

Blacklisted Musicians Gather A Large Crowd of Belarusians Abroad

Last Saturday, the famous Belarusian band Lyapis Trubeckoy gathered over ten thousand fans, mostly young people who came from Belarus, at a concert in the Siemens Arena in Vilnius.

Today a number of prominent Belarusian musicians face serious difficulties when they want to perform for the Belarusian public. Playing concerts in neighbouring countries is one of their solutions.

Tickets for the concert of Lyapis were sold out almost immediately after sales began, as were tickets for buses and trains going to Vilnius. Lyapis Trubeckoj, which is the most famous of all Belarusian bands, has fans all over the former Soviet Union. Unknown Object

Their success stretches back to the late 1990s. Last weekend, they presented their first album fully in the Belarusian language.

Almost eleven thousand people, primarily fans from Belarus, attended the concert last Saturday. Already on Friday morning long queues formed on the Belarus-Lithuania border. Hundreds of fans were also waiting to cross the border on foot. Despite the long waiting hours, almost all fans managed to get to the concerts on time. The concert area was fully packed, and in the end, the concert felt like it was being held in Belarus rather than in Lithuania's capital.

The lead singer of the band, Siarhei Michalok, mentioned the current events in Ukraine throughout the show. While showing pictures of the crackdown of protests in Kiev, he referred to people in Belarus that, much like those protesting in Ukraine,

wanted to live in an independent country where nobody dictated to them how they should live.

Michalok compared the current situation in Belarus to gangrene that started there and was then spread all over the former Soviet Union. He condemned those who said that people with similar thoughts were supporters of the CIA or paid off by American money. Although he chose not to name any politicians, he made his point of view very clear.

Liavon Volski in Cologne

For several Belarusian musicians, it is also easier to organise a concert abroad rather than at home. In October, the Belarusian singer Liavon Volski gave his first concert in Cologne. Liavon Volski is an icon of Belarusian music, the leader of two of the most famous Belarusian bands of all time. Both groups have been banned from giving concerts in Belarus for some time now. Nevertheless, Volski remains an influential artist and critic of the Belarusian regime.

Liavon Volski has been part of the Belarusian music scene for more than 30 years. He started in the 1980s with the band "Mroja" (or dream in English) which he renamed "NRM" (an abbreviation for Independent Republic of Dreams) in the 1990s. He is now also the head of the Belarusian Ska band "Krambambulya" that brings together elements of folk, ska and rock music.

Ingo Petz, freelance journalist and expert on Belarus, organised the concert. The day before Volski and Pavel Arakelian, who accompanied him on flute and saxophone, played in the German town Solingen at a festival of prosecuted arts 'Festival der verfolgten Künste'.

The musician, son of Belarusian writer Artur Volski, has moreover been successful with a series of solo projects like 'Sauka and Gryshka' for Radio Liberty in which a government

clerk and an opposition activist discuss political events like the 2006 gas crisis with a refined sense of humour in Belarusian. Volski takes up topics important to all Belarusians and that touch on their everyday lives.

Apart from the contents of his songs, Liavon Volski sings in Belarusian and therefore brings the Belarusian language to Belarusian households that usually only use Russian. Volski personifies a culture where many young Belarusians are readily protesting against the current political situation.

Moreover, Volski's songs appeared on the soundtrack for the film 'Zhyvie Belarus!' (Long live Belarus) made by the Polish director Krzysztof Lukaszewicz. This movie deals with the events surrounding the 2010 presidential elections from the perspective of young opposition activist Franak Viachorka. Volski and his bands are often associated with the opposition and critics of the regime.

Blacklists and pressure at home

Giving concerts in Belarus has become more difficult for many artists. The Belarusian authorities consider them a threat to the regime. In their songs, some bands criticise the current political and economic system in Belarus. They often express the thoughts and feelings of a whole generation and put into words what remains unsaid in the controlled media. Concerts as a potential mass gathering may constitute herds of resistance against the current regime.

According to some sources, almost 60 Belarusian and international artists find themselves on an unofficial 'black list' that is regularly circulated to all state media. It includes actors like Kevin Spacey and Jude Law who have supported Belarus' democratisation movement and it also includes Belarusian singers, writers and painters. Those whose name are on this list cannot perform in public or appear in the media.

Hanna Volskaja, manager of the band Krambambulya and wife of Ljavon Volski, a famous Belarusian singer, calls this list absurd. It prevents Krambambulya from performing under their band name, but tolerates concerts of the same band under a different name.

The system of black lists started up back in 2006, when some Belarusian rock bands supported the opposition after the presidential elections. During the period of liberalisation from 2008 to 2010, in accordance with a gentleman's agreement reached between the authorities, the bands agreed they would refrain from performing at meetings of the opposition's meetings. As a consequence, bands like Krambambulya could once again give concerts in Belarus. The state media published articles about them, an official sign that those bands were no longer considered 'forbidden'.

With the economic crisis that arose in 2011, a new, more absurd version of the black list became public. This list was given to media outlets without a signature or any sign of official ownership. However, the blacklisted artists may no longer appear in public in Belarus, as they usually they simply cannot find a place to give a concert.

State institutions refuse and private venues are also worried to anger authorities by hosting undesirable musicians. For example, in January 2013, the vocalist of the group Dziecuki was warned by the authorities that the musicians should not go near the Jolly Roger café where a concert was planned or they would be arrested.

At that point of time, the Belarusian authorities had two choices: either host concerts of bands that have already shown their readiness not to mingle in politics – or let thousands of fans travel abroad where they will gather to hear the music.

By gathering thousands abroad, the bands will achieve an ever

greater status of heroes and the Belarusians will have the possibility to sincerely compare the lives of those in Kiev, Warsaw or Vilnius to that of Belarus. Internet broadcasts of their concerts will attract even more attention. That may serve a goal runs against what the Belarusian authorities are hoping to achieve.

This coming Saturday Lyapis will play a concert in Kiev.

German Foundations in Belarus – the Soft Power of Foreign Policy

Last week, the German Boell Foundation invited the German Belarusian community to a Belarusian evening in Berlin. This event was organised by participants of a summer school who gathered all those who are interested in or dealing with Belarus in Germany.

In times of difficult official relations, German foundations maintain contact with Belarus and often can go further than the official diplomacy is able to. Thanks to them, contacts between Germany and Belarus remain strong despite the difficulties the foundations meet in their work with Belarus.

Foundations play an important role in German foreign policy. They constitute an instrument of soft power in terms of its non-formal foreign policy. The culture of foundations has been particularly well developed over the recent years. Over 90,000 foundations operate in Germany nowadays. However, all political parties in Germany have a foundation attached to them and they often wear names of important party leaders.

German Foundations Support Belarusian Counterparts

The foundations insist they act independently from parties, however, they agree with them on the main spheres in which they act. Moreover, the leading committees consist of party members and politicians. All of them have the legal form of an association and they receive by far the majority of their allocations (around 90%) through the German parliament and German ministries.

They have greater potential and possibilities in the realm of international cooperation than political parties because they are not formally actors of state diplomacy. As an association, they can perform tasks that political parties cannot tackle due to their political nature.

This is why the foundations have proven to be important partners for independent Belarus during the last twenty years. [While the official German-Belarusian relations have been rather rocky](#), the foundations have tried to maintain relations between both sides.

Away from ministers' meetings, they address different group of actors according to their party's political positions: The Boell Foundation (Green party) addresses ecological issues while the Naumann Foundation focuses on topics related to their own liberalism and values. Many of the foundations have programmes for journalists, such as in those working on the freedom of the press and free information as a basis for democracy, which is one of the most important values that all parties and foundations share.

Most important of all, however, the foundation establish partnerships with those Belarusian parties are closest to their own policy preferences and positions. The Adenauer Foundation, for example, cooperates with Belarusian Christian democrats. Those contacts make it possible for isolated Belarusian opposition activists to cooperate with established

parties, to profit from their experience in party work and establish the necessary structures within their party. As a democratic country, Belarus will need a functioning pluralistic system of people's parties.

For this reason, the Belarusian authorities eye the work of political foundations with suspicion. Unlike most countries where they work, it has proven impossible for German foundations to establish any representation offices in Belarus. Most foundations therefore have local offices in Kiev, while Konrad Adenauer Foundation (a party close to the conservative party CDU) has representation in Vilnius. This is a wise decision, as most of the Belarusian opposition activists and think tanks have been forced to go into exile and meet there frequently.

Impossible to Establish Representative Offices in Belarus

Very often, the representatives of foundations have difficulties in securing a visa to travel to Belarus which makes work for them very difficult as they have to organise their projects from abroad- and they can rarely visit their project partners within the country.

This has become a general problem as far as cooperation with Belarus is concerned: After so many years of of a stand still in relations, most foundations have reduced their projects with Belarus to a minimum. [As the authorities make cooperation more and more difficult,](#) the funding for projects amounts typically only to small sums. Over the past years the media has often reported about the searches carried out in the offices of foundations or even their forced closure in other

countries like Russian and Egypt.



In the end of 2011, the small office of Friedrich Ebert foundation (who politically is close to the social-democratic party SPD) had to be closed as the authorities did not extend its license. Up to then, the one-man office had the function of ensuring contact with their local partners.

One important, though a decidedly non-political organization, is the Robert Bosch Stiftung foundation, associated with the Bosch company and not financed by public funding. The foundation has long funded important projects with Belarus such as the Contact programme, a programme that has granted funds to German-Belarusian grass root initiatives.

