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Reflection in time

If we look globally, the contemporary world lacks stability. It's a feature of our time, and has always been the case, to various degrees. Tensions are ever rising or declining, causing responses.

The President has called on foreign diplomats to help create a group of like-minded states, aimed at promoting the 'Helsinki-2' initiative.

This year, Minsk has hosted two important international forums: a meeting of Foreign Ministers of the Central European Initiative (CEI), and a session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

At a session of the UN General Assembly, and afterwards, our country suggested an initiative to launch discussion on a new Helsinki Process, under the aegis of the OSCE, aimed at tackling contradictions between states located within the Euro-Atlantic space and Eurasia.

Belarus is interested in seeing the 'Helsinki-2' process succeed. Today, as never before, it's necessary to build and reinforce political, economic and humanitarian bridges, between integration associations in the West and in the East. We must seek out more points of coincidence to unite nations. Read further in ***Responsible but Noble Mission***.

The President of Venezuela, Nicolas Maduro, recently arrived in our country on an official visit. Venezuela is probably Belarus' closest partner on the distant arc, with Caracas supporting Minsk during difficult periods, offering its power engineering. Meanwhile, Belarus has constructed housing in Venezuela and organised production facilities. However, in recent years, an unintentional pause emerged in collaboration. During negotiations, the presidents of Belarus and Venezuela decisively announced their intention to move forward. All details are laid out in ***Reloading Relationship Is Beneficial***.

We must also mention Belarus' hosting of a forum of European spiritual and religious leaders, including a ple-

nary session of the Council of European Bishops' Conferences. Heads and representatives of bishops' conferences from forty-five countries gathered to discuss topics dedicated to youth and Europe. Catholicism is the second largest religion in Belarus, with an ancient history and centuries-old spiritual and cultural traditions. Over the last twenty years, the Roman Catholic Church in Belarus has been given, or returned, at least 300 buildings, and the process continues. Meanwhile, high-ranking Catholic representatives have visited Minsk, in recognition of Belarus' policy of peace and accord.

Religious beliefs can and should play an important role in settling global conflicts, believes Mr. Lukashenko. The President of Belarus notes that the native populations of European states are ageing, and the birth rate falling. These negative demographic processes are happening against a background of moral degradation, destruction of traditional family institutes and mass inflow of migrants. He believes that this may have tragic consequences, resulting in the regression of European civilisation, so ancient and precious. Read further in ***For the Sake of Peace and Accord***.

Fifteen years ago, our country was the first within the post-Soviet space to react at state level to the global problem of an ageing population and fall in birth rates. We adopted a law on demographic security, followed by the first national programme of action, developed by leading experts and doctors. Since then, every five years, we've set targets. Last year, we saw a natural population increase: the first in twenty years. Moreover, Belarus boasts the CIS' lowest rates for maternal and infant mortality. Our ***Substantial Lessons of Demography*** and ***Receiving a Boost*** explore this further.

VIKTOR KHARKOV

Attending Games, in comfort

Belarus seriously developing transport connections in readiness for 2019 European Games, with two more passenger aircraft being purchased next year, while journey between Minsk and Vilnius enhanced using electric trains

The Government hopes to receive EU funding to help realise its trans-boundary projects, notes Belarus' Deputy Prime Minister, Anatoly Kalinin. He confirms that negotiations are currently underway with Brussels, telling us, "Trans-boundary collaboration is gaining momentum. We've launched electrification to Vilnius, and are constructing the M-6 highway to reach Poland. We're also implementing a joint project with Ukraine and Poland for water transport along the E-40. Decisions relating to the latter have been adopted at the level of heads of state and we need to implement these as soon as possible."



He explains that the country is working to expand its geography of aviation, reducing the cost of tickets and enhancing the comfort for passengers.

"Next year, we plan to acquire two modern aircraft and, in time for the 2nd European Games, in 2019, should have a stable transport connection between Minsk and Vilnius, using electric trains."

The Ministry of Transport and Communications plans to finish construction of several large infrastructure projects in readiness for the European Games. In particular, the Minister for Transport and Communications, Anatoly Sivak, tells us that, by the launch of the Games, the reconstruction of the M-6 (Minsk-Grodno) and P-23 (Minsk-Mikashevichi) motorways should be complete, alongside the construction of the second take-off runway at Minsk National Airport.

Transport workers are preparing for another international tournament: the 2021 IIHF World Championships, being held in Minsk and Riga. According to Mr. Sivak, funds are being invested into road infrastructure near Polotsk, to ensure that main roads rival those of the most modern parameters.



▶ According to high standards

The Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), whose primary mission is to defeat hunger, has signed a co-operative agreement with Belarus

"When I was in Belarus, in June, I saw that its dairy and meat products, including its cheese, are of supreme quality. This creates a good basis for the development of exports; the country has potential to enhance volumes of international consumption of dairy produce," notes Raimund Jehle, FAO Regional Strategic Programmes Co-ordinator for Europe and Central Asia.

Collaboration is to last four years.

The UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation aims to reduce risks connected with animal diseases and will support Belarus in marketing internationally. Joint work by international experts promises to support food security, while promoting the assessment of forest resources, phytosanitary control, and restoration of degraded lands, as well as adaptation towards climate change and softening of its consequences.

The FAO is facilitating the creation of new jobs in agricultural entrepreneurship. "We'll implement best global innovation practices and standards, taking into account regional and national experience," underlines Mr. Jehle. "I'm looking forward to the launch of collaboration and we hope to receive support from all interested partners."





Reloading relationship is beneficial

President of Venezuela, Nicolas Maduro, pays official visit to Minsk

Venezuela is perhaps the closest partner of Belarus in the long-range arc of good-neighbourliness. Caracas has supported Minsk in acute periods of energy trouble, while Belarusians have built houses for partners and established production enterprises. However, in recent years, an involuntary pause has occurred. During their talks at the Palace of Independence, the

two presidents resolutely announced their intention to build anew.

Commandant Hugo Chavez's death plunged his country into a complicated and contradictory period. As often happens in such cases, 'help' from outside exacerbated the political problems faced by Venezuela, fuelled by economic difficulties. Venezuelan leader Nicholas Maduro underlines that the worst days are over, with Belarusian-Venezuelan cooperation now reviving.

"We started this path with our Commandant, Hugo Chavez, who de-

scribed the path to the new world as one of peace and cooperation, where the values of the civilised world would prevail," he notes. Speaking of Belarusian-Venezuelan relations, it seems impossible to remain diplomatically formal. Alexander Lukashenko and Hugo Chavez enjoyed a close friendship, as can exist between men who are strong. That partnership was built on absolute trust, often secured only by a strong handshake, but it was enough, and results were always forthcoming.

Nicholas Maduro was a friend and companion of Hugo Chavez. During his meeting with the Belarusian President at the Palace of Independence, Mr. Lukashenko mentioned meetings attended by the three of them, his face brightening at the recollection, as did Mr. Maduro's. The spirit of the meeting was positive, recalling their mutual friend. Venezuela now aims not simply to restore its previous level of cooperation but to attain even more.

Mr. Maduro has offered Venezuela a new Bolivarian strategy based on the idea of building a diverse, post-oil economy, looking beyond raw materials to a wide range of industries. "This is the key moment to relaunch our projects in the fields of politics and diplomacy, as well as in specific areas of the economy, industry and oil production. We need to renew our energy agreements in the field of industry and agriculture. This visit should inspire a new stage in developing the private sector in Belarus and Venezuela. We'll be relying on Belarus, as we know Belarusians' working capacity, their determination and discipline. This decision — to enter a new stage in the energy, financial, industrial, agricultural, construction and engineering sectors, building on past success — is the best decision we've ever made. We should promote it in practice. I'm happy, since I know that Alexander Lukashenko, and the Government and people of Belarus are sincere, real friends of Venezuela. There are no difficulties when friends unite their efforts," Mr. Maduro said.

The views of partners and friends coincide completely and, as the Belarusian President stresses, the basis on which to move forward is strong. "We don't need to start from scratch. We'll continue, building on the foundations already created." He believes that the goal of developing the private sector in Venezuela is attainable. "We're ready to jointly continue on this path. It's true that Venezuela isn't experiencing the best of times but we've seen more challenging times ourselves. We

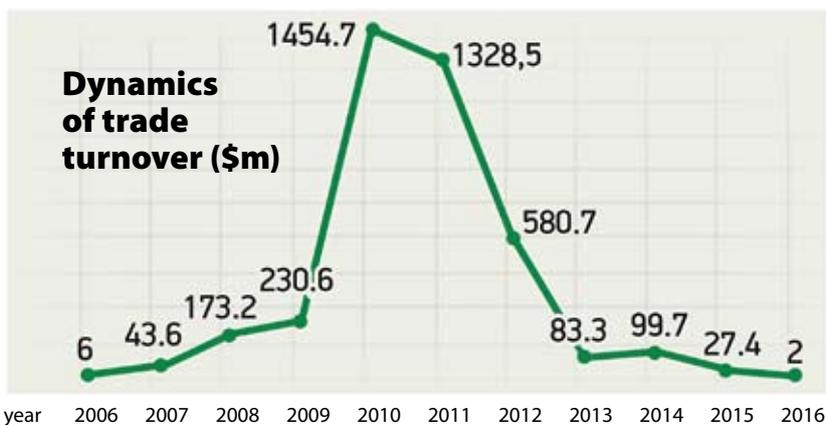
BELARUS — VENEZUELA: trade-economic cooperation



Republic of Belarus

Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela

In 2016, Belarusian-Venezuelan trade-economic turnover reduced lower to that seen a decade ago. However, the two countries continue to implement joint projects in housing construction, oil extraction, gasification, power engineering, agriculture, industry and science.



too were in the position of having to ration food, after the USSR collapsed. However, we set a goal: to be self-sufficient in food production within eight to ten years, while having some surplus to export. We met this target in the set period and, with determination and discipline, Venezuela can do so within five years. We're ready to participate in this process and provide support, as your closest and kindest friends. When we were in trouble, you helped us and we've never forgotten this. So, let us jointly plan how to quickly solve the problems Venezuela faces," Mr. Lukashenko underlined.

These comments show the spirit of the relationship between our two presidents, and the nature of talks at

the Palace of Independence. Their realisation will be overseen by a special intergovernmental commission, meeting in November. Mr. Lukashenko has also announced his readiness to visit Venezuela, if necessary.

The President of Venezuela also took part in the solemn unveiling of a monument to the national hero of Venezuela, Simon Bolivar, in the park named after him. It bears a plaque stating: 'A gift from the Bolivarian Government of Venezuela, in honour of the 20th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Belarus and Venezuela. A replica of the bust made by Venezuelan sculptor Lorenzo Gonzalez'.

By Dmitry Kryat



BELTA

Responsible but noble mission

On accepting credentials from foreign ambassadors, the President of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, notes the necessity of building and strengthening bridges between countries in both the West and East

“Today it’s necessary to build and strengthen bridges — political, economic and humanitarian — between countries and integration associations both in the West and the East. It’s vital to find more things in common which will unite countries and nations,” said Mr. Lukashenko.

The Belarusian capital has long had the status of an efficient negotiation venue, not only regarding Ukrainian problems. This year, Minsk has hosted two important international forums: the meeting of foreign ministers of the Central European Initiative, where Belarus is current chair and a session of the Parliamentary Assembly for the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

At this session, and following on from the UN General Assembly’s meeting, Belarus proposed an initiative to be launched under the OSCE aegis. This would be a wide discussion on a new Helsinki process, aimed at tackling the knot of contradictions between states within the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasia. “We’re keen to launch a ‘Helsinki-2’ process. I believe that you, dear ambassadors, will be able to make your own contribution to the creation of a group of like-minded states aiming to promote and implement this important initiative,” asserted Mr. Lukashenko, addressing the ambassadors.

The President underlined the fact that Belarus is a peaceful, stable and safe country. The absence of inter-religious and inter-ethnic conflicts is a major advantage of our country in the global economic and political arena. “In dialogue with its partners, Belarus has always adhered to the principles of openness, honesty, equality and justice. Now, when the situation in the world is far from being calm, these approaches are especially vital. The consequent and pragmatic policy of our country enabled us to normalise and reinforce relations with western countries. We’ve managed to overcome disagreements and we are now building a new platform of cooperation based on mutual respect and a balance of interests.”

It was also said during the meeting, that we shouldn’t underestimate the uniting powers of culture and sport. In 2019, Belarus will welcome the 2nd European Games, while in 2021 it will be hosting the IIHF World Championships with Latvia. “I sincerely hope that representatives of your countries will be among the participants and guests of these large-scale competitions,” said the Head of State.

According to Mr. Lukashenko, Belarus is ready to develop collaboration with states on all continents. Addressing the ambassadors, he described key areas for cooperation with each of the attending states.

By Konstantin **Denisov**



► Ambitious plans

Belarus is ready to supply a wide range of food products to Chinese Shandong Province, notes Belarus' Prime Minister, Andrei Kobyakov, as he met the Governor of the Shandong Province, Gong Zheng

“We have seen a growing demand for high-quality

food products in China. The same is true of the Shandong Province. Belarus is known for its natural and eco-friendly products. We're ready to launch supplies of a wide range of food products, including milk, baby food, beef, poultry, beverages and confectionery. We suggest using railway transportation along the Silk Road route in container trains which are currently not full to capacity, on the way from the European Union to China,” Andrei Kobyakov said.

In general, Belarus is interested in expanding close cooperation with the Shandong Province on a wide range of issues, including transit on the Belt and Road route, collaboration in tourism and education and setting up joint high-tech enterprises in the Great Stone Industrial Park.

After the negotiations, a treaty was signed on joint activity between the Minsk Automobile Works (MAZ) and China's Weichai.

► Benefit of interaction

During the meeting with the Chargé d'affaires of the United States to Belarus, Robert Riley, Ivan Noskevich, Chairman of the Investigative Committee of Belarus, noted that his department is grateful to their colleagues from the USA for assistance with investigating transnational crimes

Mr. Noskevich stressed the importance of interaction between the law enforcement agencies of the two countries in pre-trial criminal proceedings. He thanked the US for their assistance with the investigation of crimes, especially transnational ones.

Robert Riley confirmed the interest of the United States in further strengthening collaboration between Belarusian and US law enforcers, placing a special emphasis on combating cybercrime, violations of intellectual property rights and human trafficking.

► More convenient

Belarus plans to double the term of the visa-free stay for foreign tourists

A draft law has been submitted for approval to the Council of Ministers of Belarus. If parliamentarians approve it the innovations will come into force within 18 months.

“The visa-free regime has been operating since early 2017. There were initial concerns and disputes but these have now been proved irrelevant. No growth in violations has been registered because of the visa-free regime. We first suggest doubling the period for foreigners staying in Belarus without registration to ten days. The issue is now being discussed with the National Centre of E-Services for the introduction of electronic registration for foreign



citizens,” notes Vitaly Naumchik, the First Deputy Head of the Citizenship and Migration Department in the Interior Ministry.

The information tells us that over the first six months more than 30,000 guests from 64 states arrived in Belarus using the visa-free regime: Lithuanians, Swedes, Finns, Estonians,

Greeks, Croatians, Mexicans and Cypriots, as well as residents of Andorra and Namibia. The border guards now have more work and the workload of Minsk airport has increased by one third compared to last year. In 2016, Belarus exported just \$155.2m worth of tourist services while, in 2017, this figure is 10-15 percent more.

For the sake of peace and accord

Minsk hosted a plenary session of the Council of European Bishops' Conferences

The participants of the assembly — heads and representatives of bishops' conferences from 45 countries — discussed topics dedicated to youth and Europe as a common entity. The previous plenary session of the Council of European Bishops' Conferences took place a year ago, in Monaco, with Belarus named as the next host location. "On the basis of its positive image," comments Leonid Gulyako, Commissioner for Religions and Nationalities, speaking of the decision. "Undoubtedly, Minsk has become a place for the conduct of large-scale and influential forums, due to its deserved authority as a peaceful and friendly country within the international arena. As a rule, host states are chosen for having accumulated positive experience in public, social and spiritual spheres, being able to share that experience."

Catholicism in Belarus is the second largest religion, with an ancient history and centuries-old spiritual and cultural traditions. Over the last twenty years, the Roman-Catholic Church in Belarus

has been given, or returned at least 300 buildings, and the process continues.

The arrival of such high-ranking Catholic representatives in Minsk recognises the Belarusian policy of peace and accord, noted the President of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, as he met with participants of the plenary session of the Council of European Bishops' Conferences. He continued, "Today, Belarus is not just the geographical centre of Europe. This is God's gift. For many centuries Belarus has been the country where different religions coexist in harmony. Their interaction has had a strong impact on the formation of the Belarusian nation, its cultural and spiritual development."

