

Who benefits from the alcoholisation of Belarus?

Belarus is perhaps the world's second booziest nation. In 2014, Belarus topped the World Health Organisation's report on alcohol consumption. According to the WHO, an average Belarusian drinks around 17.5 litres of alcohol per year, while the median global consumption hovers around 6.5 litres.

Meanwhile, alcohol prices are considerably lower than in neighbouring western countries. Despite the government's attempt to set up a programme for prevention of alcoholism and rehabilitation of alcoholics, Belarus has so far failed to combat heavy drinking. Moreover, alcohol prices tend to decrease right before elections or during economic crises.

Cheap alcohol in Belarus has become a tool to neutralise activism and numb national consciousness. By decreasing alcohol prices, authorities guarantee themselves more loyalty and support.

The alcoholisation of Belarus

According to the WHO, Belarus is among the most bibulous countries in the world: in 2016, the organisation calculated that the average Belarusian drinks 17.5 litres of alcohol per year. This enormous figure is well over the WHO consumption standard of 8 litres per year. It's recommended for regular drinkers to also take [custom bottled water](#) to stay hydrated and avoid hangover.



Nevertheless, it is unclear how much Belarusians really drink. Over the past several years, the WHO has estimated that 17-18

litres per year seems to be the average amount of tipple.

At the same time, due to differences in methodology, [the Belarusian Ministry of Health denies](#) the WHO's data and claims that in 2016 the real figure was closer to 8.8 litres.

Statistical agencies also struggle to estimate the true scale of illegal alcohol production. In the beginning of May, police in the town of Maladziechna uncovered the largest illegal alcohol production scheme in the region in the last five years. Law enforcement found more than 100 litres of moonshine and 21 tonnes of brew.

In many villages, home-made spirits have become a huge social problem, sometimes leading to death. Neither international nor national sociologists are able to determine the exact level of alcohol consumption per person due to illegal alcohol production.

The (anti-) alcohol policy

The Belarusian government is attempting to combat the alcoholisation of Belarus while still profiting from alcohol sales. In 2011, the government introduced an anti-alcohol programme which restricted sales and advertisement. However, later in 2013, alcohol producers persuaded Lukashenka not to ban the sale of cheap 'wine' (or [Charnila](#)), one of the most popular alcoholic drinks in Belarus. Additionally, in 2013 the Ministry of Trade discussed the idea of selling alcohol over the Internet.

The Belarusian government not only ignores the problem of alcoholism, it also encourages its sale. In 2016, Belarus sold 6,954,100 dekaliters of alcohol, reports *Belta*. As of 2015, Belarusians can buy booze at night after the government cancelled its moratorium on alcohol sales between 10pm and 9am. Recently, in April, Minister of Antimonopoly Regulation

and Trade Uladzimir Kaltovich stated live on the channel *Belarus 1* that Belarusians will soon be allowed to bring their own alcohol to cafes.

☒ Over the last several years, the government is starting to take the problem of alcoholism more seriously. The Ministry of Internal Affairs, which is preparing a document on the matter, believes that the state would benefit from the reduction of alcohol sales by spending less money on treatment for the addicted.

The document suggests restricting alcohol sale between 10pm to 9 am and requiring separate departments for alcohol in large stores. Nevertheless, the strong alcohol lobby has so far been able to prevent the document from coming into force.

The availability of alcohol exacerbates the country's alcohol problem. Belarusians can currently buy alcohol at any time in any store and at petrol stations. In Lithuania, in contrast, alcohol can be sold starting at 10 am until 10 pm; in Sweden, alcohol stronger than 3.5% is available only at one government-controlled chain and can be purchased until 7 pm.

Moreover, prices for alcohol in Belarus have remained relatively stable for years, despite the economic crisis and inflation. The experience of neighbouring countries, such as Russia, proves that increasing the price for cheap wines and strong cheap spirits could decrease alcoholism.

Why does the State Benefits from Alcoholism?

Alcoholism in Belarus continues to lead to serious social problems. [Orphanages](#) are one result of the high level of alcohol consumption, and alcohol remains one of the main reasons for [suicide](#). Moreover, Belarusians commit more than

80% of murders while drunk. If that weren't enough, thanks to alcohol, Belarus has one of the highest [divorce rates](#) in the world.

Cheap prices and the widespread availability of alcohol bring economic benefits to the state. The authorities have been discussing banning the most popular form of alcohol, cheap fortified wine, since 1999. However, the profit cheap wine brings in, making up around 30% of the profit of the entire industry, makes a ban seem unlikely. Political scientist [Jury Čavusaŭ](#) believes that 'local budgets completely depend on profits from alcohol sales' and that 'any anti-alcohol policy is ineffective as long as the price for alcohol remains so low'.

✘ Besides the economic benefits, alcohol serves as a means of political and social manipulation. Along with salary raises and growth of pensions, cancelling restrictions on alcohol sales on the eve of elections (as in 2015) is a form of bribery for society.

Alcohol has become a tool to conceal economic and social problems which the state has failed to overcome. By supporting the production of cheap and easily available alcohol, the state minimises existing social discontent. As [Vitaŭ Rymašeŭski](#), co-chairman of the Belarusian Christian Democracy Party, noted to *Radyjo Racyja*: 'cheap alcohol has contributed to the alcoholisation and degradation of the nation'.

In addition to the absence of a strong anti-alcohol policy, Belarusian society has failed to mobilise to solve the problem. Investment in rescue premises and care centres for alcoholics, involving both the government and society, should be the first step to solving the alcoholisation of Belarus.

Increasing the price of alcohol, along with cracking down on illegal alcohol production, would have a positive effect on alcohol consumption rates. However, until society and the

state adopt a common alcohol policy, the government will continue to make money and manipulate Belarusians. Although the state declares its concern for the increase in alcoholism, it continues to consider alcohol sales a cash cow.

Advocacy crowdfunding in Belarus: the best projects of 2016

On 15 December, the best Belarusian crowdfunded projects of 2016 received awards in Minsk. 15 finalists received funding totaling \$19,500. Crowdfunding has become one of the simplest and most accessible forms of civic participation. In a nondemocratic environment, crowdfunding is one of the safest ways of practising social activism.

The best Belarusian campaigns of 2016 were mainly related to social and cultural issues, whereas few projects considered human rights or the environment. The relative unpopularity of such themes can be explained by potential conflict with state interests.

Crowdfunding as a resource for advocacy in Belarus

Crowdfunding is often referred to as a new form of civic participation. According to statistics, in 2014 the world crowdfunding market came to \$16bn, while in 2015 the number was more than \$34bn. However, in Belarus even traditional

forms of civic participation struggle to engage the wider public. The small number of NGOs, passive engagement in public hearings, and a low level of public awareness are all symptoms of the passive and non-participatory nature of Belarusian civil society.

Nevertheless, in 2016 Belarusians demonstrated an unprecedentedly high level of civic participation through crowdfunding. Currently, several platforms help finance [crowdfunded projects in Belarus](#): *Talacosht*, *Ulej*, and *Maesens*. The first two platforms, *Talacosht* and *Ulej*, allow users to create a project online and offers non-material support. *Maesens* suggests collecting money specifically for social projects by offering an auction of meetings.

In addition, *Maesens* organises an annual contest called 'Social Weekend', in which citizens and experts choose the best projects for financial support. 15 finalists of the 2016 'Social Weekend' received funding from *Maesens*, while most of the other 40 projects received money through crowdfunding.