This project has made cooperation on the crucial [citizen-based level](#) possible for several years by granting micro-grants of \$4,000 to German and Belarusian non-profit projects. However, the foundation has discontinued this project in the light of its new priorities. As with many institutions, the focus seems to have shifted towards the countries of the so-called Arab spring. It seems like even the foundations have given up on their hope of seeing a process of real democratisation in Belarus.

Most of them now focus very specific aspects of political development. The Konrad Adenauer foundation recently organised a summer school for young political leaders. A group of young opposition activists met in Lithuania and received media training as well as practical tutorials on organisational development and negotiation techniques in preparation of the forthcoming municipal elections in Belarus. This seems to be a

workable good approach as the old generation of opposition politicians seems to have lost stamina over the last years.

The end of the Minsk Forum as a blow to German-Belarusian relations

The Friedrich Naumann Foundation (close to the Liberal Party, FDP) writes on its website that the work of the foundation within the country is hindered by the authoritarian character of the Belarusian regime. The foundation therefore tries to invite Belarusian participants to its seminars and events and to include Belarusian actors in their activities. As soon as the situation improves, Friedrich Naumann and the other foundation will gladly intensify their project work with Belarus.

While the foundations certainly play an important role in keeping up contact with various actors of Belarusian civil society, they regrettably cannot tap their full potential. Keeping in touch with their political counterparts in democratic countries is vital for Belarusian opposition politician. We can therefore only hope that the foundations will not give up on Belarus and keep funding the projects they have implemented at the moment, despite the difficulties they are encountering.

Svetlana Alexievich: Belarusian Language is Rural and Literary Unripe

Last week, the Board of Trustees of the Peace Prize of German Publishers and Booksellers Association have chosen the

Belarusian writer Svetlana Alexievich as the recipient of this year's Peace Prize.

In a subsequent interview with the German daily Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Alexievich said that she did not write in Belarusian as this language was "a rural language", which led to discussions in the Belarusian media with many people questioning whether Alexievich was a good choice for this award.

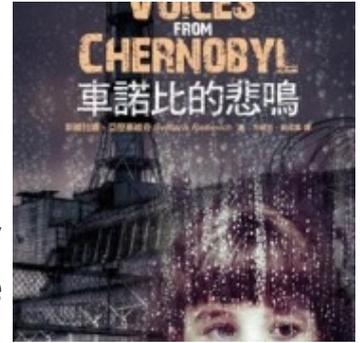
The association has awarded the prize yearly since 1950. It comes with €25,000 prize money, and the award ceremony will take place in October in the historically-charged St. Paul's Church of Frankfurt (Main) during the Frankfurt Book Fair.

Over the past years, awardees have been writers from countries where freedom of speech and press is threatened: In 2011, during the Arab spring, the Algerian writer Boualem Sansal received the prize, and last year the dissident Liao Yiwu from China. It is the aim of the Association of German Publishers and Booksellers to support writers who give, by means of their works, a voice to the population which might otherwise remain unheard.

Award gives a voice to suppressed people

Svetlana Alexievich distinguishes herself as one of few writers who show the sufferings of individuals during the Soviet Union and its aftermath as an alternative to its official historiography. The writer, born in 1948 in the Western Ukrainian town of Ivano-Frankivsk is daughter of a local and a Belarusian communist, grew up in a Belarusian village. She concentrates on topics which are kept quiet by the official historiography, like the catastrophe of Chernobyl and the war in Afghanistan as well as the Stalin era. Official discourses do not deal with the feelings and consequences of those traumatic events on the population.

After completing her studies of journalism at Belarusian State University, Svetlana Alexievich worked as a teacher and a journalist in Minsk. She tried several literary genres and soon developed a literary method to enable "the closest possible portrayal of life as it truly is". Alexievich applied this method for the first time in her book "War's Unwomanly Face" which she completed in 1983. In this book, the author uses a series of interviews to examine the fate of female Soviet soldiers in the Second World War.



For her subsequent work, "Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from the Afghanistan War" (Tsinkovye mal'chiki, 1989) she completed more than five hundred interviews with veterans of the Soviet war in Afghanistan as well as with the mothers of soldiers who died in that war – the so-called "zinky boys" whose remains were brought home in zinc coffins. Publication of this book forced her to appear several times before a court in Minsk starting in 1992, although she was ultimately never convicted of any crime. That happened before Lukashenka came to power in 1994, in what was then a relatively democratic Belarus.

Alexievich's approach: oral history from the bottom up

During an interview with the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, the writer recalled how one of the soldiers' mothers accused her of having invented all she wrote in the interview after her son, who died during his first mission in Afghanistan, had been declared a hero post mortem.

With growing attacks on her work and her person, the writer went into exile and lived in France, Sweden and Germany. Alexievich moved back to Minsk in 2012 where she is working on her next book which will be published in German in September and shortly afterwards in Russia.

While Belarusians consider Svetlana Alexievich a courageous

woman – she is often labelled the moral memory of the Soviet Union – her interview with Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung provoked heated discussions in Belarusian independent media. Since it was published last week, the writer has made a series of statements that raised questions about her understanding of contemporary Belarus.

It is symbolic that the award for one of the most famous Belarusian contemporary writers has not been mentioned in any Belarusian media until the publication of this interview. Alexievich has problems in Minsk, she is not allowed to appear in public and it is impossible to buy her books in official stores. They are, however, distributed through online shops.

FAZ interview: Correspondent does not speak Russian well enough?

A wave of protest went through the Belarusian independent media when Alexievich was quoted to have said the the Belarusian language was “rural and literary unripe” (*«Беларуская мова вельмі вясковая і літаратурна нявысьпелая»*), which is why she chose to write in Russian only and considered herself to belong to [Russian culture](#).

The Belarusian Radio Svaboda asked Alexievich for a [statement](#). The writer denied having said something like this. Alexievich emphasised that she was interviewed by the Moscow correspondent of the newspaper, Kerstin Holms, and assumed that the journalist either did not speak Russian well enough to understand her correctly or that she interpreted what she wanted to hear. She could not have said such a thing, Alexievich affirmed, as it did not at all correspond to her convictions. The writer claimed that she had always said she had “two mothers: The Belarusian village, in which I grew up, and the Russian culture, in which I was educated”.

This reaction of the writer seems very astonishing as it casts a shadow on the judgement of the famous writer. Frankfurter

Allgemeine Zeitung is the most reputable German daily. Its Moscow correspondent has been working on Russia and with the Russian language for a long time. Even if the journalist failed to understand what Alexievich meant, she could have easily asked a colleague for help, as the interview was recorded, as it is common journalistic practise. Kerstin Holms, in a statement to Radio Svaboda, emphasised this fact and pointed out that the "two mothers" were not mentioned in this interview.

The more statements the writer makes to clarify attitude towards Belarusian culture and language, the more confusing it gets.

Even after this calm reaction from the German journalist, Alexievich did not refrain from further challenging her in a [subsequent interview](#) to Belarusian news web site naviny.by. According to the writer, the lack of knowledge of the situation in Belarus by the Moscow correspondent lead to the alleged interpretation of Alexievich's words.

After this interview, however, questions occur whether Alexievich herself knows Belarus well. She says that it is "a miracle if you hear anyone speaking Belarusian in the streets". In another part of the interview she explained that "there [was] nothing offensive in calling the Belarusian culture a village culture, i.e. people's culture". The more statements the writer makes to clarify attitude towards Belarusian culture and language, the more confusing it gets. This casts shadows over her work, as her documentary style of writing relies on interviews and their exact transcription.

Unfortunately, open and broad discussions about tragedies of the past and present remain difficult in Belarus. The great majority of Belarusians neither heard about the prize awarded to Alexievich, nor about her new book, nor about her statements. Moreover, the interview Alexievich gave to FAZ and her subsequent statements considered by many as evidence of

lack of integrity that may put her whole work into question.

So far it remains unclear whether the writer and the German journalist have misunderstood each other or whether Alexievich for some reason chose to make a provocative statement.

Life in Belarusian Villages – A Trip into the Past

The differences between the Belarusian capital, Minsk, and the countryside remain enormous. This insight tourists gain when coming to Belarus. During summer, tourists arrive from abroad and some of them do not only stay in Minsk but make trips around the country.

Very often, for them it feels like going to another country or century, for the Belarusian villages seem to live back in the past. Life however, is not only idyllic but also very hard, especially during the winter months.

Minsk, a metropolis of 2 Million, presents itself as a modern high-tech capital, amazing its visitors with flat screens in the metro stations, and modern buildings with glass fronts everywhere. While Minsk expands steadily – the number of inhabitants and the territory it includes grow steadily- the majority of Belarusians are living outside the capital.

According to the National Committee of Statistics, in 2011 75.1% of Belarusians live in urban areas, which include the regional centres like Brest, and Mahileu, but also smaller towns (in Belarus, a town describes a settlement with more than 6,000 inhabitants). This leaves one fourth of the

population living in the countryside, which differs, in fact, from the urbanised areas: Wide fields, forests and scattered settlements characterise the rural parts of Belarus. Going to a Belarusian village today feels like going back in time.

Rural exodus from 1959 till now



In Belarus, like in most other countries, urbanisation is a common phenomenon. After the World War II, the share of Belarusians living in rural settlements decreased dramatically from 80% to today's figures as a consequence of the progressive industrialization of the country. However, more than 23,000 rural settlements have been counted in the 2009 census.

Today, the average number of population in a village amounts to 103 inhabitants- more than half as much as in 1959. As in most countries, mainly young people leave the countryside to live in the towns. One reason for rural exodus lies in the need earn their living. This is not possible in most of the villages that often lack a modern infrastructure. Some people work in nearby collective farms (former Kolkhozes) and bigger villages have a shop, but apart from this, they earn money by working their own land.