Mr. Lukashenko remarked that the hosting of the CCEE plenary session in Belarus now is symbolic. This year we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the first old-Belarusian printed book. It was Francysk Skaryna's Psalter. The work of the printing pioneer made the Gospel more accessible to Eastern Slavonic nations. "Moreover, this meeting takes place in the year when we mark the 25th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the Republic of Belarus and the

Holy See. I believe that our cooperation with the Catholic Church will develop further in the name of peace."

According to him, in contrast to many other corners of the planet the diversity of religions in Belarus has not become a reason for ethnic and religious conflicts. It helps strengthen mutual understanding and respect. "We do not divide people on religious lines. A person is free to choose a way to church. This is the law of our society. We are trying to recognise grandeur and beauty through friendship, understanding, and patience. Pope Francis, whom I respect immensely, spiritual leaders of virtually all religious denominations are calling for it today," sums up the Belarusian leader.

"The world is in need of open and trustworthy dialogue," noted the President of Belarus at the meeting. He views Minsk as an important platform for negotiations, with its reputation increasing as a venue for discussing and passing resolutions on serious regional and global problems. "Today's conference testifies to the fact that the church, as always, is showing what has to be done to resolve the most serious global conflicts: those new and long-standing. Your decision



President of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, suggests organising a meeting in Minsk between Patriarch Kirill and the Pope of Rome. He noted about this during the meeting with the participants of the plenary session of the Council of European Bishops' Conference

BELTA

to arrive in Minsk and to hold a plenary meeting here was the right one. We appreciate this, as it shows once again that Belarus is recognised as a peace-loving and safe state, providing an example of accord and normal living conditions, where religions and ethnicities coexist in harmony. We value that.”

Mr. Lukashenko believes that religious beliefs can and should play an important role in settling conflicts in the world. “Today we see that many countries face a spiritual crisis. This threat is more dangerous than all economic challenges. In fact, economic issues have their roots in it. They emerge because of the lack of spirituality. Crisis is in people’s minds. This is the prime cause of all economic issues,” asserted the President. “Kindness, mercy, love and faith — the highest human values, serving always to guide us — are being destroyed in front of our eyes.”

He commented that the indigenous population of European countries is growing older, and the birth rate is falling. These negative demographic processes emerge against the backdrop of the moral degradation of society, weakening of traditional family values, and a mas-

sive inflow of migrants. “As a result, that may lead to tragic consequences, the degeneration of ancient and important European civilisation,” said Mr. Lukashenko. “People should not lose the God-given moral compass that allows us to distinguish good from evil.”

The role of Belarus in building a peaceful European future is considerable, noted the President of the Council of European Bishops’ Conferences, Archbishop of Genoa, Cardinal Angelo Bagnasco, as he met the President. Mr. Bagnasco thanked Belarus for the opportunity to meet in Minsk, on behalf of the participants of the plenary assembly of the CCEE. “We’re playing a great part in forming the future of our nations by holding this event. We should answer the questions that every young person bears in his or her heart,” said Mr. Bagnasco, adding that the church shows a keen interest in Europe’s further development and peaceful future.

Mr. Bagnasco drew attention to the importance of the history of Minsk which turned 950 this year, and the 500th anniversary of Francysk Skaryna’s Psalter. The CCEE President thanked Alexander Lukashenko for the coop-

eration between the state and church in Belarus. Angelo Bagnasco believes that such close collaboration in Belarus and other European countries will contribute to peaceful development in general.

Belarus is becoming an attractive centre for both sides of the continent, said the Chairman of the Conference of the Catholic Bishops in Belarus, Metropolitan of Minsk and Mogilev, Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz. Many meetings take place in the Palace of Independence, but it has never hosted such many representatives of the Catholic church. “This is one more piece of evidence to prove that Belarus, which is geographically located in the centre of Europe, is becoming a centre of attraction for both sides of the continent for politicians, economists, figures of culture and science or athletes, as well as for religious leaders,” said the Metropolitan. According to him, the meeting between the President and representatives of the Council of European Bishops’ Conferences shows the respect of the state towards the Catholic church and is a sign of the development of relations between them.

By Vladimir **Mikhailov**

When minus brings a plus

Last July, Belarusians stopped being 'millionaires', with four zeroes disappearing from national currency banknotes. Our reporter considers what's changed since then.

Save your money

"Look for coins, I don't have any change," declares the assistant in a Minsk department store, refusing to take a paper banknote from me. Then she explains, "Everyone comes to the shop with paper money. They say it's uncomfortable carrying

coins. People bought money boxes and are now saving the coins."

It's no surprise, since last July the wallets of Belarusians

(the first after the collapse of the USSR) began to literally ring and become much heavier. There have been no coins in the country since 1992.

It appears that Belarusians prefer the rustle of paper banknotes to the heavy metal — a habit developed over decades. They now leave their coins at home, while the shelves of souvenir shops are full of money boxes in the shape of pigs, frogs and cats...

"Before denomination, money boxes were not sold at all but now they are one of the most popular goods on sale. People are not only buying them as presents for children. Adults are also purchasing them with nostalgia for their childhood," notes Olga Spakhich, a seller in the souvenir pavilion.



NADEZHDA PONKRATOVA

New dimension

Many Belarusians were afraid that, after denomination, prices in the country would increase sharply, while the move to a new monetary dimension would only disguise the increase temporarily. So even six months later, people were still adding four zeroes to the new sums in their heads. However, according to the official statistics, in 2016, inflation didn't even reach its expected level: with a forecast of 12 percent, inflation stood at 11.8. It's easier to see real growth comparing the price of public transport for instance. Over the year, the price has increased by only 5-10 percent depending on the type of transport (bus, metro or mini-bus), showing no great rise in prices.

The cutting of zeroes has brought a range of positive outcomes. The first is that it has become easier to calculate money. Of course, having millions in

one's pocket feels great but it was not efficient to use them for payment. Moreover, if an average budget for a family included a six or seven-digit number, imagine what the state budget looked like. Belarusian money caused bewilderment amongst foreigners.

After denomination, the exchange rate of the Belarusian Rouble has stabilised, though some experts forecast the reverse. The price of the US Dollar hasn't changed in over a year (around 1.9-2 Belarusian Roubles per Dollar). There are no longer queues at currency exchange offices and no one monitors the exchange rate as attentively as they did previously.

Denomination has brought one more advantage which may seem unnoticeable to an ordinary person. The total number of banknotes in circulation has reduced around 5-fold. The National Bank explains, "The expenses of banks and enterprises for the service of cash (encashment, transportation, the reduc-

tion of number of loads for ATMs, etc.) have also proportionally fallen 5-fold. State expenditure on cash circulation has also reduced, which was one of the main goals of denomination."

Reverse side of the coin

The cutting of four zeroes has considerably changed the attitude of Belarusians towards money. Research has showed that yesterday's 'millionaires' are now happy to dismiss coins of 10, 20 and 50 Kopecks. People often 'forgive' these sums to each other in shops and on the markets. However, a year ago there were thousands instead of coins and no one could call them 'change'.

Financiers call such a phenomenon the 'effect of low numbers'. It happens when a person doesn't attach importance to small sums and doesn't understand their real purchasing value. It's not yet clear whether this is a good or bad thing.

By Anna Kurak

Five facts about BYN

1 Since January 1st, 2017, residents of Belarus have completely moved to the new money. They have already got rid of around 97 percent of banknotes of the older (2000) series. The old banknotes are destroyed in a special way: they are crushed, pressed and sent to a secret storage facility. Old banknotes can't be burnt, since they are made of paper which produce poisonous and toxic substances during burning.

2 Over one year only 24 counterfeit banknotes of the national currency have been revealed in Belarus (i.e. one counterfeit against eight million original banknotes). This is relatively little. In international practice, there is alarm when there are more than three hundred counterfeit banknotes for each million originals. The new money has confirmed its reliability. However, US Dollars, Euros and Russian Roubles are more often counterfeited in the country.

3 They often try to misrepresent foreign currency units as Belarusian ones. They use Kazakh Tenge, Ukrainians Hryvnia, etc. and these often find

their way to the wallets of the unscrupulous. At the end of the previous year, a woman in the Gomel Region managed to pay in a shop with a souvenir Russian 100-Rouble banknote, released by the Olympic Games in Sochi.

4 The new Belarusian money isn't in fact very new. It was manufactured in 2008. While it was lying in storage it slightly acidified and became darker. This is quite natural. They aren't going to print or mint any new money at the present but the issue will be reconsidered in a couple of years.

5 Faulty money can sometimes cause embarrassment. People may have coins with defects of form and colour or banknotes which have only part of the drawing. Moreover, bank systems don't recognise these as fakes and they are considered 'normal' from the point of view of authenticity. Such money with a 'twist' arouses special interest amongst collectors, so if you manage to find a faulty banknote, don't be in a hurry to exchange it for a new one. It might make you a true fortune one day.



Export to any taste

State support of agriculture has borne fruit, as we're now self-sufficient in supplying the nation with food. Almost a third of countries worldwide buy our products, with sales geography expanding. The Head of the Main Department of Foreign Economic Activity, at Belarus' Ministry of Agriculture and Food, Alexey Bogdanov, shares his views on how we can continue growing, and finding new markets.

The idea of subsidising agriculture had many opponents, believing that the agro-industrial sphere shouldn't rely so heavily on state support. Over the past six years, budgetary support has been reduced from \$1.8 billion to \$823 million annually. Have exports been affected?

State funding of Belarus' agricultural sector is paying off quite effectively. We aren't dependent on other countries for our food supplies, which is a great advantage. Moreover, about 60 percent of our dairy products and around 30 percent of meat products are exported annually. In 2016, the Ministry of Agriculture and Food's enterprises sold \$2.272 billion of products. In the first six months of 2017, this reached \$1.227 billion (up 16.6 percent on the same period of last year). We're ranked third globally for exporting butter and dry whey, and occupy fourth place in cheese exportation. Belarus is the fifth largest exporter of skimmed milk powder and similar successes have been seen for the meat industry. We're ninth globally for sales of chilled beef abroad.

About 90 percent of our exports of agricultural products go to Rus-

sia. Not long ago, the media stated that, due to dependence on Russia as a sales market, we're forced to sell our high-quality milk cheaply. A refutation was later published but I must ask, is there any truth in this? Aren't world prices rising?

We don't sell anything to anyone cheaply; on the contrary, the profitability of our dairy production is very high: 15-30 percent, depending on the product. This's no quality difference regarding sales to the domestic market and those abroad, with the same ingredients processed on the same line and under the same technology. We sell everything at a market price, which varies according to the market situation. Prices for dairy products on the Russian market are slightly higher than elsewhere globally and, since Russia is our main market, we win. At the same time, we're constantly working to diversify, preserving our good results while finding new markets. Every year, we increase our production volumes and search for new markets. This year, between January and June, Russia's share in our exports fell by 3 percent, to stand at 91.5 percent.

China has been showing special interest in our exports, with Russia planning to sell beef there, despite lacking enough itself. What's our position on the Chinese market?

At present, thirty-six Belarusian dairy factories are certified to sell milk and dairy products to China. About a month ago, we signed an agreement to sell our beef to the Chinese market; we're now working on the certification of our poultry farms. In six months, we sold almost \$5 million of food products there, with exports of dairy products rising ninety-seven times, to exceed \$3.5 million.

New sales markets include countries in Africa, the Middle East and South East Asia. Since last year, an agreement has been in force on a free trade zone between the Eurasian Economic Union and Vietnam. Sales to Vietnam increased 2.3-fold in the first half-year, reaching a value of \$956,000. Relations with Middle Eastern countries are developing quite well, with Pakistan buying dried baby food from us, worth around \$1 million annually. Interesting prospects are opening up in Syria, with \$1.5 million of milk

products sold there this year. Meanwhile, Turkey has been a real breakthrough this year, with exports rising fifty times, mostly comprising butter and dried dairy products. We're also interested in developing relations with the African continent. In the first half of 2017, six times more products were delivered to Africa than in the same period of last year, indicating growth.

Our products are well known in the CIS but could easily become lost among other brands on new markets, unless we apply proper marketing. How should we be promoting our products abroad?

Each enterprise must think over this strategy thoroughly, studying taste preferences, labelling and packaging. The Vietnamese market, for example, likes sweetened milk and sweet yogurts. Most of the population is lactose-intolerant, however, so we need to produce lactose-free milk for them. In turn, the Chinese like food to be sold in easy to carry volumes, so it can easily be taken away. We need to make small packaging sizes as a result. As for meat, China's culture of consumption and, accordingly, its meat cutting technology, is different from ours. Before entering new markets, we invite technologists to teach our specialists about these peculiarities.

In July, world food prices increased by 10.2 percent against 2016 figures — reaching the highest level since January 2015. In North America, wheat crops suffered due to drought and, in the European Union, butter prices rose incredibly — by 14 percent. What niches does this open for us?

It's hardly possible to rapidly increase sales volumes to these countries. The EU is a sufficiently protected economy in terms of food exports, with a tariff regulation which almost doubles the cost of dairy products. We sell cheese at an export price of about \$5 but, due to customs duties, the import price rises to about \$10 in the EU. However, we're still making our way onto this market, seeking out products for which the price will work: cheese, curd, yoghurt, casein, juices, fish products and salads. Eleven of our enterprises are certified for sales to the EU, and five of these are dairy-focused.

As for grain, we don't yet export it, selling mostly processed products abroad. It's unprofitable for our milling enterprises to stand idle while we sell raw materials. In the first half of 2017, the Ministry of Agriculture and Food's enterprises exported three times more flour, generate \$28.3 million. If wheat rises in price, the cost of milk and meat will increase as well, so we need to pay attention.

Speaking of the future, what are the latest trends on food markets, and are we adapting to meet them?

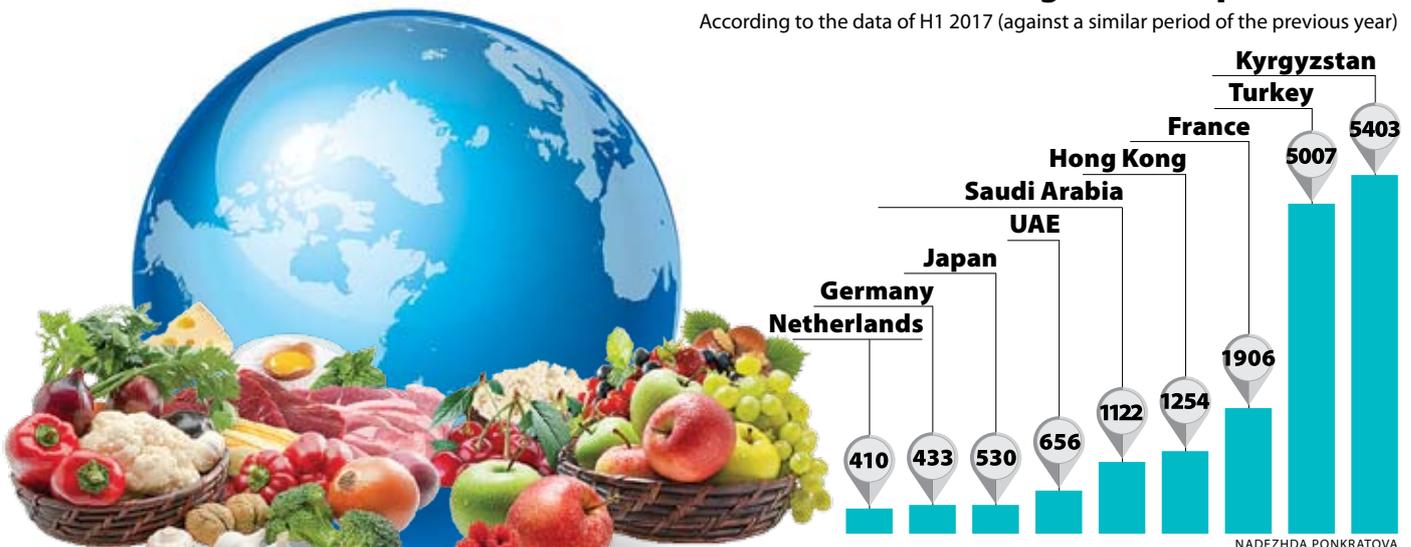
Reduced use of chemicals in production is a major trend, as is the transition to more traditional breeding conditions for animals. Poultry farms are now built to allow animals access to open space and a longer growing period is allowed, without additives to stimulate growth. We aren't lagging behind in this respect. By the end of the year, we'll adopt a law on organic production, to be able to certify such products, in line with EU legislation. We already apply strict standards, so our products can be called environmentally-friendly.

The global perspective until 2020 is that meat and dairy production will continue to grow, with the use of more modern technologies. Market competition will continue growing but we have a plan of action. Our 'Agro-business-2020' programme envisages targets for particular products. Dairy product volumes should reach 9.2 million tonnes by 2020, for example. In 2017, we're aiming to raise exports by 11.5 percent. Present trends indicate that it's impossible for us to grow too much.

