

# Pensioners have chance to receive more money

The domestic pension system is certainly stable today; though payments are not the greatest in the world, they are guaranteed and paid on time. Moreover, they are rising, as the economy allows.

By Vladimir Vasiliev

The model is well-known: working citizens and their employers make payments into the budget, forming the pension fund. However, with people living longer, the demographics are becoming a little alarming. According to Belarus' Minister for Labour and Social Protection, Marianna Shchetkina, there are 57 pensioners per 100 working people (set to rise to 60 per 100 by 2015 and 67 per 100 by 2020).

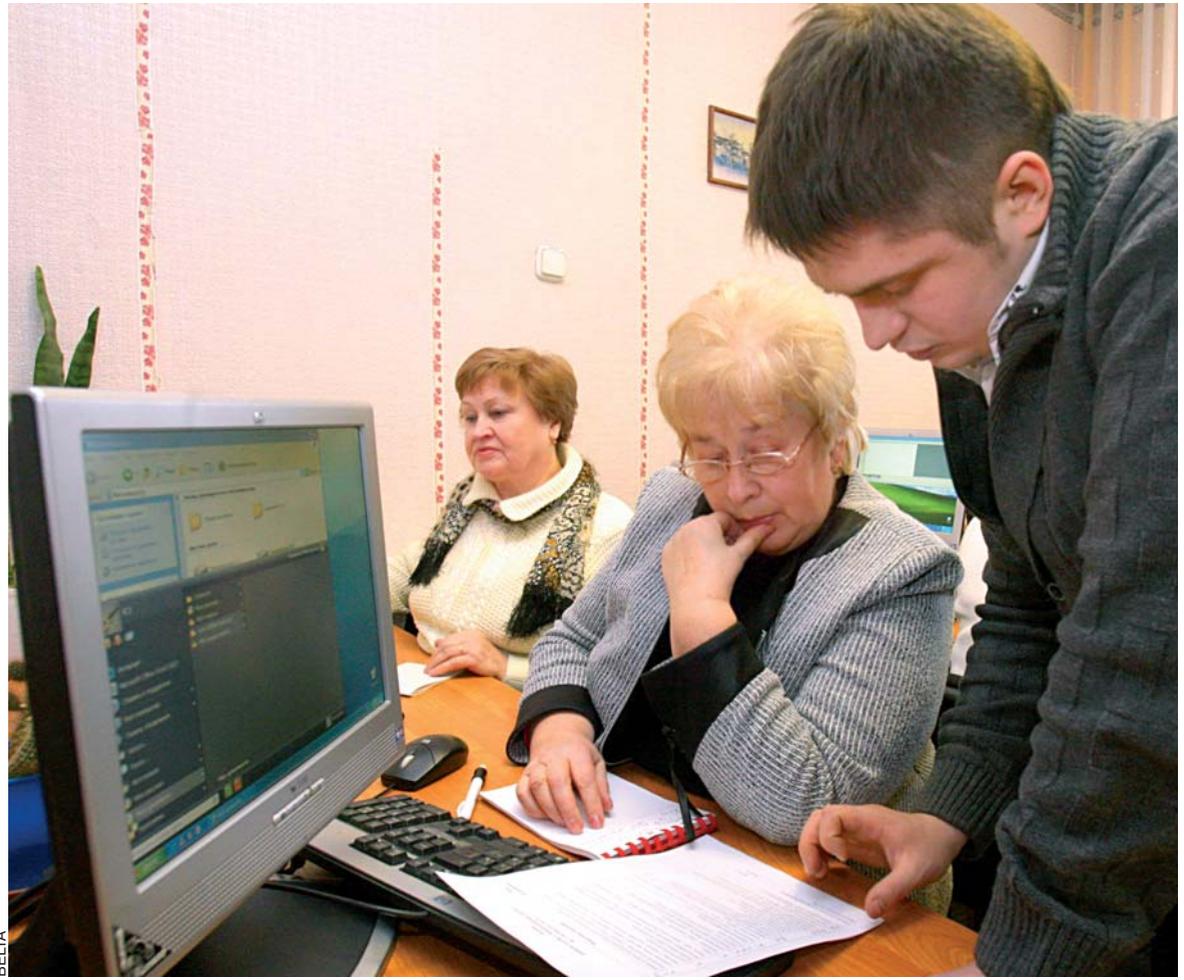
President Alexander Lukashenko gave a simple and precise analysis of the figures at a recent meeting, saying, "We have no deficit in the pension fund for our current number of pensioners but we are at the limit, at the edge of what's sustainable. By world experience, we are right on the edge."

We need to plan a new model for the years ahead and, of course, are not the first to come across this problem. Almost the whole world

is experiencing the same demographic crisis. For most, the solution has been to raise the pension age. Germany has one of the highest, at 65-67 years, while the Poles have men retiring at 65 and women at 60. The Lithuanians retire at 62.5 and 60 respectively while, in Latvia, everyone retires at 62. The Russians and Ukrainians are similar to Belarus, although their resources differ. Nevertheless, they are also considering raising the retirement age.

Should we do the same? Mr. Lukashenko doesn't think so. "We have promised our people that we won't do this. In improving the pension system, we won't follow Europe. Our pensions aren't high, comparatively. However, taking into account prices, they are no worse than in Russia. We pay them on time and have a big social package for pensioners. In this respect, we appear well. Nonetheless, I admit that pensions should rise."