Apart from the financial aspect, life in the villages is hard. While most have electricity nowadays, only few villages dispose of running water. Large ovens in the houses that heated with wood still function as heating. While this seems idyllic for Western visitors, it means a physically hard life for villagers – even more so as very often, only old people left in the settlements, mainly widowed women.

Men very often die much earlier than their wives, primarily because of alcohol abuse (alcohol is [very cheap in Belarus](#)). The population of some villages therefore consists mainly of old women. Most of them remain completely alone during the week, with their children and grandchildren living in the towns and cities.

During the summer, the population of the villages rises. First of all, parents send their children to live with their grandparents in the villages during the long holidays- they last almost three months in Belarus. Moreover, many villagers have bought village houses during the last years. A good house with several acres of land could sometimes be purchased for as little as \$500.

As demand has risen, people now have to pay around \$5,000. Still, many Minsk inhabitants are glad to escape from city life and spend their free time in a village. This goes back to the fact that for many of them, the village reminds them of their childhood as most of the people living in Minsk do so in the second or third generation. Apart from this, economic instability and inflation make growing fruits and vegetables a necessity for many people.

Belarusian villages rely on mobile grocer for supply

While the villages are revived in this way during the summer, whole weeks may pass in winter where the villagers do not see anybody from the outside. In some of the villages, electricity does not work and the snow clearing vehicles rarely manage to get through to every village. This proves especially



problematic in such cases where there is

In those villages, the population relies on “Autalauka”, a shop on wheels that gets to the villages. The driver of such a shop serves around 100 villages a week. His salary during summer amounts to \$500 per months.

However, he has to live on what he earns in the summer during the whole year, as he often cannot work during winter because of the snow on the roads. For villagers this means that they do not have an opportunity to buy bread, flour, milk or other products for weeks in a row. Moreover, an ambulance or a doctor can hardly reach frail and elderly during the winter.

To fully understand how Belarus functions, one should leave Minsk and take a trip to one of the villages. Only after having spent a weekend there, analysts and policy makers will understand why Belarus still has the current political system and why it proves so difficult for the opposition to reach the people.

Life in those small villages seems apolitical, what happens in Minsk does not play a direct role for the villagers – only to the extent that their pensions and food prices rise or fall. Hardly any difference can be spotted in those villages between now and thirty years ago, back in the Soviet Union. Most villagers have seen so much in their lives and they remain so cut off from buzzing Minsk that at any possible demonstrations, one can hardly imagine them supporting opposition politicians or even taking part in a revolution.

In an ideal state, the authorities would redistribute the expenses to ensure better medical services in the villages

instead of improving the outward appearance of the capital. Moreover, the state urgently needs to create incentives for families to move back to the villages by subsidizing private housing and founding schools.

How Belarus' Bad Image Affects German Investments

The German-Belarusian trade balance reached an all-time high in 2012. However, many German experts regret that it stays far below its full potential – primarily because of bad image of Belarus as well as unfavourable investment conditions. German institutions and companies doing business in Belarus risk to be blamed of cooperating with a rogue state. However, the Belarusian economy needs foreign capital and know-how to modernise.

In its May edition, the German economic magazine *Impulse* suggests that the German-Belarusian Economic Club (Deutsch-Belarussischer Wirtschaftsclub) consults the Belarusian government and helps Lukashenka to improve the image of his country abroad. The author of the article, published on April 24th this year, describes the German-Belarusian Economic Council as “entertaining close contacts with the Belarusian government.”

Founded in 1994, the club acts to represent its 90 members' interests in Belarus – among them companies like Bosch and Siemens. Dr Klaus Baier acts as chairman of the club which is member of the Consultative Council for Foreign Investment to the Belarusian Government – a fact that leads IMPULSE to the conclusion that the club must have influence on the decision-

making process in Belarus.

German-Belarusian trade balance below its potential

The question of acceptability of doing business with a non-democratic state has been discussed in Germany shortly after the former chancellor Gerhard Schröder started working for Gazprom's North-Stream pipeline. The ongoing debate illustrates the German struggle to find a coherent position in its foreign economic policy. A hesitating chancellor, Angela Merkel neither finds clear words nor distinct actions concerning the export of weapons or the treatment of undemocratic states at the doorstep of the European Union.

The German government along with all EU member states, after the crush down of the 2010 parliamentary elections, has contented itself with banning high ranking Belarusian officials from entering the EU. While high-level contacts on a political level remain frozen, the economic relations are still developing.



In 2012, the German-Belarusian bilateral trade found itself at a ten year high of \$4.4 bln. The Belarusian ambassador to Berlin, Andrej Giro, underlines that the trade volume has quintupled to this record high during the last decade. However, the trade balance is relatively low for Germany, which is one of the leading export nations. As a comparison: The German trade balance with its most important partner, France, amounted to \$161 bln.

Therefore, German experts point out that the potential of bilateral economic relations remains unexhausted. They underline that the image of the country plays an role for economic growths as it plays a crucial role in attracting foreign direct investment.

Main problems for German investors in Belarus

What are the main problems for German enterprises in Belarus? According to a survey among German businessmen conducted by the German-Belarusian economic representations in Belarus last year, the main problems are:

- unpredictability of the Belarusian economic policy
- lack of transparency as far as economic and political decisions are concerned
- lack of openness of tenders
- taxation policy of the Belarusian state
- legal guarantees
- low flexibility in employment legislation
- lack of economic freedom
- high degree of bureaucratisation
- system of regulation of foreign currency
- state regulation of price system
- gap between the declaration on the political level and the attitude towards foreign investors by low and midlevel clerks: They give the impression that foreign entrepreneurs are disturbing them with their concerns.

While most entrepreneurs think that taxation in Belarus remains arbitrary and that the state intervenes in individual tax decisions, some things have improved during the last years. After some reforms, the Belarusian tax system is now more investor friendly: the corporation tax rate has decreased from 24 to 18%, more expenses have become tax-deductible and the state has created tax incentives growing economic branches like the [IT branch](#). Moreover, the German businessmen named further positive aspects of Belarus as a country for investment according:

- advantageous geographic position
- good quality of transport infrastructure
- well-educated workforce
- relatively low wage level
- close relations to oil/petrol exporting countries
- relative political stability

- low criminal rates.

Obviously, good reasons to invest in Belarus exist and the German-Belarusian business community looks back to some success stories of German investments. In 2012, 360 enterprises had a German contribution of capital. Belarus especially tries strives to attract companies in those branches where Germany holds the position of market leader in order to profit from the expertise. Modernization of Belarusian enterprises and the gain of know how strengthen the competitiveness of Belarusian export products.

For this reason, the project launched by the German company Remondis is crucial for Belarus: it aims at establishing a cycle waste management system in Belarus. The successful implementation of this project would mean that the system of waste management in Belarus will be more efficient and eco-friendly.



The Belarusian economy and society both urgently need similar projects in order to modernise the country and to ensure a good living standard in the country. However, as Daniel Krutzinna, managing director of the Department for Investment Eterinterest based in Minsk, Belarus has missed the chance to attract German investment in the sector of engine building and supply of automobile manufacturers in the past years.

German investors avoid Belarus for image reasons

Krutzinna points out, that investors avoid Belarus on account of the domineering role the Belarusian state plays in the economy. They prefer Russia where everybody knows that some industries – such as energy supply – belong to the state, while other industries stay unregulated by the state. The Belarusian state, however, sends no clear signals to potential investors, who consequently fear that the state might decide

to interfere with their business.

Belarus, Krutzinna underlines, is suffering from its bad reputation, based on the above-mentioned reasons. Not only Krutzinna, but also the German ambassador to Belarus, Wolfram Maas, underlines that the image of Belarus plays a crucial role in its low attractiveness to German investors. He advises that Belarus should use the positive image of successful Belarusian sportsmen and women like Victoria Azarenka and Daria Domracheva to improve the country's image.

Klaus Baier supports this: "The bad image of the country harms the population and the investors." As a representative of the interest of German companies in Belarus, he is therefore certainly right to point out that Belarus should work on its image in order to attract foreign direct investment.

However, apart from reforming the tax system and relying on attractive sportswomen as image makers, the Belarusian leadership should think about substantial reforms of its legal system and [decision making process](#) in order to attract investors and to capitalise on the country's strengths.

Snow Storm Xavier Paralyzes Belarus

Large parts of Belarus and the Belarusian capital Minsk have spent this weekend under exceptional circumstances. The cyclone Javier has paralysed large parts of the country for almost two days.

While similar weather conditions in the USA would make it to the top news in Europe, there has been no mentioning of the

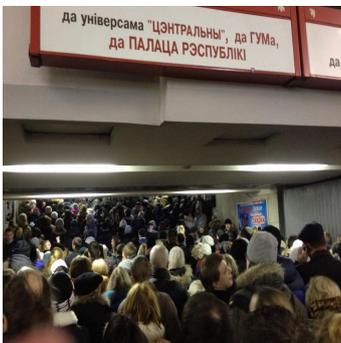
storm in Belarus in Western media.

It started as simple snow fall on Friday morning, but approximately 20 cm of snow fell in the following 24 hours. The wind was 22 metres per second according to the Belarusian hydro-meteorological centre. Sight was limited to 100 metres in the Minsk region on Friday afternoon because of the heavy snow falls. Although the country is used to severe winters and well equipped to deal with large amount of snow, public life has come to a halt at this weekend.

Traffic standstill during Friday rush hour

By the time most Belarusians were trying to go home, the situation was at it worst. This led to a chaos that is extraordinary for Belarus. "The last time I have seen something similar was in the 1980s" says Sasha, who has reached home by walking from the metro station to his homes. Buses stopped running during the afternoon and have not re-started until Saturday evening.

