsk in the early 20th century.”

Mr. Lihodedov notes that ties have existed between Belarus and the Muslim world for many centuries, as is proven by the discovery of Arab coins dating to the 7th and 8th century. However, there is much to be revealed, including the nature of trade along the Dnieper to the Volga used by our ancestors to trade with the Muslim world. Research continues, and new findings await.



Vladimir Lihodedov and his book Belarus and the Muslim World



► Three stars above Ostrovets

New three star hotel, built with Turkish capital, opens in Ostrovets

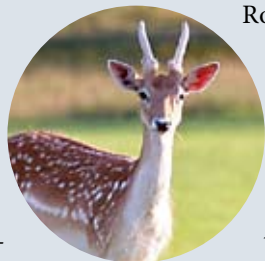
Realised by Sednat FJSC, around \$12 million has been invested in the hotel located in the city centre. Boasting six floors, it has fifty comfortable rooms, as well as a restaurant.

The Deputy Chairman of the Ostrovets District Executive Committee, Pavel Milesenko, notes that the city has long needed another hotel, due to the construction of the nuclear power station. He notes, “Ostrovets is developing rapidly, hosting various forums and seminars, and being visited by numerous delegations. Our cultural life is intensive. The recent International Festival of Organ Music, hosted by Gervyaty Roman Catholic Church, attracted about a thousand guests. Our old hotel lacks enough rooms, so the new one will help solve the accommodation problem.”

Turkish investors are realising other promising projects in the area, including building roadside services of a motel, a shop, a café and a petrol station, not far from Kotlovka checkpoint, on the Belarusian-Lithuanian border.

► Fallow deer run free

Fallow deer have returned to Belarus: 64 bucks, 165 does and 71 fawns were recently released from Krasny Bor Reserve, where they have been adapting since last January. They are now spread through forested areas in the



Rossony and Verkhnedvinsk districts, though the fallow deer are still being fed at specially equipped sites.

Some species are unique to our lands; in the Middle Ages, fallow deer were considered to be park animals but then completely disappeared. Constant wars, poachers and varmints killed them off.



Joining efforts to take the next step

2016 was the Year of Culture in Belarus. What events did it bring and how has it altered the public consciousness? Are more people aware of what's available to them culturally, and what's next, for 2017? The Minister of Culture of Belarus, Boris Svetlov, shares his views.

Mr. Svetlov, the Year of Culture is coming to an end. Does this mean that we'll pay less attention to culture in 2017, turning to a new direction? What's the peculiar feature of the Year of Culture?

After completing this year, it would be short-sighted and wrong to pay less attention to the cultural life of our society and the development of culture in all its manifestations. After all, culture is life: 'the circulatory system of the society which gives it the power of life' [as Alexander Lukashenko said at the 'For Spiritual Revival' awards ceremony in 2013].

At the beginning of the Year of Culture, I mentioned in an interview that we'd be looking at familiar things in new ways. In 2015, we tackled youth policy and, in 2016, culture was in focus, drawing attention not only to cultural treasures but the processes governing the 'produc-

tion' of culture in society. Belarus is recognised for its high levels of cultural achievement.

What new cultural developments did the Year of Culture bring?

system of legislation regulating every form of creativity relating to culture. The Code includes over 150 legal acts, including Presidential decrees, Government resolutions, and those

Our emphasis made in the Year of Culture on what kind of person you are in culture, production, at home, in relations with other people, what your spiritual life is like, will not surprise anyone, soon becoming a norm. For culture is also security, and not only public but individual, too

One of the most important — virtually a landmark — is the adoption of the Code of Culture. This is a whole

from the Ministry of Culture. Until recently, the cultural sphere lacked unified regulation. The Code has over

200 pages and 257 articles. As far as I know, no other country has anything that compares in scope. It's the legal basis of our cultural activity: a single mechanism regulating legal relations in the sphere of culture.

The Year of Culture was filled with bright events. Which impressed you most?

December has been rich in diverse cultural events. The Bolshoi Theatre has realised some major projects, enjoying extensive public coverage. It hosted a grand event: the 3rd International Christmas Competition of Vocalists — attracting 225 soloists from twenty countries. Moreover, it hosted the 7th Minsk International Christmas Opera Forum. Both events concluded with brilliant gala concerts. I attended the gala concert for competition finalists and the concert of world opera stars, and was overwhelmed with pride for our operatic art, which rivals that of any in the world.

The Bolshoi Theatre presented nothing of the kind just fifteen years ago. Now, each new show fea-

tures stars from different world theatres. Our theatres tour more often now as well. Various cultures enjoy dialogue and nations are coming closer, thanks to theatrical art. The Bolshoi Theatre's November schedule was intense, with the Belarusian public having the chance to enjoy performances by Kazakh, Yakutian, Russian and Ukrainian artistes...

It's a clear example of integration in the world of art and culture, which contributes to the formation of universal cultural values, strengthening peace and mutual understanding between people of different religious expression and of different nationalities. Not only do world known artistes come to us, we also tour worldwide! The Bolshoi Theatre's ballet troupe is touring Germany and Austria for the sixth time, from December 9th to January 18th, performing at the largest theatre venues, in Bonn, Bremen, Hamburg, Cologne, Berlin, Hanover, Munich, Dortmund, Salzburg and Vienna. They'll enjoy Tchaikovsky's legendary ballets of 'Swan Lake' and 'The Nutcracker', as well as 'Another Christmas Story.'

In late November, we organised the 4th Republican Competition of Theatrical Arts: National Theatre Award. The 'Best Opera Production' nomination was won by Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov's 'The Tsar's Bride' opera, by the National Academic Bolshoi Opera and Ballet Theatre of Belarus. The 'Best Male Role in an Operatic Performance' award went to Honoured Artiste of Belarus Stanislav Trifonov — for his role in the same show. The role of Carmen in the opera of the same name brought victory to Honoured Artiste of Belarus Oksana Volkova, as 'Best Actress in an Operatic Performance'. Yevgeny Glebov's 'Little Prince' was acknowledged as 'Best Ballet Performance'.

What do you think about 'The Seagull', staged at the Yanka Kupala Theatre? The show won the National Theatrical Award's 'Best Drama Performance' nomination.

The theatre received a well-des-



A holiday at the Mir Castle



A concert of classical music at the Minsk Town Hall

erved award, in accordance with its high status. I'm very pleased that we worthily celebrated the 75th anniversary of the birth of Vladimir Mulyavin. The Maxim Gorky National Academic Drama Theatre's 'Pesnyar' (Singer) — based on Belarusian Vasily Dranko-Maysyuk's play and recognised by the National Theatrical Award — is devoted to the musician's memory and to all Belarusian pesnyars.

Which other Year of Culture events come to mind?

Virtually every month, Belarus hosted major cultural events. I cannot but mention the National Art Museum's display of Orthodox and Catholic icons: 'Icons of Belarus from the

17th-21st Centuries', presented at the Vatican Museum from May to July. Several days after its official opening on May 18th, President Alexander Lukashenko visited, accompanied by the State Secretary of the Vatican, Cardinal Pietro Parolin.

Every day, the hall of Byzantine art — which housed the exhibition and was in close proximity to the famous Sistine Chapel, with frescoes by Michelangelo — was visited by over 30,000 people. Through this exhibition, we 'loudly' announced ourselves in Europe, introducing unique pieces of sacred Belarusian culture to Italian professionals and many tourists from around the world.

In early December, the National Centre for Contemporary Arts housed an exhibition of works by artists from the Champs-Élysées. As noted at the opening ceremony, by the Chairman of the Belarusian Union of Artists, Gregory Sitnitsa, the project confirms that Belarus and France share a single cultural and historical space.

Looking at other significant events in 2016, art lovers enjoyed the above mentioned Vatican show (in expanded format) at the National Art Museum in September. In July, Vitebsk hosted the 25th International Slavonic Bazaar Festival of Arts and, for the second year in a row, was self-funding through ticket sales and sponsorship (no longer needing fi-

nancing from the President's Reserve Fund, which has allocated up to Br 2.5 bn for the event in the past).

Some other cultural projects were also realised without state funding, as is the goal of various cultural venues these days. In fact, a fifth of all expenses in 2016's cultural calendar were generated by institutions themselves, and the figure appears to be annually growing. A new, five-year cultural programme has been adopted, requiring Br 30 tn: Br 5 tn is to be provided by the Republican budget, with Br 20 tn from local budgets and the other Br 5 tn independently raised.

Is it true that there were more international festivals during the Year of Culture?

There have been around sixty so far, including Days of Culture of Belarus organised abroad and days of culture of various other countries in Belarus. In 2016, we visited the Russian Federation, Laos, Turkey and Turkmenistan.

In 2016, there were many anniversaries of writers and poets which we worthily celebrated: the 95th anniversary of the birth of Ivan Shamyakin, the 120th anniversary of the birth of Kondrat Krapiva and the 125th anniversary of the birth of Maxim Bogdanovich.

Cultural cooperation with China has expanded, and liaisons with some Chinese provinces have strengthened. On December 21st, the Chinese Cultural Centre opened in Minsk and, in

2017, the Cultural Centre of Belarus will begin its work in China. In the future, some regions of China will present their unique culture to our Republic.

We know that Belarusians read a great deal, as well as visit theatres and other cultural establishments. They enjoy visiting monuments of historical and cultural heritage and are keen to attend cultural events, such as classical concerts held near the Minsk Town Hall. No doubt, we've succeeded in raising the profile of cultural events, and public interest; there are surely figures to confirm this view. How far has this 'diet' influenced people's consciousness during 2016? Perceptions are ever changing, although perhaps not as fast as we'd like. Trees take longer than a year to bear fruit, so we can't expect radical change from a single Year of Culture. As great Homer said, 'the mills of the gods grind slowly'.

There's another saying, that 'quiet water wears away the stone'. Frequency is as important as force, indicating that patience and persistence bring great achievements. With this in mind, our focus during the Year of Culture was to encourage people to view cultural events as part of their normal, daily life. In this way, people would come to expect such events, and take them in their stride, adopting them as part of their lifestyle.

I love that our 'people of culture' do regularly go to theatres, concerts, exhibitions and festivals (including regional). Not just urbanites but those from the countryside make the effort to attend, and their enjoyment is obvious. Distinguished guests from abroad note the same thing. I believe that our level of culture is high and that our people understand the importance of cultural enrichment. It's a growing trend, which is encouraging. I hope that in 2017 we'll continue on this path.

