

# Western insight into Europe's exact centre

Belarus as viewed by popular guide books

By Viktor Korbut

'Welcome to Belarus! This is a small country jammed between Poland and Russia, which remains a mystery to most Europeans. In 1991, after the USSR's collapse, it gained independence for the first time. Being at the crossroads of West and East, of European culture and the Slavonic world, Belarus synthesises these two worlds.' So reads Federica Visani's first French-language guide to the country, *Biélorussie* (published by famous Petit Futé Publishing House). Despite being located at the centre of Europe, many Europeans are only just discovering Belarus, alongside those from further afield. 'Belarus' image is enchanting' writes Ms. Visani.

## Green paradise

Ms. Visani continues: 'Forests, lakes, rivers, flatlands and marshes... Belarus is a green paradise! Over a third of its territory is covered with forests and, even in the centre of cities, there are huge wooded parks. The country is called 'blue eyed' due to its abundance of lakes. In turn, Polesie's huge marshes are known as 'Europe's lungs.'

This will be news for French-language readers. The author explains that most people know of the country due to the Chernobyl catastrophe, which occurred in 1986 and affected its major part. Although radiation has contaminated many fertile lands, reserves remain, with the natural balance unchanged for centuries — even millennia. Ms. Visani has visited many of them,

so shares her views: 'Large forests make Belarus attractive for lovers of nature and active tourism. You must visit at least one reserve in Belarus during your stay. Water sports, hiking, cycling and horse riding are easily organised while hunters and fishermen no doubt find luck along the banks of rivers and lakes. Eventually, the gathering of mushrooms and berries is guaranteed!' No special permit is needed for such pastimes in Belarus, except in specially protected territories.

It seems to the French, that, despite historical ordeals, Belarusians are calm and, importantly, hospitable. 'Wherever you go, you'll find people ready to help you and show the way. Sometimes, they are even ready to invite an unknown person into their home' she writes.

The guide focuses on how much cheaper it is to attend a sporting or cultural event in Belarus, to buy souvenirs or go to a restaurant, compared to France. 'However, hotel prices are sometimes high, especially in Minsk' she notes.

The French traveller precisely describes Belarusian cuisine: 'Long frosty winters and the rural character of the country predetermine the character of Belarusian cuisine, which is caloric and nutritious. It is connected with the soil: pork, potatoes and vegetables (cucumbers, mushrooms, cabbage and tomatoes) are at the heart of recipes. Desserts use white cheese, apples, berries, poppy seeds and honey while potatoes are the foundation of every meal. It's no coincidence that Belarusians are called 'bulbaši' (potato



Belarus remains a mystery at heart of Europe for many Westerners

eaters); at least 25 potato dishes are common, all differing greatly!

## Kindness of the soul

Nigel Roberts has visited Belarus at the request of Bradt Publishing House (the world's largest English-language guide book publisher) and, in April his *Belarus* will be published — accompanied by colourful photos and maps. This 272 page edition is the largest and freshest reference edition about the country released in English.

Nigel Roberts knows Russian well, which has enabled him to travel through Eastern Europe, forming an adequate view on Belarus in comparison to neighbouring states. He believes: 'Belarus is ever changing' and that 'change has exceeded my expectations'. In particular, tourist infrastructure is improving. He writes: 'Belintourist's Information Centre, near the Yubileinaya Hotel in Minsk, now provides a range of tourist information in English. Moreover, local staff speak English

fluently, while working at weekends and during public holidays.'

Despite Mr. Roberts having travelled through the whole country, he admits: 'Belarus remains a secret at the heart of Europe for me.' He continues: 'While walking through the modern city of Minsk, you'll be amazed by its monumental architecture, which glorifies and honours Soviet communism. Outside the capital, you'll be impressed by the magnificence of the primeval forests, rivers and lakes, as well as local flora and fauna.' His observations coincide with those of his French colleague, confirming their objectivity.

The release of new guide books on Belarus in French and English show the special interest being shown by Westerners. Symbolically, demand for such guides has generated results from two large publishing houses simultaneously. Sadly, the covers of the new books are disappointing, since they depict Orthodox churches in the typical Rus-

sian style. In fact, these fail to reflect the true image of traditional Belarusian architecture. Despite wars, each Belarusian city is crowned by a church in the 'Vilnius Baroque' style — characteristic for Belarus and common to Lithuania, western Ukraine and eastern Latvia. The style was used for building Minsk's major Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches. Having failed to notice this, the authors have rather distorted the country's image. However, this proves that Belarus is yet to be fully discovered, as the authors admit. The country remains a mystery but this very feature entices tourists, drawing them to explore new angles of local nature, history and culture. Mr. Roberts accurately notices: 'In the Belarusian hinterland, wonderful museums exist. Rich culture, historical monuments (including those preserved from the Middle Ages) and beautiful churches remain. Each traveller will be welcomed by the warm souls of local people.'

## Bestowed with Magdeburg Right

Minsk received its emblem 420 years ago

In Europe, emblems began to be given in feudal times; in Belarus, cities received their first emblems in the 16th-17th century. They were usually approved simultaneously with the receiving of the Magdeburg Right (envisaging self-government).

Minsk received the privilege of self-government under the Magdeburg Right in 1499, as a gift from the Grand Duke of Lithuania, Alexander Jagiellonczyk. By that time, the city was playing a significant role in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, as an administrative and economic centre. On January 12th, 1591, Minsk received a privilege



from the King of Poland and the Grand Duke of Lithuania, Sigismund III, confirming the Magdeburg Right. Moreover, Minsk was awarded with its emblem.

Minsk's medieval emblem featured one of the major saints of the Christian Church, the Virgin Mary, during her ascension: a common theme for seals in the 16-17th century (from 1591). On July 12th, 2000, a law was adopted *On the Status of the Capital of the Republic of Belarus — the City of Minsk*, envisaging the city having its own flag, emblem and hymn. Accordingly, Minsk City Council held a contest

to select the best suggestions. As a result, it became evident that the previously used emblem remained the best.

Staff from the Belarusian Archive, Marina Yelinskaya, Grigory Zholnerkevich and Sergey Rassadin, helped reconstruct Minsk's historical emblem. Using archive sources, they found a geographical basis for Minsk's emblem, which was adopted to meet the modern rules of heraldry. On March 27th, 2001, the emblem was approved by Minsk's City Council of Deputies and, on April 13th of the same year, was enlisted on Belarus' Emblem Matriculate.

The emblem of today's Belarusian capital is a Baroque style shield, with the Virgin Mary's ascension depicted against a blue background. It is an historical-heraldic monument.

## Welcoming slogan highlights image

By Sergey Kulyagin

### Mogilev to position itself as heart of Eastern Europe

'My City of Mogilev is the Heart of Eastern Europe' has won a contest to find the best slogan for the regional city. *The City of Mogilev — a Unique City* contest was judged by famous Mogilev historians, local folklore experts and figures of culture and arts, who selected the best 20 ideas from 105 entries.

Pavel Lyubchenko's slogan won, cleverly creating an acrostic with its initial letters to denote that Mogilev is a city of light. The bright, informative and memorable slogan encapsulates the essence of the city on the River Dnieper, reminding us of its historical, geographical



Mogilev's Town Hall

and philosophical importance. The city welcomes visitors with an open heart, and the new slogan is soon to appear on billboards, posters and cross street banners. Other bright ideas are also to be applied to promote Mogilev's image.