Getting home during rush hour was very difficult for all people and impossible for many. "My colleague left the office at lunch time and got home at 4a.m.", says Vasili. Indeed, circulation on the Minsk beltway came to a standstill during rush hour.



Thousands of cars were stuck in traffic jams. More than 650 traffic jams were registered in Belarus on Friday evening according to Nasha Niva. This is twice more than on a usual day, according to the road police. 3 people died in accidents. In several cases, more than 20 cars were involved in mass accidents.

For some time, the roads out of Minsk were completely closed. It was impossible to get from towns to the periphery of the capital such Dziarzhinsk and Fanipol' to Minsk or back.

Circulation on the main street in Minsk, the prospect, came to a complete still-stand during the rush hour.

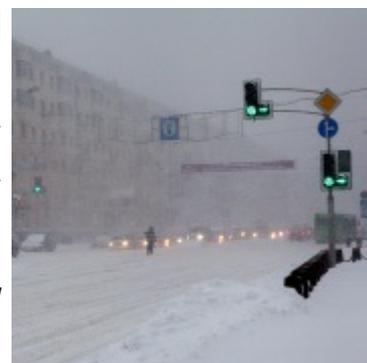
Many people had to sleep at work or were forced to stay overnight with friends in the centre. As there were no buses running, the metro had to be temporarily closed because it was so overcrowded. Those who could, left their cars at works and tried to get home by public transport. This turned out to be difficult, however, when only metro and regional trains could operate.

Thousands forced to spend the night in their cars

The roof of a car park near Hotel Minsk in the very centre of the capital fell down on account of the masses of snow covering it. The plastic roof buried around 30 cars but fortunately did not hurt a single person.

While in Minsk, inconveniences consisted mainly in perturbed traffic and the impossibility to reach home, by Friday evening more than 530 villages and towns in Belarus were left without electricity. Up to Saturday evening, 26 villages are still without electricity in Brest region. This region suffered especially from heavy snow falls and wind: 82 cars were freed from snow drifts. 320 persons, among them 37 children were in the cars. None of them was injured.

On Saturday, although the snow fall had stopped, Minsk was quieter than ever before. Around 20 000 employees and parts of the army that were called to support the city administration to clean the roads. The news agency BelTA informs that more than 900 snow clearing vehicles were employed to clear the capital.



Most people had to stay at home in the "sleeping districts" during the day. While even the courtyards and central parks had been cleaned from snow during the day, there were still no

buses running or streets cleared in the suburbs.

Some shops stayed closed, as for example the Central Fashion Market. However, fresh bread and meat was delivered to the shops in the centre of Minsk.

Public life had to be postponed as well. All Maslenica events (Maslenica is the holiday of winter farewell) as well as football, hockey and basketball matches are to take place on Sunday instead of Saturday. The soccer team of the "Football Club Homel" had to spend 28 hours on the way to the quarter finals of the cup of Belarus that was supposed to take place in Minsk on Saturday. The players spent the night in their coach and finished their journey by regional train on Saturday morning.

International airport closed on Friday

While international airport Minsk II was closed for several hours on Friday, all passengers that were supposed to land in Minsk on Friday arrived there on Saturday morning. As planes could not touch down in Minsk, they had to be directed to Homel or Kyiv.

700 passengers had to spend the night at the airport in Minsk. During the day, around 2,000 people were waiting to fly to their destinations. Unfortunately, the Belarusian national carrier Belavia did not accept that flying would not be possible on Friday and refused to inform passengers about what was going to happen according to a news report on tut.by.



According to the Minsk city executive committee, the roads leading out of Minsk were opened only for a limited

circulation in order to allow the vehicles to clear away the snow. This is also true for the majority of roads in the Minsk region. On the M4 from Minsk to Mogilev, there were still more than 30 km of traffic jam on Saturday evening.

For the upcoming days, the weather forecast promises less snow fall but still icy temperatures. The Minsk city administration did a remarkable job in clearing the centre from snow. But next time they should clean the roads on the outskirts of Minsk before clearing the parks and courtyards of privileged houses in the centre.

Nadine Lashuk

Should Germany Be Blamed for Cooperation with Belarus Police?

Scandalous news hit many media outlets this week in Germany: German police have been training their Belarusian counterparts for years.

This raised many eyebrows because of the serious human rights violations perpetrated by Belarusian security services. In addition, the German media confuse words by calling the Belarusian security services "militia", which has a very negative connotation in German.

The question remains whether Germany has trained Belarusian riot police units or ordinary policemen. Material support and on-site training for the Belarusian security services demonstrates that Germany as well as other EU member states

are lacking a consistent approach towards Belarus.

It is time to define clear guidelines when dealing with non-democratic states such as Belarus. It should be out of the question for Germany to support Belarusian state organs that are involved in violent crack-downs of peaceful demonstrations. Apart from ethical objections to this support, it contradicts the policy of supporting the Belarusian opposition struggling for survival in Belarus.

It is now known that between 2008 and 2011, the German police trained around 500 policemen, border guards and other members of the security forces. Moreover, the German government equipped the Belarusian security forces with computers, uniforms and technical equipment. In total the equipment was worth around €200m. After the election day [crackdown in December 2010](#), cooperation stopped.

The German press and many opposition politicians declare that supporting a dictatorial regime is unacceptable. The German Ministry of Internal Affairs claims that the training started during the period of opening in Belarus. At that time the Belarusian authorities had signalled readiness to take steps towards ensuring rule of law in the country.



Training for policemen is part of Germany's international cooperation programme. This also includes cooperation with non-democratic or transitional states. One example of the cooperation is the training of Afghan police officers. However, the training of Belarusian police men touches problematic points.

Police Trained On-Site in Germany

First, the training consisted not only of seminars but also involved on-site training. Several hundred Belarusian policemen were present during the passing of castor transport.

Whenever nuclear waste is transported through Germany anti-nuclear activists stage protest along the railway.

This is one of the few times when the German police clash with activists. During the operation at which the Belarusian forces were present, around 500 protesters were injured by the police. This hardly gives a good example to Belarusian policemen. Without doubt, the aim of this mission was that they should learn how to proceed in a non-violent and deescalating way during rallies and demonstrations.

Moreover, the German policemen are nicknamed “friends and helpers” and Germans highly respect the institution. Whenever clashes between police and protesters happen – as was the case during the castor transport operations – there is an outcry in the country.

Because of their history, Germans are very careful about using military units for operations inside the country. The deployment of Bundeswehr during demonstrations or even football matches is still much discussed in the parliament. Therefore the cooperation between German police and the forces of a non-democratic regime may seem very problematic.

Did Germany Send Bats to Equip Belarusian Riot Police?

German newspaper articles are not precise in their reporting, which adds to the chorus of outrage. The German *Spiegel* keeps writing that there was cooperation with the “feared Belarusian militia”, using the German word *miliz*. Belarusian “*miliz*”, however, is ordinary police, while the feared forces are the riot police. the “*Spez Nas*”. It is not clear from the articles whether the cooperation took place between militia or special forces. However, German police cooperating with something called “militia” would lead to disapproval among Germans in any case.

Several newspapers claimed that the German government had supplied bats to the Belarusian militia. While the German

government immediately rejected this, it shows that the German newspapers are heating up the discussion.

While cooperation between Belarusian state forces such as border guards and German institutions is acceptable for the Belarusian and the German opposition politicians, the support of riot police is not. The question is therefore whether the government really supported the riot police. In any case, supporting the Belarusian opposition through German political foundations and equipping the forces that crush them down at the same time will indeed raise questions.

Most likely, Germany started this training as part of a European Union programme. EU countries train and equip border guards at the EU's external border in the interest of all EU member states. It is highly improbable that the German government decided to support the Belarusian regime in place and to enforce its capability to crush demonstrations as several articles in German press imply.

Cooperation Started During the 2008 Opening of Belarus

Only in 2012 did everybody in Germany start to notice that the opening of the regime in 2008 was not a true one. Back then, nobody looked beyond the pretence of rapprochement by the Belarusian authorities. The German government was more than relieved to believe in opening while it was always clear to that Lukashenka had no intention of changing his policy towards democracy.

Here again it seems that the German government- along with all other EU members states- was only too happy to believe in reform. They were quick to send the German Foreign Minister, Guido Westerwelle, to Minsk. A more cautious approach to a formal rapprochement and low level cooperation could have

proven more sensible.

Those people working with Belarus on a regular basis know that it is crucial for any project to bring state and non-state actors together. In Belarus, state and non-state actors live in two parallel worlds with very little interaction. It is easy to organise seminars for non-state actors and opposition politicians. However, their impact is very low and they have no power whatsoever to change things in the country. Serious change can take place when state actors start seeing democratic ideas more favourably.

However, it is usually difficult to involve state employees – journalists, policemen, professors, politicians – to take part in training organised by Western countries. It is remarkable that the German government managed to involve so many Belarusian policemen in the seminars in the first place.

The government should realise that the debate about the police training constitutes a chance to review its policy on Belarus.

It is of course important not to stop cooperation with Belarus altogether. A completely isolated country at the Eastern border of the EU would be worse than a country that cooperates with EU institutions. It should however be clear that material support and transfer of knowledge can only be provided when they are not used against the democratic forces in the country.

The German decision makers may not be sure which security force is merely doing police work and which are the riot police beating peaceful protesters and former presidential candidates. But there are people and organisations in Belarus and in Germany who can provide them with such information.