Interviewed by Valentina **Zhdanovich**

I believe that our level of culture is high and that our people understand the importance of cultural enrichment. It's a growing trend, which is encouraging



During the concert

YURIY MOZOLEVSKIY



What is the Republican Centre of National Cultures and what activities does it undertake? We discuss here, and take a short excursion into its recent history, under the directorship of Olga Antonenko. It's no secret that Belarus is currently experiencing a 'festival boom': more than a hundred are held annually. The word 'fest' is more commonly used than ever before. Besides the well-known Slavianski Bazaar in Vitebsk, and the Republican Festival of National Cultures in Grodno, there's Sozhski Karagod in Gomel, Belaya Vezha in Brest and Golden Shlyager

from Irkutsk. Alena Sipakova, who heads the Irkutsk Association of Belarusian Culture, tells me that she dreamt about the event for two years before finally buying tickets and flying to Minsk, with her mother. However, she asked me to tell her how to get from Minsk to Polesie.

Polesie, on the Pripjat River, is located deep in the countryside, and has preserved its unique culture. The event is organised by the Gomel Regional Executive Committee, with the Ministry of Culture, the administration of Pripjatsky National Park and the Petrikov District Executive Committee.

I sent the organisers' contact details to my friends and looked up the train timetable, as well as that for buses. You can go to Zhitkovichi, through Baranovichi. I suggested to Alena and her

Place to meet talented people

The Republican Centre of National Cultures helps carry cultural and enlightening activity to as ethnic communities in Belarus so many Belarusians living abroad

musical festival in Mogilev. Miory's Cranberry Fest is growing in popularity, as is the Cherry Fest in Glubokoe (find out more at <http://www.belarus.by/by>).

Belarusians living abroad are also interested in festival life. This autumn, the Irkutsk Association of Belarusian Culture (named after Yan Chersky) is organising the fourth international festival of folk culture traditions, Call of Polesie, in the Petrikov District's Lyaskovichi. Interest in folk traditions, customs and folklore singing is huge among members of the Siberian society. Working for Golas Radzimy newspaper, I maintain ties with Belarusians

mother that they join a bus carrying representatives of the Culture Ministry or that of the Republican Centre of National Cultures. Alena and Tatiana Sipakovy phoned the Republican Centre of National Cultures and its director, Olga Antonenko, to make arrangements.

Ms. Antonenko helped when Alena's flight was delayed in Irkutsk, which disrupted her onward travel plans, arriving in Minsk late at night. "We arrived in Minsk and chatted to Ms. Antonenko by phone," Alena revealed later, writing to our editorial office. "We went to Baranovichi, as we initially planned, then travelled to Zhitkovichi by train. At about 4.30 a.m., we were met by a driver who took us to Lyaskovichi in fifty minutes." Alena adds that all turned

out well, due to the director of the Republican Centre of National Cultures. When the Siberian Belarusians finally met Ms. Antonenko, they felt like old friends.

Employees of the Republican Centre of National Cultures have plenty of similar stories, all with happy endings, as has the former director of the Centre, Mikhail Rybakov, who now heads the Belarusian Cultural Centre in Poland, and is well remembered by many Belarusians living abroad.

This year, Ms. Antonenko took up the baton in responding to those (of various nationalities) who address the Centre. She has spent time living beyond Belarusian borders; fifty years ago, on January 26th, 1966, she was born in the city of Miass, where famous Ural vehicles are produced.

We begin our conversation by looking at her personal biography.

Ms. Antonenko, how did you come to be born in the Urals?

My mother comes from Gomel but studied at an institute in Moscow. She received her first job appointment far from home. My father comes from the Urals. Our family didn't live long in Miass, returning to Gomel when I was 18 months old. After school, I studied at the Gomel State University Economics Department, but graduated from the university's Philology Department. I realised my love of humanitarian sciences. I was keen on amateur arts, joining dance and theatre groups. I helped organise various events and concerts, and became a cultural organiser for my department. I won prizes at Olympiads and language contests and then received my diploma with honours. I began work as a director at a regional radio station, and then took employment as a journalist at the Gomel TV and Radio Company.

You were primarily involved in cultural topics...

Not only cultural. I enjoyed chatting with various people, and had my own programmes: 'Dialogue with Power' on TV, and 'Ask a Question of Authority' and 'Sunday Evening Without a Tie' on the radio. At the same time, I hosted events of regional and international level, in Gomel, directing most myself. After ten years of television work, I was offered the position of first dep-

uty chair of the regional executive committee's culture department. I worked there for a decade with great pleasure. Together with culture workers from the Gomel Region, I organised many bright festivals, contests and interesting events.

I could talk endlessly of my talented fellow countrymen from Polesie, and how we built and unveiled memorial complexes and memorial plaques, with assistance from the leadership of the region and of the country.

There were so many interesting endeavours and meetings. All enriched me greatly. Culture is a great and multi-faceted world where everything is mutually connected and there are no trivial matters. Everything has its weight, meaning and sense, even the timbre, pitch and tone of a single voice. The mood of the person on stage, near the microphone or TV camera is significant in its influence.

You went for promotion from Gomel to Minsk, didn't you?

I moved to the capital at the beginning of the year, due to a combination of circumstances. Every decade brings significant change in my life. Since April, I've headed the State Institute of Mixed Culture, at the Republican Centre of National Cultures. The work is both interesting and creative. We've so many ideas and plans. Importantly, the endeavours of the Centre are supported by diaspora heads, who join our activities and make suggestions.

Belarusians living abroad liaise closely with the Centre; we are jointly developing, supporting and expanding Belarusian culture in countries where our fellow countrymen reside. We share the same roots, though they were born far from their ancestors' land. They have spiritual and cultural ties with Belarus.

Tatiana and Alena Sipakovy, the mother and daughter born in Siberia, sing perfectly in Belarusian and do much for the benefit of Belarusian culture. They have a great desire to 'live with Belarus', as do other Belarusians from the Lake Baikal area. Distance is no obstacle.

I know that my fellow countrymen highly appreciate having somewhere to apply, to receive advice or support,

within the land of their ancestors. Probably, this was the ultimate goal of the establishment of the Republican Centre of National Cultures?

National culture embraces great treasures: our Belarusian culture and the cultures of representatives of other nationalities who live in the Belarusian land. However, the attitude towards treasures should be appropriate. It's known that representatives of around 140 nationalities live in Belarus. Members of twenty-six nationalities have set up more than 180 civil communities and their branches; as a rule, these are involved in cultural and enlightening activity.

The Republican Centre of National Cultures has assisted them, and there are communities beyond the country's borders which also need us; up to 3.5 million Belarus-born people and their descendants live abroad: across the CIS, Europe, the USA, Australia and the UK.

More than 220 civil associations of our fellow countrymen have been established and are currently operating abroad. Many are in contact with us.

I'll read you our Centre's mission statement (cited from Decree No. 291 of the Minister of Culture, as of January 22nd, 1944): 'To ensure support and co-ordination of activity, and to provide organisational-methodical and practical assistance to national cultural-enlightening civil associations in implementing their statute activity.'

Belarus has been providing state support to representatives of various nationalities for more than twenty years, offering the opportunity to preserve their history and culture, and their unique ethnic identity.

Due to this goal-seeking policy, our fellow countrymen abroad feel the support of their Fatherland through our Centre: when they establish Belarusian societies, work for the benefit of Belarusian culture, remember their native roots and defend and facilitate the interests of their historical homeland. Of course, we have to work within our sphere of competence: we're able to help in some cases while others are beyond our power.

Who, alongside the Centre, works in the international and intercultural spheres?

Primarily, the Ministry of Culture, the Office of the Plenipotentiary Representative for Religious and Nationality Affairs and the Ministries of Information, Justice and Education, with local authorities. The sphere of inter-ethnic relations is developing from various sides and state run public authorities are facilitating this process, making these relationships constructive.

The most important document is the Culture of Belarus state programme for 2016-2020; we also use Law 'On National Minorities in the Republic of Belarus'. There's much work to do in the preparation and conducting of festivals, alongside various creative projects and concerts. We provide assistance to amateur groups from various ethnic communities. Our efforts promote international concord within Belarus and we create conditions to enable those of Belarusian origin living abroad to satisfy their ethno-cultural interests. Our strategy is to adopt a multi-vector policy, activating partnerships with all those interested.

Which societies of ethnicities are liaising with the Centre most fruitfully?

Civil associations of people with roots in Azerbaijan, Armenia, Afghanistan, Georgia, Greece, Dagestan, Kazakhstan, Korea, Lithuania, Moldova, Germany, Palestine, Poland, Russia, Ukraine, Turkey, Estonia and Turkmenistan, as well as those organised by Tatars, Bashkirs, Romany people, Chuvashes and Jews. Societies of Latvians, Iranians, Tajiks and Syrians are less active, for various reasons, and Yemenites also show little activity.

Who can you name among your partners?

We're maintaining relations with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Belarus, as well as with the National Commission for UNESCO of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and with the Belarusian Association of UNESCO Clubs.

Partners also include institutes and scientific centres of the Belarusian State University (BSU) and the National Academy of Sciences (NAS). In particular, we provide assistance to NAS scientists in conducting research projects while also

sharing information on nationalities in Belarus. We conduct joint conferences, round table discussions and mass media exhibitions with the Society for Ties with Fellow Countrymen Abroad.

We also organise joint courses, such as one recently in Minsk, for activists of Belarusian societies abroad. We support business and creative contacts with museums, embassies and cultural centres in Belarus, from a range of foreign states and with such Belarusian centres abroad. We're in contact with Belarusian media. We have very many friends and partners.

friendship ensemble (headed by Artur Gomonov).

Rehearsing free of charge in the Centre's hall are 'Sunny Georgia' folk dance ensemble, as well as Russian groups 'Mlada' and 'Nadezhda', and Dagestani 'Legends of Caucasus'. Armenian groups 'Erebuni' and 'Nairy', in addition to Tatar, Kazakh, Azerbaijani and other ethnic groups also use the hall.

Are rehearsals tightly scheduled? Is there space for everyone?

We prepare a timetable for rehearsals, based on applications received from socie-

Olga Antonenko:

Culture is a great and multi-faceted world where everything is mutually connected and there are no trivial matters. Everything has its weight, meaning and sense, even the timbre, pitch and tone of a single voice



Can the Centre's efficiency be assessed?

The best indication is when ethnic societies (both in Belarus and Belarusian communities abroad) work for the benefit of our multinational country, through interaction with the Centre. We help only those who 'help themselves', offering methodical, organisational and other support. The results of this depend on individual associations' desire to engage.

What are the most active communities doing?