The most popular genre of projects on *Talacosht*, *Ulej* and *Maesens* are humanitarian, cultural, and publishing projects. Examples of notable projects on *Talashkot* include a translation of *The Chronicles of Narnia* and a fundraiser for Belarusian athlete Vital Hurkou. Other recent campaigns have included a fundraiser for *Nasha Niva* investigations and Christmas gifts for Belarusian orphans.

The most successful projects manage to combine crowdfunding with other advocacy tools. *Imena* magazine, the Swamps Protection Campaign, and the *Adnak* festival of Belarusian advertising are particularly noteworthy examples.

Charity, Swamps, and a Belarusian Advertising Festival

The largest and most successful crowdfunding campaign of the year has been a project called *Imena* (Names). The format of the magazine is unique to Belarus. Besides covering personal stories, the magazine offers readers the option of supporting groups in need. *Imena* also allows visitors to its website to create their own projects and organise fundraising campaigns. The project raised more than \$21,000 for the magazine itself and \$35,000 to support seriously ill children.

The founder Katsiaryna Seniuk was named 'person of the year' for stimulating Belarusians to participate more actively in society. Seniuk highlights the importance of motivating Belarusians to act and participate rather than just being aware of problems. The project has proved that Belarusian society can change and mobilise to provide essential support for groups in need. On 23 December the Assembly of Belarusian NGOs named the magazine the best media project of the year.

✘ An older but equally successful advocacy project aims to protect Belarusian swamps. The *In Defence of Belarusian Swamps* campaign emerged as a project to inform Belarusians about the importance of wetlands. The organisers collected signatures and signed appeals to the local authorities in the regions where wetlands are most endangered.

In many cases, the authorities overturned decisions to drain swamps. This year, the project used crowdfunding to gather money to support the creation of a guide to Belarusian swamps. The campaign was also able to persuade authorities to [adopt a strategy for conservation and sustainable use of peatlands.](#)

A final example is a campaign for the *Adnak* Belarusian

advertisement festival. Over the last 7 years, the operation of the festival has depended on sponsors. However, this year's campaign to promote Belarusian language and culture through advertising garnered additional material support via crowdfunding platforms. According to *ulej.by*, the *Adnak* campaign is one of the most successfully implemented projects, collecting more than \$7,000 over a short period.

The organisers encouraged those interested to actively participate through fundraising. Nina Shydouskaya, the head of the project, reports that the majority of the campaign's goals have been achieved. The campaign was the second most popular crowdfunded project at *Ulej* in 2016.

The Less Political, the More to Successful

Crowdfunding has become a significant part of civic activism in Belarus. With the development of technology, crowdfunding is growing as a resource and tool for advocacy in the world. In 2016, Belarus saw a significant increase in social participation via material support for projects spread on the Internet.

Top 10 projects at crowdfunding platforms, the best projects on *Maesens*, and *Imena* magazine demonstrate that the most successful projects in Belarus in 2016 are humanitarian, cultural and publishing projects. Some experienced advocacy campaigns, such as *Budzma* or *In Defense of Belarusian Swamps* employed crowdfunding as a new resource and were able to receive the financial support they required.

It seems that only projects with a low-level of politicisation can be successful in Belarus: advocacy and crowdfunding practises indicate that non-political projects received the most support in 2016. At the same time, neither *Ulej*,

Talakovshchyna, *Maesens*, or other platforms hosted projects promoting human rights defence, energy, or other topics which could possibly clash with the state's interests. In a non-democratic environment, projects with a high degree of politicisation have only a small chance of survival.

Despite the increase in civic activism in Belarus during 2016, it is hard to picture how projects with politicised goals, such as *Human Rights Defenders Against the Death Penalty* or the *Antinuclear Campaign* could achieve significant results. However, crowdfunding has allowed many Belarusian to safely participate in the civic life of the country by funding important and problematic projects while remaining anonymous.

Feminism in Belarus: present but unpopular

This year the World Economic Forum (WEF) ranked Belarus 30th out of 144 countries in its Global Gender Gap Index.

According to its indicators, Belarus surpassed highly developed countries such as Canada (35) and the United States (45). However, unlike other countries at the top of the list, Belarus does not have any coherent strategy to achieve gender equality.

2016 also saw a record increase of activity at the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), where Belarus presented its 8th periodic report in October 2016. Independent NGOs and initiatives presented seven alternative, or 'shadow', reports disputing the celebratory official narrative on the state of women in Belarus.

They touched upon the issues of gender-based violence, labour rights for men and women, and reproductive health, as well as women with disabilities, and the LGBTQ community, among others. Only [1% of Belarusian NGOs](#) advance women's rights and among these even fewer identify themselves as 'feminist.'

Historical and social paradoxes

The official gender equality strategy in Belarus differs from the Western European pro-feminist approach, and focuses primarily on family policies. No politician has ever openly called themselves a feminist in Belarus. Quite the contrary, while the West promotes individuality and women's rights in social, political, and economic spheres, Belarus continues to emphasise family values and maternity for women.

Feminism remains a taboo word in Belarus. Few women openly admit to being feminists, to say nothing of men or  influential decision-makers. In fact, most public figures prefer to distance themselves from the feminist agenda. Neither mainstream nor oppositional political parties have a strong feminist or gender equality strategy.

Women constitute 53% of the population in Belarus. They hold about 34% of seats in parliament, live on average 74 years ([11 years longer than men](#)), are well educated, and about 70% of them work outside their household. Is it possible that Belarusian women enjoy equal rights and opportunities and therefore do not relate to the global feminist movement as the WEF indicators suggest?

Some argue that the Soviet Union liberated women in Belarus; it provided them with all the opportunities and services which feminists in the rest of the world had to fight for. Not only did women in Soviet Belarus gain access to education and

prestigious professions, they also enjoyed state healthcare, access to childcare, and the right to legal abortion. Most of these rights and services carried over into modern Belarus even after the USSR was dismantled. For instance, Belarusian women continue to enjoy [generous maternity benefits](#).

The flip side of this generous policy presented itself later. In the 1960s, the rest of the world was engaging in 'second-wave feminism'. Women in the US and Europe started to broach the subjects of domestic violence, marital rape, and the exploitation and control of female sexuality. Meanwhile, the 'woman question' appeared to be solved in the USSR and Soviet Belarus. However, as women gained access to education and new professions, they also continued to bear [the brunt of housework and caretaking](#).

Who needs feminism

✘ According to a 2012 sociological survey carried out by the agency NewEffector, neither men nor women in Belarus need feminism. Belarus displayed the [lowest level of tolerance towards feminist ideas](#) in comparison with Ukraine and Russia.

Only 4% of women in Belarus – compared with 9% in Ukraine and 7% in Russia – characterised themselves as openly feminist. Moreover, only 6% of men in Belarus claimed to support feminist ideas – compared to 11% in Ukraine and 16% in Russia.

Therefore, feminist ideas remain marginal for both state and oppositional politics. Since early 2000, Belarus has implemented four Gender Equality Action Plans, but all four lacked any measurable indicators or allocated budgets. The outcomes remained intangible and had to be taken at face value from the Ministry's reports.