By Valeria Gavrushcheva

Top 10 countries in the growth of exports of Belarusian agricultural produce, %

According to the data of H1 2017 (against a similar period of the previous year)



NADEZHDA PONKRATOVA



Non-traditional sources of energy are still a rarity for us and each new wind powered unit is a true event, while a small 'plantation' of solar batteries is a sensation. No-one would argue against the fact that the green economy must be developed in our country and much money should be invested in such projects. However, do these investments always give the necessary return? The answer is no. Nine years ago, a source of warm water was discovered in the suburbs of Brest and it was decided that water from the geothermal well could be used to heat the greenhouses of the Berestie factory. They hoped that the ambitious project would pay for itself in a maximum of seven years. However, the potential of the well hasn't been fully realised. Our reporter attempts to shed light on the situation.

Resources waiting for investor

Heat from beneath the ground

Cucumbers, tomatoes, peppers, eggplants and even roses are being grown in the Berestie greenhouse facility. The squares greenhouses cover 22 hectares and each year millions of cubic metres of natural gas are necessary to heat them.

"In 2008, a search Vychulkovskaya well #201 was drilled around the greenhouse facility. No oil or gas was discovered; however, a source of warm fresh water was unearthed at a depth of 1km. The well was given to Berestie. It was planned to use water whose temperature reaches 25°C to heat the greenhouses.

In 2010, a geothermal station with a capacity of 1MWt was launched," says engineer Tatiana Nikolova. The scheme is as follows: water from the well is sent to the heat-exchange unit and with the help of propylene-glycol and Freon gives its warmth to the water from the greenhouse's heating system.

Its temperature rises to 60°C — more than enough to create comfortable conditions for the growth of vegetables and flowers. However, then a question appears: what to do with the water raised to the surface and which has already given its heat? It's suitable for drinking even without additional purification.

One option is to supply water to Brest's water supply system. The capacity of the well is 1,000 cubic metres of water daily — enough to provide one seventh of the city's needs.

Initially Brestvodokanal showed interest in the 'green' project and even recommended deferrisation station be constructed. The station was built and, in line with Brestvodokanal's technical conditions, a 'cut' was made, a calibrated meter and a shutter were installed and everything was ready for the supply of water to the city but it turned out that the city doesn't need it. The reason is simple: water and sewage utilities can buy

water from outside organisations only if they lack water themselves. However, Brestvodokanal has five water supply inlets and 77 wells, with around a half of these used. So, there's obviously no lack of water. Then what should be done?

"We can use it to water plants in the greenhouses. There's no need to heat it in winter and this is also a saving. However, during the heating season plants require minimum watering and we are unable to use all the water raised from the well, while in summer 1,000 cubic metres is not enough, as we need 5 times more. We have to then use the water supply inlet in Mukhovets," explains Ms. Nikolova.

Saving is apparent

The situation is rather curious: thanks to the warm water from the thermal source, Berestie could save up to one million cubic metres of natural gas annually. However, the water used to heat greenhouses (after it has given its heat) should somehow be used. The city doesn't need this water, let alone the business, which doesn't need it either in such quantities. It seems criminal to allow thousands of cubic metres of pure fresh water to flow into the river: water management is strictly regulated in our country.

Tatiana Nikolova takes a small folder which contains a draft construction project of the workshop to bottle fresh water, developed back in 2012. They failed to find an investor for the project, however. It's a pity, because the establishment of this workshop is likely to be the only way out of the current situation.

"We sometimes joke: a regional airport is close to Berestie, so perhaps water can be delivered to the United Arab Emirates or Qatar by plane. It is very



In all regions, water with a temperature of 8-9 degrees occurs at a shallow depth of about 100m. In the most heated crustal blocs, at a depth of 4-5km, the temperature reaches 110-115 degrees

expensive there. Moreover, water from our well is unique because it's completely protected from any external influences at a 1km depth, as ground water doesn't penetrate so deeply. In a word, we are open for cooperation and hope to receive help from investors."

Research by scientists from the Belgeology Republican Unitary Enterprise confirm that our country has huge potential to develop geothermal power engineering. In all regions, water with a temperature of 8-9°C occurs at a shallow depth of about 100m. In the most heated crustal blocs, at a depth of 4-5km, the temperature reaches 110-115°C (not far from Rechitsa and Svetlogorsk).

There are currently

*about **120** geothermal installations in the country, including in privately-owned cottages and buildings. Primarily they are installed in facilities that are away from central heat pipelines and other communication lines*



Cucumbers, tomatoes, peppers, eggplants and even roses are being grown in the Berestie greenhouse facility

Such temperatures are enough to generate warmth for heating buildings and constructions, as well as to use in agricultural and industrial production. However, to find geothermal sources wasn't the most difficult thing. The main task is how to realise their potential and to settle the conflict between traditional and alternative power engineering. The solution to this still needs to be thought out.

By Pavel **Losich**

Reference

The heat of the Earth's crust is used in 78 countries of the world, with 24 countries having learnt how to generate electrical energy by using underground steams. There are now around 5,000 geothermal units in Estonia, while this figure exceeds 40,000 in Switzerland and 300,000 in Sweden.

Steadily standing on one's own feet

Hip fractures may seem nothing special at first sight, as many parts of the body can break from time to time. A plaster cast is often needed to recover but, in some cases, another method of treatment is needed. This is primarily due to the necessity of surgical intervention which is not always as simple and fast as we would like. Another aspect is even more complicated: hips are mostly broken by the elderly who already suffer from comorbidity issues. Sadly, a year ago, 30 percent of such patients died after the trauma. To date however, the figure has decreased ten-fold. To find out how our doctors have been able to cheat death, our reporter visited the Republican Scientific and Practical Centre of Traumatology and Orthopaedics.

Elderly hip injuries

Our visit starts in the emergency room — here, the major patient flow is concentrated. People are distributed to other departments based on a queuing system. Four out of five patients are treated at this stage and offered outpatient treatment. Among these patients, there are often two or three coming in with a fractured hip. The figure is larger in the winter season. Young people seldom come with this problem; moreover, they are mostly broken not in the domestic environment but falling from a height, skiing downhill or in road accidents.

“A hip is often broken by the elderly since their coordination of movements is disturbed due to osteoporosis. Moreover, their bones do not easily knit together later. The fact is that, over time, one of the three arteries that provides joints with blood grows over and stops functioning,” the Head of the Centre’s Emergency Department

and high category doctor — Sergey Kazaev — explains, while demonstrating a hip snapshot on the computer screen. “The blood vessels that nourish the femoral neck are turned during such an injury. If no blood penetrates the bones, they fail to knit together.”

Fractures of the femoral neck are life-threatening: the elderly can find it difficult to recover

from the whole set of diseases involving such a severe injury and diverse comorbidities. They start suffering from increased heart and blood pressure related problems. Blood circulation fails to function properly and respiratory distress is common. Moreover, these are supplemented by pneumonia and bedsores appear (it’s necessary to stay in bed for up to 4-6 months to recover). In the past, traumatologists used an anti-rotation boot on the ankle which did not allow the foot to turn outward; skeletal traction was also common. Due to blood



PAUL CHUYKO

Traumatologist Andrey Yaroshevich and nurse Lyudmila Prokopenya plan to enable a patient to walk on their own two feet a week after a hip fracture



Head of the Centre's Emergency Department — Sergey Kazaev

PAUL CHUYKO

disorders, such fractures seldom fused. Doctors later mastered other fracture fixing methods: patients were as a result able to turn to the side or even sit down. Moreover, to ensure quicker recovery, joint replacement surgeries were used.

Walking again

The Centre has not actually changed its technology or materials for treatment, but it is now applying a new approach. “Previously, we spent a great deal of time examining a patient — deciding on what should be done to treat them. The tactics have changed now: sometimes, a person with a broken hip is immediately admitted to the emergency department (of course, on condition that an operation is to be conducted in the next 24 hours),” explains traumatologist Andrey Yaroshevich. “In recent times, we’ve finally managed to systematise and bring together the work of the emergency services and intensive care units.”

Patients no longer spend weeks waiting for surgery. On arriving at the Centre, they are diagnosed, pass the necessary tests and have special ‘equipment’ put on. They are then sent to an intensive care unit. The operation takes place on the first day. The next day, the patient can stand on their feet.

Such an emergency regime of examination helps get rid of several problems — including to treat comorbidities. An elderly person is experiencing one trauma rather than several successive ones. Of course, those with severe diseases are not allowed to be operated on immediately — i.e. after a heart attack or stroke. Elderly people who are operated on during the first days after a trauma recover much faster. Moreover, the mortality in the first year after a surgical intervention is virtually eliminated.

“Galina came to the emergency department on Monday at 14:40 with a fractured hip. The picture shows that

the leg is shortened and deformed,” the doctor shows us an example. “She went immediately to the intensive care unit for tests. This picture was made at around 4pm. The following day at 11am, she had already had an endoprosthesis. The patient can almost walk easily now.”

Success follows

76-year-old Nikolay has come to consult a traumatologist. He is aware of medical affairs since he has worked as a therapist in the past. Sadly, he’s now a patient. He tells us, “I was operated on two weeks ago and am now already recovering after a fractured hip. I stepped badly and caused a break. My wife’s situation is even more complicated. She suffers from osteoporosis so, probably, no surgery will be allowed.”

A year ago, fractures of the femoral neck were not treated urgently. The new method of treatment has required the concentration of considerable resources. Resuscitation units are always full of patients from different departments after prosthesis. Moreover, there were not enough prostheses and fasteners for all and the Centre lacked new equipment. At present, traumatologists are experiencing a shortage of trained personnel and implants: after all, an emergency operation involves the forces of more than one doctor and department. Of course, it’s much easier for traumatologists to work according to a plan but the effectiveness of the changes is truly stunning: the mortality of elderly people after an operation is close to zero.

So far, only the Republican Scientific and Practical Centre of Traumatology and Orthopaedics can treat patients with fractures of the femoral neck so quickly and efficiently; people with severe cases are brought here from all parts of Belarus. However, specialists confirm that, in the near future, the Centre’s experience will be implemented throughout the country.

By Veronika **Ulasevich**



Nine and a half centuries

Legendary architect Zaha Hadid once noted that our ancient cities often cleverly hide their age. With modern cars travelling along multi-level interchanges, and our cities filled with businesses and shopping centres, we forget that hundreds of years of history lie behind our 21st century facades. Minsk is no exception, having celebrated its 950th anniversary this year, yet nobody would call it old-fashioned. On the eve of the anniversary, the Chairman of Minsk City Executive Committee, Andrey Shorets, met journalists to tell them how the capital is set to develop.



With modern cars travelling along multi-level interchanges, and our cities filled with businesses and shopping centres, we forget that hundreds of years of history lie behind our megapolis

The construction of rental housing continues to be important, with twenty such buildings erected over the past four years, creating 2,500 apartments. By the end of 2017, another block is due to open, and another two are due for launch in 2018.

Satellite towns

Regarding Minsk City Executive Committee's plans regarding the development of satellite towns, Mr. Shorets comments, "We would have long ago intensified our work in this area had we enjoyed more funds. Minsk City Executive Committee is focusing on the development of Rudensk and, partially, Smolevichi, as well as Logoisk, Dzerzhinsk, Fanipol and Zaslavl."

A proposal exists to expand residential housing construction not far from the Minsk ring road, building the 'Nottingham' complex, near Kolodishchi. The first houses are due to open in the fourth quarter of 2018, with infrastructure design already complete, and two areas defined for building houses, a kindergarten, a school and a clinic.

Mr. Shorets is sceptical about the likelihood of investors coming forward, saying, "While there are empty areas within Minsk, and while the expense of demolishing industrial areas is modest, investors won't be interested, since the profit per square metre for housing won't be as great as in the city or, at least, in the Minsk Region."

City-planning policy

Last year's discussions of Minsk's development plan until 2030 saw the President state that the city boundaries shouldn't expand further. Instead, he is eager to see the development of unoccupied and ineffectively used industrial territories within the ring road. Speaking of building accommodation, Mr. Shorets confirmed that the major construction plans of years ago are past. The 2017 plan to create 644,000 square metres of new housing has nearly been met (including 160,000 square metres for those listed as being in need of better housing). Importantly, the price per square metre is falling, as is particularly noticeable for those on the waiting list for housing. Profitability of such construction stands at just 5 percent, allowing a price of Br1,000-1,100 per square metre.





Nemiga citadel

Back in 2012, it was planned to recreate the 11th century wooden Minsk citadel, at the entrance to Nemiga underground station. However, Mr. Shorets explains that the idea of building an avenue of wooden buildings has been pretty much abandoned. Historians, painters and sculptors are still undecided about what should be done. Some have suggested that a memorial be erected on the site of the original citadel, perhaps in the shape of a huge sword; however, the artistic value is questionable.

Minsk City Executive Committee recently proposed the erection of a monument to Gleb Vseslavich (known as Minsky) and who is thought to have contributed to the city's birth.

Various buildings have been launched in the city on the eve of its 950th birthday — schools, kindergartens and residential houses — but all have been of almost identical design. Mr. Shorets notes, “Those launched on the eve of City Day share a common advantageous feature, having been economical to build. For example, the new Druzhba swimming pool, in the Brilevichi residential district, was so modestly budgeted that city authorities are now hoping to build similar facilities in each city district. The same could be said of kindergartens and schools, currently serving 1,200 children; they differ only in the colour of their facades.”

“We’ll continue applying this approach, since we know how to build quickly, efficiently and inexpensively. For example, a recently opened kindergarten in the Vostochny District took just eight months to build, against eleven months forecast,” Mr. Shorets tells us.

By Alexander **Benko**

Investors

There are companies wishing to invest in Minsk's development but these developers are eager to build the residential suburbs of Mayak Minska and Minsk-MIRs, as well as other major construction projects.

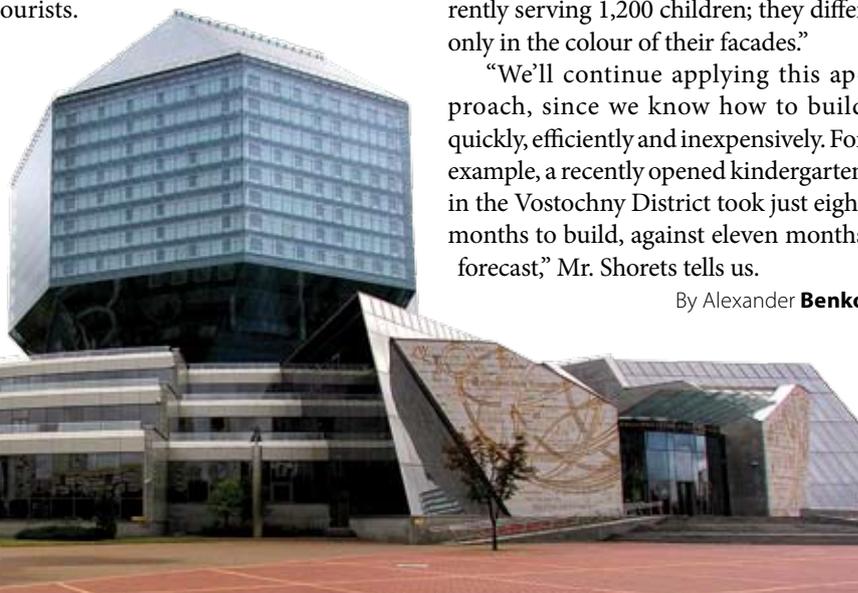
Investors focusing on building commercial property are active but, according to Mr. Shorets, market saturation is close. “We have so many buildings of the kind per capita that such construction is no longer attractive. With this in mind, we've been inviting investors to reconsider the trading centres now being designed, suggesting that they change their focus or, at least, partially change their intended end-use,” he said.

people want to travel from point A to point B in the shortest possible time, and with the greatest possible convenience. Sadly, this doesn't always work, as we have traffic jams. We need to change our transport flow.” He adds that city authorities are trying to ease urban traffic by building the first ring road to direct vehicles away from the centre, using ‘smart’ technologies.

Several partly pedestrianised streets are also planned, with a one-way traffic system likely for Komsomolskaya and Revolyutsionnaya streets, to make them more attractive to residents and tourists.

Pedestrian centre

Mr. Shorets believes that pedestrianising the city centre is an interesting idea but should be treated with caution. He explains, “Our



► Virtual trip to the past

The 15th-17th century castles of Krevo and Golshany can now be visited without leaving Minsk



“Our museum now offers a virtual trip through Krevo and Golshany castles. Using 3D glasses, one can move into the past and see these castles in the time they were at their most important and flourishing, approximately the 15-17th centuries. The digital reconstruction was created using historical data, consultations with archaeologists and scientists. Some inaccuracies may be present in the interior but great attention has been paid to present accurate historical details,” explains Oleg

Ryzhkov, Director of the National History Museum of Belarus. Krevo Castle in virtual reality is presented primarily as a fortress while Golshany Castle allows the viewer to study its interior and to submerge themselves in the atmosphere of the time.