Our Centre's premises host seven amateur groups established by national-cultural civil organisations; their leaders receive a wage from 0.5 to 1 full tariff rate. Among them are: the Russian folk choir named after A. Nikitina (headed by Inessa Borisova); 'Krynitsa' Ukrainian folk choir (headed by Maria Kuchuk); 'Arirang' creative group of Korean culture (headed by Alena Dvoretzkaya); 'Erebuni' Armenian folk band (headed by Ruzanna Avanesyan); 'Vatra' Ukrainian song and dance ensemble (headed by Alexander Volodchenko) and 'Zgoda' international

ties. It's important that our rooms and hall are busy seven days a week: from 9 a.m. to 10 p.m.. Some groups rehearse at the MAZ Palace of Culture ('Zgoda' ensemble), at the House of Culture of Trade Unions ('Sapna' Indian dance ensemble) and at the MTZ House of Culture (the folk choir named after A. Nikitina). We hold monthly meetings with heads of groups, to share our experience and coordinate joint plans.

I've heard that, previously, Sunday schools met at the Centre.

They continue to do so. Georgians, Koreans, Poles, Armenians, Tatars and Bashkirs study their native culture, traditions and languages. We have a library and are compiling a database, while expanding our archive of video, audio, photo and text materials on the activity of ethnic associations in Belarus and of Belarusian societies abroad.

Where do amateurs artists perform?

They often perform in Minsk, and across various Belarusian cities. This year, with the Centre's assistance, ethnic community groups travelled abroad, including for 'Multi-National Belarus' project

in which we participate. Creative groups of Belarusians abroad come to perform, and we help set up venues and meetings for them.

We regularly conduct concerts, round table discussions and literary evenings, with their participation, enabling representatives of various nations to learn more about each other. Participants often praise these events, saying they gain greater understanding from them. We promote respect for the traditions of other ethnicities, working as a team to support each other, in association with the Republican Centre for National Cultures. The key event of the year is our Republican Festival of National Cultures, which was hosted for the eleventh time in June 2016, in Grodno, bringing together representatives of thirty-seven nationalities.

Which ethnic communities are working most actively?

This is something we continue to monitor, while encouraging further activity. Our 'Ethnoculture' concert for civil national-cultural associations of Belarus will mark the best achievements in expanding and preserving national cultures in Belarus.

Each month, we inform the Ministry of Culture, in detail, about the Centre's joint activities with ethnic communities. We advertise forthcoming events and, sometimes, with ministerial support, find interested partners, enabling us to conduct events in style. It's a strategy yielding fruit.

We planned to organise 328 events this year but actually managed about 500. New approaches to working with ethnic communities and attracting partners are resulting in larger numbers of events, and greater cost efficiency. Most are held with assistance from the Centre, and without direct financial help from the state. It's a rare situation.

We view this as a social investment by ethnic communities, helping preserve and strengthen peace and concord in the civil community of Belarus. At the same time, we're encouraging ethnic communities to have faith in our Centre as a reliable partner.

I'm keen to learn how the Centre is building relations with leaders of ethnic

communities. Do you follow any particular model?

We focus on working with heads and active members of ethno-cultural associations, conducting working meetings and sessions with the Consultative Council, at the Centre, as well as seminars and councils.

As far as models are concerned, the Consultative Council on National Communities has been operating at our Centre for more than twenty years. It's a bright example of constructive cooperation and interaction between ethnic associations and state run public authorities, testifying to our democratic relations.

The Council includes twenty-six leaders of ethnic communities in Belarus. Their self-governance shows that there's no confrontation between nationalities in the country. If you want to be involved in civil activity and take part in the socio-cultural life of Belarus, you're welcome.

At the Council, leaders study and solve problematic issues as they arise. It meets at least once every three months, to discuss cultural activity by ethnic communities and problematic issues in associations' activity. Representatives of various state run public authorities are invited to speak, as are members of the media, representatives of cultural and art institutions and experts in the sphere of national relations.

The Consultative Council of National Communities is led by the Head of the Congress of Azerbaijani Communities' International Civil Association, Natiq Nadir oğlu Bağırov. He's an Honoured Master of Sports of Belarus, and a European and World multi-champion in wrestling. During discussions at Council meetings, we endeavour to find compromises.

By Ivan **Zhdanovich**



KATERYNA MEDVEDSKAYA

It's all in your hands

A key piece of advice addressed to people travelling to India (the whole list can be found on the website of the Embassy of the Republic of Belarus to the Republic of India) is as follows: show friendship to the local population. While in India, as cultural people, we should never forget this, not even for a minute. Next year, Belarus and India will celebrate their 25th anniversary of diplomatic relations, tied by the strings of personal contacts and the good impressions made by Belarusians.



For Minsker Yelena Likhtarovich (right), helping a person at Abu Dhabi Airport is not just a part of her medical profession but a natural state

Lena and Japanese people

It's impossible to convey all the magic of a trip to India. 2016 has been the Year of Culture in Belarus, with events taking place through all the seasons. I recall an incident at Abu Dhabi Airport that took place on our way home from India.

It prompted me to think about how we communicate: the chain of cause-and-effect, the 'domino effect' which reaches beyond day-to-day realities, into the realm of senses and emotions. We, Belarusians, taking our holidays, meet people of all nationalities.

Late in the evening, we landed on a flight from Cochin International Airport, in the state of Kerala, in the south-west of India. A whole night of waiting for our flight to Minsk was ahead. We were well rested and full of positive energy (enough, it seemed, for the whole year). We weren't anxious, simply waiting in the comfortable chairs near the lounge. We chatted about various topics, and watched passers-by, of various nationalities. Our attention was drawn by exotic-looking, tall Arabs in white burnouses, and their wives, with sparkling eyes behind the narrow slit of their niqab. Golden rings on their fingers, and hands painted with henna, they could barely keep pace with their husbands.



Indian exotics in the wet season

We adored looking at sleepy Korean children; some young mothers carrying them on their backs, while others strapped their babies to their front, like a kangaroo. Not far from us, two sleepy ladies, either from Spain or Italy, sat resigned to a long wait. As dawn broke, an elderly Japanese couple replaced them, aged about sixty or seventy, or older. It was difficult for us to guess their age.

“His wife doesn’t look like she feels well,” someone said. “Most likely, she’s tired.” Her husband gestured for some water, and gave it to his wife to drink. Our Lenochka Likhtarovich then rushed to the side of the pale lady, taking her pulse, and asking her how she was feeling. Neither spoke English but I knew that Lena — a doctor and a massage therapist — would do her best to help them.

We gave the lady some validol from Lena’s first aid kit but she didn’t perk up, so Lena went to fetch a doctor. Meanwhile, boarding for the Abu Dhabi-Minsk flight was announced. We left our seats and saw that our neighbour was coming to life. Having noticed that we were leaving, she approached, clasping her hands to her heart, saying something. It was clear that she was ex-

pressing her most heartfelt thanks and it was impossible to hold back tears of joy. I was sorry that Lena wasn’t there to hear those words...

Later, we managed to take a photo with the ‘revived’ lady. Boarding the plane, we were happy for all of us. And I was happy to think that, thanks to Lena, two modest people from the Land of the Rising Sun, perhaps from a small province, would tell their loved ones that there is a country called Belarus, where people are kind.

Ayurveda, or heavens on Earth

This ancient system of knowledge is five thousand years old. I’ve known about it since my youth but only recently discovered more, thanks to some Minskians keen on Indian culture. Ayurveda, which was recognised in 1985 by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as the most effective system of alternative medicine, establishes harmony and balance between spirit, mind and body. It’s practiced in India in almost its original form, at health centres in southern Kerala.

Anyone can go, trying its revitalising effects. Panchakarma is the act of cleansing, which balances energies in our bodies. According to Ayurveda, a disease occurs when the balance between energies is disturbed. We can restore this balance, by natural means and through a holistic diet. A holistic approach tackles body and mind, taking into account such external factors as the weather, work and diet and our internal, psychological state.

Ayurveda’s purpose, as the famous physician Suśruta said, two and a half thousand years ago, is the restoration of health to those prone to diseases, as well as the preservation of health for those who are healthy. Our health depends on cultural factors, too.

We decided to go to India, a country that has attracted many of us since childhood, through fairy tales, the novels of Kipling and other authors, and the stories of friends who’ve visited. Of course, there are also Indian films, with brilliant Raj Kapoor. The other day, I reviewed ‘Journey Beyond the Three Seas’, a 1957 film about a merchant from Tver, Afanasiy Nikitin, who discovered India in the Middle Ages. It stars handsome Russian actor Oleg Strizhenov.



At the Ayurvedic centre, everything is arranged with taste and in view of centuries-old traditions

We chose one of the few travel agencies in Minsk specialising in Ayurvedic tours, headed by a man passionate about his work and about India. Vladimir has travelled extensively throughout India; he talks about it in great detail, as if he'd have lived there for a long time.

Having carried out all the formalities, we flew from Minsk to Kochi via Abu Dhabi. Later, on June 19th, we were back in Minsk's Gorky Park, mastering asana breathing with yoga instructors. It was the International Day of Yoga, as we later found out online (as proclaimed by the UN General Assembly on June 21st, 2015, supported by over 170 countries). About sixty yoga centres currently operate in Belarus. Yoga is more than gymnastics; it binds the soul and the body, helping us gain

control over our body, including our thoughts and feelings.

Five of us travelled to Kochi: Yelena Likhtarovich, with her friend, psychologist Nadezhda, from Minsk, joined by my husband and I, and our hydrogeologist friend, Vladimir. We arrived at 4 a.m., in the dark, driving two hours to our hotel. As we got out of the car, an unknown bird cried out, and I smiled, finding it an exotic welcome.

According to Indian hospitality, the manager anointed our foreheads with oil, and gave us garlands woven of sweet smelling jasmine, before offering us refreshing drinks. It didn't take long, which was just as well, as we were trying hard not to yawn after our long flight. She soon had the keys to our two villas, located close to hotel reception, and were informed that we'd meet the doctors at 10 a.m..

Having fallen into a short sleep, I heard the roar of the ocean, then a cock-crow, which cheered me enormously, making me think of our home village of Yatskovschina, in the Brest Region. Beyond the hotel fence, a Muslim village was waking.

Some philosophy

Regarding cause and effect, it's said that every object and phenomena is related, linked in an endless chain, enclosing all existence as a coherent whole. The chain, at its deepest level, is never broken; everything interacts with everything. We might say that we cannot move a little finger without 'disturbing' the universe. According to Leibniz, the Universe is like an ocean; even a slight movement ripples far. This endless 'web' of connections binds to-



gether everything. Break the bonds, and we'd be hurled into chaos (<http://www.forens-med.ru/>).