I shied away from the word 'feminism' although I have been a feminist for most of my life

Non-governmental actors face backlash if they decide to use the word 'feminist' in their agenda. Irina Solomatina, a Belarusian feminist and activist, recalls a story when certain publishing agencies refused to print their materials because they contained the word 'feminist'. *'A few years ago I attended an exhibit in Moscow entitled "Feminist Karandash." This is when I realised what tremendous pressure the curators and organisers faced for using the word. I decided to fight my inner stereotypes and use the word "feminism" more often.'*

The only international body capable of holding the country accountable for women's rights issues and gender equality is the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). This is a forum where countries regularly report on their achievement in this sphere. Based on Belarus's official documents, along with shadow reports presented by NGOs and initiatives, the Committee came up with several recommendations.

This year the Committee recommended adopting comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation, laws against domestic violence and gender-based violence, and comprehensive attempts to eliminate discriminatory gender stereotypes. As experience from previous years and reports has shown, Belarus adheres minimally to the recommendations, but still manages to look good and rank high in terms of gender equality.

Who are the feminists

The unfortunate reputation of the word 'feminism' seems to  have scared many people away. But in reality everyone who believes in equal education for boys and girls, voting rights for women and men, and equal pay for equal labour should call themselves feminists, regardless of their gender or their interpretation of feminism. However, few women identify as feminists, and feminist men are almost nonexistent.

Belarusian women do not feel oppressed and men do not see how they propagate the patriarchy. While statistics show that every third woman and every fourth man in Belarus has experienced violence in their lives, no one seems to have connected this to gender inequality and discriminatory stereotypes. Few people have woken up to their oppression, either personally or politically. Abuse remains [widespread and tolerated](#).

Meanwhile, experts point to the emergence of new types of online initiatives in Belarus focusing on gender equality which lack the status of official NGOs. They promote a feminist and gender agenda through online resources. Examples include Makeout.by and gender-route.org. Most importantly, they also embrace LGBTQ communities who remain otherwise highly marginalised in Belarus.

The WEF has calculated that at the current pace of progress, it would take the world around 170 years to close the economic gender gap universally. In Belarus, the gap remains wide. The state reinforces the role of the traditional family, and Belarusian society has not yet identified the need for more equal power distribution among its individual citizens.

Going green: towards a zero-waste economy in Belarus

On 12 October 2016 Belarus announced its intention to adopt a national action plan for a green economy. This September the country also ratified the Paris Climate Change Agreement. What's more, the European Union has invested over €10m in a project aiming to facilitate Belarus' transition to a green

economy.

What a “green economy” entails could be anything from simply recycling to increased use of renewable energy sources, all areas in which Belarus needs improvement. According to some calculations, the average Belarusian produces 1–1.5 kg of garbage per day. This adds up to roughly 300kg of garbage a year. In Belarus, only about [12% of this amount](#) will be recycled. The rest goes to landfills.

Business as usual

Belarus is a country lacking its own significant energy and fuel resources. It therefore relies heavily on imported crude oil, natural gas, and peat. However, almost all existing energy resources within the country are renewable: water, wind, solar energy, and biomass. Therefore, it would be logical for Belarus to invest primarily in the development of [renewable energy](#) sources.

And yet according to Naviny.by, in 2015 only 5% of energy in Belarus came from renewable sources. The government plans to increase this number to 6% by 2020. This is nevertheless a negligible margin compared to the neighbouring EU's plans to spike at 20% by 2020.

A look at the structure of renewable sources of energy also reveals that wood fuels account for the major part of such sources. Almost 93% of renewable energy comes from wood, wood chip and wood waste. This in itself presents a problem and can hardly prove to be sustainable in the long run.

Belarus has also begun the costly and controversial construction of a [nuclear power plant](#) (NPP) on the border with Lithuania. According to some experts, Astraviec NPP will not only produce a surplus of energy in Belarus, it will also stall the development of alternative energy resources. Some

argue that it will increase the country's dependence on Russia as well, as the main contractor is a Russian company also likely to stay on to take care of the NPP's nuclear waste disposal.

Recycling in Belarus

Major improvements in the recycling sphere can also make Belarus a more eco-friendly and sustainable country. The present rate of recycling peaks at 12% at the Speckommuntrans Waste Sorting Facility in Homyel, according to its Deputy Director Aliaksandr Nikonov. In contrast, about 80% of waste in Germany will be recycled and the USA can boast a reported 93% recovery rate for cardboard packaging for recycling, according to WBUR. The difference in attitudes towards recycling is staggering.

The state still has a monopoly on the recycling sector in Belarus. People continue to expect the government to pay them to return their waste products, such as paper, plastic, and glass. However, because the rates are so low, most citizens do not take advantage of these opportunities. According to Denis Grebenchuk, Chief Engineer at Gomelhimtorg, a scrap metal facility, Roma people and the homeless, who view recycling as a business opportunity, provide the bulk of the resources.

If you have scrap metal at home or your business that you are not longer using, you can contact [scrap metal yard Sydney](#) to recycle it.

Thus, ecology remains a marginal issue in mainstream Belarus. In Germany, for instance, a major shift occurred in 1985, when the federal government announced its priorities to recycle and reduce waste. However, the government failed to act, and the amount of rubbish continued to grow, until private small enterprises stepped up.

Today Germany leads the EU in recycling and zero-waste efforts, thanks to combined private and state efforts. Massive public information campaigns encouraged citizens to commit to separate waste management and recycling.

In Belarus change is slow. Private initiatives have sprung up across the country, while the state lags behind in ecological matters. The mentality that the state should take over and solve ecological issues has slowly changed in major cities thanks to new generations of Belarusians. One can find separate containers for glass, paper, and plastic. The younger generation seems to be more willing to take responsibility for its own carbon footprint.

How to achieve a greener economy

One initiative, called “Green Map” <http://greenmap.by/>, aims to educate people about utilisation of toxic waste, such as used batteries, bulbs, and other products. It also provides information on how to sort garbage. Such initiatives step up where the state has failed – they encourage Belarusians to take ownership of their future by managing their own waste today.

Air quality in Belarus causes concerns, as the number of car owners has increased. According to BelStat there are 412  cars per 1,000 residents in Minsk. This is the highest ratio in any former USSR country. In comparison, Moscow stands at 380 cars per person.

This ratio, an all-time high, also leads to very tangible problems in terms of air pollution, noise, traffic jams, and parking issues. Despite the well-developed and affordable public transportation system in Minsk, 2015 has seen a 5% decrease in the number of passengers, according to the

Ministry of Transport.

Another way to go green is the paradigm of the “sharing economy” or the peer economy. This is when owners rent something out that they are not using. To some extent, this mentality has already caught on in Belarus, and it will only become more widespread. Both [Airbnb.com](https://www.airbnb.com) and [uber driving service](#) have a strong presence in the country.

Since 2014 there have been regular initiatives such as free-markets, charity shops and book crossings, where people exchange, donate, or lend their old things. These events attract thousands of motivated Belarusians who care about the environment. According to scientists at the individual level any person can make a difference by giving up driving, plastic bags, or bottled water, and reducing the amount of meat they eat.

Made in Belarus. By the Chinese

In the first six months of 2016, according to the Ministry of Interior 4,076 Chinese labour migrants entered Belarus. They now outnumber all other nationalities, including Ukrainians, who peaked at 3,334.

The Belarusian government maintains a firm grip on the labour market, and strictly regulates the number of work permits available to foreigners.

While Belarus attempts to re-engage with the West after the removal of sanctions and Russian investments continue to dwindle, Chinese investors are capitalising on Belarusian

projects.

More and more Chinese workers are appearing in the streets of Minsk and other cities. Belarusians wonder what brings them here, what jobs they have, and most importantly, whether they are staying or moving on.