Beyond High Politics: German Organisations in Belarus

As a result of the Belarus-Sweden diplomatic conflict, many media stated once again that Belarus is now “even more isolated” than it was before. Last Tuesday, the Belarusian ambassador to Berlin, Andrei Giro, was ordered to come to the German Foreign Ministry as a reaction to the diplomatic conflict between Belarus and Sweden.

German authorities often criticise Belarus for disrespect of human rights. In return, the Belarusian president personally attacked the German foreign minister in March 2012 by saying "It is better to be a dictator than a gay".

While on the high political level relations have been badly strained, particularly after the 2010 presidential elections, at grassroots level Belarus does not look so desperately isolated.

Belarusians See Germany as the Most Attractive Country

Despite cold relations on the higher level, Germany is one of the most active countries in Belarus on a lower level. German expatriates constitute one of the biggest communities of Western foreigners in Belarus. Several hundred German citizens officially live in Minsk. Moreover, a whole variety of German institutions work in Belarus.



The International Educational Centre Johannes Rau Minsk (known as IBB) is a German- Belarusian joint-venture and has been the embodiment of German- Belarusian relations since the very beginning of Belarusian independence. It is a joint-venture between a German

association, the Belarusian city executive committee, the tourist agency Sputnik and Belarusbank.

Apart from a hotel and a conference-centre, the IBB has various fields of activity. In one of the few preserved buildings of the former Jewish ghetto in Minsk is now the History Workshop. Since 2003 it serves as a place for historical research with scholars and witnesses.

Another focus of the IBB is the Belarusian media landscape. In its Media Academy, the IBB offers seminars for Belarusian journalists- aiming at bringing together state and non-state journalists. In a country where training for journalists is provided by state universities only, using teaching methods dating back to Soviet times, this is a good opportunity for many journalists. The IBB hopes to make reporting more professional and enhance the number of investigative and well-researched articles in the Belarusian media.

Hundreds of Initiatives under the Belarus Support Program

The most important task for the IBB is, however, to implement the German government's Belarus Support Programme for Belarus. Since 2002, the government has supported small projects co-organised by German and Belarusian parties with a budget of over €13m. The aim of these projects – and overall the German support program – is to achieve the objectives of the "National strategy for sustainable socio- economic development of the Republic of Belarus" approved by the Ministry of Economy in 2003.

Through this programme, the IBB manages to bring together several hundred German and Belarusian initiatives. The impressive number of partnerships as well as the fact that most of them have been cooperating since the early 1990s shows that Belarus is by no means isolated at grass-roots level.

Moreover, the vast majority of initiatives financed by the Belarus Support Program are officially registered, as they do

not aiming at political but social and economic change. For the IBB, which also hosts the renowned [Minsk Forum Conference](#), it is crucial to prevent Belarus from becoming more insolated. The Minsk Forum has taken place since 1997 and assembles politicians, scientists and entrepreneurs in Minsk.

Apart from IBB, there are several other institutions working in Belarus. Among the most important of the German-Belarusian partnerships are two organisations working in the economic and social fields: The German- Belarusian Economic Club (*Deutsch-Belarussischer Wirtschaftsclub*) and the Representative Office of the German Economy in Belarus (*Repräsentanz der deutschen Wirtschaft in Belarus*).

The aim of these two organisations is to improve conditions for enterprises and to help firms that want to establish economic relations with Belarus. The German- Belarusian trade turnover was USD4.438bn in 2011, which constitutes 5.1 per cent of the overall external trade of Belarus.

Germany is in 6th place for direct foreign investment in Belarus. Despite the fact that working in Belarus is often difficult because of the economic situation and administrative barriers, about 350 German enterprises work in Belarus. Almost one hundred of them have a representative office in Belarus.

One example is the German waste management company Remondis that has been working in Minsk since 2010 as a joint venture with the City of Minsk. Well-known German companies such as Bosch and Henkel are present in Belarus, while others (such as Zeiss) have joint ventures with Belarusian firms.

Cultural Cooperation Projects

The last major area in which German institutions are active in Belarus is cultural cooperation. While the British Council and the US culture centre had to close their offices in Belarus, the Goethe Institute is very active. Not only does it offer German-language classes but also a big variety of projects for

teachers, cultural managers and other people interested in German language and culture. Moreover, it has been organising cultural events since its opening in 1993.

The German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) also has an office in Belarus. Hardly any other institution would maintain a whole office in order to foster academic exchange with Belarus. The number of students going from Belarus to Germany with a DAAD scholarship is – not surprisingly- by far higher than the number of incoming German students.



Apart from the DAAD, there is also an office for German teachers working in Belarusian institutions, an office of the German Adult Education Association, fostering lifelong learning in Belarus and cultural managers sent by German foundations that are working in different institutions all over the country.

This impressive list of activities shows that bilateral relations are much more than the statements and warnings issued by the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Even if official bilateral relations seem to be bad, many initiatives at grass-roots level continue working. They ensure the people-to-people contact.

A possible answer to the question of why German organisations in particular are so active in Belarus is that Germany as a big country has a large network of organisations working abroad, both state and non-state institutions. Because of the relative closeness of Belarus to Germany, Germany feels that the country is its business more than does, say, France.

In any event, it is good to see that Belarus is by no means as isolated as one might think when reading various newspaper articles these days.

Germany and Belarus: Why People's Diplomacy Doesn't Work

The argument for loosening the visa regime for Belarusian citizen is that people to people contacts must improve. At a time when the official diplomatic relations are at [an all-time low](#), it seems that the exchange between ordinary people offers a glimpse of hope. It might prevent the Belarusian citizen from total isolation. However, looking at the German-Belarusian informal relations, it gets clear that it may not work. Here is why.

The EU and many support programmes aim at bringing together civil society actors. In their opinion, young people, politically interested actors and activist of non-governmental organisations should meet. Belarusians would consequently understand how democracy works and the Westerners would see themselves that Belarus is a country worth visiting. But this is a somehow naïve vision of things.



If you look at those who are actually travelling to and from Belarus and Germany, you can dress the following list:

- **Women tourists:** men who think “Belarus” is the name of a high gloss catalogue with beautiful women. Choose any you like. A German private television network is now broadcasting a series showing a middle-aged man who comes to Minsk to meet girls he met through an agency in the search of the love of his life. TV shows like this strengthen the image of Belarus as a country where beautiful women are waiting for allegedly rich men coming to marry them and offer a better life in Germany.
- **Businessmen.** They take direct flights from Frankfurt or Berlin and stay in top class hotels. Neither has any of them as ever been to the sleeping districts where Belarusians actually live nor are they sincerely interested in going there or experiencing the “real” Belarus.
- **Members of partnership and aid committees.** Those people are working in German- Belarusian friendship associations. They bring clothes and food to Belarus. If you tell them that people in Minsk are neither starving nor walking around in rags, they will be very astonished to hear that. In their opinion, every child living in Belarus is a “child of Chernobyl”. It is very common to read in German newspapers that “20 children have arrived to Germany to recover from the Chernobyl catastrophe”.

Belarusians who want to go to Germany have to show an official invitation letter. As a consequence, the groups of people travelling West are the following:

- **Chernobyl children.** Those children invited by the friendship associations.
- **Students with a grant** from one of the many organisations offering scholarships to Belarusian students.
- **Women who are going to get married** to Germans.

- **Men who want to buy a car.** This was an especially big group last year before the customs tariff for the import of cars rose. There were many thousands of men going to Germany in order to buy second-hand cars.

No Contacts at Grassroots Level

The problem is that those groups of people have totally different expectations when they meet. Consequently, there are no eye-to-eye meetings between the German and the Belarusian civil society.

The meetings of friendship associations and partnership committees are based on the assumption that Belarus is an underdeveloped country that needs material support. People collect old clothes and tinned food in Germany in order to send it to Belarusian towns. Most of them have not been to Belarus for several years, otherwise they would know by now that nowadays it is difficult to distinguish a German teenager from a Belarusian one by their appearance. Smartphones, flat screens and modern public transport is a part of the everyday life in the Belarusian cities.

The partnership committee members think they are doing the Belarusians a favour by sending them their old clothes. However, none of them is looking at the meetings with people from Belarus the other way round: That Belarus is a great country and Belarusians are on a par with them. Of course the living standards here is not as high as it is in Germany, but there are still things that Germans can learn from their Belarusian friends.



On the other hand, Belarusians often look down at their German acquaintances. They go to Germany with a feeling of "Germany is a great country, only that there are too many Germans living there". They think the country is well-organised and approve of the efficiency of their German friends. Then, however, they deplore that things are different than in Belarus: people are coldhearted and they generally lack solidarity with each other.

How to Stop Supporting Stereotypes

If those partnership committees concentrated on working against stereotypes on both sides, this would be a big step forward in German- Belarusian relations. As it is now, the old scheme of donor and recipient is maintained. No evolution of the work of those committees has happened since the Chernobyl disaster. Only if meetings take place at an equal level, there will benefit Belarus' transformation.

It is true that some German and Belarusian NGOs do try to cooperate. Those NGOs that are really doing efficient work in Belarus are not registered here. Unfortunately, German donors shy away from cooperating with non-registered NGOs and try to work with those few that are officially accepted by the Belarusian government. If the international and German donors changed their opinion on this point and took the (manageable) risk to cooperate with an organisation regardless of its formal status, money and energy could finally go to those projects where people meet as equals.

Belarus is a great country. It is time to stop seeing it as an exporter of beautiful but will-less women who are happy to get donations from Germany. Belarusian children should go to Germany and take part in exchanges without being labelled "children of Chernobyl". They are not pale impoverished children but smart young people who know mathematics ten times

better than the German children they meet.