Near the glasses for these 3D trips into the past special screens are located where one can see both castles as they look now. “Our goal is to popularise these castles. This is our historical and cultural heritage. These ruins also have a special energy. In my opinion, it’s necessary to preserve them and to create a new tourist project. Now not a single visitor walks by these glasses. People will go through our museum, attend a virtual excursion and are likely to want to visit both Krevo and Golshany castles,” notes the Director of the museum.

The implementation of the project began several years ago and required difficult and time-consuming research to recreate the architectural details and interiors. Now, the author of the project is already thinking about how to continue it, so that in the future, virtual tours may also be made for other Belarusian castles. The next plan includes the recreation of Bely Kovel Castle and the necessary information is already being collected.



► Spectacular stunts of flexibility

Popular Belarusian singer supports military in Hollywood style

Jean-Claude Van Damme’s recording of doing the splits between two huge speeding lorries has had millions of Internet views, with the site gaining hundreds of followers. Even Chuck Norris has made an attempt to repeat it.

Alexander Solodukha, known as a heartthrob singer, recently decided to outdo the movie star, performing the same trick: dressed in uniform and old military boots, he performed the splits between the bonnets of two tanks: a T-72 and T-55. Following a command, they moved apart, until Mr. Solodukha — who remained smiling — stretched between them.

► Meeting with rarity

The Bible, published by Francysk Skaryna five hundred years ago in Prague, can be seen at the National History Museum. This precious folio has been long kept at the State Historical Museum of Russia in Moscow but has moved in Minsk for the next few months.

“Our Russian colleagues gave permission to exhibit the rarity and to scan separate pages, enabling visitors to ‘turn’ the Bible with the help



of contemporary digital technology,” said the Director of the National History Museum, Oleg Ryzhkov.

This book is only a part of the ‘Belarus: Revival of Spirituality’ exhibition which describes the history

of the spread and existence of religion in Belarus. In total, the exhibition displays more than 400 monuments of history and culture, many of which are on display for the first time: a 12th century stamp of

Yevfrosiniya Polotskaya, a mural painting of the Transfiguration Church of the Monastery of Our Saviour in Polotsk from the 19th century, a unique collection of silver Kiddush wine glasses, a Catholic altar painting.



It's delightful to take a ride on a 'Chizhik' tram

Super modern trams, presented in Minsk, soon to traverse streets of St. Petersburg



- **By using two driving cabins, the trams can reverse direction without difficulty, and can achieve a maximum speed of 75 kmh, thanks to seven electric motors, with a capacity of 80kW each (creating almost 760 horsepower).**
- **The three-section cabin is 34 metres long and can carry up to 376 passengers, with 66 seated places.**
- **An automated system allows the driver and traffic controller, based at the tram depot, to monitor the number of passengers and how many of them have paid for their trip.**
- **Passengers will have access to 220V electric sockets, to recharge their devices, as well as USB-connectors and a Wi-Fi system.**
- **The trams have a lowered floor, making it easy to enter and exit: of special importance for those with less mobility.**
- **'Chizhik' tram stops will have spacious shelters, containing electronic boards, an emergency button and video-observation.**

Namesake for bird

While St. Petersburg is known for its bronze Chizhik bird, its namesake (a tram made in Belarus) is soon to serve the northeast of the city. Around 337,000 people live in the Krasnogvardeisky District but have only two metro stations, making it hard to travel into the city centre. A new tram line

Bright, quick and modern carriages to run along new tram line; made by Belarus, for the city on the Neva River

is to help solve the problem: bright, fast and modern, and built in Belarus.

Transport analyst Arseny Afinogenov, of 'City Projects', tells us that the new vehicles are likely to transport up to 34 million people annually. He notes, "The project is sure to be to passengers' liking. It's good that rolling stock has been ordered from Belarus. As far as I know, Russian trams have been criticised, while those from Belarus are considered to be among the best."

Just one year ago, Stadler Minsk signed a contract to supply St. Petersburg's Transport Concessionary Company with twenty-three trams, tailored to St. Petersburg's specific needs.

Slow but in the centre

The new project's slogan is 'Go on, Smile!' Certainly, travelling in a 'Chizhik' tram is a real pleasure, as they're running on new rails laid on special fibre-concrete slabs, allowing silent movement, without the usual rocking motion. Trams will connect the main streets of the district with metro stations and will allow people to reach the centre quickly.

Experts have been praising the modern trams, such as have never before been seen in the city. Meanwhile, passengers have called them 'innovative', 'comfortable' and 'safe', smiling with pleasure at the addition to the city's infrastructure.

Transport Concessionary Company explains, "Each carriage has three sections and is very spacious inside, while tram stops feature the latest technologies, equipped not only with illumination, shelter and an emergency button but with a video observation system and an electronic board, alerting passengers to waiting time before the next tram arrives."

Happily, tickets are to remain at the same price, in line with other ground transport across St. Petersburg.

Fanipol's Stadler Minsk factory (a joint venture with famous Swiss Stadler) has produced 85 percent of the components for the trams, as a resident of Minsk free economic zone. Director Phillip Brunner tells us, "The first batch of six trams, inspired from our 'Metelitsa' model, will arrive in Petersburg by November 1st, with another three delivered by the end of the year, and the remaining fourteen in 2018."

By Tatiana **Borisova**

Expert opinion

Nikolay Petrov, Transport Concessionary Company's Deputy Chief Engineer:

This tram project is the first of its kind for Russia. Belarusian vehicles will stand out among existing rolling stocks, which is mainly painted red. The new models are more attractive, being painted brightly, to raise the spirits of city residents. The project is very important, since most European cities use modern electro-transport these days, to ease traffic congestion. For some reason, only Russian cities are still using tram rails, but we're aiming to become up-to-date.



Receiving a boost

In 2016, the population totalled around 9.5 million people: approximately 350,000 more than five years ago

According to UN data, by 2030, the population of the planet will have risen by a billion. However, some countries' birth rates are actually too low to ensure that their population remains steady. Among them are the USA, Brazil, Russia, Japan, Vietnam, Germany, Iran, the UK and, even, China! More than eighty states are affected. Our country is on the list, despite having improved the birth rate in recent years. How can we build on this to accelerate growth?

Last year, for the first time in twenty years, Belarus saw natural growth,

with the number of those born exceeding the number of those who died. In 2016, the population totalled around 9.5 million people: approximately 350,000 more than five years ago. The Head of the Socio-Demographic Policy Sector, at the Human Development and Demography Department, at the NAS Institute of Economics of Belarus, Natalia Shcherbina, tells us more, "Of late, our country has seen demographic growth, with the trend helped considerably by the favourable structure of the population: we have lots of citizens born in the early 1980s, who have now entered child-bearing age."

We're still working to ensure a growing population, as the Academic Director of the Belarusian Economic

Research and Outreach Centre (BEROC), Katerina Bornukova, underlines. She explains, "Belarus covers around 207,000 sq.km, while the UK is 243,000sq.km — just 18 percent larger. However, the UK has 63 million residents. In theory, even 50 million people could easily live in our country."

We can currently feed up to 20 million people but we're some way off of achieving this figure. Each woman of child-bearing age has 1.7 children (the 'aggregate birth coefficient'). This is much better than in the early 2000s, when the figure dropped to 1.2. However, it's not enough. If we ignore the recent boost to population figures from migration, the population is falling. According to UN forecasts, by 2100, we may have

only 7.6 million residents. To achieve simple population replenishment (let alone growth) the coefficient should be at least 2.15.

How can we reach this figure? Ms. Shcherbina explains, “In our country, the rising birth rate coincided with a period of economic growth, accompanied by enhanced living standards. The opportunity to work and earn provides confidence in the future, and is the best stimulus for deciding to have children.”

France’s situation provides a good example, as it boasts one of the highest birth coefficients in the European Union. Since 1945, encouraging measures of state support have included family allowances, care leave, tax privileges, and the provision of free nurseries and kindergartens.

Such an approach is an obvious one. Annually, our country spends around 2 percent of its GDP on child allowances (we have eleven of these). Meanwhile, special attention is paid to families with many children. In 2015, family capital was introduced: a family receives \$10,000 when the third baby (or subsequent) is born. This can be spent on housing, provision of education and other important costs involved in raising children. Tatiana Starinskaya, a deputy of the National Assembly’s House of Representatives, comments, “One of the key measures is paid leave after childbirth, of up to three years. This distinguishes our country from others. As far as families with many children are concerned, state support is provided across various areas. For example, if a family’s budget is less than the minimum living wage, we pay state target assistance. Many types of privileges exist, including in the sphere of education, alongside measures of housing support. These give a powerful financial ‘helping hand’ to parents.”

Stimulation of growth is only part of the national strategy. Just as important is the need to neutralise negative factors. Improved medical facilities are bearing fruit, with Belarus’ infant mortality rate now standing at one of the lowest worldwide. The overall mortality rate in the

Republic has fallen from 14.4 percent in 2010 to 12.6 percent in 2015-2016. Campaigns to deter smoking, alcoholism and drug addiction have played a role, with the population becoming healthier and living longer.

Ms. Shcherbina tells us, “In 2016, expected lifespan stood at 74.1 years, against 69 years in 2000.” Demograph-

if we want to enhance birth rates we need to change the accent.

“In Sweden, the switching of state policy has benefitted the birth rate. Women have moved from seeing themselves as mothers alone. Sweden has directed efforts to offering affordable child care, so that women can combine work and maternity. Also, importantly, it’s en-

Belarus covers around 207,000 sq.km, while the UK is 243,000 sq.km — just 18 percent larger. However, the UK has 63 million residents. In theory, even 50 million could easily live in our country

ic policy measures are, undoubtedly, paying dividends, with housing support, allowances following childbirth, and rising average monthly salaries all contributing. However, economic factors are not the ‘be all and end all’. According to a report by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the UN Secretariat, the highest birth rate among 47 less developed countries stands at 4.3 births per woman. As a result, the population of these countries is increasing by 2.4 percent per year. Meanwhile, developed countries are seeing a decline. Is it a paradox? Ms. Bornukova explains this ‘demographic transition’, whereby women are aware of the opportunities open to them and see themselves as more than mothers. They have ambitions for their happiness beyond motherhood.

Nigar Göksel, the International Crisis Group’s Project Director, offers Turkey as an example. Husbands don’t tend to help about the house, and grandparents are usually far away, while employers don’t show much sympathy to mothers; as a result, women face the choice of either having a career or raising children. Ms. Bornukova notes that

abling fathers to take time off work to aid with child care,” she explains.

France has also done well, offering subsidised nursery facilities and accredited nurses to take care of babies at home. However, it’s necessary to understand that the change of values takes time; it can’t be calculated from a mathematical point of view and an incorrect step can ruin previous successes. It’s best to move carefully. Short-term leave following childbirth is being set up for fathers, notes, Ms. Starinskaya, alongside other measures.

“In our country, any relative can take leave following childbirth, so that the mother can continue working. Recently, amendments were adopted into legislation, allowing mothers to work part-time while on maternity leave, without losing their allowance,” explains Ms. Starinskaya.

Last year, the population of the European Union increased by 1.5 million, due to migration. Moreover, over 28 percent of children born in England and Wales last year had foreign-born mothers. Women arriving from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh are making a significant contribution to

the demographic situation in the UK. On average, their families have 2.5-fold more children than those from European countries.

Belarus observed considerable migration growth in 2014 and 2015. Ms. Shcherbina tells us, “It was preconditioned by the unstable political and economic situation, as well as the military conflict in Ukraine. Net inflow of migrants from this country rose 3.5-fold in 2014 (compared to the previous year) and by almost 6-fold in 2015. The migration growth of this period has enabled us to overcome the natural decline in population.”

Of course, migration flow can bring problems, as we see along the EU borders, some of which are being closed to migrants. However, if we act wisely, we can receive benefits in regard to demography and the economy. Guests from Ukraine have taken jobs which were vacant because of lack of our own personnel. They are working at trolley bus depots, medical institutions and agricultural enterprises.

“This is what we need,” explains Ms. Bornukova. “There’s a view in our country that migrants should be exclusively specialists, with a high level of competence. However, it’s not truly necessary. To attract foreigners, our migration legislation should encourage those who have a chance to find work in our Republic.”

Of course, competition on the world market is high and many go where they can receive higher salaries. In recent years, the IT industry and the sphere of biotechnology have been developing in Belarus. A decree is being developed to turn our country into a high-tech state, to help attract intellectual capital.

The growth of the population makes the country stronger economically and politically. China would hardly have become the world’s second largest economy without its population of almost 1.4 billion. Meanwhile, people should have the opportunity to earn money, and receive an education and medical aid, ensuring a decent life. We’re moving along this path.

By Valeria **Gavrusheva**



Substantial lessons of demography

Fifteen years ago, our country was the first in the post-Soviet space to acknowledge the global demographic problem of an aging population and falling birth rates. As a result, a law on demographic security has been adopted, followed by a first national programme of action, developed by leading experts and physicians.



ALEXANDER STA DUB

Since then, every five years, the country has defined its major targets. Pleasingly, in 2016 (for the first time in twenty years), there was a natural increase in population. Belarus boasts the lowest maternal mortality rates in the CIS, while its infant mortality stands at 3.2 per mille. In the first seven months of 2017, this figure reached 2.9 ppm, placing Belarus among the top three countries worldwide.

Despite one in seven women suffering difficulties during their pregnancy, 'normal' births are increasing, now reaching 41.7 percent. However, the number of women of reproductive age is falling. Most 13-15-year-old girls dream not about motherhood and large families but of a career. They think of travel and fun and large salaries. Our state has over a hundred institutions assisting mothers and children, and enjoys a clear system of family support, yet continues to face the need to promote reproductive trends.

The consequences of the 1990s demographic fall are evident. In three years' time, there will be only 2.162 million potential mothers in Belarus; by 2040, their number will have fallen by around 350,000. "We're working with schoolgirls, asking about their future family plans. Sadly, some have no desire to have children at all. For our nation to develop, almost every family needs to have three children. In recent years, the number of large families has risen by only 0.5 percent — from 5.5 to 6 percent. About 63 percent of families are raising a single child," notes the Head of the Matulya Centre of Family and Children Support, Veronika Serdyuk. She laments that women who've already had one or two children consider abortion an option. What forces them to take this step, when the state is ready to offer all practical support? Lack of money, or fear for the future? Not at all. Such women say that their husband or partner is against having another child, or they fear what their neighbours will think. Unfortunately, harmful stereotypes continue, concerning large families.

The amended Law 'On Public Health Protection' permits doctors to refuse the offering of an abortion, on moral and ethical grounds. Logoisk doctors have decided to no longer offer abortions at all, making the city the country's first settlement without this service.

The Head of the Main Department of the Medical Aid Organisation at the Health Ministry, Yelena Bogdan, notes that women are marrying later, and having children later too: a trend registered across the EU. It's time to reflect on what motivates and encourages parents. The introduction of short-term leave for new fathers (up to two weeks) is now being discussed. Slodych Confectionery is providing a good example in allowing five days of unpaid leave, regardless of how busy the workplace is. Student families, which number several hundred, also need support, since it's hard to combine parenthood and studies. Of course, a young couple can be provided with a room in a hostel and can receive some material support at the initial stage. However, more needs to be done. For example, in Russia, young mothers paying for education are automatically waived their fees.

There's no doubt that the state is offering various support to families with children: allowances, free school meals, and subsidised textbooks for children from large families, as well as New Year presents, and additional payments for attending health camps... However, parents of three or more children assert that they'd like to see differentiation in the system, since families with four children have different needs to those with nine. No doubt, problems remain to be settled but society must agree on viewing the birth of a baby as a gift, regardless of support, privileges, family capital and other measures of social support. Our forefathers did not have mountains of gold: they believed that a large, friendly family was their treasure.

By Inna **Kabysheva**

The United Nations 70th General Assembly has designated 2017 as the International Year of Sustainable Tourism. Bike4SDGs — a young initiative encouraging a mass cycle ride — helps domestic and foreign tourists see a more complete representation of the history of Belarus, and its beautiful rural areas



Bike4SDGs returns

Facilitation of tourism development in Belarus

Saturday, 26th of August 2017, and it is a perfect day to be on a bike. Taking advantage of the sunny, warm weather, with its gentle, late August breeze, around 400 people of more than twenty nationalities — aged 7 to 77 years, came to cycle along Avgustovsky Canal, in the Grodno Region of Belarus. The exceptional weather and the possibility of spending a perfect day outdoors were not the only reasons for these people gathering. They hopped on their bikes to join a massive cycling event called Bike4SDGs, and to test their abilities in a 18.5km ride, and 6km kayaking, through the lush scenery of the canal.

