

Belarus struggles to preserve its historical heritage

When travelling to Hrodna at the end of January, a group of tourists ended up saving a unique historical museum: the Yanush Parulis Museum in Hrodna was only able to survive financially thanks to local activism and a media campaign.

Whereas neighbouring Poland announces a 9.5 per cent budget increase on culture, Belarus is failing to implement its only state-funded project for national heritage preservation. Instead of cooperating with civil society to preserve important cultural sites, the government prefers to restrict NGO activities and spends money on safety and order.

Conservation of heritage

Belarus placed the issue of preservation of cultural heritage on its policy agenda only recently: the first document directly addressing cultural heritage protection appeared only in 2006. In contrast, in Lithuania heritage preservation laws date back to 1992, while in Austria such legislation goes back as far as 200 years. Meanwhile, the Belarusian government only introduced its first modest heritage project in 2011.

International programmes are also pushing Belarus to protect its cultural heritage. In 2015, the Belarusian town of Mstislau became a member of the COMUS project (Community-led Urban Strategies in Historical Towns), which aims to foster active civic participation in heritage preservation. Likewise, UNESCO has designated [four world heritage sites](#) in Belarus. Broadening the list of historical places would put more sites under protection.

However, the Belarusian government has so far failed to create

a comprehensive project for heritage preservation. Over the past years, Belarus has begun to commercialise heritage conservation in such famous tourist sites as Mir Castle. Nevertheless, castles in Kreva and Lubcha survive due to the voluntary work of historians and locals. By [liberalising the visa regime](#), Belarus has a greater chance of benefiting from tourist money, but the government should first focus on effectively preserving heritage sites which could be of interest to tourists.

Maintaining castles

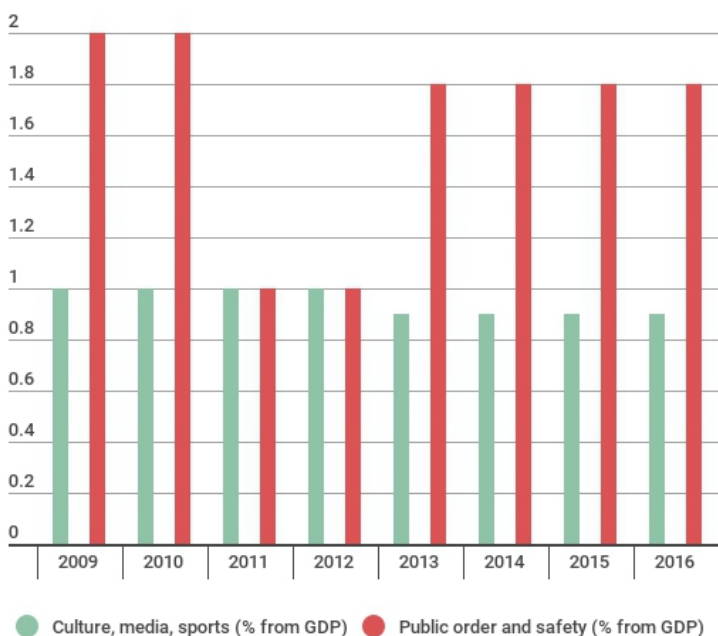


Although Belarusian historical sites often attract tourists, the government has chosen to focus exclusively on castles: in 2011, money was allocated to a programme called 'Castles of Belarus' for 2012 to 2018. The programme aims to repair and restore 38 historical sites in Belarus. However, while local authorities choose to repair some castles, they also demolish many other historical buildings, as recently happened with two 19th century military buildings in Minsk.

'Castles of Belarus' has not received a large enough budget for proper implementation, and only a few castles have benefited from the programme so far. Castles in [Kosava](#), Ružany, and Lida were the first to be renovated, while restoration of many other historical sites, such as Hrodna or Sviack castles, has yet to start. Already in 2015, deputy minister of culture, Aliaksandr Jacko, stated that the project was under-funded and could not go on with the current amount

of money.

Due to the economic crisis, the Belarusian authorities are not prioritising the preservation of historical heritage. In contrast to the budget for public order and safety, the budget for culture and media has remained very low over the past seven years. In comparison, at the end of 2016 the Polish authorities announced an increase in the culture budget of 9.5 per cent of the GDP. Moreover, the Belarusian authorities put culture, media, and sports all in the same bracket.



Historians have expressed concern about the 'Castles of Belarus' programme. For example, Stsiapan Sturejka, a famous anthropologist, told *Tvoj Styl* that the state is working on restorations without consulting historians or experts. According to Anton Astapovich, the chairman of the Belarusian Voluntary

Society for Protection of Historical Monuments and Culture, there is a huge difference between renovation and restoration; the authorities often do not take this into account.

While in most neighbouring countries consultation with experts and discussion with locals prior to restoration is a requirement, in Belarus the authorities prefer to skip this crucial step. According to Astapovich, only those sites which the authorities consider to be historically valuable are safe from demolition. Local authorities are prone to decide whether particular sites should disappear without historians' input. The state should discuss each restoration project with experts and citizens, as in Poland.