And: Germany is a great country, too. Germans are not as bad as their reputation.

German-Belarusian Relations at an All-Time Low

German-Belarusian relations are currently at an all-time low. The tension is rising, and it is still uncertain when the German ambassador will return to Minsk. In the meantime, the Belarusian authorities are doing everything possible to further deteriorate relations. As a result, all major German parties now support new sanctions against Belarus.

When Polish and EU ambassadors were asked to leave Belarus, German foreign minister Guido Westerwelle declared that “an act against Poland or the EU was an act against Germany at the same time”, so the German ambassador to Belarus, Dr Christof Weil, was called to return to Berlin for consultations.

A further deterioration in relations between the two countries was caused by the execution of Vladislav Kovalyov and Dmitry Konovalov, the alleged criminals responsible for the explosion in the Minsk metro on 11 April 2011. Westerwelle, in the name of the federal government, deplored the executions and voiced doubts about the correctness of the verdict.

Germany Deplores the Execution of the Alleged Minsk Bombers

Steffen Seibert, spokesman of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, said that the executions added further tensions to the difficult relations between the two countries. Indeed, all

major German parties are in favour of new sanctions against Belarus. On 23 March the Council of the European Union adopted a new list of people who are not allowed to enter the EU and agreed to further economic sanctions against Belarusian enterprises.

Moreover, politicians and human rights activists propose to withdraw the [ice-hockey world championship](#) from Belarus. It was planned that Belarus should host the sporting event in 2014. For Lukashenka, this is an important project, not only because ice-hockey is his favourite sport. The championship is meant to attract supporters and guests (and before that, investors) from abroad and show to the world that Belarus is a well-liked member of the international community.

Now, high-ranking German politicians like the Chief of Staff of the German Chancellery, Roland Pofalla, are vocally considering boycotting the competition in Belarus. "From my point of view", he said, "it is an unbearable thought that this unjust regime will be rewarded by hosting the ice-hockey championship, which is a personal wish of Lukashenka."

The discussion on the human rights situation in Belarus comes at a time when the German public is debating freedom and personal rights. The new German president, Joachim Gauck, was the head of the authorities dealing with the archives of the Eastern-German secret service. In his public speeches, he often refers to the German past and the time of Germany as a dictatorship, a fact that makes Germans even more sensitive regarding what is going on on the doorstep of the EU.

No Ice-hockey World Championship for Belarus?

This is indeed a month of bad PR for Belarus. Ice-hockey is a popular sport in Germany, so now even those newspaper readers who usually stick to the sports section will learn about Belarus and the disastrous human rights situation in the

country. Sports journalists are writing political comments, like *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung's* Evi Simeoni, who has asked the functionaries of international sports federations to take responsibility for their decisions.

Another event featuring Belarus has backfired on the regime: the Leipzig book fair, one of the biggest book fairs in Germany with more than 160,000 visitors, hosted Belarus, Ukraine and Poland as special guest countries this year. Instead of reporting on Belarusian contemporary literature, bloggers and journalists presented Belarus as the country that it is in the moment: a white stain in the middle of Europe with the last dictator at its helm who still carries out death penalties.



The last serious indicator of how bad Belarusian-Germans relations are at the moment was Belarus' refusal to let Dr Astrid Sahm enter Belarus. Dr Sahm, a German political scientist, was the German director of the International Educational Centre Johannes Rau (IBB) in Minsk for six years until December 2011. Ms. Sahm has a multi-entry visa that is valid until June 2012. Nevertheless, she was denied entry to Belarus and sent back to Riga after landing at Minsk airport last Sunday.

German Director of IBB Denied Entry to Belarus

The international centre IBB is a German-Belarusian joint venture, co-owned by the Minsk city administration. Since its opening in 1994, it has been a place of dialogue and meeting, even in times of the worst crises between Belarus and the EU. The Minsk Forum taking place in IBB, of whose organisation committee Dr. Sahm is a chair, has always been a reliable indicator for the state of German-Belarusian relations.

In 2008, when there was an improvement in relations, the head of the presidential administration, Vladimir Makej, was present at the opening of the Minsk Forum. Last year, when relations were already deteriorating, Minsk Forum was cancelled, a rare occurrence since its kick-off in 1997.

The refusal to let Ms Sahm enter the country has shocked the German-Belarusian community and shown to those working with Belarus how bad relations actually are. The German-Belarusian Society (DGB), an NGO whose members are in key positions in bilateral cooperation, has voiced concern about the treatment of one of its chairs.

It is striking to see that the regime is willingly risking losing its most reliable partners and becoming even more isolated. Lukashenka risks a total break with the EU; a Polish member of the European Parliament even proposed reducing official EU-Belarus relations to consular level. Minsk is however used to ups and downs in diplomatic relations.

What is worse, the regime deliberately seems to be accepting a rupture with Belarus' most reliable partners. IBB is responsible for the implementation of the Belarus support programme of the German federal government, a programme that has brought in more than €13m for different projects to Belarus since 2002.

Even if the authorities are annoyed by the sanctions adopted in Brussels today, they should think twice before reacting over-hastily. Otherwise, it might not only be ambassadors who stay away from Belarus, but also tourists, partners and investors.

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Women's Day in Belarus: Celebrating the Real Heroes

On 8 March, Belarusians celebrate International Women's Day. In the tradition of the Soviet Union, there is no special day for lovers such as Valentine's Day, but men and women have separate holidays. This is the time to look at the relations between men and women in Belarus. Although both are equal in front of the law, in reality, women are not as equal as men.

23 February is Men's Day, the Day of the Defenders of the Motherland, as it is called. This day is celebrated in the honour of the first victory of the Soviet Army near Pskov in 1918. Nowadays, 23 February is a day when all men feel like war heroes who defend their country and their families.

On their special day, men get shaving creme and socks as a gift from their wives, sisters and mothers. Women prepare cakes and food. On the day before 23 February, the department stores look like they are for women-only. The department for men's socks and toiletries are crowded with women buying presents for their beloved ones.

In return, women have their special day on 8 March, International Women's Day. Here again, they prepare food, and their sons, husbands and brothers give them flowers, chocolate and household devices as presents.

Gender holidays as remnant of the Soviet past

Traditionally, these gender holidays are celebrated at work. Women prepare a party for their male colleagues, and men make up poems praising their female co-workers. Some companies have

real competitions on which gender prepares the best party.

However, the gender holidays seem to be more and more a remnant of the Soviet past. According to opinion surveys, for the young generation of Belarusians, 8 March is just a day off (this is an example of positive discrimination: Women's Day is a day off while 23 February is not). Only history students know that 8 March became the International Women's Day to commemorate the role of women during the 1917 Russian revolution.

Some people in Belarus also prefer to celebrate the day of Belarusian Military Glory on 8 September instead of 23 February. This day refers to the victory of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania's troops over the army of the Moscow principality in the battle on 8 September 1514 near the town of Orsha. This victory prevented Muscovite forces from occupying the territory of Belarus. Celebrating this holiday regularly leads to a deterioration in Russia-Belarus relations.



Women's rights in Belarus

No matter whether you celebrate Women's day or not, it is still a day to have a look at the situation of gender equality in Belarus. Article 22 of the Belarusian Constitution states that all citizen are equal before the law. Belarus signed the optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. However, there is no separate law on gender equality in the country, and there are no quotas established for women's participation in elections, employment, etc. in the legislation.

Belarusian law protects the physical integrity of women to a

relatively high degree. However, violence against women, in particular sexual violence such as rape, sexually motivated murder, sexual harassment and trafficking in women, remains a significant problem. According to a survey conducted in 2004 by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), one-third of Belarusian women have suffered domestic violence.

Even if Belarusian women are not beaten by their husbands, life is still hard for them, as Belarus is a country with a traditional paternalistic scheme of male and female roles. While most women work full-time, they also bear the basic load of housework. After their working days, they come home and cook, clean the flat and do the laundry.

Belarusian women, as every foreigner who has been invited to a Belarusian family knows, are exceptional: they always have several dishes readily prepared, even if they do not expect any visitors. If they have guests, or a holiday, the hospitality is legendary, and they will not stop cooking until the table is fully loaded with food. At the same time, Belarusian women manage to take care of themselves and are reportedly good-looking.

Importance of paternal role in raising children is underestimated

It is part of the traditional role-understanding that women stay at home looking after the children. Despite the Belarusian law providing for “parental leave” three years after the birth of a child, in 2010 only 2,000 fathers used it. According to the United Nations Population Fund, Belarusians underestimate in society the importance of paternity, a fact that led to a decrease in the influence of men raising children.

In Sweden and Germany, the same possibility of parental leave exists. However, in those countries, the state explicitly

encourages fathers to profit from the occasion and stay at home. In Germany, for instance, the sum of payments last for only 14 months, and the payments can be received only if the fathers stay at home with their children at least two months of this time.

This shows that not only in Belarus but also Western countries have a long way to go towards true gender equality in child care. In contrast to Germany and Sweden, Belarus does not do anything to encourage fathers to stay with their children for some time.



A recent article in *Nasha Niva* weekly on the subject of child care underlines this problem: "Papas will not be forced to work as Mamas". The fact remains that most mothers have to stay at home because women work in lower-pay jobs. Women are often paid less, even if they do the same work as men do.

It is a pity that Belarusian young fathers are deprived of the possibility to spend more time with their children. In Belarus, it is unusual for a father to attend the antenatal classes or to be present at the birth of their children. Men who want still want to do so have to explain themselves when talking to others and are made fun of by their male friends.

