

Holiday acquires new tradition

Idea of organising *Alexandria Gathers Friends* Festival in the Shklov District already an attractive reality

By Igor Slavinsky

When Alexander Lukashenko took part in the first such holiday in his home district, he expressed his hopes that it would become a tradition. This year, even more artistes, masters, craftswomen and spectators gathered in Alexandria, on the border of the Vitebsk and Mogilev regions. Several thousand people from neighbouring villages, Mogilev, Orsha, Shklov and Minsk joined in celebrating Kupalle night on the banks of the River Dnieper, revering the ancient customs of our ancestors.

The Alexandria Festival occupies a unique niche among our revived and newly invented Belarusian holidays. Bread makers are the major characters at *Dazhynki* while the *Slavonic Bazaar* celebrates pop singers. Meanwhile, Alexandria is a kingdom of folk crafts and folklore, with the Belarusian spirit universally present; everything has a Belarusian aroma.

The Shklov District is certainly a fitting venue, having been part of the famous 'from Varangians to the Greeks' route (which passed along the River Dnieper); trade fairs and folk



Alexandria Gathers Friends Festival impresses with folklore colour and is expected to be held annually

festivals would take place in Shklov, Alexandria and in the Orsha District's Kopys (connected via a bridge). Skilful craftsmen resided in the area, with Alexandria residents good at osier weaving. Shklov's

woodcarvers made iconostases for churches in Moscow and Smolensk while Kopys' potters were known throughout Belarus and Russia.

Good traditions should be revived, so the *Alexan-*

dria Gathers Friends Festival promises to become an annual event, smiles Svetlana Kozlova, Deputy Head of the Mogilev Regional Executive Committee's Cultural Department. She explains, "The holiday has

already outgrown its regional boundaries. Guests from River Dnieper areas travelled to the Shklov District, coming from the Vitebsk, Gomel, Kiev and Smolensk regions; around 2,000 craftsmen, folk masters

and amateur artistes took part alone!"

Evidently, a creative team organised the event, which so wonderfully allows each corner of the Mogilev Region to show its talents along the riverside. You can see how Shklov delicacies differ from those of Mstislavl, and how Kupalle night in Bykhov is unlike that of Klimovich. You can buy straw and osier masterpieces from Glusk and see the skills of Belynichi masters. Curiously, this small region boasts great diversity.

We have inherited our ancestors' legacy of crafts in a way quite different from that of the rest of Europe. Kupalle is still celebrated in Belarusian villages, with bonfires and games on this magic night. Of course, it's now a rare thing to see old women singing traditional ancient Belarusian songs, while sitting on a mound of earth. However, the festival in Alexandria is a superb way of honouring and enjoying this legacy — and requires no particular capital investment. It's enough to simply bring together all that we've preserved in our provincial houses of culture and homesteads.

Unanimous desire to strengthen partnership in the field of culture

Belarus included in Council of Europe's Kyiv Initiative regional programme

The Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers has hosted the Yalta conference — 'Kyiv Initiative' and 'Eastern Partnership' — *Co-operation and Interaction* — which closed with the signing of the Yalta Declaration. Conference participants unanimously agreed on the inclusion of Belarus into the Council of Europe's *Kyiv Initiative* regional programme and expressed a desire to strengthen partnership with the European Union in the field of culture (to protect the historical and cultural heritage of *Kyiv Initiative* member states).

The regional programme was launched in 2006 during a

meeting of the Council of Europe's culture ministers in Bucharest. Project organisers are Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine and one of the programme's goals is to assist sustainable cultural, social and economic development through multilateral co-operation and a cross-sectoral approach in matters of the protection of culture and cultural heritage.

The programme is named *Kyiv Initiative*, having been agreed in the Ukrainian capital in 2005. It brings together the activities of the Council of Europe in the region, while focusing on the results of the already implemented projects such as legislative reform, improving the protection of historic sites and co-operation between cities to develop cultural tourism.

Entry to Ireland simplified for Belarusian citizens

Travel made easier owing to pilot project by Irish Government

The project will run on a temporary basis, presumably until late October 2012. The changes are applicable to Belarusians who hold valid British general visas, allowing them to enter Ireland without an

Irish visa as long as their British visa is valid. Belarusians will be able to stay in Ireland for up to 90 days each year or until their British visa expires, whichever comes sooner.

Foreigners cannot stay for more than 180 days in any year in the common British-Irish tourism space.



Checking speed and comfort of train journey

Swiss electric train carries first passengers along suburban route

By Marina Shumilo

These comfortable electric trains were dispatched to Minsk from Switzerland back in February, yet their tests along typical traffic routes began only in July.

My own journey began pleasantly, since there's no need to waste time queuing for tickets. You can simply buy them from the conductor.

These new electric trains significantly 'outstrip' traditional models, boasting a spacious interior, equipped

with information screens and air conditioning for comfort. Meanwhile, they can reach quite high speeds while retaining a smooth and quiet ride. You only realise how fast you are moving on looking at the information screen or seeing the rapid change of scenery through the window.

The train control system is almost completely computerised, with various screens showing sensor displays in the cabin. One of these shows images received from cameras installed in the passenger



seating areas. "Undoubtedly, it's more difficult to drive these trains than traditional ones," notes engine driver Vladimir Povolyaev. "Our drivers have even passed a special week-long internship in Hungary."

At present, two new Stadler trains are undergoing trials along suburban routes. In total, our Swiss partners will supply ten electric trains, four of which will be operational in the regions. The remainder will connect the Belarusian capital with suburban industrial and cultural



centres. Of course, railways workers are primarily concerned as to whether people will use these trains, to help decongest buses, trolley buses and mini-buses. However, judging by the trial trip, passengers will be keen to use Stadler electric trains.