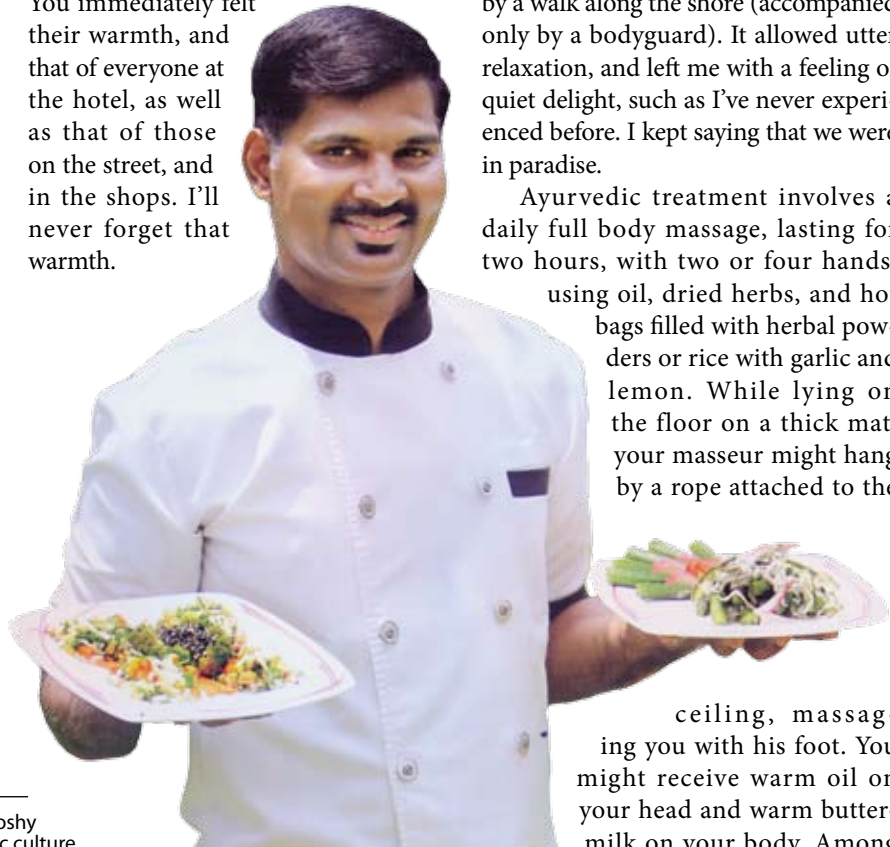
I can't help thinking that a genial smile is of great importance. Saint-Exupéry, in his 'Letter to a Hostage', describes arriving in Madrid as a correspondent for the Paris newspapers during the Spanish Civil War. He was detained by a Republican patrol unit and nearly shot, as his guards didn't speak French and he didn't speak Catalan. Lack of communication could have led to tragedy, but a miracle occurred. A simple smile saved Saint-Exupéry. He gestured to his guard, asking for a cigarette, with a slight smile. To his amazement, the guard smiled back...

A smile, a few polite words and sincerity, are the basics of our culture, of

communication between people. Of course, we don't always feel like smiling, and resort to the smile of habit, to appear polite. There's a place for this too but, I do believe, the Indians' cordiality and kind-heartedness come naturally, without effort. It says much of their high level of culture, which is known for its religious elements. Almost all world religions are found in India.

Hinduism is the dominant religion, but others play an important role in the cultural life of the country and promote respect. The multireligious state of Kerala is inhabited by Hindus (80 percent), Muslims (11 percent), Christians (2 percent), Sikhs (2 percent) and a tiny portion of Jains, Buddhists and Parsis. Most of the Kerala Christians belong to the Syrian Church. Hindus speak lyrical Malayalam, as I heard from my sweet masseuses, Malika and younger Achille, talking to each other.

They were tired and laden with everyday problems, as are other Indians, but responded to all requests with a smile. You immediately felt their warmth, and that of everyone at the hotel, as well as that of those on the street, and in the shops. I'll never forget that warmth.



Dishes of Kerala cuisine cooked by skilled chef Joshy Sebastian is a significant part of Indian Ayurvedic culture

Procedures and people

Here was the country we'd all dreamt of. It was the wet season, when heavy rains may pour for hours. Even when there's no rain, humidity remains high, making it pleasant and easy to breathe. After a delicious vegetarian breakfast, with fresh mango, pineapple and coconut juice, we sat ready, waiting to meet our doctor.

Introducing ourselves, we began trying to explain our individual health problems, with the help of Google translator. Doctor Shreekala Santosh chatted with us, aided by junior doctor Dr. Shahina. They took our blood pressure and pulse, looked closely into our eyes, and asked many questions about our state of health, temper, attitude to money and our friendships with each other. They defined our doshas and prescribed treatment.

They then took us to separate rooms to receive wonderful massage, followed by a walk along the shore (accompanied only by a bodyguard). It allowed utter relaxation, and left me with a feeling of quiet delight, such as I've never experienced before. I kept saying that we were in paradise.

Ayurvedic treatment involves a daily full body massage, lasting for two hours, with two or four hands, using oil, dried herbs, and hot bags filled with herbal powders or rice with garlic and lemon. While lying on the floor on a thick mat, your masseur might hang by a rope attached to the

ceiling, massaging you with his foot. You might receive warm oil on your head and warm buttermilk on your body. Among



these delights, we sat in wooden steam baths, drinking fragrant herbal teas. Before each meal, we drank warm water with ginger, coriander and cumin. In the morning and in the evening, we took pills and potions.

We practiced yoga with an experienced instructor, who studied at an Indian ashram for fourteen years. Our meals were made from the freshest food, each fitting our personal dosha, matched to our energies (of fire or air). Some need warming up, while others need cooling, eating more fruit. We ate healthy, well-cooked food, seasoned with spices, fulfilling our doshas, and drank fresh juices with pleasure. Our chef, Joshy Sebastian, was an expert indeed, having been working in this profession for twenty-five years. For seventeen, he studied Ayurvedic cuisine. According to Joshy Sebastian, dosha-based food is a treatment. Sebastian is a Catholic but it doesn't prevent him from communicating with those who practice Hinduism, or who pray to Allah.

The choice of dishes for breakfast, lunch and dinner is tremendous, including vegetable soups, salads, and stewed and boiled vegetables — carrots, peppers, beets, chickpeas, peas, and beans. There are coconut scones, and all man-

ner of rice dishes, with mango, banana, coconut and raisins, as well as yogurt and other dishes of Kerala cuisine.

Smile, even if you don't feel like it

As we approach the New Year, with deep winter outside, it makes me smile to look back on photos of the village of Nattika. I open up the folder on my phone and delight in seeing so many warm smiles. Everyone I met each day at the Ayurvedic centre shone with joy: in the restaurant, on reception, on the way to the ocean, in the fishing village, and in the shops.



Rain, fishing and ocean

Our fair-skinned group drew attention of course, from those passing on motorcycles, scooters, and tuk-tuks. People looked up from their gardens as we walked by and children's faces lit in wide-toothed grins. Local people are descended from those who inhabited southern India, being representatives of the oldest, and one of the most advanced civilizations, in the world.

It wasn't just our skin colour that attracted the attention of Nattika residents: our own friendliness came across. Willingly, people helped us look for papaya, which we couldn't find among other fruits: we were keen to bring home some of the sweet fruit, which we tasted at a restaurant. Stallholders even called a policeman to help us find some papaya. They kept trying to persuade us to take mango instead, indicating that the papaya season was over.

We saw sacred Indian cows; a cute calf even licked my hand, which we decided was good luck. The village was situated in a huge palm grove, where we saw a white heron, looking like an Egyptian ibis, grazing on the back of a white buffalo.

Around the hotel, all the trees were numbered, and there were more than a thousand. Muslim mansions stood be-

side modest homes, with fences made not only from concrete and cast iron, but from woven coconut tree leaves. Speaking of coconuts and palm trees, we were amazed to see a hotel gardener climbing a palm tree, cutting leaves with a machete. Others pulled weeds one by one, and a very muscular man dragged a cart full of coconuts to the restaurant. He agreed to our request for a photograph but, unusually, refused to smile. Even though Kerala is not as poor as some parts of India, people have their burdens to carry.

Parable of the moth

I recently heard this parable from someone who has been practicing yoga in Minsk for over twenty years. Two students decided to play a joke on their teacher, to check his intuition. One put a moth in his hands and asked the teacher whether he thought the moth to be dead or alive. If the teacher said 'alive', he'd let the moth go. If not, he'd squash it between his palms before showing. The insightful teacher smiled and told them that the moth's fate was in their hands.

Tropical butterflies, in yellow, blue and orange, are part of India's vivid fauna. They settle among the flowers and upon the leaves of banana and avocado trees, and others we didn't recognise. None were afraid of us. Once, being close to a butterfly, I held my breath, anxious of disturbing the har-

mony of its world. At that moment, I remembered a story by Ray Bradbury, called 'The Sound of Thunder', telling of the far-reaching consequences of accidentally stepping on a butterfly. Bradbury showed the correlation between events, facts and people. That's what I've tried to do, just a little.

Some say that the future of the world depends not on successful people, but on those who are kind, compassionate and warm-hearted, capable of getting along with each other. A smile, in my opinion, is a significant link in the chain.

By Valentina **Zhdanovich**,
Ivan **Zhdanovich** (photo)
Minsk-Nattika (Kerala)-Minsk



These photos are unforgettable

For information

■ According to various information sources, bilateral cooperation between India and Belarus is steadily developing, as confirmed by last year's visit by the Indian President to Belarus. It was the first such of this level in the history of relations between our two countries. As the Belarusian President, Alexander Lukashenko, said, "We are separated from India only

by geographical distance. This will never become an obstacle to cultivating contacts between our countries and peoples, because our countries and peoples have a significant history of relations." This relationship is one of quality.

■ A Belarusian parliamentary and business delegation, led by the Chairman of the Council of the Re-

public of the National Assembly of Belarus, Mikhail Myasnikov, visited India in May 2016. Some productive meetings and negotiations took place, including the Belarusian-Indian business forum. Meanwhile, a BelAZ vehicle service centre opened in the city of Nagpur. In June, the Prime Minister of India met with Mr. Lukashenko in Tashkent, during the SCO summit.



A solved mystery

How Belarusian schoolgirl Masha Denisyuk suddenly became famous

“Who is this lady, and where have I seen her before? Her profile looks familiar, though neither Greek nor Roman,” Masha Denisyuk mused, looking at Portrait of a Stranger online. At that moment, the schoolgirl from Minsk couldn’t have imagined that the picture of a 17th century lady would make her famous worldwide.