For the second year in a row, Bike4SDGs drew participants of all walks, ages and abilities to spend their day cycling and kayaking, to raise awareness of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

A little bit of history

Bike4SDGs is a young initiative, first organised one year ago, on September 21st, when around 600 cyclists rolled out, attempting a 22km course through the Naliboksky Nature Reserve, in the Volozhin District of the Minsk Region. The huge success of the ride and positive feedback from its participants inspired the UNDP in Belarus, the event's main initiator and organiser, to upgrade it to an annual ride.

Completing, not competing, is the name of the ride

Although Bike4SDGs has all the features of a sporting event, it's designed as a partnership bike ride, aimed at highlighting the contribution Belarus is making to promoting and achieving the SDGs at local level. Goal #10, Reduced Inequalities, is supported through offering equal opportunities to people with disabilities, allowing them to take part in the



SERGEY PLYTKEVICH

ride. Goal #15, Life on Land, and Goal #13, Climate Action, are featured through promoting reduced usage of non-eco-friendly transportation. Goal #3, Good Health and Well-Being, is streamlined through promoting a healthy lifestyle. The event has become the biggest annual bike ride in Belarus themed around SDGs.

This year, Bike4SDGs moved to the Avgustovsky Canal in the Grodno Region, where it joined the International Folk Festival 'The Avgustovsky Canal in the Culture of Three Nations'. The latter has been organised for the past 17-years, aimed at boosting cultural relations between the three neighbours: Belarus, Poland, and Lithuania. Bike4SDGs helped the Festival raise its international profile and added a strong sports segment to its agenda.

Bike4SDGs participants spent the day adhering to a healthy lifestyle, learning about the history and culture of the Avgustovsky Canal, but also giving up their use of cars, for the benefit of the environment, for the rest of the day.

Convenient venue to demonstrate advantages

The United Nations 70th General Assembly has designated 2017 as the International Year of Sustainable Tourism. This shifted the ride's primary focus and, in addition to promoting and celebrating the topics set earlier, in the 2016 ride, Bike4SDGs 2017 concentrated on the role of bike tourism in inclusive economic development.

In recent years, bicycle tourism has been on the rise across Europe, accounting for 2-4 percent of total trips in most European countries. It annually contributes over 44 billion Euros to the EU's economy.

In Belarus, cycling tourism just truly begun taking off. The country has great potential for developing bike tourism, and the Avgustovsky Canal is a perfect place to showcase the





SERGEY PLYTKEVICH

Around 500 cyclists and 40 kayakers — representatives of various national ministries, diplomatic corps, UN agencies, and cycling communities from Poland, Lithuania and Belarus, joined by residents of the Grodno Region — took to the historic route, enjoying the picturesque tourist potential of the Avgustovsky Canal, in a 18.5km ride and 6km of kayaking, beside the unique 19th century hydrotechnical construction

benefits cycling can bring, to boost tourism and benefit local economies, attracting riding and boating tourists.

A monument of 19th century hydro engineering technologies, the canal runs for 100km through the territories of contemporary Poland and Belarus. The canal was built in the 1820s, to bypass Prussian customs posts that imposed high duties for Polish, Lithuanian and Russian transit of goods through its territory. At the beginning of the 20th century, the place became a popular tourist destination, providing excellent sporting opportunities for kayakers, sailors and boaters. During the period of the Soviet Union, the canal's beauties remained hidden from foreign tourists. Now, the canal has been reconstructed and has received a new wave of attention.

No need to pull off until tomorrow...

Local authorities have ambitious plans to turn the Avgustovsky Canal into a tourist attraction again. A visa-free regime has been imposed for the territory, inviting foreign tourists to visit the Belarusian part of the canal by bike, boat or kayak.

Bike4SDGs used this opportunity, inviting cycling communities from neighbouring Poland and Lithuania to join the ride. Many had never been to this side of the Avgustovsky Canal before and really loved what they saw and experienced.



The participation of Poland and Lithuania is helping establish new partnerships for promotion of tourism in the region, linking Bike4SDGs to Goal #8, Good Jobs and Economic Growth. The UNDP, together with Polish partners, recently announced plans to build a 10km long, inclusive bicycle lane in Lida.

The ride highlighted how investing into pedal power and kayaking can contribute to building local accessibility and facilitating a vibrant and inclusive economy, while reducing negative environmental impact.

Inclusive event helps to remove barriers

It has already become a tradition for Bike4SDGs to be accessible for people with disabilities, bringing them social opportunities and the chance to keep fit. This year, over twenty cyclists with disabilities joined the ride, proving that they don't need cars to take control of their mobility, and to enjoy sensational scenery and beautiful landscapes. Many hand and wheelchair cyclists rode the whole distance and successfully crossed the finish line. Cycling was not always easy, as some parts of the bike trail chal-

lenged with steep climbs and sandy roads. Dozens of caring volunteers, who acted as route marshals, did their best to help people with disabilities enjoy cycling.

At pit stops set along the course, cyclists could relax, enjoying the water and the stunning beauty of the local landscape.

Official closing of Bike4SDGs, as part of the festival's bright programme

The concert featured amazing wheelchair dancing. Taking part were 2016 European Championship silver medallists in wheelchair sport dancing Irina Makeichik and Yevgeny Yarmoshko, who also won the German Open Championship in 2017. They were joined by the winners of the World Cup in wheelchair sport dancing, Anna Ivanova and Mikhail Zhigalov, and the winners of the 2016 World Cup 'Everybody Dance' (Ukraine), World Champions in Latin American dance in wheelchairs Darya Kulsh and Alexander Lyakhovich. Also taking part was Natalia Astanina, a member of the international dancing and parachuting project.

By Vladimir **Mikhailov**

18,5
km Bike
SDGs Road
6 km +
SDGs Waterway

In the eastern orbit

A search for lost values sometimes does lead to distant lands. This was the thoughts of Minsk historian and collector Vladimir Lihodedov when, during the recent Moscow International Book Fair, he presented his historical-educational book, entitled 'Belarus and the Muslim World' (already in its second edition) together with the Sharjah Book Authority, an unexpected but fortuitous pairing.

Undoubtedly, 'Belarus and the Muslim World' by Vladimir Lihodedov is a true revelation for many. It's no surprise, as Belarus is divided from the Muslim regions of the world by thousands of kilometres; however, centuries-long ties do exist. A substantial number of the books have found their way to the United Arab Emirates. This was also facilitated by the fact that the text has been written in five languages: Belarusian, Russian, English, Arab and Turkish. Now, the book is

V. VLADIMIR MITYUSHKIN



A mosque in Ivie. 1916



A mosque. 1920s



Ordashchi village in Smorgon District. A Muslim cemetery in 1916

found in the collections of libraries and museums of Turkey, Qatar, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Abu Dhabi. It tells us about the history of trade and cultural contacts between Belarus and the Muslim world. Special attention is paid to the Belarusian Tatars. Moreover, the contribution of our scientists into Oriental studies was also noted. The edition is illustrated with reproductions of unique old postcards from Mr. Lihodedov's collection, as well as the author's contemporary photos.

Vladimir Lihodedov and guests from Sharjah at the Moscow International Book Fair



A mosque in the early 20th century



Minsk Tatars. 1918



Muslims on their festive day near the mosque. 1920s

“During excavations in Belarus, archaeologists have unearthed ancient Eastern coins and silver Dirhams dating back to the 8th-9th century. The major subject of Eastern trade at that time was my native city of Polotsk — the centre of ancient Polotsk Principality,” Mr. Lihodedov says proudly. “The greatest treasure including Arab Dirhams in Belarus was also discovered not far from Polotsk in 1973 (hidden approximately in the mid- 940s). Most of the coins are Dirhams of the Arab Caliphate, minted in North Africa, the Middle East, Transcaucasia, Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia. This treasure became a kind of map, reflecting the wide geography of the Muslim East, involved in trade with our ancestors in Belarus. There isn’t much material about the history of the

Islamic community in Belarus. However, they do exist and evidence shows that such nations diverse in faith and culture — Christians-Belarusians and Muslims-Tatars — were peacefully and friendly setting up their houses and lives side by side, hand in hand, for many centuries.”

The experience of Belarus is unique not only for historical world practice. Our country ‘continues to be a brilliant example of successful functioning of a multi-confessional society’. This is the opinion of Vladimir Peftiev, taken from his foreword to the book ‘Belarus and the Muslim World’: ‘Thousand-year ties of Belarus with the Muslim world is, in our view, invaluable heritage which serves nowadays as a basis for mutual understanding and the development

of fruitful cooperation in various spheres of economy and culture’.

This was also noted in his speech by the Faisal Khalid Al Naboodah, an Executive Director of the Sharjah Book Authority, at the presentation of the edition in Moscow. Highly praising both the book itself and the support provided by Vladimir Peftiev, Mr. Faisal Khalid Al Naboodah underlined that good relations between nations can and should be built via attentive and respectful dialogue, as well as educational and cultural interaction. He invited Vladimir Lihodedov and Vladimir Peftiev to take part in the Book Fair in Sharjah. As expected, the search for the lost often leads to new discoveries.

By Alina **Kolesnikova**,
Vladimir **Matyushkin**



Recreation with rural flair

Nature favours: almost forty percent of Belarus is occupied by forests. Considering twenty thousand rivers and ten thousand lakes, it is for a good reason that our country is often called Sineokaya (Blue-Eyed). Unsurprisingly, rural ecologically friendly agro-tourism is developing with immense speed.

State shoulder

In 2006, there were only 34 agricultural homesteads registered in Belarus but, at present, around 2,300 operate — with the Vitebsk and Minsk regions in the lead. The secret of success is simple: the hard work and traditional hospitality of the owners. State support is also a great aid. According to the Decree of the President of the Republic of Belarus as of June 2nd, 2006 ‘On Measures for the Development of Agro-ecotourism in the Republic of Belarus’, loans for construction of an agro-mansion are provided on a preferential basis for the period of up to seven years, with a possible deferral of payments for a year.

“Citizens who permanently reside in rural areas can work in the field of agro-ecotourism on a declarative principle — paying a one-off annual fee. The sum is not large at all: around \$10. Agro-mansions are fully exempt from taxes and other mandatory payments,” Yelena Perminova, the Director of the Department of Tourism at Belarus’ Ministry of Sports and Tourism, explains.

It is now clear why rural houses are opening in a geometric progression. “This is beneficial for everyone,” believes Valeria Klitsounova, who heads the Country Escape Association. “Villagers enjoy an additional opportunity to earn money while local authorities and the region in general registers an increase of funds, infrastructure development and the creation of new

Figures

- The total number of agro-homesteads is 2,263: 605 — in the Vitebsk Region, 597 — in the Minsk Region, 346 — in the Brest Region, 303 — in the Grodno Region and, 216 — in the Mogilev Region and 196 — in the Gomel Region.
- 300 thousand people spent their holidays in Belarusian mansions last year — including 90 percent of Belarusians and 10 percent of foreigners from 74 states (including 24 thousand Russians).



Yedishki Khutor estate, near Vitebsk

jobs. In turn, tourists get the chance to spend their vacation interestingly and with little expense in an ecologically friendly environment.”

Each homestead has its own flavour and colour. Some hosts have preserved and reproduced local traditions and cuisine, while others offer active rest — fishing, hiking and scenic walks.

Please the forest host and find Zazyvka

Yedishki Khutor estate near Vitebsk is among the few in Belarus with its own petting zoo: sheep and horses. A hedgehog family also lives here, with a mother, father and babies. Children are delighted with these live spiny beasts.

Another interesting homestead is Belovezhskoe Pomestie near Brest; it borders the national park. Holidaying here is like time travel: guests can get personally acquainted with the traditions and lifestyle of our ancestors. The restored wooden hut recreates a 19th century rural house down to the smallest detail. Food is cooked in a true clay oven, according to old recipes.

Those relaxing in agro-mansions near the Berezinsky Biosphere Reserve are envied. The reserve is thoroughly imbued with myths and the number of sacred places, legends and fairy tales is enormous. Not long ago, the Centre of Mythological Tourism opened here and tourists on the exciting journey along the mysterious route are accompanied by author of the idea — Victor Boiko. Dressed as the mythological Bolotnik, he describes the unique Belarusian nature — using the mythological characters: Leshy, Polevik and others. Guests should under no circumstances go deep into the forest as they might meet Zazyvka — a forest spirit in the image of a beautiful naked girl. She will fascinate the unwary and carry them away to the dense forest and then disappear — mockingly laughing as she bids them farewell...

Those wanting a spine-tingling experience can enjoy a night-time excursion to the mysterious world of forest spirits where strange characters come alive with sound and visual installations.

By Boris **Orehov**

Heading to the countryside estate

For several years, Ganka estate, near Minsk, has been named best in the ‘Hospitality’ nomination for rural tourist households

Host Anatoly Gonets has conducted a military band, been a captain, and even headed a pharmaceutical firm, but suddenly abandoned everything, leaving Minsk to head to the countryside, where he and his wife bought a ruined old house. His creative approach has resulted in an amazing new business.

“When I was in Israel, on a kibbutz, I took note of how things were run and pondered on introducing something similar in Belarus. I encouraged hosts of other agro-estates in the idea and we created a tourist cluster. Each estate is unique. One grows organic potatoes, beets and carrots, which we pay for at 60 Kopecks per kilo, buying his entire stock. He benefits from not having to take his produce to market, where it may rot before finding a buyer. Another farmer produces cheese using Dutch technology; a third has his own hives,” Anatoly explains.

Anatoly bakes bread on his Ganka estate, using ancient recipes, in wood-burning stoves. There’s no competition between estates; only mutual benefits. If someone has no room to accommodate eager guests, he sends them to his neighbours. People arrive intending to stay for a week but often linger for two or three. There’s even an arrangement with a nearby sanatorium, so tourists can go for relaxing treatments.



Apples, once again apples...

Festival brings zest to Vitebsk Region

Pople living in the Sharkovshchina District of the Vitebsk Region know well the 'Apple Fest', hosted by the village of Alashki. It's included in the festival cycle of international friendship, 'Belarusian Summer', as one of the most entertaining and original events of the season. It gathers folk groups from the Pskov Region, with whom Sharkovshchina has not only cultural ties, but economic relations.

The celebration of one of the most beautiful holidays of late summer began in Sharkovshchina about 20 years ago, when the village of Alashki opened its museum dedicated to agronomist Ivan Sikora, who gained fame for his work with selective cultivar breeding. Known locally as Michurin, he planted a hybrid apple orchard, which is now tended by museum workers, continuing the traditions of their talented countryman. Sikora's apple trees bring so much happiness, with their generous crops.

The Pskov Region's 'Zhuravushka' and 'Vdokhnovenie' folk groups took part in the event this year, dressed in national costume. The Head of the Pskov Regional Centre of Culture, Galina Lari-





onova, tells us, “Our artistes are frequent visitors to various creative forums in Belarus, while we’re for the first time, in Alashki. The atmosphere of the holiday is unusual, with the traditions of ancestors and the soul of people felt strongly.”

Sharkovshchina folk groups are regular visitors to Pskov Region festivals, as there are various cultural-economic partnerships. Every September, enterprises bring their best produce to Pskov’s agricultural fair, while local groups perform, and artisans show their crafts, creating a wonderful atmosphere. Invitations have already been sent for the next event.

This year, at the top of ‘Apple Avenue’, groups took to the stage to perform, while artisans, craftsmen and owners of farmsteads invited visitors to purchase souvenirs, and sample national cuisine. Naturally, apple recipes featured large! After the ceremony of the godfather, which opened festivities, groups from Latvia and Russia contributed berries and fruits to the collective basket.



The ‘Apple Fest’ holiday, held in the Alashki village, is included in the festival cycle of international friendship ‘Belarusian Summer’, as one of the most entertaining and original events of the season



The then Culture Minister Boris Svetlov joined the Chairman of the Sharkovshchina District Executive Committee, Dmitry Lomako, at the event, offering a master class in mowing. He also learnt how to bake pancakes on an apple block: an ancient tradition revived in Sharkovshchina, in the village of Radyuki.

“Sharkovshchina has its own zest,” noted Mr. Svetlov. “People are showing that culture is inseparably connected with work and with the history of our land. It’s what attracts tourists. I have only praise for this festival. It’s the first time that I’ve baked pancakes on an apple block. When I return home, I’ll surprise my wife.”

Visitors to the festival tasted apple gifts, participated in master classes in arts and crafts, and watched a competition to find the ‘Lord of the Village’ (chosen from among the young families in the region). Meanwhile, there was the joy of an ‘Apple Wedding’.

Summer may have ended, but visitors’ memories of this festival will warm them for months to come.