Unlike Europe, Belarus has thus far been spared the influx of refugees and asylum seekers from the Middle East. However, as the number of jobs decreases, and Belarusians turn elsewhere in search of employment, they find themselves competing with imported labour as well.

Chinese Labour Migration in Numbers

According to the Ministry of the Interior, in 2015 Belarus  admitted almost 32,000 workers. Among them almost half, or 14,000 people, came from war-torn neighbouring Ukraine, and another 7,225 from China. In 2016, as the situation in Eastern Ukraine stabilised to a certain degree, the number of Ukrainian workers decreased, while the Chinese labour force presence increased.

Data from the Ministry of the Interior also informs us that the majority among the 4,076 labour migrants works manual jobs. Only 888 among them are “trained specialists” according to the Ministry’s definition, and another 57 hold managerial position. 43 found employment in the service industry. Apparently, there is a demand for foreign non-skilled labour force in the Belarusian market.

This may come as a surprise to local Belarusian workers. Many have been struggling to find employment in Belarus, as the number of job cuts in industry rose throughout 2015 and 2016 due to the ongoing economic crises in Belarus and Russia. As

Belarusians encounter more and more Chinese workers in the streets of Minsk and other cities, they might find themselves wondering what jobs they have, and which industries they work for.

According to a recent interview published by the official news agency belta.by during the president's visit to the Mahileu Lift Plant in July 2016, President Lukashenka remarked that Belarusian workers should be more proactive and flexible in looking for jobs, "If there is no work in Mahileu, then there should be some in Babruisk, Minsk, Hrodna, Svetlagorsk, or Dobrush." Belarusian workers now face not only internal, but external competition as well.

Chinese Labour Migration in Faces and Stories

The sleepy provincial town of Dobrush, home to 18,000 residents, saw a sudden increase in population when local authorities approved the construction of a cardboard factory in 2015. The Chinese investor and main contractor imported 1,000 Chinese workers, a sizable addition to the existing population. They certainly stand out among the rest of the native Dobrush population.

Their presence might have remained unnoticed had a number of Chinese workers not protested. They accused their bosses of mistreatment and marched to Homyel (about 30 km) demanding justice. The situation was allegedly resolved through negotiation but according to many sources, including Radio Liberty in Belarus, many Belarusians felt impressed by their courage and sympathised with the Chinese workers as they insisted on fair pay.

Most Chinese workers come for a short span of time, work on construction sites in Belarus, and head back home. The case of

the Chinese workers in Dobrush suggests that many of them are exploited and abused by their Chinese employers. Lack of transparency and oversight on the Belarusian side jeopardises their status and labour rights.□

✘ But some stay. And to a certain degree, they successfully integrate into otherwise very homogenous Belarusian society. According to the 2009 National Census, almost 84% of people in Belarus identify as Belarusians, followed by another 13% of Russians, Poles, and Ukrainians. In other words Belarus is 97% white.

Wan Syaomun has lived in Belarus since 1999. According to Deutsche Welle she came to study at a Belarusian university when she was 17, later got married, and stayed. Belarus became home. She now owns a translation agency. Her story amplifies the lack of transparency and integration for short-term labour migrants from China.

Short-term Manual Labour Migrants

Belarus attracts short-term manual labour migrants from China, Ukraine and Turkey. And although labour is cheap in Belarus, foreign investors prefer to bring their own labour. One of the reasons lies precisely in the comparative ease of controlling foreigners. For now it seems that Belarus has no competitive advantages in attracting and retaining high-skilled foreign labour. Some experts say that it should instead focus on retaining its own promising individuals who are keen to emigrate.

According to data from the Ministry of the Interior, for every Belarusian leaving the country in search of employment abroad, six foreigners enter the country securing jobs. This 1 to 6 ratio stems from official statistics, which reflect only those

Belarusians who chose to provide a signed contract to the Ministry of the Interior before leaving to work abroad.

According to Ejednevnik.by, a Belarusian news outlet, this data distorts the real picture and the true ratio should be 3 to 1 in reverse. Other estimates suggest that around 100,000 Belarusians leave the country seeking employment abroad, mostly in Russia, and only around 30,000 migrant workers enter Belarus annually. The outflow of labour force from Belarus could deplete the national talent pool.

Belarus failed to come up with reliable ways of retaining local talent, wealthy Belarusians send their children to study and stay on in Western Europe or North America.

On the other hand, in times of economic crisis, the remittances wired by Belarusians working abroad to their families have become a strong stabilisation factor for private households as well as the national economy. According to the World Bank such remittances contributed 2% to the Belarusian GDP in 2014.

As Belarus failed to come up with reliable ways of retaining local talent, many wealthy Belarusians choose to send their children to study abroad, and encourage them to find ways to stay on in Western Europe or North America. Meanwhile, the Belarusian government seems to have focused on regulating the inflow of foreign labour force by adhering to a non-transparent system of labour permits granted to chosen investors, mostly from China and Turkey.

This also places Belarus into a grey zone when it comes to labour code regulations. If investors do not hold up their end of an agreement with imported workers, Belarus has little to no leverage with them. While the strategy of importing temporary labour force may be a short-term solution to attract foreign investments, in the long term Belarus should identify more sustainable and modern ways of regulating its labour

force markets.

Profiling Domestic Abuse in Belarus

The first and only Belarusian national hot line for domestic violence prevention celebrated its four-year anniversary in August, 2016. Since 2012 it has received 8,445 phone calls.

The Belarusian non-profit “Gender Perspectives” runs the hotline from Minsk. They pioneered the much-needed service, creating a point of entry for women who found themselves in dire circumstances.

The number of calls reveals the tip of the iceberg when it comes to violence against women in Belarus. In July the Facebook campaign [#IamNotAfraidToSayIt](#) generated multiple personal accounts of gender-based violence against women in Belarus. These stories had remained mostly untold until then, which means they were also not reflected in any available data.

The hotline data serves as the only reliable alternative to the official national statistics on domestic violence, which come from both the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection.

Police reports provide important insight into the number of crimes, while the victim rehabilitation services fall under the purview of the Ministry of Labour. In this sense Belarus follows its own path, as most European countries have resolved that the non-profit sector serves the interests of these

clients best.

Stories of love and death

The story of Lyubov (the Russian for 'love') Tkacheva shocked Belarusian society. On 10 August, 2016 her ex-husband, Vladimir Tkachev, who terrorized her for 15 years after their divorce in 2001, stabbed her 44 times with a knife around 4:00 pm at her workplace in Fanipal (a town just 25 km outside of the capital city of Minsk).

Vladimir Tkachev does not fit the police's official profile of a batterer. The police continue to claim that domestic  violence predominately plagues low-income families with alcohol and drug abuse problems. In this regard, Vladimir Tkachev stands out as a former head of the Dziarzhynsk executive city council, a town just outside of Minsk and next to Fanipal, where the murder took place.

The murder gained public resonance because of its brutality, but also because Tkachev held a prominent government position. This underscores the refrain of experts at the hotline: No woman is safe from abuse. Over the course of four years they have received phone calls from doctors and teachers, directors and unemployed women, whose husbands abused them.

A few details of this murder are especially striking: firstly, the obvious lack of accountability by law enforcement, who having received multiple calls from Ms. Tkacheva, failed to protect her, and secondly, the impunity of the abuser. Lyubov Tkacheva's daughter has told tut.by that her mother called the police multiple times.

In the beginning they could not do anything, as Tkachev was a local authority. Later, when he lost power, they also got divorced, which once again made him immune to domestic violence charges according to the current legislation.