Heritage protection: the business of society?

Thus far, conservation of historical and cultural heritage in Belarus has mostly been the business of enthusiasts. In 2016, the streets of Minsk received historical names. Shortly after, historians in Hrodna initiated [a similar project](#), which started on 15 February. Due to the initiatives of local activists, some historical sites continue to function.



The Yanush Parulis Museum in Hrodna was in jeopardy, as the owner could no longer afford to pay the rent. However, it was able to survive into 2017 thanks to the media and a campaign organised by locals. Media coverage allowed the owner to attract tourists, who are now visiting the

museum more and more.

Some initiatives aim to solve a legislative deficiency which significantly complicates the monitoring of the renovation of historical objects. The Belarusian Voluntary Society for Protection of Historical Monuments and Culture continuously fights against demolition of historical buildings. Several weeks ago, they sent an [appeal](#) to the parliament with a proposal to enhance legislation on renovation of historical sites.

International projects also aim to support heritage protection, although the scope of such projects is small. The Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation organises an annual competition for projects aimed at improving heritage sites. At the end of each year, however, the fund is only able to support a few heritage-related projects.

Belarusian heritage as a priority

Conservation of historical heritage should not only be left to volunteers. The government finances heritage protection poorly. Civil society does not possess the resources to conduct such projects without governmental support. Additionally, NGO initiatives are constrained by legislation requiring registration of international funds. Consequently, many historical sites are left to citizens or volunteer groups.

The Belarusian government itself is does little to protect heritage, but it is not willing to allow civil society to be part of the solution. Authorities try to save money on heritage preservation, limiting the budget only to 0.9 per cent of GDP. At the same time, they ignore suggestions to organise public hearings or expert consultations about renovations or demolition.

Grassroots initiatives over the last year demonstrate the ability on behalf of civil society to achieve goals. By opening up space for conservation initiatives, the state delegates more functions to civil society, thus empowering citizens. Instead of dividing responsibility for culture heritage, civil society and the government could unite forces to create an effective heritage conservation programme.

Western Belarus: What To See

and Do

For many first-time visitors to Belarus the limit of ambition and adventure often extends no further than the boundaries of inner city Minsk, yet a voyage of discovery exists elsewhere in the other major cities, museum towns and the natural world.

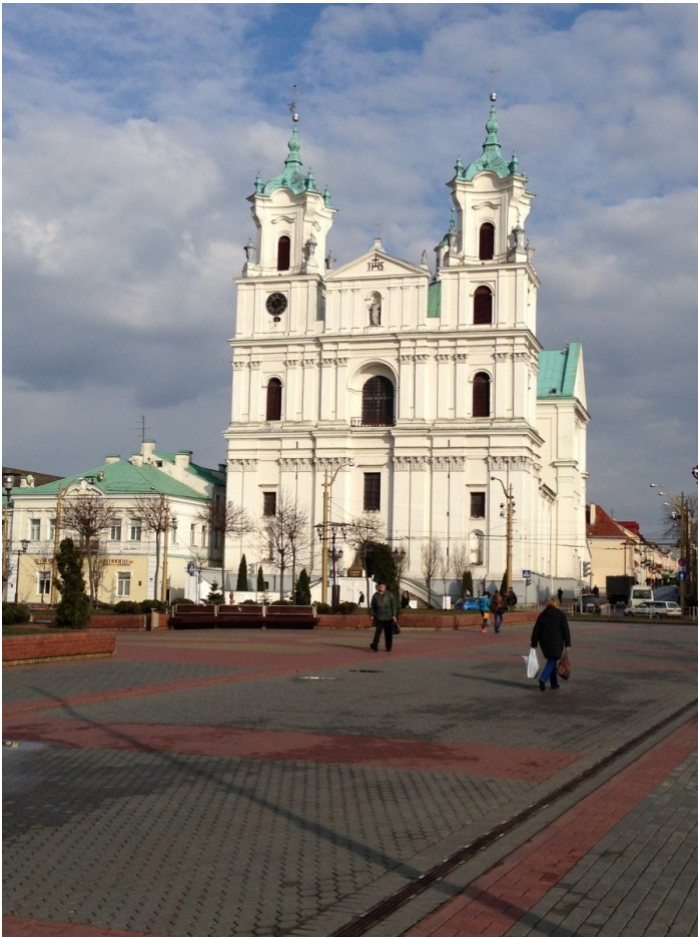
This article, the first of a two-parter, introduces a number of these treasures in the Western half of the country, where the elegance of Hrodna (also spelled Grodno), the frontier bustle of Brest, the palaces and castles of Mir, Niasviž and Navahrudak and the natural beauty of Bielaviežskaja Pušča National Park all await the curious traveller.

Cities: mediaeval and Soviet heritage

In strategic and geographical terms, Belarus played a number of important roles as the most Westerly of the former Soviet Union's republics and it comes as no surprise that this feature continues to dominate its attractions today.