As soon as the economy gives



Computer science lessons for elderly people are already commonplace

a signal, the move will be made. Mr. Lukashenko is uncompromising in this respect. "We shouldn't begrudge our pensioners anything, so we should raise pensions. The economic situation is developing in such a way that we can raise pensions a couple of times this year, as planned. We should do this."

Nevertheless, the rising number of pensioners requires us to address the budgetary situation. The Government plans no change to the essence of pensions, since everyone may retire at the same age as they ever have done. However, there are other options. We may continue working while receiving both a pension and salary or postpone drawing on our pension in favour of higher payments at a later date.

On reaching pension age, if you

continue working without claiming your pension, you will receive an additional 6 percent of your earnings on your pension after one year. This rises to 14 percent in 2 years, 24 percent in 3 years and 36 percent in 5. For each subsequent year, pensions are to rise by a further 14 percent of earnings. By voluntarily postponing your retirement, you can raise your final pension. Of course, much depends on your strength and ability to work; it must be a personal decision, as the President notes. He explains, "We shouldn't force people by raising the pension age artificially or administratively. It shouldn't be done. If you don't want to postpone your pension, women will maintain the right to retire at 55 and men at 60, as now. However, we can offer another choice."

The Belarusian leader has told the Government, "There should be no populism: no steps which worsen the financial situation. Simply put, we should have enough money for whatever we choose to do."

The Government believes it has the finances to fund the new proposal. Of course, there are other choices, such as pension insuring, which are already in partial operation. However, the President is sure that we should develop them gradually and carefully. The state wishes to guarantee pension funds, so proper economic provision is required. We can already give people a real alternative for their retirement but we must calculate everything precisely and scrupulously, accounting for every coin, in order to make the advantages visible to everyone.

## Enjoying pure healing water

Project to purify spring wells launched in Vitebsk and Mogilev regions

By Vasily Rodionov

The UNDP Office in Belarus is partnering the Christian Social Service inter-confessional mission to launch the *Live Water — Purification of Spring Wells in Belarus* project. This aims to improve four spring wells in the Vitebsk and Mogilev regions — under the patronage of church communities. The project is being financed by Coca-Cola Beverages and the Global Environmental Facility.

The veneration of spring wells is a special phenomenon in the traditional culture of Belarusians as, since ancient times, people have thought natural water sources to be imbued with holy healing powers.

The first documental mentioning of Proshcha, not far from Osipovichy, dates back to 1864. According to legend, two blind travellers drank water from the spring and washed themselves, miraculously recovering their sight. They also saw an icon of the Virgin Mary appear on a tree near the spring well. People brought the Christian relic to the nearest church three times but, each time, it had returned to the same tree in the forest by the next day. In 1864, a church was erected on the site, with thousands of pilgrims since arriving from far and wide to pray and wash themselves in the spring water, which is still thought to have healing properties.

The word 'proshcha' derives from the 'remission of



Near the spring well at Zhirovichi Monastery

sins', and indicates miraculous powers. In Belarus, those places in which people gathered to ask for forgiveness of sins, or to request the successful delivery of healthy children were called 'proshchas'.

Vitebsk's 'Paraskeva Pyatnitsa' spring, found near the church of St. Thaddeus the Martyr, is located on the original site of the ancient wooden church of St. Paraskeva Pyatnitsa and its water is thought to miraculously help with ill-

nesses of the leg.

The spring runs under Drutsk agro-town, which is famous for its Holy Mother of God Church, built in 1001 and thought to be one of the first Christian churches on Belarusian territory.

The project will see these springs purified and developed, to allow more people to enjoy their pure healthy water. It should also help Belarusian brooks, lakes and rivers become cleaner.

## Rarities in gallery

15th century Gospel from Zhirovichi on show in Vilnius

404 pages of the folio are written in old Slavonic, while its pages are decorated with bright illustrations and miniatures depicting the evangelists — in Gothic and Byzantine style. The luxurious book was kept in Zhirovichi until the mid-19th century, at its famous monastery. Now, it is held by the Wroblewski Library, at the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences, and is being publically showcased for the first time: at Vilnius Picture Gallery, located in the former Chodkevičiai Palace.

The exhibition includes items relating to the Sapegi family. Lev Sapega was the chancellor who signed the Statute of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania — released in old Belarusian in 1588. This rare book is also on display but the Gospel remains the main draw for visitors. "It's also connected with the Sapegi family," asserts Marijus Uzorka, a co-ordinator of the exhibition.

"Not all Sapegi family members were Catholics, as some were Orthodox believers." In fact, Lev Sapega wrote in old Belarusian on pages 376 and 377, detailing the donation of several land lots to Zhirovichi Monastery.

It hardly seems possible that the rare book might return to the monastery but it hasn't been 'lost' to us forever, as it has been recorded in electronic form by the National Library, alongside other editions from the Sapagi collection (aided by experts from Lithuania, Poland and Russia). With assistance from UNESCO, a CD has also been released. "We're liaising closely with the Library at the Academy of Sciences of Lithuania and are expanding our electronic collection," notes Lyudmila Kiryukhina, Editor-in-Chief of the National Library's Department for Periodic Editions. "With the Belarusian Orthodox Church, we've initiated a project to digitise and re-publish the Slutsk Gospel and a similar project may be implemented for the Zhirovichi Gospel."