Impunity breeds more crime.

Profile of an abuser

As part of their analysis of the past four years, the hot line put together a profile of a Belarusian victim of domestic violence. It is a woman (94% of all calls), who resides in Minsk or Minsk region (34% and 11% accordingly) with a husband (54%) and has one or two young children (72%). According to research data published by the UN, every fourth woman in Belarus has experienced physical abuse in an intimate relationship.

The Ministry of the Interior pinpoints three most common characteristics of abusers: unemployment, previous incarceration, and alcohol. In fact, they claim that in the first seven months of 2016 58% of all domestic violence abusers neither studied nor worked, 24% of them previously served prison sentences, and in 73% of all criminal cases offenders were intoxicated.

The total number of domestic violence cases in Belarus reached 1,598 in the first seven months of 2016. This might seem small, and amounts to only 3% of all criminal cases, yet these statistics cause alarm among law enforcement, because out of 248 murders in Belarus in 2016, [68 or every 4th murder was committed in a family setting.](#)

The hotline data paints a somewhat different picture of an abuser. While 57% of all abusers have alcohol or drug abuse history, women report that in 79% of all cases abusers' violent and abusive actions are not driven by alcohol or drugs.

People still rely on gender stereotypes to explain domestic violence, blaming male aggression on alcohol and women's provocative actions. After futile attempts to seek protection,

women usually choose to escape. Although hot line specialists recommend calling the police, many women see no point and become disillusioned.

Anna Korshun, the manager of the hotline says,

We have access to unique data that help us identify gaps in protection of women in domestic violence situations. For example, we see that many victims are still unaware of the existence of restraining orders, and the most common form of redress remains a fine, which is usually taken out of the family budget. You can check with [Robert K Bratt](#), which is an expert in redress, in case that you might have a concern in this topic.

Accomplishments and challenges

✘ It seems that some changes have made a difference. In 2014 a major legislation amendment resulted in greater protection for women and children.

The revised law introduced the short-term eviction order stipulating that the domestic violence abuser should leave the residence if he commits a domestic violence crime. In 2015 the police served 1,422 of restraining orders.

While this might be a step in the right direction, major legal gaps allow for abusers to remain unpunished. Women's rights advocates argue that Belarus needs a domestic violence law similar to the legislation existing in most European countries, and, for instance, in neighbouring Ukraine.

Instead of patching up the old Soviet-style criminal and administrative codes, Belarus could benefit from a comprehensive overhaul of domestic violence law, stipulating

both the rights of victims and accountability for the abuser.

Meanwhile, the hot line continues to struggle financially and face limitations. They come from both internal and external conditions. The internal limitations include providing services only through telephone. Callers receive legal (32%), and psychological assistance (62%). 97% sought emotional support in developing and discussing a safety plan, and sought more information on available services. But what happens if a woman needs immediate and very real help?

This brings up the issue of external limitations faced by the hot line. Hot lines primarily serve as a point of entry for a clients into the system. In other words, a caller can gain access to information about the availability of services. Problems arise when available services are limited or of low quality.

The hot line bears the grunt of customers' dissatisfaction. In more dire circumstances, hot line specialists may simply feel helpless, just like most of their female callers.

Belarusian Partisan with Love: In Memory of Pavel Sheremet

On 20 July 2016 at 7:45 am a bomb went off in a car in Kiev. The explosion killed Pavel Sheremet, a prominent Belarusian journalist working in Ukraine.

Pavel was 44 years old and was killed in a car of his partner Olena Prytula. Ms Prytula owns *Ukrayinska Pravda*, an

influential online newspaper in Ukraine, one of the media outlets where Mr Sheremet worked.

The Ukraine President, Petro Poroshenko, called the journalist's death "a terrible tragedy", and ordered a thorough investigation. Mr Sheremet was driving his partner's car on his way to work at the time of the tragedy. Security has been dispatched to protect Ms Prytula.

Mr Sheremet is not the first partner and colleague whom Ms Prytula has tragically lost. Georgiy Gongadze, an investigative journalist and founder of the *Ukrayinska Pravda*, was murdered 16 years ago. His body was found decapitated in the forest outside of Kiev. Mr Sheremet's murder is yet another name on the list of a whole generation of journalists in the former USSR who have lost their lives due to their work.

Belarusian, Russian, and Ukrainian periods

Mr Sheremet began his career as a television journalist in his native Minsk. He came to journalism from banking, starting out in 1992 by consulting Belarusian television on economic matters. In 1996 he became the editor-in-chief of *Belarusskaya Delovaya Gazeta*, a major Belarusian business newspaper.

In 1997 Belarusian authorities arrested him and sentenced him to two years for allegedly crossing the Belarus-Lithuania border. However, he served only three months in Belarusian prison thanks to the intervention of former Russian President Yeltsin.

Sheremet produced a documentary together with his colleague [Dzmitry Zavadski](#) (who later went missing) about the ease of crossing the Belarusian-Lithuanian border. The documentary

enraged the Belarusian authorities, and shortly after Sheremet chose to leave Belarus under pressure and went to work in Moscow.

After a few years of working for a major Russian TV channel in Moscow, Mr Sheremet yet again found himself in opposition to the government. He continued to work in journalism as long as he could. He befriended prominent opposition leader Boris Nemtsov, who was also murdered in Moscow last year.

Pavel Sheremet helped Boris Nemtsov write his autobiography and produced a documentary about him. He also paid his last tribute and led Nemtsov's memorial service in Moscow.

In 2010 Mr Sheremet was stripped of his Belarusian citizenship, which he found out from an official letter sent through the Belarusian Embassy in Moscow. He had to move again, this time to Ukraine, having now been denied the right to freely practise his profession in two countries.

There he was once again successful, participating actively in Ukraine's social and political life and opening a new journalism school. His colleagues remember him as a highly professional and very personable man. "Ukraine has changed and will continue to change," Pavel Sheremet wrote in one of his last Facebook posts.

Legacy in Belarus and beyond

Even in exile from Belarus Pavel Sheremet remained active and wrote about events in Belarus. He founded and worked for *Belarusian Partisan*, an oppositional online newspaper. He liked to call people on the phone and introduce himself by saying: "Hello, this is Pavel Sheremet, Belarusian partisan. I've got a question."

When Mr Sheremet chose to come back to Belarus in 2006 for the opposition march during the presidential election in Belarus,

he was once again badly beaten and arrested. Nevertheless, he always stayed true to his pro-European ideas and supported democratic forces in Belarus.

In his own words, given to Radio Liberty in March 2016: "I may not be objective, since I grew stiff in my opinion about Lukashenka, but I think that his fear to lose the grip on power in Belarus is so strong, that he will not let even ten opposition representatives into the Parliament."

Mr Sheremet's reporting earned him the International Press Freedom Award from the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) in 1998. When authorities in Belarus denied permission for Mr Sheremet to travel to New York for the awards ceremony, the Committee to Protect Journalists held a special award ceremony for him in Minsk.

In 2002, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) awarded Mr Sheremet its Prize for Journalism and Democracy in recognition of his human rights reporting in the Balkans and Afghanistan.

Emotional tributes and official silence

Mr Sheremet's death prompted an immediate shock and triggered an outpouring of grief from his colleagues in Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia. Ms [Sviatlana Kalinkina](#), managing editor of Narodnaja Volya, an oppositional newspaper, who co-authored a book about Lukashenka with Sheremet, said:

He was the first to have an analytical programme on Belarusian television. "Prospekt" was critical of the authorities; he showed us this was possible and even necessary. This is such a tragedy. Thank you, Pasha, for being with us. And forgive us.