Nestling in the north-western corner lies the city of **Hrodna**. Just 20 kilometres from the Polish border and only 40 kilometres from Lithuania, its cultural and administrative importance within the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania and later in the time of the influential Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth goes back over 750 years.

Catholic and Polish influences abound here, as most notably exhibited in the form of the majestic 17th century Jesuit **Farny Cathedral**, located centrally on Savieckaja Square. The exquisite high Baroque altars, one of which is 21 metres high, should not be missed.



Only a few hundred metres away, the frontage of the lovely **Bernadino Church and Seminary** high above the Nieman river affords fine views across the lower town, framing the unusual **Drama Theatre**, the **Fire Tower** and the **Old and New Castles** in the foreground.

Beyond and well worthy of a visit stands the **Kaložskaya Church of St Barys and St Hlieb**, the oldest remaining building in the city. Probably the only surviving example of the ancient style of **Black Ruthenian** architecture in the country, much of the original stonework of this lovely church dates from the 12th century.

Almost due south and 232 kilometres away in the south-western corner of the country lies the city of **Brest**. Situated on the pan-European E30 highway and the main Berlin to Moscow railway line, Hitler unleashed Operation Barbarossa here in 1941.

The 19th century [fortress](#), one of the country's major visitor sites, withstood a fearsome onslaught for six weeks. The title of **Hero-fortress** was bestowed after the Great Patriotic War to honour the heroism and self-sacrifice of the defenders during the early months of Barbarossa, the city itself also being honoured as "**Hero City of the Soviet Union**".

Today, travellers with an interest in 20th century European affairs will find much in this somber and moving place to fire their imagination. And the **Biarescie Archaeological Museum** in the grounds of the fortress should not be overlooked.

Only a handful of kilometres from the European Union, this city has all the hustle and bustle of a true border town. Closer to Warsaw than to Minsk, Western cultural influences predominate.

Fairy-tale castles and palaces

160 kilometres due east of Hrodna on the M11 motorway lies the town of **Lida** with its mighty **castle**, boasting huge walls and a high level walkway connecting two of the imposing corner towers. Construction began in the middle of the 14th century. The site measures 80 metres square, making this one of the largest castle complexes in the country.

Similar to Lida in design and style, the 16th century [Mir Castle and Fortress](#) is one of the country's UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Only 90 kilometres from Minsk, this sympathetically renovated fairy-tale castle of sublime décor and sumptuous exhibits easily repays the close attention of visitors.

Just half an hour away by road stands another UNESCO site, the

historic settlement of **Niasviž** with its glorious [palace](#). Surrounded by a charming lake and beautifully landscaped grounds, opportunities to promenade abound at this splendid site, one of the finest historical locations in the entire country.



A visit to ancient **Navahradak**, once the capital of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, splendidly complements a visit to these castles and palaces. Around 45 minutes' drive from Mir, the 14th century **castle** now lies in ruins, though renovations are under way.

Its location atop a hill 323 metres above sea level, one of the highest points in the country, dominates the town and the surrounding area, making it easy to appreciate its strategic value in times of medieval warfare.

The town also has a number of sites (including an interesting museum) devoted to the life and works of [Adam Mickiewicz](#), national poet of Belarus, Poland and Lithuania, who was born here and christened in the church on the hill below the castle.

The beauty of nature

Only 70 kilometres north of Brest, the magnificent [Bielaviežskaja Pušča State National Park and Biosphere Reserve](#), a third UNESCO World Heritage site, should be considered one of the country's 'must see' sites. It came into existence as a park over 600 years ago, though its original status as a playground for Polish princes and Russian tsars has now far been exceeded. The first class Museum of Nature presents a fine guide to the history of the park as well as comprehensively describing current attractions, while tourist trails on foot, on horseback and by bicycle abound outdoors.



Several hundred **European bison** inhabit the park and eagle-eyed visitors should have no difficulty in securing a sighting from roads and paths. Another noteworthy resident, the 'real' **Grandfather Frost** also lives here. I have visited his dacha and was privileged to meet the grand old gentleman himself. He certainly convinced me of his credentials ...

European Union visitors entering the park from Poland no longer require a Belarusian entry visa, although the process of applying for exemption presents no less a challenge than the visa application itself!

Four **hotels** await in and just outside the park, each with decent facilities for nourishment and relaxation. I have stayed at **Hotel Number Three**, just inside the park gates. Although a little shabby (dating as it does from the Soviet era), visitors to this place of peace and beauty will doubtless be seeking to return to the simplicities of life and nature. In that context, expect to find the rooms basic but clean. All have en-suite facilities.

I have one word of caution if visiting here though; do think carefully before stepping inside the **Valeri animal enclosure**. All of the animals and birds in this section of the park are caged. Many of them appear to exhibit distress and in particular, I found the sight of two brown bears in a state of considerable discomfort outside their natural environment particularly upsetting. Although the only negative experience in an otherwise delightful place, it remains a significant one.

Belarus has so much to offer beyond the attractions of its capital city. Those with an open and enquiring mind who step outside the boundary of the Minsk orbital road will not be disappointed by all they find there.

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