I’d recognise this nose from thousands

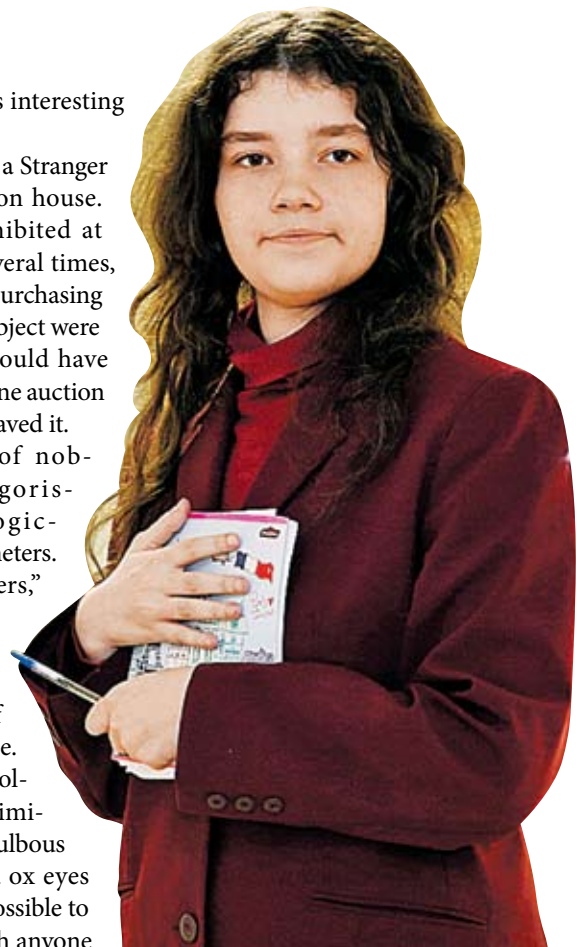
Masha has been interested in world history since childhood. While her peers were playing with dolls, she was reading the myths and legends of Ancient Greece. At eleven, she began to study Lev Gumiliev’s theory of ethnogenesis. Her classmates thought she was too much of a swot, but Masha Denisyuk is now the class star, being a national hero!

A year ago, she created a group in VKontakte social network called Monarchs and Aristocrats of Europe. Every day, she posts portraits of European nobil-

ity from the past and writes interesting facts from their biographies.

Masha found Portrait of a Stranger on the website of an auction house. The canvas had been exhibited at Christie’s and Sotheby’s several times, but nobody wanted to risk purchasing a work whose author and subject were unknown. The painting would have continued to wander from one auction to another, had Masha not saved it.

“I collect portraits of nobility by country, categorising them in chronological order, and by other parameters. I have three hundred folders,” says Denisyuk. “The hair-style, sleeve length, and collar shape are important, helping me define the date of painting by around a decade. I was looking through my collection and came across a similar picture. I saw the same bulbous nose, prominent chin, and ox eyes and realised that it was impossible to confuse this young lady with anyone



Reference

■ **Ulrika Eleonora was born in 1656, daughter to Danish monarch Frederick III. At nineteen, she was engaged to Charles XI, King of Sweden. Despite political discord between the two countries, and the match being disapproved of, the marriage was a success. According to the legend, Carl never cheated on his wife. The couple had seven children, and three lived to adulthood. The Queen was involved in charity work, often helping the poor; she built a house for widows in Stockholm and several orphanages.**

Because of frequent childbearing, she suffered from poor health and died at thirty-six. Charles XI outlived his spouse by four years but, before his death, confessed to his mother that without his wife life had lost its meaning.



▶ Crossing through centuries

Anniversary of Napoleonic army's crossing of river Berezina and battle on Brilevskoe Field, in November 1812, marked with largest ever military-historical reconstruction at this memorial complex, near Borisov

The event gathered around 450 soldiers in uniform, from various kinds of troops, of Napoleonic times, from Belarus, Russia, Latvia, Lithuania and Belgium. A hundred fought on horseback, recreating the battle of Brilevskoe Field. With losses of 35,000, word 'berezina' entered the French language, meaning the crushing of all hopes.

Soldiers of various European nationalities are buried in our land, inspiring the heads of various diplomatic missions to visit this site. For the 204th anniversary, the Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the French Republic to Belarus, H.E. Mr. Didier Canesse, laid wreaths, together with representatives of the Minsk Regional Executive Committee and the Borisov District Executive Committee, at the foot of each of four monuments constructed at Brilevskoe Field Memorial Complex.

else. Allow me to introduce you Danish princess Ulrika Eleonora!"

The schoolgirl hastened to write to the attributer of the auction house, letting them know about her discovery. European critics were blown away, since a fifteen-year-old schoolgirl had solved a puzzle that had confounded hundreds of specialists. The picture that had remained unsold for a long time was immediately acquired by the Royal Danish Museum.

The author still needed to be unearthed, but historians soon pinpointed court artist Abraham Wuchters.

"The canvas is now hanging in Fredriksborg Castle, where the princess lived. It's really great that my name has left a mark in the history of this masterpiece," Masha says proudly.

Hard to watch historical films

Both national and foreign media have picked up the story, and the National Art Museum of Belarus has invited her to take a tour of its archives: a rare privilege.

Masha has noticed other mistakes made by fine art experts, saying, "Sometimes, it comes to the point of ridicule: at one auction, I came across a portrait of Charles II, King of England, called Portrait of an Unknown Lady!"

She also finds it impossible to watch historical films, noting, "How can you believe an actress whose hairstyle is of the fifteenth century, and whose dress is from the 1340s—1350s, while the action takes place at the beginning of the eighteenth century?"

She chose her profession long ago, telling us her intention is to apply to the historical faculty of the BSU. Masha also plans to go on vacation to Germany, revealing, "I love to travel. I've explored Belarus and have visited St. Petersburg, where I was impressed by Mikhailovsky Castle. This summer, I travelled to Poland and the Czech Republic. Now, I dream of seeing Fasnerie Castle in Germany, which has a huge gallery of portraits. I cannot wait to see it. What if I suddenly make a new discovery!"

By Kristina **Khilko**



Puzzles of Turov places

One of Belarusian smallest towns is home to various mysteries and legends. It has enough mystical secrets for several cities! Its crosses grow from the earth. Can you believe it?

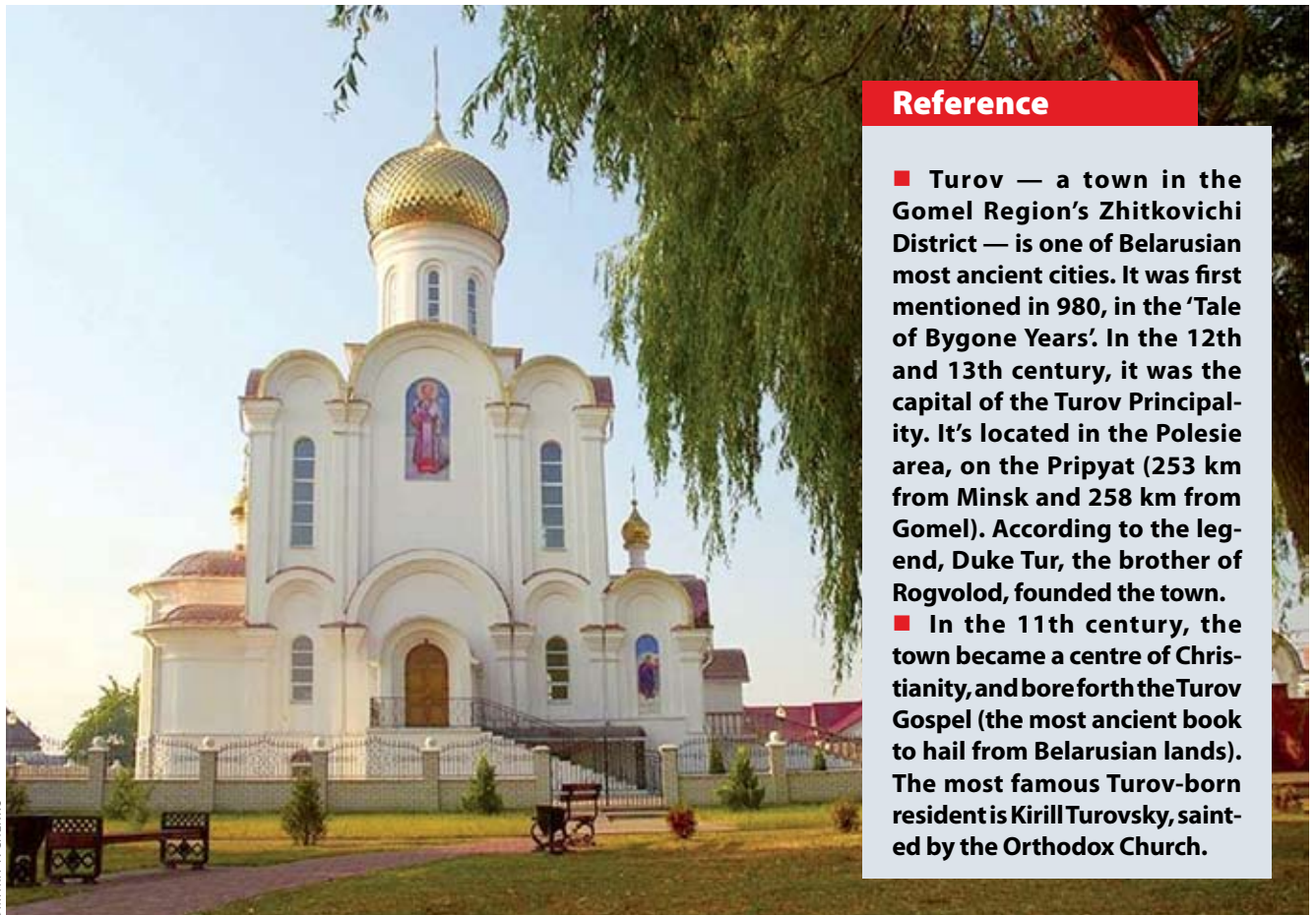
Stumbling blocks

As a child, I heard about the Turov crosses said to have swum from Kiev against the stream, a thousand years ago. Then, the stony relics became 'lost', appearing again only last century, miracu-

lously. I don't believe in myths, but I can't ignore reality. As a journalist, I'm keen to uncover some truths about the Turov phenomenon.

I got into my car, adjusted the navigator and took to the road, passing two tourist buses whose number plates indi-

cated that they were from Russia's Bryansk Region. I was curious as to whether they were going to Turov to taste its famous cheeses (manufactured by the Turov Cheese-Making Plant) or to see the mysterious phenomenon, which is spoken of even beyond Belarusian borders.



DMITRY IVCHENKO

Reference

- **Turov** — a town in the Gomel Region's Zhitkovichi District — is one of Belarusian most ancient cities. It was first mentioned in 980, in the 'Tale of Bygone Years'. In the 12th and 13th century, it was the capital of the Turov Principality. It's located in the Polesie area, on the Pripyat (253 km from Minsk and 258 km from Gomel). According to the legend, Duke Tur, the brother of Rogvolod, founded the town.
- In the 11th century, the town became a centre of Christianity, and bore forth the Turov Gospel (the most ancient book to hail from Belarusian lands). The most famous Turov-born resident is Kirill Turovsky, sainted by the Orthodox Church.