Belarusian men can be great fathers; they have a lot to give to their children. It would be good for the future generation of Belarusians if the men were enabled by the society to assume their natural role in the upbringing of their offspring. That could be the best present for mothers on the Women's Day.

Minsk Struggles with The Coldest Days on Record

The frosty winter which is paralyzing many European capitals has hit Belarus hard. While public services work efficiently in the capital, many in various regions and the homeless suffer from the cold. In Minsk, the city administration has taken measures to deal with the cold weather which is [exceptional](#) even for Belarus. In the small villages, however, people often end up being cut off from the rest of the world by snow.

While public life does not come to a standstill in Belarus because of the winter, it is still unusually cold. Last week, on 2 February, the country has seen the coldest day and night since the beginning of weather recording in 1917. On that day, the average temperature in Minsk was -21 °C.

The Belarusian capital is well equipped to deal with snow and ice. In contrast to Western European cities like Rome, where the traffic stands still as soon as snow is falling, Belarus has efficient mechanisms to deal with snow. Special vehicles clean the roads and bring the snow out of town.

Traditionally, the Belarusian state [fights unemployment](#) by sending people to do public works. They work in orange vests, clean streets, shovel snow, and weed flower beds. There are thousands of them, working in parks, in courtyards and on the roofs, from where they remove loads of snow and the icicles.

Minsk Residents Asked to Volunteer In Shoveling Snow

However, the economic crisis has made itself evident this winter. For the first time, announcements at entrance doors of many houses are asking Minsk's citizens to volunteer for snow shoveling.

The mayor of Minsk, Mikalai Ladutska, has repeatedly called on the residents of the capital for help. Apparently, the Belarusian state can no longer afford to employ an army of people and pay them to do work that is done by the population in most other countries.



It is not surprising that there are not many people that would like to clear away 30 cm of snow from the paths of their courtyard for free. People in orange vests have been paid for by the state for years.

The result of the volunteering campaign has been disappointing and the city administration came up with another idea. The Minsk city executive community, recently adopted a new directive. Apart from people registered as temporarily unemployed, students and staff of city enterprises will from now on work to help the public. Apart from this group of people, prostitutes who have been sentenced to render community service are supposed to help shoveling snow as well as some media report.

For residents of Minsk, this winter means that they have to cope with a temperature difference of around 50° C between their flats and the world outside. Most flats in Minsk have central heating regulated by the city authorities. Heaters do not have thermostats. In flats it is often around 25° C. But some houses, especially recently-built are badly insulated, so it is rather cold in these flats and a draft makes it impossible to get warm after you come home from the street.

The situation is especially problematic for families with small children. It is nearly impossible to take a bath in a cold flat. Young families suffer more impediments from the cold winter. Doctors recommend not going outside with little babies when it is colder than -10° C. Many people decide not

to let their children go to the kindergartens because it is simply too cold to leave the house and because many kindergartens and schools are not heated. Schools, however, are closed only when temperatures drop to lower than -25°C during the day.

Sixty Already Died from Cold this Winter

In Minsk, an old hospital on Bahdanovich street has been transformed into a home for homeless people. It has 55 beds, and homeless people get warm clothes, tea, blankets and hot soup. The home will work until 1 April, and social workers and doctors are there to help the homeless people who come there. However, everybody who wants to find shelter there has to go through a medical examination.



Outside Minsk the situation is even worse. In small villages, many houses do not have central heating. The villages are cut off from the rest of the world because the roads are not cleaned from snow. As mainly old people live in the villages, there is a risk that the people will freeze or starve to death. Caritas and other humanitarian organizations bring food and wood to some of the villages, but of course it is impossible for them to get to every village in the country.

According to the website of the newspaper Nasha Niva, 129 people have suffered from frostbite this winter and 60 people died from cold. And those are only the officially recorded statistics. According to Caritas, some homeless people cannot come to the soup kitchens because they do not even have shoes.

If you have a business trip to Minsk coming up in the next days, stick to our three survival hints for Belarusian winter. The weather forecast announces temperatures around -25° C for the next week.

Survival Hints for Winter Business Trips to Belarus

1. Make sure you have a Belarusian friend who will lend you a fur coat (ask for *shuba* or *dublionka*) and a hat (*shapka*). No matter what you think, the clothes you bought in any country west of Poland are not going to keep you warm in Belarus in the winter.

2. If you are a woman: do not be vain. Put on the *shapka*, even if it makes a mess of your hair. You will notice that most women either have a deranged hairstyle as well, or they just leave on their *shapka* indoors. Otherwise your ears may suffer serious frostbite.

3. Only walk in the middle of the sidewalks, never close to the houses. Icicles may fall down and kill you- they are one of the great dangers of winter in Minsk. For this reason, signs warn pedestrians to be aware of those ice stalactites. You certainly do not want the full “Basic Instinct” experience when you are on a business trip to Belarus.

Lost in Translation in Minsk – The “Real Belarus” Travel Tips

Last week, leading Belarusian newspaper *Nasha Niva* announced that in Minsk there will be signposts put up in English and in

Russian. This reveals several facts about contemporary Minsk. There are no signposts in English. Putting them up is so extraordinary that they publish an article about it.

You Better Read Cyrillic

If you have traveled around Minsk without speaking Russian and reading Cyrillic, you will understand why. Apart from one road sign in the Western suburb of Minsk announcing the way to "Inturist", there are no street names or metro stations in Latin script. Only in the newly renovated park around Komsomolskae ozero will you find signs indicating the way to "Youth Island" and other promising places in English.

For a Western visitor, it means that you will need either a photographic memory or a good interpreter to get around in Minsk. Upon arrival, you may buy an English-language map of Minsk. But it will not help much, as the names indicated in English on your map will be hard to compare with the Cyrillic writing on the road signs and metro stations.

Even if you can speak or read some Russian, you will notice that this is the language most people speak in the streets but not the one used for road signs. They are in Belarusian, and Belarusians think it is very funny if a foreigner does not understand that if he is supposed to meet somebody at "Oktyabrskaya" station he actually has to get out when "Kastrychnickaya" is announced in the metro. Both words mean the same, but one is Russian, the other is Belarusian.



Don't Take Your Granny or Your Baby with You

You will be able to use your Russian in those shops that still have no self-service and where you need to ask the salesperson to give you what you want. A few years ago, there were many such shops in Minsk. Today, most shops in the city centre are supermarkets but you can still find the corner shops and they are pervasive in the countryside.

So do not be frustrated when shop assistants pretend not to understand the language you are speaking (even if you are quite sure it is Russian). They are not used to hearing foreign accents. And, of course, they do not speak English or any other Western language. Some will think that you are not speaking proper Russian in order to annoy them.

No matter what you are planning to do in Minsk, make sure you do not have a wheelchair or buggy with you. Minsk is absolutely not barrier-free. It is impossible to access most shops and almost all means of public transport. Even if you can get on the metro in Uruchie you cannot leave it in any other station because there are no lifts or even ramps. This shows that disabled or the elderly do not have wheelchairs or are not moving around in Minsk. Moreover, young mothers with babies in buggies are supposed to stay at home and should not go shopping or travel by metro.

Be Sure to Check Out Minsk Metro

The Minsk metro is quite impressive. Most people are amazed to see that the country reported to be on the edge of bankruptcy has large flat screens at many of its metro stations (and has had them for several years now). Every station is designed and decorated according to a specific theme: Lenin, Proletarian Revolution, Sports, etc. Minsk metro is clean, efficient and very speedy. When riding it for the first time make sure you have a seat or a stick to hold on to, otherwise you will fall down. With time, you will learn to keep your balance and “surf” like Minskers do.



But of course it's not this efficiency that put the metro on the front pages of the world media last year, but the [bomb explosion](#). Although the two young men allegedly responsible for the blast that caused the death of 15 people on April 11 2011 have been [sentenced](#) to death, many in Belarus still believe that behind the bombing were the Belarusian security services.

Many people had a strange feeling when going by metro for the first time after the explosion, and the bored police agents that pretended to look into your bags and backpacks in order to prevent you from bringing more bombs to the metro did not make anyone feel safer.

But normality soon returned, and going by metro is now once again a usual part of everyday life; the only thing to remind you of what happened is that they have removed the benches on the platform so that no more bombs can be hidden below them (and no more people can have a rest when waiting for their

train). Only at some stations were the benches back at the end of the last year.

If you get the impression that Minsk is a city for young, healthy russophones, you are right. So far, it is impossible to be lost in translation as there are no translations into English. The Minsk Tourist Information Center still has not decided whether to put up signs in Russian or Belarusian or English. Putting them up in English would bring Minsk a step closer to being an international capital and would make it seem a lot more welcoming to foreigners.

Three Survival Tips

So, our three survival hints for this week:

First, make sure you have a Belarusian friend or colleague to show you around. Treat him or her well, otherwise you might get really lost without reading Cyrillic.

Second, if you have to go by metro, count how many stations you have to go. Do not try to understand what the voice in the train announces unless you are a fluent Belarusian speaker.

Third, if you are hungry or thirsty and you do not speak Russian or Belarusian, stick to shops like Zentralny (next to McDonald's in the centre) or Evropeiski (next to Porsche centre in the east of the city). There you can get what you want yourself and then pay for it without having to explain anything.

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The “Real Belarus”: Travel Tips from a German Expat

At the beginning of the new year, Belarus made headlines in the Western press once again. The reporting on the [new internet law](#) showed that Belarus is a white stain on the European map for most people. This week the Toronto Star published an article called "Belarus: The North Korea of Europe". It's those often misleading descriptions that most Westerners have in mind when going to Belarus for the first time.