Michael McFaul, a former U.S. Ambassador to Russia, called Sheremet "one of the best" journalists and said: "Pavel was  such a decent man. So sad." Global rights watchdogs Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch (HRW) called Sheremet's killing a "reprehensible act that has sent a shockwave for freedom of expression in Ukraine."

[Svetlana Aleksievich](#), the Belarusian Nobel Prize Winner, reports to BBC:

About six months ago I visited Ukraine, and we had a meeting with Pavel. And I would like his wife, Ms. Olena Prytula, a person he really loved, to know about this conversation. When he found out I was writing a book about love, he said "You know, I travelled to Ukraine for love. And big love, trust me!"

This contrasts sharply with the tacit reactions from the official government news outlets in Belarus. Some sources, including Belarusian state television where he started his career as a journalist in 1990s, chose to remain silent. Others either omitted that Pavel Sheremet had anything to do with Belarus, or reminded its readers about Sheremet's 'criminal' past.

Pavel Sheremet's body will be returned to Minsk, according to his mother. He is survived by his mother who continues to live in Belarus. On behalf of Belarus Digest we would like to extend our deepest condolences to Mr Sheremet's family and friends.

Belarus Struggles to Contain Cancer

In mid-June 2016 Belarus hosted a regional forum on oncology for the second time since 2004. It brought together leading regional cancer specialists from 25 countries.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) 14 million people annually get diagnosed with cancer. In Belarus this number reached 50,000 new patients in 2015. Belarus has achieved considerable progress in cancer screenings and diagnoses at the regional level.

However, it consistently falls behind in cancer morbidity rates when compared to Western Europe, including immediate neighbours like Lithuania, and Latvia.

Sad statistics

Currently more than 270,000 Belarusians have registered as oncological patients. In addition to the usual risk factors associated with cancer, such as ageing, smoking, and diet, Belarusians have now been living for 30 years with the radiation fall out from the Chernobyl disaster. This accounts for the saddest peak in cancer data – thyroid gland cancer increased disproportionately among children living in the affected areas.

The number of people diagnosed with cancer in Belarus has doubled since 1990: from 26,000 cases to 50,000 in 2016  according to the Chief Oncologist of Belarus, Aleh Sukonko. This number will continue to rise and reach 70,000 people by 2020. And the overall number of cancer patients diagnosed and registered with the healthcare system has steadily increased from 2002 and reached 271, 000 in 2015.

16% of patients go to see a doctor when the disease has already advanced to stage four, that is most advanced stage, at which cancer is almost always terminal, says Dr. Sukonko. Only 5% among them will recover.

To put it into perspective, according to Dr. Sukonko the morbidity rate in Belarus for cervix cancer is as high as 36%, compared with 21% in Germany. Screenings could help maximise early detection of the disease, and bring the morbidity rates down. Cancer screening involves testing apparently healthy people of a certain age, typically 50-70 years old.

Belarus has introduced regular cancer screenings aimed at prevention and early detection, but progress has stalled. Cervix cancer screenings among women are an example. Annual screenings are recommended for all women during their regular doctor's visit. Yet the ratio of stage four cancer cases diagnosed during such screenings remains stable at 10% among Belarusian women. In neighbouring Poland, where similar screening procedures are in place, the ratio is less than 4%, according to naviny.by.

What causes cancer in Belarus?

The most common risk factors for cancer include ageing, smoking, sun and/or radiation exposure, alcohol, poor diet, lack of physical activity, and being overweight. In Belarus quite a few of these factors come into play, such as [radiation exposure after Chernobyl](#), [overall population ageing](#), and poor self care with widespread smoking and [high alcohol consumption](#).

Smoking is the leading cause of cancer in Belarus, with around 30% of all cases attributed to it, according to the chief  oncologist Dr. Sukonko. Poor diet is the next most common

cause, with 25% of cancer cases. The numbers are expected to increase because of the longer life expectancy among Belarusians.

Thyroid cancer is usually rare among children, with less than one new case per million diagnosed each year. However, after the Chernobyl accident a striking increase in the disease was reported in children and teenagers in the most contaminated areas of Belarus and Ukraine. Scientists have estimated up to 5,000 cases of thyroid cancer among residents who were children at the time of the accident, according to the WHO.

Gender plays a role too. Belarusian men most often suffer from prostate (17% of all cases) and lung (15%) cancer. Women face diagnoses of breast (18%) and cervix (10%) cancer. And 10% of all cases among both men and women turn out to be colorectal cancer. Most of these forms of cancer are curable if diagnosed at stages one or two.

How people deal with it

Cancer takes its toll: every seventh Belarusian dies from cancer. It is the second most common cause of death in Belarus after heart disease. The government, recognising the cost to human life as well as the problems of population decline, has pledged to invest in combating cancer. According to Belstat, around 30% of the healthcare budget will go to fight cancer.

While this may mean potential improvement to the national cancer statistics, large gaps in patient care remain. Below is the account of a cancer survivor Ulia Liashkevich, who also lost her mother to cancer in 2007:

My mother was diagnosed with stage four. Little could be done in terms of treatment. But a dying person is not yet dead. They (the doctors) told me I should take her home, that her death will look bad for their statistics, they

threatened that they would perform an autopsy on her body. I did manage to make her last weeks painless, but only thanks to my connections and her friends.

Whenever the government does not provide a certain much-needed service, people have to self-organise. Cancer support groups have sprung around the country. Many have an online presence, such as <http://oncopatient.by/> and <http://news.tut.by/tag/1814-onkomarker.html>. Both were created by cancer survivors aiming to provide resources for fellow citizens fighting the disease.

As one Belarusian neurosurgeons, who preferred to remain unnamed, put it:

Say, I have a patient with a malignant tumour in his head, and he has come to see me with his wife. I do not know whom to console, him or his crying wife. And most importantly, I feel like it is not up to me altogether. I am a surgeon after all, not a psychologist.

Much fear stems from lack of information. Most people feel overwhelmed and lost when diagnosed with cancer. Many turn to God, some look for answers in science. But for now cancer patients in Belarus, it seems, need to rely on their immediate family and friends in dealing with the non-medical aspects of this disease.

Belarus

Introduces

Alternative Civilian Service

On 1 July 2016 a new law on alternative civilian service comes into effect in Belarus. This coming fall, 10,000 young Belarusian conscripts will start their compulsory military service. According to tut.by 20 of these would like to exercise their option for alternative civilian service.

Finally, after more than a decade of debates in parliament and discussions by various commissions, the new law will stipulate the conditions for such an alternative service. Known as "alternativschiki", these young men will fall under the mandate of the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection. In Belarus they will have to serve for three years, twice the time required of regular military conscripts.

Conscripts, dodgers, and 'alternativschiki'

Twice a year the Belarusian Ministry of Defence drafts young men between the ages of 18 and 27 for conscription. During Soviet times [men were eager to sign up](#). The received wisdom was that for men 'the army was the school of life'. They had to serve for two years and could end up virtually anywhere in the huge territory of the Soviet Union, usually outside of Soviet Byelorussia.

Since then much has changed. For each conscription round – one in the spring and one in the autumn – the Ministry of Defence aims to draft around 10,000 young conscripts. Many young men successfully dodge the draft. The army has lost its allure since Soviet times and families pay big money and pull many strings to get their sons out of it. Daughters are immune, as the Belarusian army conscripts only men.