Ancient Turov meets its guests with serenity: it's a compact, spacious and well-cared-for town, with a rural outlook. A huge cathedral is located in the central square: a modern church honouring local saints Kirill and Lavrenty Turovskie. A stone giant reminds us of another Turov church that used to stand near Zamkovaya Hill, 900 years ago, said to have rivalled Sophia Cathedral in Kiev and Sophia Cathedral in Polotsk.

The first stone cross was installed near the church, under a special stone dome. I spent several minutes watching people approaching and standing still for some time, as if rooted to the spot. One respectable man stood long near the cross, with closed eyes, as if time had stopped for him.

"Were you praying or making a wish?" I asked him later.

"Both," he said. "This is not our first time here. We've come from Zhlobin to bow to our unique crosses; they're unrivalled globally. If you touch them, you can feel presence, as if something is alive. Thoughts begin to 'flow' in a different way; it's as if one is speaking to the cross."

Ancient technology

I couldn't resist touching, laying my palms on the mysterious stone and asking for something personal. I hope the wish will come true. I didn't know what I expected but the stone felt warm, despite being in shadow. Perhaps it was the hot Polesie sun. The structure was somehow unusual though.

"It's as if made of concrete," said another visitor, seeming to hear my thoughts. Alexander Sharov, a physicist from Bryansk, was there on his second visit, with his wife. "She believes in the miraculous power of the cross, while I'm studying its nature," he told me. Speaking of the 'swimming legend', he added, "The stone itself is very strange, being porous. It seems that it wasn't cut but cast in a mould. We know little about ancient technologies but certain density of such material could float on water. Unfortunately, in Soviet times,

A dimly remembered world

Duke's son

"The Tale of Bygone Years" tells of the appearance of the town, saying that Duke Tur came from over the sea and began to rule. Probably, the name of the town derives from his name, while local residents were called Turov residents. No other chronicle data exists about the Duke. However, local legends say that Duke Tur dug a well and was baptised in it.

It's said that this well had three bottoms: copper, silver and golden. If the copper bottom broke, Turov would be flooded. If the silver did, all Polesie would flood, and if the golden bottom broke, there would be a new global flood. Accordingly, the well was buried, to avoid the catastrophe!

Duke Tur went to Kiev to visit Duke Vladimir, where it was demanded that a young Christian boy be sacrificed to the pagan gods. He intervened on behalf of his son, fought boldly, killing dozens of pagans, but was killed.

This fits with a Kiev legend about early Christian Fyodor the Varangian and his son Ivan. When Duke Vladimir saw their fight with Kiev residents, he was greatly impressed, saying that only those with true faith can fight so vehemently. When Duke Vladimir baptised his people, he constructed the Turov Chapel, on the site of the baptism, to honour the martyr. The corpses of the duke and his son were sent to Turov via the Dnieper and the Pripyat, followed by twelve stone crosses, which 'swam' against the stream from Kiev.

Emperor's daughter

Turov also had its own tzarevna. The sister of the Byzantine Emperor, Varvara, married Svyatopolk Izyaslavovich (from Turov initially, and then a Kiev duke). He was a grandson of Yaroslav the Wise. In 1113, Svyatopolk died and his cousin, Vladimir Monomakh, gained the throne. The new duke banished Svyatopolk's widow to Turov, accompanied by her entourage, and the town began to develop after her arrival.

when it was possible to send part of the cross for analysis, this wasn't done. Now, it boasts the status of a relic, so it would be an 'act of vandalism' to take a piece from it for scientific analysis."

Relics swam to the shore against the stream

According to the legend, in the period of baptism of Rus by Duke Vladimir, twelve crosses swam from Kiev to Turov, along the Dnieper and the Pripyat,

against the stream. When local residents took them to the shore, the water turned blood-red, which was perceived as a sign. In this way, pagan Turov residents accepted the Christian faith, and the stone 'guests' from Kiev were installed on the river bank.

Maybe, there was no miracle? Maybe, Kiev residents just brought these crosses in boats a thousand years ago and installed them on the bank, killing with swords dissatisfied pagans and



The place where crosses began to grow is now a place of pilgrimage. St. Boris and Gleb Monastery once stood here



Slate sarcophagi found only in Pripjat river of Polesie area

STANISLAV GALKOVSKIY

Scientists have managed to restore the image of the ancient 'fashionista' from Turov, using Gerasimov's method



STANISLAV GALKOVSKIY

baptising the rest. Chronicles mention that Duke Vladimir converted Rus to the new faith by the cross and by the sword. Perhaps, chroniclers edited the details, to create a miraculous legend.

Local History Museum curator Sergey Moroz treats legends with respect but prefers facts. He says, "It's not known how many crosses there were on the river shore before the last century, nor where or how long they were standing. According to one version, the area was long flooded. Another legend states that the flood was sent by God, immediately after the October Revolution. In the late 1930s, at the height of repression, a river wave brought two crosses, overgrown with moss, to the shore of the town, where local youngsters often spent time in summer. Local militant atheists tried to break them but failed. At night, the faithful hid the crosses in the cellar of All Saints Church. Now, they've been cleaned and restored; one is installed in the church while the second is in the churchyard. Pilgrims come regularly, believing that the crosses boast healing power."

Inhabitant of stone sarcophagi

Turov doesn't have mummies, as in Egypt, but it has sarcophagi. The foundations of the huge cathedral — destroyed on May 3rd, 1230 — are the only current reminder of the former status of the capital of Turov Principality. An earthquake on the Belarusian flatlands swept away Turov's cathedrals and castles.

In the 11th-12th century, the domes of 76 churches and three monasteries shone under the sun. Of six Kiev dukes who gained the throne, three came from Turov. These aren't legends, as archaeologists can confirm. The local museum has many interesting artefacts, including a stone sarcophagus made from Ovruch slate (originating from the Ukrainian town of Ovruch). In fact, several sarcophagi were unearthed, including one containing the bones of, supposedly, a 25-year-old



Another 'Kiev' stone giant can be seen at All Saints Church

princess. Using Gerasimov's method, scientists have recreated her image, saying that she was a true beauty, with big eyes and high cheekbones. Many local girls resemble her.

Meanwhile, the famous 'Russian Chrysostom' was born in Turov: Saint Kirill Turovsky, whose 1056-1057 Gospel is the most ancient Belarusian book. His burial location is unknown but Turov is sometimes called the most mystic town in Belarus. In the local cemetery, chatting by twilight, Valentina Karas told me a story that made my flesh crawl. In spring 1909, a grave was being dug. "They stumbled upon a stone sarcophagus containing human bones and fabric with golden thread and, while they were looking for a priest, the remains disappeared. Out of fear, the sarcophagus was buried again. At night, Kirill Turovsky came to the priest in his dream and said that they shouldn't seek his remains," Valentina explains. It's now thought that Kirill watches over the town and protects it.

Ms. Karas told me another local legend, "If you're walking through Turov at night and see a golden or green glow in the vegetable gardens, it indicates that treasure is buried."

I decided to postpone my treasure-seeking walk, as I'd rather return with friends, to avoid being scared!

The town is truly full of mysteries. Looking at my photos on my digital camera I found that some had disappeared, and the auto focus had misbehaved. Out of a hundred shots, only a dozen can be used.

Where else do crosses grow and swim, saints appear in dreams and cameras stop working properly? I need to return, and perhaps find the treasure...

'Egyptian' passions on Pripyat riverbanks

There's one more place deserving our attention: St. Boris and Gleb's cemetery, where two crosses almost 'grow' from the earth.

Previously, it was difficult to find them without an experienced guide. Now, a tent has been constructed over them and a place for prayer built. People come with requests, and leave flowers and money. I watched a smart young girl bend her knee and touch one of the crosses. Natalia Petrenko had come from Minsk for the second time, telling me, "Last winter, I visited to tour the Turov Cheese-Making Plant (whose cheeses are unique). I also came to the crosses, following others, feeling rather sceptical, but, as soon as I approached, I felt that the cross was warm and saw that the snow was melting around it. I made a wish, relating to something that had been troubling me, and all worked out well. Now, during my vacation, I've returned, to show my gratitude and offer a new wish. This place has strong positive energy."

The crosses in the cemetery seem to be made of something other than stone; as physicist Sharov said, they are like concrete. Thinking about the construction of the Egyptian pyramids, some scientists suppose that the blocks weren't cut from stone by the Egyptians, but were cast. Probably, ancient Russian people knew similar technologies.

Valentina Karas of Turov has been conducting excursions to the growing

crosses for more than thirty years, and has witnessed various miracles. She notes, "In Soviet times, my acquaintance and I measured the crosses. They were growing upwards while seeming to balloon from inside. They were growing unevenly, by several millimetres per year (sometimes by a centimetre or more). Various images began to appear and disappear: the crucifixion, icons, and the Mother of God. These were seen by hundreds of people. Moreover, the big cross 'blossomed' on the eve of celebrations for the millennium anniversary of the baptism of Rus. Ornaments in the shape of flowers appeared. It sometimes seems that these stone relics are alive."

The Turov cross is currently 35 cm high and 35.6 cm across at the widest point. In recent years, it hasn't grown by any significance, yet its neighbour is growing ever taller.

For several years, rumours have been spreading in the town that a third cross may grow in the cemetery, since things happen in threes.

The place where the crosses grow is unusual. In the 12th century, it housed St. Boris and Gleb Monastery, where pious Monk Martin lived. According to historian Sergey Moroz, his personality partially throws light on the mysterious growing crosses. He tells us, "When Monk Martin became seriously ill, he saw a vision of saints Boris and Gleb. They ordered him to drink water from the well, which he did, and he recovered from his illness. He also acquired the gift of healing, as is written in 'Words about Monk Martin', thought to be written by Kirill Turovsky. Before his death, Martin said, "You'll lose my grave but, within centuries, I'll show you where I lie and will serve you." So, locals believe that the crosses are growing on the grave of Turov's first performer of miracles.

By Pyotr **Sidorovich**



The stone tent with cross is hugely popular with tourists



Kirill Turovsky was called 'Chrysostom' even in his lifetime

STANISLAV GALKOVSKIY

Happiness cannot be bought

Lithuanian actor Juozas Budraitis is a frequent visitor to Belarus, recently performing his 'Krapp's Last Tape' monologue at 'Teart' festival

Cinematic success

Juozas, you come to Minsk several times a year, although you've never worked with Belarusfilm before...