Based on Western media reports, it is impossible to imagine what Belarus is actually like and how people live here. For this reason, Belarus Digest launches a new series of articles, written by a German living in Belarus. In several articles, we will try to paint a more realistic picture of life in “Europe's last dictatorship” and describe events and everyday life from the perspective of a Western expat. So let's begin the journey.

If you plan to visit Belarus, you are probably a diplomat or business man on a mission, a backpacker or a German between 60 and 70 on an organized commemoration tour. Unless you drive, there are two principal ways to arrive in Belarus – by plane or by train.

Landing at Minsk-2 Airport: Welcome to the Potemkin Village!

Airport Minsk 2 will seem strangely deserted. There was National Airport Minsk 1 in the very middle of the capital, which was reserved for flights of the president and inner-Belarusian flights but it is no longer used. So Minsk 2 is the only major international airport in Belarus.



Upon landing you will probably be intimidated by customs officers and border guards in huge hats who never smile or try to pretend to speak anything other than Russian.

You will need to buy a Belarusian insurance because the traveling insurance you bought in your home country will not be valid in Belarus no matter what the agent told you at home. When you have passed the passport and customs control, you will take a relieved breath and head towards Minsk.

Make sure to buy some Belarusian Roubles which you can't get in Western capitals. Bring small bank notes and a big purse – changing 10 Euros will bring you more than 100 000 roubles. There are no Belarusian coins, only paper money.

Take a taxi or marshrutka (a mini-bus) to the city. You will have a 42 km drive to think about where you have landed now.

The highway connecting the international airport Minsk 2 to the city looks very modern and shows off the national companies and campaigns on glossy (English language!) road signs. Clearly this country wants to impress its foreign visitors from first sight.

However, you will understand quickly that this road as well as the impressive buildings you will see when entering Minsk are Potemkin villages. The facades are beautifully maintained and always freshly painted, but when you see them from the backside you understand that you have been fooled. Nevermind, Minsk is still a nice city.

Getting There by Train: Gradual Adaptation During an Overnight Trip

When you arrive by rail, you will probably take an overnight train from Berlin or Warsaw. Most likely you will feel like you are in one of the documentaries you saw on TV, describing trips on the Trans-Siberian railway titled “From Berlin to

Vladivostok". You will have to deal with a stewardess who speaks only Russian. That seems to be very intimidating, particularly when she shouts at you at your home railway station that she is no longer going to wait until you have put your belongings into the train as the train is already running late because of you.

You will then enter a compartment that you share with two or three fellow travelers. Most probably they will be Belarusians coming back from a visit to their children and grandchildren who immigrated to the West. Over the long trip (around 18 hours from Berlin) you will get to know them very well and agree to pretend some of the booze they bought is yours as they exceed the allowed amount. You will pass the border control in the very East of Poland and then in Brest. As always, border guards will not speak a word of English.



Then you will see how the wheels of a whole train are changed. Train tracks in Belarus (and elsewhere in the former Soviet Union) are wider than in the rest of Europe. One carriage will be lifted after another while you are actually on the train. It is an amazing experience.

When you enter Minsk after four more hours of rattling through forests and neat villages with railway buildings that are painted pink and blue and yellow you will hopefully be impressed.

The Minsk railway station is newly built and looks like a UFO landed on the railway square with its two towers. You will get

out of the train and be caught up in the buzzing atmosphere: taxi drivers offering you a ride, people meeting their relatives that unload their luggage... Until some years ago, they were still playing a march for international trains arrived in Minsk. This honor is reserved for trains arriving from Moscow only.

Unless you know Minsk and its system of public transport well, treat yourself with a taxi ride to your final destination. It is not expensive, and when again in life will you have the possibility to be driven around a Soviet Union theme park sitting in a Lada with fake fur on the back seat?

Three Survival Tips for Your First Visit to Belarus

So, when traveling to Belarus for the first time, make sure you remember these three tips:

First, never be intimidated by an official unless you have done something illegal and there is a chance they know about it.

Second, never try to put on a seatbelt when sitting in the back back of a taxi. Even if you may find seatbelts, the taxi drivers will be seriously insulted and take it as a sign that you do not trust their driving skills.

Third, if you are not keen on reading newspapers and books in Belarusian or Russian for the duration of your stay, bring your reading materials in a language you understand. It is impossible to buy international newspapers in Belarus.

Belarus May Destroy The Last Large European Swamps

Belarus is on the verge of breaching one of its serious international ecological commitments. If the government plans to extinguish Belarusian swamps goes ahead, this could have implications for the rest of Europe.

This summer, the Belarusian government launched a new initiative on energy generation, which will lead to the extinction of the last large swamps in Belarus. These swamps are the only natural territories of their kind in the European temperate climate zone, which were not disturbed by human activities. The Government Decision №794 of 17 June 2011 approved peat extraction in some areas including eight natural bogs in the country. In effect that would lead to extermination of that peat.

The new peat extraction project has been initiated by the Energy Ministry. Their reasoning is simple – Belarus is seeking for new energy sources as Russian gas and oil are getting ever more expensive. In Soviet times, Belarus was well-known for drying the bogs and producing peat fuel. It is not surprising that in times of harsh economic crisis, the idea of using old solutions seems so attractive. In particular, the Energy Ministry considers peat as the main way to provide energy for cement works. This cement will be needed urgently when the Chinese investment plans to build new facilities in Belarus will be implemented.

The author of the new peat extraction program, Dr Ivan Lishtvan of the National Academy of Sciences, argued that out of 4.4 billion ton of peat in Belarus 3.3 billion tons might be extracted for energy needs. Besides non-protected peatlands, he proposed to include peat bogs located both in

national protected areas and in internationally-known reservations such as the Biarezinsky Biospheric Reservation, the National Park "Belavezhszkaya Puscha" and the National Park "Prypiatski".

The Ministry of the Environment is strictly against the new program, and its employees have clearly protested against it even in media. That came as surprise because open quarrels between government institutions in the media are almost unheard of. Yet the place of the Ministry of the Environment in the official hierarchy and in the governmental decision-making process is a very low one. Therefore, the ministry cannot overrule the decision after it was taken at the top of the hierarchy.

Interestingly, all estimations underlying the project are questionable. Another scientist, Aliaksandar Kazulin of National Academy of Sciences says that the country does not have such large peat deposits. The last study made by the Academy and the Environment Ministry based on the Google satellite images proved that the area of Belarusian swamps estimated by the Energy Ministry was largely exaggerated. Previously the researchers had estimated that there might be about 1.4 billion hectares of undisturbed swamps. Now they believe there are just 862.6 thousand ha – 59% of which are seriously disrupted by neighboring peat extraction and melioration. Accordingly, the unextracted deposits make up not 4.4 billion tons but only 160 million tons.

In Minsk, those working on the protection and re-wetting of peat lands have been utterly shocked when learning about the Government's decision. Firstly, some of the areas to be dried out and exploited are protected natural territories of international significance that are covered at least partly by three major international environmental conventions – the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, the conventions on migrating species and on biodiversity.

Secondly, some of the protected areas are included in a large-scale project on peat bogs regeneration carried out with significant contributions by the UN and other foreign donors. The money has been given to the government under the condition of sustainable bogs' use in the future. Among the targeted areas there are the peat lands of "Dakudauski" and "Morachna" which have been regenerated recently as part of a UNDP/ Global Environmental Facility (GEF) project. USD 1 million given by international donors, including the money of the Federal Republic of Germany, were spent on the project.

Violating international ecological commitments does not seem to be a wise step at a moment when Belarus is internationally isolated and ostracized by its European neighbors. Ecological projects are some of the few that the international community is ready to support in Belarus even when the political climate is as chilled as it is under the given circumstances. It is in the interest of the European countries to protect and regenerate Belarusian swamps – which are unique in Europe – as they contribute to a better climate in the whole region. The donors are, however, not likely to continue the projects when it gets clear that climate regeneration is clearly not on the priority list of the Belarusian government.

Moreover, the money coming to Belarus through those large projects constitutes an inflow of the bitterly needed hard currency. Given the fact that the project means are linked to the condition of sustainability, Belarus might be about to ruin further chances to profit from international money. For those working on the projects it is hard to imagine any further cooperation with Belarus if their work will be destroyed for the purpose of gaining cheap energy.

The consequences of the new program will not only be felt on the level of international cooperation but also throughout the country. In addition to threatening rare species, the climate in Belarus will become drier. Although up to now Belarus was famous for its excellent freshwater deposits, they depend on

the swamps system, and cannot be sustained without swamps. The swamps prevent large-scale floods and they take in water after snow melt and big rainfalls.

Apart from those practical arguments, the annihilation of the swamps also contains a sentimental element for many Belarusians: They traditionally see themselves as “people from the swamps”, the bogs and wetlands play an integral role in the national consciousness. Large swamps are characteristic for Belarus, a country that possesses neither sea access nor mountains. Belarus without swamps is unimaginable for many Belarusians and will deprive them of one the few specifics that can be a competitive advantage for the development of tourism in Belarus.

Although in private, those Belarusians knowing about the government plans complain about them, they are far from staging a protest or establishing a civil action committee as it would be the case in other European countries in a similar situation.

It seems that the new energy policy is just another example of arbitrary decision-making by the Belarusian government. If the government – which does not report to anyone but the president – had thought twice or undertaken serious inter-ministerial consultations on the matter, it would have been clear that more is at stake than just a few swamps. In the face of the crisis, the government again fails to seek new ways but stays with old Soviet models and recipes.

However, not all is lost – the extraction of peat has not yet started. Hopefully, the government will understand in time that it risks losing international support and money as well as selling the country’s ecological future for some cheap energy.

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