

# People of the Swamps Fight the Flooding

This April, the region of Paliessie in southern Belarus experienced annual flood caused by major local rivers. The flood was the largest in decades.

Yet Paliessie is famous not only for floods that turn towns and villages into islands. The region's population presents a distinct ethnic group within the Belarusian nation. They speak a peculiar dialect and retain many features of traditional lifestyle.

Belarusian protestant communities are very concentrated in the region. Their way of life differs a great deal from that of their Orthodox compatriots. Previously, Paliessie was one of the Jewish centres of Eastern Europe and many famous Jews come from here.

Because of its unique nature, culture and history, Paliessie became a popular tourist destination in Belarus.

## **Belarusian Venice**

Belarus has no access to the sea, but once a year some Paliessie spots turn into islands surrounded by water. Geographically, Paliessie lies in the lowlands, where two major Belarusian rivers, Prypiac and Dniapro, flow. These natural conditions make Paliessie vulnerable to floods, which occur annually in spring. The 2013 flood turned out to be one of the largest in recent decade. Here is a typical picture of a flooded village:

For people who are used to a comfortable city life such floods look like a disaster. But paliašuks (this is how they call themselves) take it easy. They have gotten used to such

phenomena since childhood and perceive them as the natural state of things. Every family usually has a boat to move between their yards and mainland during the flood. Children sail to school and their parents to work. When water comes too close or even inside the houses, people construct devices to raise their house and even animals in sheds.

However, even these sophisticated means of adaptation do not help, if the situation becomes too extreme. For that reason the Belarusian emergency service is especially busy during the flood period. They move people and animals, build dikes, distribute food and other products when people are unable to reach mainland and do other kinds of emergency work.

### **People of the Swamps**

Ethnically and linguistically, Paliessie presents a peculiar case. Some scholars consider Paliašuks a separate ethnic group within the rather homogenous Belarusian nation. This group has formed and preserved their distinctiveness very much due to natural conditions which isolated them from the rest of population.

Linguists believe Paliessie dialect to be a transitional dialect between Belarusian and Ukrainian language, as it contains elements of them both. In the beginning of 1990s, a separatist movement emerged which sought to create a Paliessie language. However, the movement did not become popular among locals and soon declined.



Paliessie has always been a treasure house for ethnographers and linguists, as it preserved many ancient features in the way of life, culture and language. However, Paliašuks has never held a strong common identity. They have acknowledged their distinctiveness but call themselves “tutejšyja” (the locals) when asked about their own identity.

Before the World War II, Palesie was one of the centers of Jewish life in Eastern Europe. Quite a few famous people of Jewish origin descend from here.

Chaim Weizmann, the president of the World Zionist Organisation and the first president of Israel was born in Motal village near Pinsk and received his first education here. Golda Meir, the fourth prime-minister and the "Iron Lady" of Israeli politics lived in Pinsk with her family for some time before they emigrated to the United States. The winner of 1971 Nobel Prize in Economics, Siamion Kuźniec (Simon Smith) also came from Pinsk, where he was born and studied at a local gymnasium. Another famous Pinsk scholar, David Shoenberg, became professor of Physics at Cambridge University.

Early ethnographers of the Russian Empire depicted Paliashuks as a gloomy and unhappy people with weak health and a widespread hair illness. Today, however, Paliessie demonstrates highest birth rates in Belarus and is famous for its strong local communities. The main reason for such developments seems to be tied to a religion not common in other Belarusian regions – Protestantism.

### **The Miracle of Paliessie Protestantism**

Protestant communities began to spread in Belarus in 1920-1930s, but soon the communists destroyed most of them during Stalin's rule. Until the 1970s, authorities constantly persecuted the protestant church. Nevertheless, the communities continued to exist and flourished after the collapse of the USSR.

The Brest region, the western part of Paliessie, presents the centre of protestant communities in Belarus. Protestants differ significantly in their way of life compared to regular Belarusians. Protestant families often have more than five children, while normally Belarusians have one or two.

Protestants do not drink alcohol, while in some Belarusian villages alcoholism killed every single man.

No wonder the region looks rather positive in terms of its social indicators. It has the youngest population in Belarus and higher average household income. For example, the whole Alšany village, one of the biggest protestant communities in Belarus, deals with the cucumber business.



Every family has greenhouses where they toil day and night. Remarkably, local children do not want to go to big cities in search of a better life. They stay in the village and continue their father's business. "Why should we go to the city? Here, on the land, we can make more money during one season than you will make during your whole life", they say.

### **Paliessie as a Tourist Destination**

Due to its unique nature, culture and history, Paliessie became popular among Belarusian as well as foreign tourists. Some people seek the ancient way of life which still exists in local villages. For instance, in some places the roofs of the houses are still covered with reed.

For some categories of tourists, the tour in areas contaminated by Chernobyl presents a real adventure.

Others enjoy struggling through vast swamps and woods. Actually, Paliessie's wetlands appear the largest complex of wetlands in Europe that have preserved their natural environment.

Paliessie has a great potential for tourism as it offers experiences and adventures for those who like unusual

experiences, hidden just a few kilometres from the EU border.

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# **Victims of Communism Memorial: Wreath Laying Ceremony and Truman-Reagan Medal of Freedom Ceremony**

WASHINGTON – Wreath Laying Ceremony and Truman-Reagan Medal of Freedom Ceremony will take place at the Victims of Communism Memorial on June 16, 2009.



A delegation of Belarusian diaspora representing Belarusian-American Association and We Remember Foundation will attend the events and lay flowers to commemorate tens of millions of victims.

Cordially Invites You  
on

**June 16, 2009**

to

**Wreath Laying**

**Ceremony** The Victims of  
Communism Memorial -

10:30 - 11:00 AM

International

commemoration ceremony

Wreaths and flowers from

around the world ~

**Truman-Reagan Medal  
of Freedom Ceremony**

United States Capitol

-12:00 - 2:00 PM Medals

awarded to international

heroes of freedom: U.S.

House of Representatives-

Majority Leader Steny

Hoyer U.S. Secretary of

Housing & Urban

Development Jack Kemp

(posthumously) Romanian

Bishop Laszlo Tokes

Complimentary luncheon to

follow ~ **Launch of the**

**Online Global Museum  
on Communism** Reception

at the Romanian

Ambassador's Residence -

6:30 - 8:30 PM Multi-

media presentation and

ribbon cutting ceremony

Romanian food, drink and

music Ticket donations

are requested for this

event Individuals \$100 /

Couples \$175 ~ **RSVP by**

**calling 202.536.2373**

**or emailing**

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