By Andrey **Zakharov**



Living water of beauty

Olga Gaidukevich — one of the first in Europe to combine the arts of theatre and floristry

Isloch Park Wellness Complex, near village of Rakov (close to Minsk), hosts 2nd International Festival of Landscape Art — Landart Camp Spa 2017, attracting designers from Russia, Poland, Switzerland, Italy and Belarus creating open-air art, from branches, cones, grass and stones

The festival is the brainchild of Roza Azora, which offers international training courses in professional floristry. It's a name well-known to Belarusians, thanks to its wide network of floristry shops. Several years ago, the Association of Professional Florists and Flower Business was set up in Belarus by Olga Gaidukevich — a master-florist and Roza Azora's founder. Olga is the first in Europe to combine the arts of theatre and floristry. Her debut flower performance — 'Experiment: Winter' — has received praise from Belarusian theatre directors, journalists and cultural figures.

Olga is convinced that flowers have their own soul and come to a person's life with some hidden

purpose. When I look at my potted plants, I understand her meaning. I can spend hours looking at my scarlet rose, observing its unfolding petals. My clivia also delights me, blooming in winter on my windowsill. Its fiery orange blossoms contrast with the sparkling snow outside the window. Of course, many plants need certain conditions to thrive, and we may fail to understand their needs, to help them thrive and bloom.

Olga here discusses the language of plants and the delicate art of floristry, which is gathering fans in Belarus.

Olga, floristry is becoming increasingly popular — including among entrepreneurs and bankers, artists, linguists and housewives. How far do you think this is a reaction to our technogenic world?

Many of those coming to study at our school are seeking an artistic escape through floristry, being eager to achieve self-expression. Others have different motives, perhaps finding it a way to relax from stressful employment, such as on an ambulance team, or a job which doesn't allow them creative expression, such as working in a bank.



During lesson

We have accountants and young mothers. People from Australia, New Zealand and Italy come to us. For example, French floristry champion Jean-Louis Amis arrives this winter for the 'Psychology of Art' course (run by Peter Hess). He'll then deliver a two-day

seminar, called 'Elegant Christmas,' focusing on decorating large spaces. An old building of 300 square metres is to host these classes. We also hope Eric Bianco, a well-known figure in the sphere of floristry, will come to join us.

We're united in our desire to appreciate the beauty in everyday life, and to create and invent something new. We study material, texture and colours for three hours in a row. Understandably, it alters your perceptions. You notice the smallest details and nuances, finding treasure in a mossy branch, torn moss or autumn flourishing forsythia. Fresh flowers can be more valuable than diamonds.

Floristry can inspire you to create something magnificent. One of our students, from Los Angeles, launched his own line of lamps after attending our course on the theory of light: a must for floristry. His lamps are highly original.

Florists use psychology to influence mood but can you tell how someone is feeling by the bouquet they choose?

I often advise on which flowers to select to raise the spirits. Beauti-



In the hall for seminars

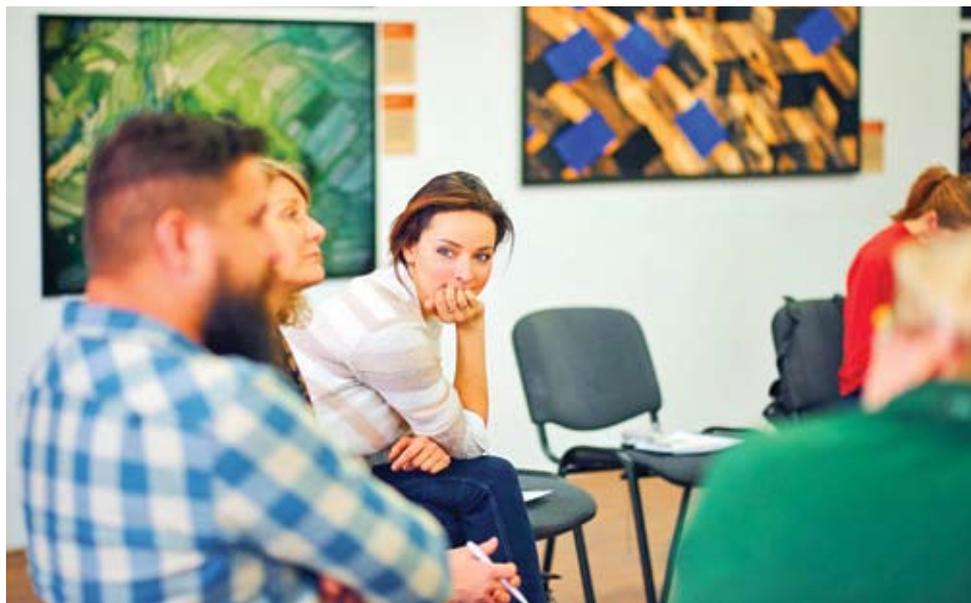
ful plants come to us in trying times. My work with flowers rescued me from deep depression, caused by my father's death. I realised what a powerful tool this could be! At the same time, you need experience and knowledge; there's more to it than matching tones. I graduated from an art school, while my higher linguistic education helped me participate in international competitions and seminars. I became a professional only after finishing the Nicole Moscov school of florist-designers (based on the Swiss system). Interestingly, Peter Hess, the main guest at the Isloch Park festival, is from Switzerland, where he teaches 'Psychology of Art' Roza Azora courses. Peter came to floristry after a spinal injury ended his Olympic medal hopes. He developed a passion for creating beauty; flowers give us so much positive energy! They're like life-living water. In the 1960s, he founded land art — a globally recognised direction in floristry and landscape design.

Flowers are beautiful but working with them is an expensive business...

True. It's especially expensive to invite floristry stars to Belarus. We



All ages surrender to beauty of floristry



'Psychology of Art' seminar run by Peter Hess

periodically organise touring seminars, such as working with flowers in French Provence. In the future, pupils at our children's school of floristry will travel to Milan, having been invited to the International 'My Plant and Garden Fair'.

Which materials do you prefer to use?

We aim to limit damage to the environment, so we use only natural materials, and bring new life to old things, in the manner of recycling. If you soak old newspaper and paint it, you can mould a sculpted work of art. You can create the shape of a tree from veneer, and glue small water vials in place, from which plants will bloom. Such a composition was presented by Gregor Lersch from Germany: a legend in the world of floristry. He's lectured in architectural floristry at our school, teaching students how to introduce contemporary design into the environment. A flower pot may be fine on a windowsill but it can damage the integral composition of the interior, carefully created by decorators.

There are many modern avenues of floristry design, including recycling, architectural floristry and land art. Can you tell us more?

Floristry has a long history, having begun in the Netherlands, when the fashion for tulips was born. Artists painted still life canvases of tulips, fruits and game, while ladies held small bouquets at parties. Later, flowers began to be placed in vases, with florists inserting blooms into water-soaked moss. Bouquet holders were pinned to the waists of dresses.

These days, florists need to know the basics of physics, chemistry or botany. Diverse compositions are now demonstrated not only in special halls but in open-air spaces. Land art creates works in the natural environment. In the forest, you can use tree stumps, dead branches and scattered cones; perhaps, you may find a small lake with reeds nearby. These inspire ideas and allow you to create something perfectly in tune with the environment: born from existing materials.

What do you do when there aren't enough materials?

We search for them, mostly going to the construction market. You can find so much there: welded wire net, diverse fittings, metal rods, wire, a wax melter.... Some elements can be found in landfill or ordered from the factory. It's easier, often, for men

to work with larger pieces, which are placed on huge metal frames.

Tell us about commercial floristry...

People like wreaths covered in ribbons and garlands of balls, using artificial fir branches. They're commonly for sale in the shops, but have nothing in common with high floristry.

The profession of florist doesn't actually exist in Belarus, does it?

Sadly, you're right. With this in mind, the Association of Professional Florists and Flower Businesses has proposed adding a new speciality to the state register of professions — including all relevant standards and classifications. In France, the profession of florist is considered to be one of the most dangerous, since

ally wanted those roses, to congratulate his beloved daughter on her tenth birthday. I agreed to help organise a private flight to Kenya or Ecuador, where such roses grow on plantations, and arrange prompt clearance through customs. However, he changed his mind about it, and settled on an alternative. In fact, we still created something spectacular, and both father and daughter were delighted. Belarusian celebrities also love to order floral dresses, which can be worn once only before the blooms die. I once 'sewed' a wedding dress from roses and hydrangeas, which her groom persuaded her to wear for as long as possible, even though the blooms were fading. She looked so beautiful!



ated an impulse, which the scientist connected to a sensor, unlocking the door. If a stranger approached, the plant failed to react. This proved that plants have memory. Another experiment showed a ficus correctly identifying a person out of a hundred, each of whom brought a lighter close by. Changes on a computer chart indicated the plant's 'state of health'.

I've heard that a drooping plant you've given up hope on can revive or, even, bloom. Is this true?

It does happen. Make sure you talk to your flowers, and share good emotions with them. They hear everything.

Interviewed by Alisa **Krasovskaya**



Florist Peter Hess (Switzerland)

you deal with many allergens: pollen, chemicals, and solutions. Moreover, you need to lift heavy loads. A huge bouquet of red roses is Hell to carry. Your wrists seem to be falling off afterwards.

Do you have many 'romantic' orders?

I was asked, once, to deliver ten thousand roses, with just one day's notice. It was winter and, naturally, it was impossible to find so many flowers in Belarus. Meanwhile, my customer re-

What's the best way to prolong the life of plants, and flowers? They need certain conditions to thrive, and it can be tricky.

Some scientists believe flowers have intelligence, though we're yet to study it. In the 1970s, a scientist connected his computer to his ficus plant situated on a staircase in his residential building, near the window. Theoretically, it 'saw' everyone who lived there. Each time someone passed whom the ficus recognised, it gener-



Light your fire, or path to yourself



Tolya (Ivan Kushneruk) and Maxim (Pavel Ostroukh). A scene from performance

WWW.KUPALAUSKIBY

The theatrical season in Belarus that opened in September continues to please us with premieres, including original 'Matches' performance by Belarusian playwright Konstantin Steshik, directed by Tatiana Larina, on the Yanka Kupala National Academic Theatre's Chamber Stage

When my friends and I went to the Austeria Uršula Café, near the theatre's service entrance, to grab a coffee after the premiere, I felt confused, in the state of stupefaction! One, a middle-aged designer, asked me how I'd liked the show and I had no idea how to reply. Without waiting for my answer, she said, "There's something in it..." My fellow journalist friend called the performance 'a rebus' and said nothing more. Meanwhile,

a 68-year-old hydrogeologist said he was very fascinated by the show. The 18-year-old, first-year student and future programmer, sitting with us smiled ironically, saying that the language was 'modern'. We then began discussing the sets and decided that these were stylish and original.

Reflecting on the Kupala Theatre's premiere staged by Tatiana Larina — which opened the 98th theatrical season on the Chamber Stage — I dwelt on the sarcastic tone of the student which he used to express his attitude towards the performance. It 'tortured' me all night; at the café, then at home

and, even, in my dreams, I pondered on why he'd responded in that way. Such cases often inspire me to write an article, although I tend to wait until the morning to clarify my thoughts. Everything seems clearer then. Vague feelings, images and key phrases emerge from the subconscious, like a ball of yarn unwinding.

I suddenly realised that the performance's modern feeling was due to its language, which was that of today's young people: laconic, concise and slightly sarcastic. They easily understand each other, reading between the lines, using language unburdened by unnecessary details. They are the 'net' generation, used to algorithms and charts. However, this doesn't mean that their inner life is poor, as my freshman friend demonstrates.

This is the language of Konstantin Steshik's play. It is as if 'torn', its characters communicating without unnecessary words. They speak in half-words. They fail to disclose what's happening in their 'real' lives and souls. It seems time has stopped during the show and even the characters are slightly inhibited. However, this was only my first impression.

It's the task of the audience to read into the margins, between the pauses, to make sense of what happens on stage. It's possible to do this when actors fill their characters with intense inner life. What had puzzled me initially began to take shape, and the fragmented impressions I'd received began to intersect. I saw the destinies of the seven protagonists.

If you look closely at the poster of the play and the theatre programme, you'll see a hint at its meaning. It features a running creature: a wolf or a man, perhaps both. They are a mixture in a bottle, with a flaming fire in the heart of their chest...

Fire is a recurring motif in the play, in burning matches, in lighters and campfires. It's mentioned as the refrain in the parables which Tolya (played by Ivan Kushneruk) tells his young daughter in the evening.

Fire is symbolic, not just for cooking or to provide light, but to sear the past, clearing the indomitable selfishness of human nature. This is the fire of life, transforming our consciousness. In religious and philosophical teachings, it's called consuming — or the fire of consciousness.

In my opinion, an important thought in the stage director's concept of the performance is: without awareness of ourselves, our successes and failures, we become disoriented. Sometimes the behaviour of a person is absurd; he shies away from life and reality, not knowing how to escape nets of illusion, and so suffers, being captured by the power of unconscious battles. This is the cold darkness in which characters from Tolya's parables live.

Who is Tolya? Is he a writer or a musician? Actually, his profession and job are of no significance, as the director of the play believes. Tolya is the main character, representing the generation of thirty-year-olds searching for meaning in life and failing

to find it. His focus is to bring up his daughter. He puts her to sleep, buys food and meets friends when he has time. Relying on the scraps of phrases we hear him speak to his friends, we understand that Tolya lives in a house where neighbours drink and brawl. It's impossible to leave his daughter with them, and his wife Sveta works at night. She never appears in the performance. It's evident that Tolya has accepted the banality of his life, as is symbolised by the grey palette of his clothing, and the way he speaks to his friends, without expression or colour. They all wear jeans, T-shirts and sweatshirts, in dull tones, as they young do.

Tolya is well educated, kind and gentle, as we see from his declaration that he wishes to hurt no one in living his own life, and in his actions. Yet, introverted Tolya is seeking peace from the torment of his inner life. His thoughts give him no rest; while he stands at the bus stop, his mind wanders elsewhere. Probably, this was the task set by the stage director before actor Ivan Kushneruk.



After performance

Burnt matches represent an interesting motif in the performance. Tolya keeps them in a separate box and never throws them away or crushes them underfoot, as others do. The stage is littered with them, signifying a certain careless barbarism but also the idea of a 'spent' past. Burnt matches are like 'past' days of life, as when our character tries to understand the present, to understand the sense of life. Does it have meaning? It's no accident that the topic of smoking recurs through the play. Of course, it doesn't refer to Tolya's dependence on nicotine. I once read that psychologists believe that smoking, like alcohol abuse, is a way to escape reality. We wish to escape what cannot be changed: some drink while others smoke. We see this in Masha (played by Kristina Drobys, with Diana Kaminskaya in the second cast line-up) after the death of her beloved. Heavy smoker Tolya invites her to smoke. Anton (Dmitry Tumas) who's lost faith in love and who fails to accept and understand

his wife's devotion to dogs, drinks beer. Childishly naïve Maxim (played by Pavel Ostroukh) is keen on esoterica, escaping by 'running' into other worlds, attaching great importance to his dreams. He tries to understand which signs are sent by the otherworld in his dreams. It is he who tells Tolya that dramatic change is coming, singing a strange song: 'life comes on the point of a knife to residents of the second floor...'

Tolya lives on the second floor and often repeats Maxim's song, with a smile, as if seeing meaning in the enigmatic lines. This happens when a person is anticipating something very important in life. In this way, he seeks to break through the banal routines of the everyday.

Eventually, Tolya shakes himself free of oppressive thoughts and comforts Masha in her distress, trying to explain to restless Anton the absurdity of his attempted suicide. He demonstrates sympathy for lonely Sobachnitsa (played by Yekaterina Oleinikova and Marina Gordienok) whose love for her dog is not sufficient to 'save' her. Tolya becomes a hostage to her madness, as she attacks him with a knife while he tries to protect Masha from her insults...

Tolya doesn't appear to die but rather to transform.

It would be too obvious for death to be portrayed as a release from the routine of life.

Rather, this aspect of the plot remains ambiguous. It's likely that Tatiana Larina has chosen deliberate understatement. Tolya's insight and transformation of his consciousness is important. The world is full of lonely people, as we see in the performance; it's obvious if we look with our inner heart. Meanwhile, when we begin to feel meaning in our life, we stop feeling unhappy. Kushneruk manages to convey this message via the parable of throwing one's own past into the fire. Tolya gains self-awareness and, we must assume, ceases then to feel miserable. The spectacular final scene shows Tolya leaving the kitchen and merging with a pillar of fire. The lighting effects technician deserves sincere respect for this, as the fire illusion is amazing! While embracing the pillar, Tolya transforms, released from his oppressive sadness and obsession with the past — including matches. He is finally free.

I like to think that, in the face of death, Tolya realises how small his sufferings are, in comparison with his friend's death and Masha's grief. The fire is not only a symbol of Tolya's transformation but a symbol of life which is wiser than we are. In this respect multi-functional scenery in the form of cylindrical columns fits perfectly. These columns — of various diameters

— black and white, appear as a scattered technogenic megapolis, some grouped in one corner, others standing separately in another. They differ in height, resembling matches, trees in a forest or, even, poles at bus stops... You might think they resemble interior columns in houses and apartments. Certainly, they symbolise loneliness and psychological barriers between people, as well as the barriers which we build inside ourselves, preventing us from breathing freely, accepting life as it is.