Methods for dodging, postponing, or cutting the length of compulsory military service have become common knowledge. Education for one offers immediate payoffs. Men without higher education have to serve 18 months in the army. Having a university degree decreases this term to 12 months. If the individual's university itself offers military training, a conscript's time in the army is further reduced to six months.

Now, starting from 1 July, those with religious pacifist beliefs could qualify for a different kind of deal. The new Belarusian law on alternative civilian services offers conscientious objectors a paid option instead of conscription. It stipulates 36 months – instead of 18 in the army – of paid labour in the healthcare sector or social system institutions, agriculture or railroad maintenance, or other areas as delegated by the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection.

Victor's story

The new Belarusian law covers only religious pacifist beliefs as possible grounds for conscientious objection. In order to be eligible for alternative civilian service one needs to submit a written petition no later than ten days before the end of the conscription term. The committee will then consider the application, and hand down its ruling. This is how the process should work if properly applied. Victor's story shows how the law does not work in practice.

Victor works at a factory in Brest. He comes from a middle class working family with an alcoholic father. He identifies as a Jehovah's Witness, and has refused to serve in the army. Victor would eagerly commit to 36 months of alternative civilian service, double the time of a regular conscript. Except he faces criminal charges and a BYR 21m (roughly \$1,000) fine instead.

Victor's story started when the law on alternative civilian

service did not exist. And yet even then two consecutive  court hearings ruled in his favour. The court found his desire to serve in a 'non-military' way was justified by his religious beliefs. The Prosecutor General, dissatisfied with the decision of the local courts, appealed to the Supreme Court, and won.

Victor filed an appeal on 24 June, and is awaiting the decision. In his interview to people.onliner.by Victor speaks of the possible resolution:

Two courts have ruled in my favour, and on a third attempt under the same article they charged me with a criminal offence. Certainly the law (on alternative civilian services) will soon come into effect, as it is only a matter of time. But why should I depend on it? How can I account for the lack of alternative civilian services up til now? I have never dodged conscription; I wanted to serve my country. And not just for a year and a half, but for all three! I see it as my responsibility to my country, but wish to do so in an alternative way.

Naysayers

Formally Article 57 of the Belarusian Constitution grants eligible Belarusian men a right to alternative civilian service if their religious beliefs did not allow them to serve. However, in reality, no mechanism for enforcing this has existed until now. In the eyes of the Ministry of Defence, men who could not serve because of their religious beliefs were no different from other army dodgers.

Current and previous Ministers of Defence have openly denounced an alternative civilian service, called it outright harmful, and spoke about it in other negative terms. The Ministry has typically seen its biggest challenge as being to

make alternative civilian service so unattractive that men would not choose to pursue it. It seems they have succeeded.

The new law takes into account only religious grounds. It stipulates double the term of service as compared to regular conscripts – three years instead of one and a half for those without higher education, and two years instead of one for college graduates. And most importantly, ‘alternativschiki’ will get paid around BYR 2m monthly, which roughly comes to \$115.

These conditions certainly make it highly unappealing. Moreover, the Ministry of Defence reserves the right to deny applicants this option without explanation or recourse to appeal. It seems at least for now that the service exists only formally. And the Ministry of Defence has no intention of turning it into a viable alternative to military service.

House of Death or House of Hope: First Belarusian Children’s Hospice

On 16 June the new building of the Belarusian Children’s Hospice (BCH) will open its doors in Baraulyany, just 20 minutes outside of Minsk. First of a kind in the country, it has been helping terminally ill children and their families since 1994. They actually pioneered both: hospice and palliative care.

A team of 25 health care professionals at the hospice helps children who are nearing the end of their lives. They maximise their comfort by reducing pain and addressing psychological,

physical, and spiritual needs of such patients.

Palliative care is for children who have serious but stable conditions. It focuses on providing relief from the symptoms, and improving quality of life for both: such children, and their families. Each year more than 250 children receive much needed care in Belarus through children's hospice.

How it all started

The Belarusian Children's Hospice first appeared in Minsk, in 1994. It was founded by a child psychologist Ms. Anna Garchakova, as a response to the ongoing consequences of [Chernobyl](#). It initially occupied an empty kindergarten in the suburbs, and worked on the sheer enthusiasm of a handful of dedicated people.

In 1998 came the first turning point. Ms. Daryl Ann  Hardman, a UK citizen, began her humanitarian activities in Belarus by delivering goods and hosting Belarusian children in her home in the UK. What started as a private initiative soon grew into a full-fledged operation.

Ms. Hardman established a humanitarian organisation in Britain and tellingly named it "Friends of Belarusian Children's Hospice". It started off by purchasing a wooden house on a smallholding in a village outside of Minsk and gifting it to BCH in 1999. They used it for hospice family holidays for many years, until its current main building in the Minsk suburb of Baraulany was purchased and converted for hospice use.

Shortly after BCH began working on an adapted UK model of children's hospice at home. The main philosophy was to provide care for children with different life-limiting conditions whenever possible in their home, and not at a hospital. Currently according to BCH data, anywhere from 3,000 to 5,000 children in Belarus require palliative care.

Palliative care comes to Belarusian children in the form of a BCH medical team consisting of a doctor, nurse, social worker, carer, and BCH volunteers. With the family's help they assess the child's and the family's needs. Then they do their best to meet these needs: medical care, advice, social welfare, psychological support, counselling, social programme, and summer holidays. Families may join a bereavement programme.

A new building, old challenges

For some ten years the UK Fund covered the cost of the BCH staff basic salary bill and provided advice and training in the UK. In 2010 with the training from UK specialists, the BCH set up its own dedicated fundraising and PR department. This now covers 60% of annual staff basic salaries, another 40% still come from foreign funds, namely the UK charity.

In 2011 Anna Garchakova announced the need for a new bigger, more modern building for the BCH. It would cost \$4 million.

“While \$4 million may seem as a lot, we only need 400,000 caring Belarusian people who would each give us 10\$ for a brick”.

So far the BCH has just raised \$1.75 million to build a modern, state of the art hospice, also in Baraulyany. The Friends of BCH raised another £250,000 in the UK. President Lukashenka donated land for hospice free of charge with a decree. The new building is due to be opened mid-June amid a fanfare of publicity.

In the earliest stages, the architect of the building came to the UK at the invitation of the Friends of BCH charity to see successful children's hospice buildings. He also met one of the best children's hospice architects in the UK. As a result

he was subsequently able to incorporate many of the ideas from this visit into the new hospice venue.

Ms. Daryl Ann Hardman continues to support BCH. She now heads the Advisory Council.

I also revived BCH's Advisory Council and have chaired it for over 3 years as no Belarusian participant has yet agreed to take the chairmanship over. This is a body of mostly Belarusian top managers, company directors, one ex-Minister and some UK advisers, who meet 3 or 4 times a year to offer strategic development advice and fundraising help to BCH's director. The Council has been very focussed in recent meetings on building the new hospice building.

What comes next

The new unprecedented arrangement stipulates that the state will run the medical side of the new hospice, and BCH and partners the other parts, in a building owned by an NGO. This carries some potential for clash of interests between the main stakeholders. Rigid state's way of operation does not bide well with individualised approach to palliative care.

BCH was tolerated rather than welcomed when it first came on the scene in 1994. Many people were suspicious of it as a western idea that had no place in Belarusian healthcare, others did not understand its aims, some regarded it as a "house of death" instead of a house of light, joy and good quality of life.