Recently, I acted in a film directed by young Alexandra Butor, called 'Vera's Sweet Farewell'. I've brought my monologue, 'Krapp's Last Tape', invited by director Oskaras Koršunovas, who is one of my favourites. The role is intense and serious, as a lonely person assesses his life, in which nothing has gone well.

Your own life has been absolutely different.

In half a century of stage and screen work, I've played many roles, and have met most interesting people. I recently acted in 'Garden of Eden', directed by Algimantas Puipa, which has been interesting. It features many veterans of the cinema and theatre, so we have plenty to talk about, recalling the past.

Writing memoirs

Tell us about your memoir, 'My Cinema: the World of Men', published recently.

It's the first serious work I've done in my role as counsellor for culture, with the Lithuanian Embassy to Russia, based in Moscow. I didn't want to lose the momentum. However, the book isn't a memoir. Authors of mem-

oirs don't tend to write the absolute truth, rather giving a subjective view. Instead of revealing information about myself, I wanted to write about the history of cinema. The most interesting

injustice. I played Felisio. Žalakevičius really challenged us, requiring me, in the role, to berate myself, disclosing every innermost thought. Felisio is a hero of few words. It really taught me a

There is no happiness, only states of elation... I'm happy when I have a cup of tasty coffee, and when it is possible to publish a book

pages are about film director Vytautas Žalakevičius, who brought me into the world of cinema. He was a person of incredible erudition and intellect, a true creator. We have very few such people. I'm happy that fate gave me the chance to work with him.

It all began with the legendary film 'Nobody Wanted to Die'. When it was released, everyone acting in the film was in great demand.

You acted in almost all of his films. 'This Sweet Word — Freedom' still has relevance today...

It's valuable from a stylistic point of view, and explores the timeless theme of our struggle against violence and

great deal; I consider it to demonstrate the height of my acting powers.

The role influenced my further work. In the Soviet years, I chose roles unconnected with ideology. One famous director offered me the role of Dzerzhinsky, but how could I agree, when my own family had been killed during the years of Soviet repression?

Hobby as second profession

Your own photos illustrate the book, showing celebrities in unusual situations. Last year, Listapad Minsk Film Festival hosted an exhibition of your photos.



In play 'Krapp's Last Tape' by Beckett the famous Lithuanian actor performs a lonely eccentric between life and death. Endlessly listening to a tape with his own voice, he assesses his life in which nothing has gone well

My first photo-exhibition was held at 'Moscow' cinema house. It was the start of my career as a photographer. I took pictures during film shoots, wanting to keep them as souvenirs for when I was old, to remember all those people with whom I'd worked. At 'Moscow' cinema house, there were about twenty portraits of colleagues, and then seventy more at another exhibition, at 'Mosfilm'. I took the exhibition on tour across various cities, in Russia and Belarus. It reached Vilnius only three years ago. By the way, my exhibition 'Borders and People' opened in Helsinki recently.

Your portrait of your beautiful wife, Vita, always attracts attention at your exhibitions.

Vita is very beautiful; therefore, I constantly photograph her.

Your son, Martin, is following in your footsteps.

He's director of the National Drama Theatre, and acts in films. Martin chose the profession himself, without

my input. I've only wanted that he and my daughter, Justina, became decent people.

My family is my support, as my parents taught me. I was three years old when war began, and my father and his brother decided to go West. They packed their things and left our native village of Liepynai. However, soon, my father changed his mind and decided to return. His brother, Juozas, went to America. My parents and I endured the slaughter of war, somehow, being placed in carriages for the exiled, which was a favourable destiny for us. Unfortunately, the house in which I was born was destroyed, all traces of the past erased.

Personal details

Books inspire most of all.

What else, besides family, cinema, theatre and photography, warms your soul?

Books. I read a great deal. Books are like people, meeting new faces. I

can talk to Jean-Paul Sartre or Roland Barthes, or Thomas Mann, or Samuel Barclay Beckett; I recently acted in a play by Beckett, in Minsk.

Belarus is the closest neighbour of Lithuania, and we share similar landscapes. I like to be outside, to photograph nature. Whether people like my photos is another question. When you view nature through a lens, you peer into the clouds, into the branches of trees. You touch nature, and converse with it. I can admire nature indefinitely.

What brings you happiness?

Some say that there is no happiness, only states of elation. For one, happiness may be a drink of water in the Sahara; for another, it may be a new BMW car. You cannot purchase happiness. Where we are elated, we feel inspired. I'm happy when I have a cup of tasty coffee, and when it is possible to publish a book. If the book is interesting to someone, I'm even happier.

By Tatiana **Orlova**

Couturier Yuri Kot: 'I want to show Europe the beauty of Belarus'

In late eighties, aged thirty, Minsk resident Yuri moved to Toulouse, becoming the first Belarusian to open a Fashion House in France, designing with linen



■ Yuri Kot was born in Minsk in 1959. After graduation, he worked as a tailor at the House of Models (now know as the Belarus Fashion Centre). In 1980, he moved to Moscow, sewing stage costumes for Soviet stars.

Frightened Parisians

With needles between his teeth and huge scissors sticking out of his pocket, the couturier stands, attaching lace to a blouse. Beyond the wall, you can hear sewing machines. The team is fulfilling a large order, making outfits for the National French Symphonic Orchestra. Among his clients are members of the royal families of Denmark, Spain and the United Kingdom. Having found success in Europe, the fashion designer has decided to return to Minsk.

The student of the Minsk Light Industry College began with clothing Soviet celebrities such as Boris Moiseev and Laima Vaykule. For many, this would have been enough, but Yuri had huge ambition. He packed a suitcase and bought a one-way ticket to France. That was twenty-seven years ago.

"At the time, I didn't know any French," Yuri recalls. Just imagine, I came from the USSR, while there were such stars as Christian Lacroix and Jean-Paul Gaultier..."

It seemed that the capital of world fashion had seen everything so Kot decided to shock the public, creating sumptuous designs. He tells us, "I'd been designing for a long time. I bought very expensive fabrics, deciding that I'd make everything very special."

The collection caused a stir but didn't sell, as people thought the designs impractical. He recalls, "It was like a slap in the face. I began thinking how to reconcile haute couture with everyday life."

Then success came.

■ **The first fashion week was organised in New York in 1943, when enterprising manufacturers realised that they needed to be inventive to compete with French fashion houses. The American fashion industry soon attained world level recognition, with the US Fashion Week becoming a key event of the season. Russia Fashion Week launched in 1999, with Belarus following suit in 2007.**

I go home

Having won over France, the couturier decided to storm Belarus. In October, he opened his first showroom in Minsk. He explains, “The fashion business is difficult in Russia and Belarus, as we lack outstanding designers. Even if you’ve created something ingenious, you need a lot of money, as fabrics are very expensive, as is equipment. In due course, everything will change; after all, we have great potential!”

Yuri Kot is now in Minsk, taking part in Belarus Fashion Week. He tells us, “One year ago, on one of the leading European TV channels about style, I saw a clip from Belarus Fashion Week and was so surprised! I was glad that the Belarusian fashion industry had reached the world level.”

By Yelena **Karlina**

‘I recreate in Minsk’

Yuri is now 57 years old and has spent almost half of his life in France, but has no desire to change citizenship. He comments, “I have a Belarusian passport, and I love my native land dearly. I visit it as often as I can; Belarus is the only place I go on holiday. Some go to Paris on holiday, while I go to Minsk,” he laughs. “You can live anywhere in the world, but you only belong to one country.”

Last year, Yuri Kot visited Zacharavanne exhibition, by photographer Irena Gudievszkaya. It made a huge impression on him. He relates, “There were photos of the famous Belarusian linen, and I was so impressed that I took a notebook and began sketching. This way, my linen collection appeared. We approached everything creatively, using unique models, and making not everyday clothes but evening dresses and even wedding gowns.”

French women loved the collection, buying every item within a few weeks, despite them being expensive. Kot then added linen clothes to the stock in his shop.

“Linen fabrics used to be rough, so nobody wanted to work with them. Now, they’re soft, they look good and im-

portantly, they don’t crease. I know that many Belarusian designers have tried to enter the European market with linen clothes but have been unsuccessful. If you just embroider some fabric with beads and flowers, it won’t sell. You need to take a certain approach.”



■ **Moscow Fashion Week, showing spring-summer 2017 collections, ran from October 18th to October 23rd this year, while Belarus Fashion Week occupied the Central Exhibition Centre from November 3rd to November 6th. Apart from Belarusian designers, the event attracted collections from the UK, Germany, Italy, Latvia, Poland and, of course, Russia. There were charitable activities, photo-exhibitions and film screenings, as well as catwalk shows.**

Georgy Skripnichenko holds his place in the history of Belarusian fine arts as an artist of various mysteries and paradoxes. He is the foremost of our surreal artists, using originality and figurative language to engage us in free interpretation.



Associations of Georgy Skripnichenko

November and December at the National Art Museum of Belarus were marked with an exhibition project honouring the memory of Georgy Skripnichenko (who passed away slightly more than a year ago). The current exhibition included more than fifty canvases and graphic works from the private family collection, dating from various periods of the master's creativity: from his early period through to mature years.

"Allegory and metaphor, improvisation and unrestrained imagination were everything to him," Yekaterina Izofatova, who heads the Department of Modern Belarusian Art at the National Art Museum, states. Mr. Skripnichenko embraced the fantastic and unreal, creating his own

interpretation of classical themes, as well as Biblical and mythological characters, well-known historical persons and contemporaries. He painted the full kaleidoscope of human states, from suffering and consolation to anxiety and hope.

His allegorical representations of time and the Universe are unmatched and unique, although many attempt to categorise them, and make comparisons. As our 'Belarusian Salvador Dalí', Georgy Skripnichenko holds his place in the avant-garde movement of the 20th century, being closer to surrealism than to any other category. His allegories and paradoxes, as well as his style of composition, all point towards surrealistic, figurative thinking.

The development of this style was all the more fascinating considering the restrictions of Soviet society, and the extremely negative attitude towards mod-

ernist art, with its balance between the real and unreal, connecting the fantastic and the naturalistic, corporal and material. Truly, Georgy's work belongs to the surrealist camp!

He began with landscapes, sketches and portraits but, during his studies at the Minsk Art School in the 1960s, shifted from external realities to those of the inner world, creating fascinating cultural dialogue. He played a rich intellectual game without rules, improvising, with unpredictable yet greatly effective results.

He moved onto reflections on Old Testament themes, as well as those from classical mythology and world history, coloured with the poetics of 'subjective historicism'.

"Skripnichenko defined his Saint Sebastian, Abduction of Europe, Adam and Eve, and Don Quixote of the 20th

Century as modern interpretations of myths,” Yekaterina Izofatova, the Head of the Department of Modern Belarusian Art at the National Art Museum of Belarus, explains. “According to his own principles and beliefs, he interpreted philosophical truths, seeking originality of embodiment, connecting the past and the present, and investigating contradictions and opposites.”