Scenery was created by young artist Yekaterina Shimanovich. She is a pupil of Boris Gerlovan, a coryphée of scenography and art director of the Yanka Kupala Theatre. This is her debut as a set designer in the professional theatre.

As far as Tatiana Larina is concerned, she is no novice to directing, having participated in international festivals and theatrical workshops. She has worked as a stage director in the Vsevolod Meyerhold's Cultural Centre in Moscow ('Caliban's Death' performance) and in the Belarusian Drama Centre ('Harvest' performance). She has staged various performances. She graduated from the Academy of Arts, specialising in 'Drama Direction' (under Vitaly Kotovitsky), and took post-graduate courses at Vsevolod Meyerhold's Cultural Centre and at the Moscow

Art Theatre School (under Victor Ryzhakov). She plans to continue working with Belarusian theatres, focusing on modern Belarusian drama. Her desire is commendable, since it's important to discover new names for national theatre.

Like the playwright, the director explores our search for meaning in life, and understanding of self. As to whether the play's protagonists find answers to these questions, we must decide for ourselves. Some, such as Anton and Masha, still remain confused before tomorrow: virtually 'frozen' at the end of the play, after experiencing personal dramas. Anton keeps a beer can while Masha continues smoking, lighting one match after another. We are quietly happy for Tolya, while feeling deep sadness for Masha and Anton, who must yet achieve their catharsis.

Naturally, we're inspired to reflect on our own motivations, and sense of self, our own path in life. If we take away some understanding, perhaps it is that, for every 'unhappiness' in life, there is some 'good'.

Others may find another interpretation of 'Matches', since the plot is open to us bringing our own life experience. There are some unexpected twists to the plot but much of what we see is routine life, depicted at doorways, at the bus stop and in the kitchen. Like the sparse language, the action is restrained, occurring in short strokes. With a different tone of acting, or direction, the play would be a different creature. What is unde-



A scene from performance

niable is its psychological impact; this aspect is more important than any element of the plot, no matter its twists and turns.

Steshik's mystical story finishes with a poetic summary. We have the impression that no story has taken place at all, as we see the lines scroll across the screen:

*...So strange and thrilling
Everything arranged inside of me.
As if it's not me at all,
Or as if it's me.
My whole story
Has surfaced and turns languidly —
Like a ripe blackberry
In baked milk.*

The video screens upon the stage are a clever choice, showing pages turning. One features an apartment building while the other displays remarks, poems, names of characters and pictures. We see the forest and wolves from Tolya's fairy-tales. Between them, the stage is dark. As the characters appear upon the stage, we imagine that they've emerged from those turning pages.

Why did Tatiana Larina chose this play? She asserts that, as is so often the case, it chose her. "Victoria Belyakova, a wonderful theatre expert, who worked at the Yanka Kupala Theatre some time ago, invited me to stage Konstantin Steshik's 'Matches'. Victoria, who is responsible for Belarus' first drama festival — WriteBox Drama — loves to promote modern Belarusian drama. The theatre's Artistic Director, Nikolay Pinigin, also loved the play, and there was an opportunity to stage the play on the Chamber Stage. I knew the play and agreed immediately. Within about six months, in the end of the season, together with theatre's actors we had an opportunity to make a sketch (which was adopted for staging) and within about a year we continued our work. Unfortunately, I'm never satisfied and cannot treat a show as something that has 'a result,'" Tatiana admits. "For me, a performance is a complex living organism, constantly transforming and improving. I consider myself fortunate to have worked with remarkable composer Mikhail Zui and musician Dmitry Yesenevich (who have written amazing music for the performance), and with young Yekaterina Shimanovich. She encapsulated my thoughts from the first meeting. Yekaterina wasn't afraid of my ideas and joined me immediately in our work. I'm happy that our performance has become her debut as a set designer," Tatiana says. "I also praise the work of Anastasia Pantsevich — a graphic designer who created the promotional posters and whose imagination knows no bounds. I'm fully satisfied with the company's efforts too."

I can't predict whether the show will be a success or not, as it's hard to know which audience 'Matches' is aimed at. Strange yet brilliant, it's not for those seeking light entertainment. It will be enjoyed by theatre-goers wishing to be inspired to think. By those who view self-awareness as a priceless stream.

By Valentina **Zhdanovich**



Final scene of the performance

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NAVIBAND on the rise

Even the musicians themselves didn't expect such popularity after the Eurovision-2017 Song Contest. "We are the name on everyone's lips! We even decided not to give interviews for a couple of months so that the audience don't get bored," Artem Lukyanenko said during a telephone conversation. Their fans keep up the demand that their favourite artists perform on stage. Ksenia and Artem's feeds in social networks are full of comments such as, 'We're waiting for you in Brest! When will you perform in Gomel? Vitebsk is ready for you!'

After the 'Slavianski Bazaar' Arts Festival, the group planned to take part in the Basowiszczka Festival in Bialystok, to perform at Laima Rendez Vous Jūrmala Festival in Jūrmala and a solo concert in Kiev, apart from any performances in Belarusian cities. Despite being ranked only 17th in the Eurovision finals, NaviBand sell out wherever they go. Undoubtedly, taking part in the European contest added to their popularity, but their listener's admiration is much more complex than this.

This year, everyone is singing 'Hey-hey-hayayayo!' and their famous Eurovision song, 'The Story of My Life', has already had many cover versions in Belarus, the Czech Republic, the UK, Chile, Qatar and other states. Videos of these alternative versions cover the Internet.

"We are very pleased with the new versions of our songs that we find on the Internet," admit the artistes. "Once we saw children at a school singing our

'Story of My Life'. I can't describe our emotions. It's great that Belarusian language and culture have their natural place in our values through music."

One of the major goals of NaviBand's performances at Eurovision was to represent Belarus with authenticity and uniqueness. The slogan of the Belarusians in Kiev sounded like #NaviBand from #BelarusLand.

They explain their popularity simply, "Our uniqueness is in the atmosphere we create and in the opportunity to show modern Belarusian culture to the world. We're free in our creativity. The harmony of Ksenia and Artem is apparent. However, it would hardly have been possible if they had been connected solely by music. They were 'harassed' enough by their fans until the mystery of their personal relationship was revealed by that tender kiss that has become one of the highlights of the Eurovision finals. The social networks responded to this with a romantic flash mob: Instagram was filled with hundreds of kisses with the hashtag #kissbelarus. "What happiness it is to understand that our country symbolises love," said the comments.

By Lyudmila **Minkevich**



Ksenia Zhuk and Artem Lukyanenko are one of the most popular Belarusian artistic duos around today



slightly polished the composition. When Dakota listened to me performing the song she said: 'It's a bomb!' I was very happy that after my victory in the national selection round, she was one of the first to congratulate me on her Instagram page.

Was your teacher pleased with the performance?

My teacher wouldn't have been my teacher if she had been pleased with everything! She always demands a perfect performance so she immediately showed me my mistakes. I understand that I still have much to work on. I need to learn how to manage my excitement, as this prevented me from completely revealing my soul during the performance, though I was trying hard. There will be a big stage in Tbilisi, as well as many spectators.

I have been co-working with Olga Drozdova this year. She isn't merely my teacher, she is my friend. Every lesson brings much joy. I remember how I first began to study everything from scratch with her. Together we took part in the 'Golos' Children's TV project where I was a part of Dima Bilan's team and 'New Wave' where we came first.

Tells us something about yourself...

I have been singing from the age of eight though I first appeared on the stage when I was just three. My nursery teacher in the kindergarten took me to take part in the 'Teacher of the Year' contest where I sang a song from Mary Poppins and my teacher won.

I study at gymnasium #3 where I'm in the ninth grade. This year I finish the choir department of the musical school and I also play the piano. I feel that this year will be very difficult. In autumn, I will be preparing for Junior Eurovision and then I will have to take exams. I enjoy studying and last year my average grade was 9.5. I like the history of Belarus and the Belarusian language. Are you surprised? Why? I'm a Belarusian. My father was born in Syria but I have been living in Minsk all my life and I'm very happy that I was entrusted to represent the country at such a high level.

By Natalia **Stepanova**

'I'm very happy here...'

Helena Meraai will be representing Belarus at the Junior Eurovision in Georgia

This was decided by the professional jury and spectators, who unanimously gave 12 points to the young dark-eyed beauty. When, after all the emotion, she had calmed down we spoke to the artiste about her performance and the people who have brought her to success.

Helena, tell us, how did you meet Dakota who has written the song 'I Am the One' for you?

Last year at the 'Battle of Talents' where Dakota was one of the contest's teachers. Interestingly her husband Vlad Sokolovsky also selected me. Then it was my turn to choose a teacher and I went for Dakota. It was very enjoyable to work with her and I have reached the final. I really wanted to take part in Junior Eurovision and we asked whether she could write a song for me. She agreed and Vlad worked on the sound and arrangement. However, my teacher Olga Drozdova has



Beautiful, open and spiritual

The large European competition hosted by our country in 2019 should be a present for the whole country and its numerous guests



In the eternal dispute of analysts about the primacy of either economy or policy it is... sport that has often become the winner in recent times. Initially designed to unite nations and peoples, it has often divided them. Now, the time has come to go back to our roots. In two years' time, our country, which has long been used to competitions at the highest level, will welcome probably the most unique of them — the European Games, due to take place from June 21st-30th, 2019.

The uniqueness of these competitions is that they will be held for only the second time. The first took place in June 2015 in the Azerbaijani capital and brought 43 medals for Belarus, including ten golds. However, the benefit of the forthcoming competition for our country is not only in new sporting victories. The European Games will bring presents for millions of our citizens in the form of the drastic renovation of the Dinamo Stadium that will turn into a multi-functional complex; a new building of the Republican Scientific-Practical Centre of Sports where athletes will be able to pass all medical and comprehensive scientific examinations; in the currently under construction Rhythmic Gymnastics Centre and a multi-purpose hall for games; and finally in the

form of the most grandiose, 25-storey hostel in the Student Village, enabling us to provide 1,800 students with housing. Moreover, Minsk Railway Station plans to renew six out of eight escalators, to equip ticket halls with modern air condition-

ers and modernise fire alarm and video surveillance systems. Of course, the whole infrastructure is being built targeting the Games and their participants, but also considering our own citizens.

The competition also promises to be an unforgettable event in the life of our country. The Director of the Foundation, 'Directorate of the Second European Games', Georgy Katulin, emphasises the grand scale of the project, "Despite the experience accumulated during the conduct of international competitions, the organisers of the 2nd European Games will have to face some serious challenges. In terms of scale, nothing similar has been staged in Belarus, around 11,000 participants will be accredited for the event, alongside athletes and coaches whose number is expected to be around 4,000, this includes volunteers, journalists and official figures."

It's no surprise that the Sports and Tourism Minister, Alexander Shamko, forecasts high competition for all athletes across all 15 sport disciplines, "At the recent Olympic Games, more than 50 percent of medals were earned by athletes from the Old World. We have good victorious traditions in a range of disciplines."



SERGEY LOZIUK



The final countdown before the 2019 European Games at the reconstructed Dinamo Stadium starts on June 21st, 2018. A year later, the 2nd European Games will open in the presence of around 20,000 spectators, as well as competitions which will be held in various sporting disciplines

In 2016, Belarusian athletes claimed 46 medals at European events, while this year we have won 37 awards, and not all the European championships have been completed. 11,000 participants are significant for further strengthening Belarus' positive image and tangible growth of foreign fans and tourists. The conduct of international sporting competitions is one of the most efficient marketing methods to promote the country. All those arriving in the country will be welcomed with... a bell. At least, this is how head coach of the Belarusian national canoe and kayak team, Vladimir Shantarovich, sees the talisman of the future Games, "For me Belarus means space: endless fields and meadows with lots of flowers. It seems to me that a bell-flower is best suited to be our mascot, since it symbolises our delicate and interesting culture."

Alas, another flower, a fantastic fern, has been already chosen as the basis of the logo of the Games. Bronze medallist of the Summer Olympics 2016 in Greco-Roman wrestling, David Gamzatov, suggests his own, "A Tiger symbolises nobility, strength and speed. This is an animal with a beautiful colour, which moves gracefully and runs fast. I believe it per-

fectly suited to be a symbol for the 2nd European Games." Anyone wishing to can take part in the open Republican contest to develop a logo for the Games. It's necessary to suggest an idea of a symbol, picture and name. Applications can be received until November 15th, 2017. The logo should correspond to the Olympic values and the slogan 'Bright Year, Bright You'. Details are available on the websites of the Information Ministry, the National Olympic Committee (NOC) and News Agency BelTA. Winners of three top prizes are to receive invitation tickets to the Games, as well as to the parade and a sports kit for the country's national team.

"The European Games is an important event which should give a powerful ideological impulse to our society

and consolidate the nation even more," noted the President of Belarus at the recently held NOC session. There's only one aim: 'We should bring the nation, the country, the state to the highest stage of development and the Games should push us towards this. Everything should be done for the benefit of the people. We won't compete with the opening of the Olympiad in Sochi and the 1st European Games in Baku. But we don't aim to do this, because hundreds of millions of US Dollars have been spent there. If this would have been for our benefit we would find the money. There's no need to do this. We need to break records with the spirituality and openness of our nation. We need to do it in our own way: beautifully and spiritually.'

By Maxim Osipov

Revenues and expenses

■ **The contract for the European Games, signed on September 1st in Minsk, is different to the first Games, held in Baku. Revenues from the European Games in Minsk will be divided between the Belarusians and the European Olympic Committee. The same refers to expenses: our Organising Committee will bear the major costs of the accommodation and food for athletes and the provision of transport. The European Olympic Committee has undertaken obligations to pay for travel in Minsk of all sporting delegations and officials.**



Legend. Epoch. Style

At the age of 19, when many are ending their sporting career, Alexander Medved was just beginning his road to championship glory. His unique career is full of contradictions. Medved is known not only by his titles — three as the Olympic champion in freestyle wrestling and a whole range of victories at world championships. He has an incomparable reputation of total invincibility and domination in the sport. An ordinary ‘ploughboy’ who managed to encapsulate the heroic might, intelligence, skill and mental strength of the champion wrestler. He is called a brown bear in human form, indeed he often says of himself, ‘I am a bear [Medved is translated as ‘bear’] without fur.’ Alexander Medved is legendary in his sporting uniqueness. He is a starry mix of the widest range of natural abilities, colossal determination and hard work.

That Medved had a talent for fighting was first discovered by a lieutenant of the tank corps, Kotsegub, who helped make his name by meeting the would-be legend on the wrestling mat. Seeing himself as a good fighter, he called on the most physically suitable young

boy as a sparring partner; however, the opponents hardly managed to shake hands before the novice took his commander in his arms, lifted him up and threw on the carpet. After that Kotsegub didn't appear in the gym anymore, but told everyone: ‘I fought with a Bear. I didn't beat him but I stayed alive’.

Who decided Medved would be suitable for the tank troops is a ques-

tion without answer. The tall young boy couldn't even get into a tank: he got in through the top hatch and came out through the front. Despite this, the deputy commander for political affairs was actively against his sporting activities: ‘Private soldier Medved, why do you need this sport? You will finish tank school, return home and work as a tractor driver!’



New distance

The number of desirable brides has decreased in the country. In general, information that our 'golden fish', Alexandra Gerasimenya, is going to marry appeared more than a year ago. At a press conference after returning from the Rio Olympic Games (where Alexandra claimed bronze) the athlete said that she was affianced to Yevgeny Tsurkin, one of the leaders of Belarus' national swimming team.

It turned out that they have been together for several years already but preferred not to advertise their relationships. Everything is good in its season.

In February 2016, the couple disclosed their love affair, exchanging in the Facebook congratulations on the occasion of St. Valentine's Day. Despite this, Alexandra didn't name the concrete date of wedding. She only said that it's a bad idea to marry in the leap 2016 year, also referring to the fact that before making such a decision it's necessary to acquire one's own housing.

Alexandra ponders philosophically about her future, as priorities do change in life. Of course, she would like to earn Olympic gold, in addition to her gold medals from European and World championships. However, the champion prefers not to speak about the Games in Tokyo so far.



It's an important and specialist job; you will become a big fish in a little pond!' They later met in 1963 in an airport in Sofia. By that time, Medved was already a double world champion. He was going through the airport and suddenly heard shouts:

"Private soldier Medved! Stand fast: one-two!"

"I'm not a private soldier," replied Medved. "I'm a champion."

"You don't say! And I wanted to make a tractor driver of you..."

He paid no attention to the hardships he endured on the road to success. He lived for a long time in a hostel near Chelyuskintsev Park. The rooms were so full of bedbugs, they had to sleep in the street, while the athletes jokingly called the house, 'Benya-lux' (after the hostel's head). Medved cured sprains with a cloth covered with horse radish: he put it on the sore area and heated it with an iron. At the Olympiad in Mexico he fainted three times during the tournament because of heart problems. He was brought back to consciousness, then again went onto the mat and won. He didn't lose against anyone in the

USSR national team in a 100m race, and when they were running the 3km long distance he always finished first and outstripped them all by half a track. He swam perfectly. He also scythed, a habit, as well as wood chopping, from his childhood. After training, he would take a scythe and go to the meadow. His teammates' eyes would bulge:

"You have just had training..."

"I haven't worn myself out yet," he would reply.

When he became a coach he also used non-traditional methods, sending sportsmen to the fields to carry bales of straw and load them onto trucks. Tractors were working on the one side while wrestlers were on the other. People often managed to do it quicker than machines. As a sign of gratitude, the chairman of the kolkhoz organised shashlyk for them.

It would be possible to describe Medved's career at far greater length, as not only the master, but the sport is 80 years old! He embodies the entire epoch of wrestling, Congratulations and many happy returns of the day!

By Sergey Kanashits

Acquaintance promises to be interesting

Judging by information which regularly appears, China is enchanted by Belarusian pictorial art. How is this manifested? Read on...



Director of National Art Museum of Belarus, Vladimir Prokoptsov, donates his work to National Art Museum of China

In October, as part of the celebrations of the 25th anniversary since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Republic of Belarus and the People's Republic of China, the National Art Museum of China in Beijing hosted a solemn opening of the 'Masterpieces of the National Art Museum of the Republic of Belarus' exhibition. A joint exhibition aims to familiarise residents and guests of Beijing with canvases by prominent masters and to show the development of Belarusian art in the context of traditions and modernity. In total, the exhibition will display around sixty 19th-20th century pictorial works from the collection of the National Art Museum of Belarus.

As far as the current exhibition is concerned, the exposition displays the works by such prominent masters of the Russian art of the 19th-early 20th century as Ivan Kramskoy, Ilya Repin, Ivan Shishkin, Isaac Levitan, Konstantin Makovsky, Mikhail Nesterov, Boris Kustodiev and Valentin Serov. The works by



Best works taken from the Minsk museum's collections for the exhibition in Beijing

these famous authors are taken from the collections of the National Art Museum of Belarus. Each of the painters made their invaluable contribution to Russian and European art. From the late 18th century, Belarus was part of the Russian Empire. For the 19th century Belarusian painters, the centres of Russian art became a place where one could receive a stimulus to creative development. For example, the wonderful Belarusian master of still-life paintings, Ivan Khrutsky, whose works are also on show at the exhibition in Beijing, studied in St. Petersburg.

Two outstanding Belarusian landscape painters studied in Moscow — Stanislav Zhukovsky and Vitold Byalynitsky-Birulya. It should be also mentioned that alongside landscapes, Zhukovsky worked often in the sphere of interior painting, and pictures on this topic are certainly displayed at the event.

“The exhibition continues with works of Belarusian art from the second half of the 20th century, comprising the largest part of the museum collection

A joint exhibition project aims to familiarise residents and guests of Beijing with canvases by prominent masters and to show the development of Belarusian art in the context of traditions and modernity. In total, the exhibition displays around sixty 19th-20th century pictorial works from the collection of the National Art Museum of Belarus

and boasting more than 15,000 exhibits,” notes Mr. Prokoptsov. “This part of the exhibition is focused on presenting the creativity of a talented group of artists of the new generation, who stood at the roots of the national artistic school of painting: Ivan Akhremchik, Pavel Maslenikov, Gavriil Vashchenko, May Dantsig, Vladimir Stelmashonok, Victor Gromyko and Leonid Shchemelev.”

In the 1960s, the pictorial gift of famous Belarusian landscape painters was fully revealed. Love towards one's native land, lyricism and the harmony of paints in reflecting simple everyday motifs, as well as unusual coloristic ability and deep psychologism are embodied in the works by Vitaly Tsvirko, Pavel Maslenikov, Anton Barkhatkov, Sergey Katkov, Piotr Daneliya, Anatoly Baranovsky, pre-



At Sergey Selikhanov's exhibition in Minsk



One of S. Selikhanov's works

sented at the exhibition. Undoubtedly, the works by Vladimir Stelmashonok are a bright point in 1960s painting. He was one of the first to creatively re-interpret the traditions of Belarusian folk culture.

“Socio-political change in the late 20th century, and Belarus’ gaining its independence in 1991 marked a completely new stage of development in the artistic culture of our country,” says Mr. Prokoptsov. “The processes of transformation determined the change of a single artistic concept of socialist realism into the diversity of artistic trends, areas, genres, forms and individual styles.”

The creativity of many Belarusian painters is seen in their keen interest in the traditions of Belarusian antiquity and accent on roots and sources of the Belarusian nation. Painters are inspired by the traditions of ethno-culture, folk customs and mytho-poetic heritage, while

an enhanced interest towards folklore material, interpretation of folk holidays, legends, folk tales and parables.

A new view of reality, connected with photo-realism, the aspiration to reflect our times in a documentary way is found in the works by Valery Shkarubo and Boris Kazakov. Unique cultural and time ‘renaissance’ can be seen in the pieces by Vladimir Tovstik who combines both the past and modernity in his pictures.

“Today the creativity of Belarusian painters — both representatives of the older generation and young artists — is closely connected with the life of their country and it can’t be imagined without universal philosophical and aesthetic views,” believes Mr. Prokoptsov. “Evolution from purely narrative thematic structures towards symbolical-metaphorical language is becoming logical, with the works more often showing the reality of culture and its symbolic space rather than a visible and physical reality.”

It’s to be expected that the works of Belarusian painters in the Beijing exhibition will demonstrate unique colour, spiritual integrity and the emotional nature of Belarusian pictorial art, as well as our great traditions and the national identity of domestic culture.

“We’ve active mutual relations with the People’s Republic of China, not only in economy and politics but in the sphere of culture,” notes Mr. Prokoptsov. “I’d like to say that, this May, a session of the Belarusian-Chinese Commission on Cultural Cooperation took place, with a special protocol signed. According to the eighth point of the document, as part of cultural cooperation for 2017, the National Art Museum of China is now hosting ‘Masterpieces of the National Art Museum of Belarus’. A return exhibition of the National Art Museum of China, to our museum, is scheduled for next year. The exhibition that opened in Beijing, in the National Art Museum of China, in October, showcases fifty-seven pictorial works from the 19th-20th century. It’s the

first of its kind in the history of cultural collaboration between our two states. Moreover, Chinese colleagues have asked to display works by famous sculptor Sergey Selikhanov, whose birth centenary was recently celebrated by the Belarusian cultural community. Now, his works are going on show in Beijing. Why Selikhanov? Because he had an internship in China in 1965, making sculptures: depicting figures of culture and simple workers.”

It was Sergey Selikhanov who made the last sculptural portrait of Chinese painter Qi Baishi, who is known as the Van Gogh of Asia. Several dozen busts of children, peasants and workers remain from his internship in China, and much can be read in their eyes. Despite the abundance of all possible art in modern Beijing, Chinese art historians don't doubt the success on this exhibition.

Sergey Selikhanov was a multi-faceted artist, creating not only portraits and sketches but epic works: heroic-dramatic sculptural compositions, and memorial reliefs. He worked with various materials, from clay and gypsum, to granite and marble, demonstrating universal skills.

Undoubtedly, the events and heroes of the Great Patriotic War inspired him. It was a war he experienced, later creating such masterpieces as ‘The Unbowed Man’, at Khatyn Memorial Complex, dedicated to victims of Fascism, and ‘Soviet Army in the Years of the Great Patriotic War’, which is a haut-relief on the Pobedy Monument in Minsk, honouring soldiers of the Soviet Army and Belarusian partisans who died in the years of the Great Patriotic War. He sculpted a monument to Soviet Union Hero Konstantin Zaslonov, erected in Orsha, and another, to Soviet Union Hero Marat Kazei, a pioneer, in Minsk. Each is unique in scale and depth of spiritual grandeur, embodying fully the heroism of the nation.

His time in China brought forth a wonderful legacy of thirty-six portraits, capturing not only representatives of the creative intelligentsia but ordinary citizens.

The National Art Museum of China in Beijing is simultaneously hosting two major Belarusian exhibitions. Is this a Belarusian cultural breakthrough?

Undoubtedly, it's pleasing. We've even taken some of the exhibits from the permanent exhibition at our museum. Of course, these are very prestigious events, being held in the Year of Culture of Belarus in China. On May 25th, the Days of Belarusian Culture opened with a performance of ‘Swan Lake’, by the Bolshoi Opera and Ballet Theatre of Belarus.

A cultural centre is operating at the Belarusian Embassy to China, hosting the current exhibition, ‘Masterpieces of the National Art Museum of Belarus’. It's taken two years to organise, using special thermo-boxes to dispatch works safely. They were sent first to Moscow, by special transport, before flying to China on special aircraft.

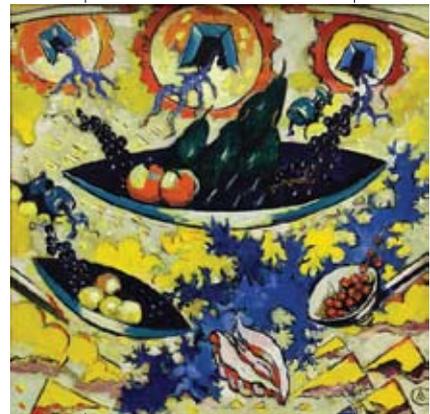
For us, the exhibition is a big responsibility and, undoubtedly, a great honour. I'd like to add that, as part of the 25th anniversary since the establishment of diplomatic relations between Belarus and China, this year has been intensive. We've organised exhibitions of Chinese painters, as well as conducting conferences, involving Belarusian authors on Chinese forums. Last year, there was a plein air in the city of Changchun, where ten Belarusian painters used to work. Evidently, Chinese citizens are interested in Belarus, and vice versa. We look to the future with optimism and hope for further cultural liaisons, including as part of the Belt and Road project.

Belarus is an active cultural presence in China, meeting representatives of Chinese regions and planning future exhibitions and plein-air, not only in Beijing but across the provinces. Next year, we expect the arrival of ten Chinese painters in Belarus, for a plein-air. Our activity is worthy of admiration.

You must feel China's interest towards Belarusian pictorial art, being located in China. I know that you've donated your work to the museum in Beijing.



‘Roses and Fruits’ by Ivan Khrutsky (1839)



‘Cosmic Still-Life’ by Alexander Kishchenko (1992)



‘Portrait of foreman A.V. Selivanov, Hero of the Socialist Labour. Soligorsk’ by Vladimir Stelmashonok (1979)



Works by S. Selikhanov from Chinese internship



'Still-life' by Stanislav Zhukovsky (1916-1917)

Actually, this wasn't my initiative but that of my colleague, Mr. Wu Weishan, Director of the National Art Museum of China. He's a sculptor and suggested a very original idea: of donating a large sculptural composition of Confucius and Laozi to the National Art Museum of Belarus. These are huge sculptures, at almost 3m tall, and are spectacular. Wu Weishan is a famous sculptor even beyond the borders of China, having works on display at the headquarters of the UN and UNESCO, and in various museums worldwide. He's suggested a comrade exchange.

On May 25th, when we were at the joint forum, I donated my landscape, 'Homeland of My Parents', to the National Art Museum of China. It's a Belarusian landscape, depicting Belarusian Polesie. My Chinese colleagues love it.

Now, Wu Weishan wants to donate something to our National Art Museum of Belarus: one of his sculptural compositions. This will happen either this year or next, during the opening of the exhibition in Minsk, which will also showcase Mr. Weishan's works. Next year, a major exhibition will take place at our museum. We do boast very active inter-museum relations. It's great that

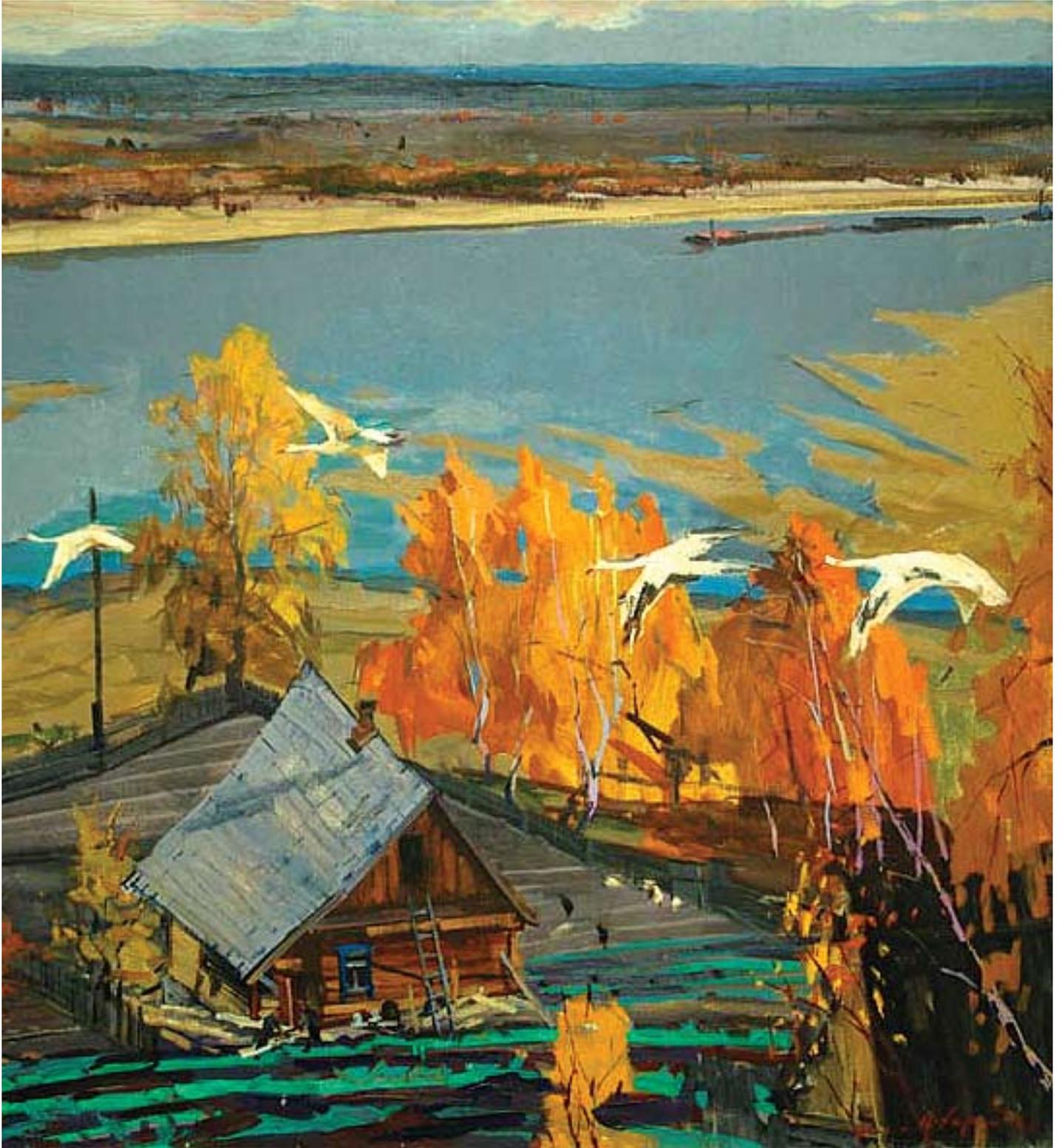
The current exhibition in Beijing represents a 'slice' of the National Art Museum of Belarus, as well as a cultural 'slice' of the whole country. It's a presentation of our nation

our personal friendships are aiding the process of cooperation. It's very important for us to have such friendly relations with China's leading museum.

I'd like to note that our Chinese colleagues are passionate about the pictorial art of Belarus. Their love for our art shows that we achieve a highly professional level. The current exhibition in Beijing represents a 'slice' of the National Art Museum of Belarus, as well as a cultural 'slice' of the whole country. It's a presentation of our nation and will be seen by a hundred thousand people over the next three months, in China. Of course, it's great advertising. Certainly, we shouldn't rest on our laurels. I think that, in future, our relations will grow stronger, and we must prepare for this. China is active in economy, politics and culture. Moreover, it's very important that we're respected and appreciated there.

Works by Belarusian painters and sculptors showcased at the Beijing exhibition will reflect the unique colour, spirituality and emotionality of Belarusian pictorial art, while showing the development of our national identity and domestic culture.

By Victor **Mikheev**



A fragment of picture 'Landscape. Pripyat' by Vitaly Tsvirko (1963)