Women appeared often in his works, within surrealist settings, such as in *Victim* (1996), *Evening Rhapsody*, and *Once in Ratomka* (1979). With shades of phantasmagoria, and the transformation of reality into the Gothic, these works are parables and allegories.

Georgy Skripnichenko’s outstanding and original artistic language, from such an early age, invites us into an associative game, yet one that is serious and frank, rather than wry. He invites us to gain understanding of ourselves through his work, presenting an identifiable history of mankind, with its cultural values and figurative possibilities.

As Salvador Dalí said, “...when the Renaissance wanted to imitate Immortal Greece, Raphael came of it. Ingres wanted to imitate Raphael, and Ingres came of it. Cézanne wanted to imitate Poussin, and Cézanne came of it. Dalí wanted to imitate Meissonier. DALÍ CAME OF IT. Nothing comes of those who fail to imitate another.”

Mr. Skripnichenko created his own, individual style and, surprisingly, became a national artist. He inherited what came before, and gave birth to something original, yet connected with centuries-old world art. Today’s retrospective display of his creativity allows us to trace the development of his path, seeing his versatility.

The exhibition launch also saw the presentation of a new book, entitled *Georgy Skripnichenko. Graphics*, including about 200 works, covering forty years of his creativity.

Meanwhile, very few Belarusian painters could boast of having their works kept in the permanent exposition of the country’s major museum. These

included Georgy Skripnichenko who made his way towards recognition due to his talent and mastery.

From conversations with the painter in various times:

Actually, I almost managed to never have a personal exhibition, but not because someone banned me. There was a time when the authorities weren’t pleased with my art and personal exhibitions were out of the question. However, from 1985, something changed and I began to be offered a place at a great many group exhibitions: in Minsk, Moscow and abroad.

I also organised several small exhibitions of my own, dedicated to Minsk. Like Georgian primitivist painter Pirosmiani, I walked through the city with my sketch-box easel, making drawings, sketches and watercolours.

Are you an adherent of informal painting?

Probably, yes. However, I like realism in art. Is not Caravaggio a realist or El Greco? I’ve never consciously formulated my relationship with art.

What motivates you when painting? What is most significant?

I like to paint from life. I like to think and dream while standing at the easel. The canvas is a game: a theatre of deceit, lies and laughter...

Are you a philosopher?



Insight. 1992. Second version



A Girl and a General, Mannequins. 1979



At the exhibition at the National Museum of Belarus



G. Skripnichenko's works are not easy to perceive



Along Life's Path. 1992



Today is a Holiday. 1985

I've never considered myself to be so, since philosophy is something 'high'; intuition was given to me by nature, I think. I'm a bad philosopher and thinker but work hard.

Aren't you afraid that audiences may not understand your works?

The audience should be prepared.

What is your attitude to fame?

If it is deserved, you should take it in your stride. I haven't had such an experience, so, I know nothing about this, but it's pleasant when, at an exhibition, your work is remarked upon and you agree that it is worthy. Everyone is pleased when they receive external approval.

What are your creative plans?

Work, work and work!

Mr. Skripnichenko doesn't sell his works and presents them only rarely. It's difficult to part with something drawn from your soul. Every one of his works has meaning for him, possessed with his personal energy and inner thoughts.

Mr. Skripnichenko considers himself to be a realist but his formal paintings don't always confirm this, since his style can be so various — even when creating landscapes and still-life works. His figures and objects may be realistic but they are only details in his larger plot. He likes to interpret space and time, exploring them sometimes in a way only he fully

understands. He uses irony, creating juxtaposition between the serious and comic. Accordingly, he gives complicated names to his paintings, with some sense of fantasy, combining elements which are not natural companions. However, he always strives to ensure a certain logic, for those with time to ponder.

From conversations with Georgy Skripnichenko:

My philosophy is simple. It comes from the soul: expressive emotions, feelings and my own vision of the world.

What inspired you to become an artist?

Apparently, my genes; my father tried to enter art school before the war and was unsuccessful, despite his great desire and passion for painting. My grandfather also liked painting.

I lived in Slutsk, which has a strong creative environment and an art studio run by Vladimir Stepanovich Sadin — a great enthusiast. Nikolay Korsov also had huge influence over me, with his real passion for painting. We became friends and he managed to direct me in this path. Art school saw me painting from morning until evening, to the point of exhaustion.

Do you think that time has helped you to develop as an artist?

Art is my life; I know nothing else. I believe this has made me move in one direction. During my youth, when I felt everything to the max, my only goal was to be like Leonardo da Vinci.

Undoubtedly, all Mr. Skripnichenko's works are recognisable. His great life experience from over 60 years, dating from his post-war childhood, includes difficult times when there was little to celebrate. He worked on a building site and attended evening school, painting in his free time and sometimes making up to 300 sketches a week...

He left many incomplete works, some begun over a decade ago, which he liked to return to, sometimes finding an unexpected artistic solution. However, he could also suddenly lose interest in a

work. So, canvases were left incomplete until he felt inspired again. New discoveries were applied to old themes, further developing plots.

Perhaps, this was a feature of Mr. Skripnichenko as a creative person. He was always pushing his borders and found new limits through life experience. When his impressions were united, an idea was formed which could be expressed.

From conversations with the painter:

How would you describe your style of painting and do you reflect that which resides in your soul?

I can't give a simple answer. Each artist works according to their talent. I was very surprised when Finnish gallery owners were interested in my early works, as I thought they were irrelevant.

Nevertheless, how would you define your creative credo?

I'm a realist, so I can't create abstract works. Probably, my love of Rembrandt, El Greco and Velazquez inspires me to make most of my images appear real. However, I also change them from reality, as is the fashion. My creativity starts with a clean sheet and I have no idea where each day will lead me, relying on my intuition. Sometimes, it's enough to touch a stretched canvas and inspiration comes. At other times, I already know what I want to achieve. I usually start as a realist, making lots of sketches, but I can also be inspired to mix realistic images with elements of surrealism.

His original views began early in his days at art school; even then, he was confident in his style. Without the support of his teachers he might have been asked to leave, for his originality, for his formal compositions, and for his self-confidence in portraying life as he did. His teachers emphasised to the director of the school that, if they excluded Skripnichenko, whom could they ask to stay? It may have been the most authoritative assessment of his talent. In the studio, some works from those days remain — simple in compo-

sition. However, his still life works show a desire for something beyond reality. His paintings are even more detached from the everyday, influenced by Picasso's cubism. They lack detail, rather using symbolism.

From conversations with the painter:

Are your works based on life?

Certainly, what else can inspire them? Everything comes from reality and all that is associated with my own life, my home town of Slutsk, and the city of Minsk. Regardless of my travels abroad, I've always wanted to return home. We have a great national school for graphics, painting and sculpture. We rival anything happening abroad and may even have higher skills.

What is the Belarusian art school?

We have a wonderful school of graphics. It's a very good school, with high professionalism. At the Academy of Arts, youngsters receive serious education from great teachers. Many years pass but they continue to work there, with great love. In short, the school is rich in painting traditions and, particularly, in graphics. Its sculpture is also admirable.

Do you consider yourself to be a Belarusian artist or an international artist?

Of course, I am a Belarusian artist — a real one. However, I don't like the distinction between Belarusian and international. If I'm a high level Belarusian artist, it means I am international. I won't deny the influence of Picasso, Dali or Van Gogh, or that of the world contemporary art. All impresses and inspires me. We are each individual, yet are inspired by what's around us. It would be impossible for me to move to another planet, since this is my world. I perceive everything in it and make it my own. The more capable you are as an artist, the more international you become. Exhibitions abroad bring you into the international realm. Perhaps, the national and international shouldn't be separated, at least in art. I think so.



Chernobyl Girls. 1997



Morning. 1963



Centaur, a Friend of Mine. 1971



The exhibits were versatile



Nastyia from Slutsk. 1969-1971



Time to Go to Bakshty. 1994

Gallery on one occasion. I think it's most important to have exhibitions at home.

Actually, vanity is one of the things which drives forward any profession, especially creative work. Nobody lacks vanity. I'm satisfied that my works reside in the National Art Museum and the Museum of Modern Fine Art. It's great. Of course, they're also found in private collections around the world and have been seen at dozens of international exhibitions. Once, I received a magazine from the USA by mail, in which there was an article about Georgy Skripnichenko of Belarus; they printed one of my works, which was pleasing.

What is the idea behind your paintings?

They reveal my inner world.

Do you think that art should be beautiful, always pleasing?

I remember a poem by Pushkin, which read: 'Are you pleased with it, exacting artist? Satisfied? Let the crowd scold you'. As 'geniuses', we work hard and can't help feeling that those who don't like our works should simply look elsewhere. The main thing is for us to be satisfied and happy with our own works. Of course, we want favourable reviews and, like any artist — whether realist or abstractionist — need an audience. The natural scheme of things is: artist — painting — viewer.

What nourishes your creative work? What drives you? After all, you have been doing the same thing for years.

I can't do anything else, so, I can't be bored. You can tire physically but you make your own choices. I don't want to do anything else, so, I live with it.

How many works have you created?

Thousands: drawings, paintings, watercolours, graphics, lithographs, etchings and sketches.

Is today a good time for creativity?

Certainly, you rarely leave exhibitions feeling indifferent. Something always touches you. I'm seeing works of a good level.

You combine reality, associations and thoughts, showing us your soul. Is this essential to the creative process?

In my case, it is, and it may be the same for most artists. I used to illustrate books, drawing futuristic cities with flying cars from my imagination. Where did those images come from? Nothing comes from nothing. You need to be open-minded. Probably, my knowledge is intuitive, as no one directs me. I read Pushkin, I was keen to learn more about avant-garde art, but it's hard to say for sure where ideas come from.

Is it important for you to be recognised as an artist?

Everyone is vain and I'm no exception. My vanity is a little parochial, as I'm rather insecure, having been turned away from an exhibition at the Tretyakov

We can assume that every artist strives for harmony, regardless of declarations to the contrary. Georgy Skripnichenko approaches harmony via life's conflicts, as we see from his *Along Life's Path*, created twenty years ago. He likes texture in painting, alongside loud, colourful bursts and elements of collage. He loves painting with precise detail, as well as using complex associative, imaginative structures, which are fantastically diverse and attractive.

All are sides of one style. Perhaps, this helps him keep his integrity and a panoramic view of the world. He forms a new dimension in Belarusian fine arts.

By Veniamin **Mikheev**



Georgy Skripnichenko. Visiting Harlequin. 1993 — 1994