Gradually both the Belarusian public, media, medical services, ministries and other governmental departments have come to gain a better understanding of the huge benefits a children's hospice. Namely what added value it brings to the country's healthcare, both in terms of vastly improved quality of care and quality of life of the chronically and terminally ill

child and their family.

From the financial standpoint it also means huge savings for the state medical service when a child on 24-hour care is at home instead of in a hospital intensive care department. For the past decade BCH has trained medics from all over Belarus in children's palliative care and hopefully will be able to expand these programmes in its new education centre.

Most Vulnerable: Child Welfare Services in Belarus

On 1 June children celebrate their day in Belarus. The first day of summer brings break from school, lots of free open-air concerts, markets, and other attractions. Currently, more than 1,7 million children live in Belarus and about 25,000 among them do so without parents.

The number of children in custody stays relatively stable at 25,000 with predictable peaks in times of crises. Belarus struggled in the 1990's as the number of orphaned children tripled and resources remained scarce. Since then it has adopted some of the best international practices and national legislation improving the standards of life for orphaned children while bringing the costs of care down.

Previous Record and Decree N

18

The term 'social orphans' describes children who live in foster care or orphanages and have living biological parents. They amount to about 80% of all children under state custody in Belarus. Belarus looks relatively good compared to the situation in Russia, but in the EU and US orphanages have become obsolete. Since the number of such children has steadily increased since 1993, new legislation was drafted in 2006 in Belarus.

Referred for short as Decree No. 18, it became the single most important legislative act regulating how, when and who got to decide the fate of such children. It established a coordinating body, the Committee, between law enforcement, health care, education, and social services. The right kind of [childcare in bolton](#) should be sought for the safety and in the best interests of your children.

Now, the Committee scrutinises the lifestyle of a particular family suspected of neglect toward their children. In theory, they have to work with the families to prevent the worst case scenarios such as the lost of custody over children.

"Ten years ago we went out to reprimand families. Now, we go out to support them." Child Protection Specialist, a representative of the Ministry of Education

If the Committee finds the parents unfit to perform their responsibilities, the government has to step up. Most often than not the parents suffer from alcohol or drug addiction, have had incarceration history, and are constantly unemployed. But while they failed as parents, the decree states, they could still continue to work and reimburse the cost of childcare to the state. In 2014, 2644 parents lost custody of 3110 children.

The decree introduced a two-tier approach to dealing with such

families. Initially if found unfit, parents may lose custody for up to six months. If there is a chance of finding a job, giving up addictions, normalising their lives there is a possibility of gaining custody back if they are in compliance with the plan designed by the Committee. After six months with no obvious improvements, the court may decide to take the children forever from such a household.

From Institutional to Family Foster Care

The biggest positive changes for children in custody came when Belarus committed to shifting from orphanages to family foster care. According to Child Fund International data, since 2004, the number of children put in institutions decreased by 65%, and the number of such institutions went down by 40%. Increased preference for foster care potentially means better quality life for children, but also fewer expenses for the state.

Figures and data from Child Fund International Final Report 2015:



Each year, since 2007, has seen a consistent decrease in the number of children in orphanages. For example, the numbers dropped from 34% of all children in institutions in 2004, to only 13% institutionalised in 2014 according to a UNICEF report. In 2010, President Lukashenka announced that orphanages should cease to exist, and all children must live in families.

Irina Mironova, a Chairwoman of Child Fund International in Belarus, worked at the forefront of these changes and she

shares her experience:

Attachment theory tells us that a child needs at least one reliable adult in their lives who can provide care and support for them on the permanent basis. These goals are impossible to achieve in the institution environment. Only family type care can do it. We aimed to create an alternative system to orphanages that would help parents to embrace their responsibilities, and become better at it. Or develop a system of alternative family type care for children who cannot stay with their biological parents for different reasons. We also needed to shift the attitudes among child protection specialists from punishing to empowering parents.

Certainly orphanages continue to operate in 2016, and so do the facilities for disabled children in custody. The number of such institutions has even grown from 9 to 10 in 2015. These children require intensive care, might never graduate to independent living, rarely get adopted, and if adoption occurs, it is usually into foreign families.

International best practices and local implementation

The majority of best practices introduced by international actors in child protection came from the US model called Parent Resources for Information, Development, and Education (PRIDE). This model strengthens the quality of family foster parenting and adoptive services. Simply put, everybody could become a better foster parent with a little bit of help.

But some children will never find either foster or adoptive parents, as after a certain age, namely between 10 and 17, the chances of adoption decrease significantly. In 2014, 17,234 children lived in foster family arrangement in Belarus while

another 10,478 were adopted. However, only 53 children out of these 10,000 adopted in 2014 were between the ages of 14 -17. This calls for very specific services designed for such children who have spent their adolescence in orphanages.

Only a few who start adult living independently integrate well. As data shows many of them engage in risky behaviours, and incarceration rates reach up to 80% for such children. Statistics also show that they often fail as parents too, and this leads to an 'institutional cycle', a condition where children who grew up in orphanages end up sending their kids to orphanages.

Some of the projects attempt to create a sense of belonging for adolescent kids who fall through the cracks of state and family care. They include after-classes activities, which teach them basic life skills like personal finance, self-care, and job search techniques. Most importantly they keep these children off the streets during after school hours.

Providing quality life standards for children in custody is certainly humane, but also constitutes a social and economic investment not only in children themselves but in the nations' security and stability. However, such initiatives are few, scarce, and chronically underfunded.

As Belarus struggles to provide long-term comprehensive support for such children, it seems a lot more could be done with the infusion of international funds and expertise in this field.

Invisible Minority: Surviving with Disability in Belarus

On 5 May 2016, Minsk hosted a rally of Belarusians on wheelchairs, who gathered to remind the society of continuing discrimination.

Neither the state nor the public noticed this desperate cry in the desert, ignoring the needs of about 500,000 people with disability.

In 2015, Belarus was the last state in Europe to sign the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, yet disabled people here still remain a hidden minority.

Various [forms of discrimination](#) in education, employment, and everyday life limit the chances of the disabled for full social integration. They suffer from the lack of barrier-free access and persisting stereotypes, which deny them equal chances of realising their potential.

“Nobody sees or hears us here”

✘ Any traveller to Belarus who strolls through the streets of its capital or any other cities for that matter, will not likely see disabled people, wondering if they indeed exist here. Yet according to Belstat, about 500,000 Belarusians suffer from various disabilities, making up 6 per cent of the population. Among them, around 20,000 are wheelchair users.

These people are often left on their own in the struggle for equal opportunities. Only a few dozens of disabled managed to attend the rally in Minsk on 5 May 2016. The organiser of the

event, the Republican Association of the Wheelchair Users, wanted to highlight basic needs of the disabled, primarily creation of barrier-free environment and ending discrimination.

Unfortunately, the rally took place far from the city centre, on the Bangalor Square, invisible to the wider audiences. It is a traditional venue where Belarusian authorities allow the opposition to organise political protests, thus conveniently moving them away from public attention.

Same scenario applied to the protest of the disabled, only in their case authorities did not even care to send the police forces to secure order. Neither medical teams nor restrooms were available on site, indicating callous neglect from the side of the state.

✘ The head of the Republican Association of Wheelchair Users, Jauhen Shauko, noted that not much has changed since the last similar rally of the disabled in 2012: “Yes, we have better food and clothes now, but our cages became tighter. Authorities try to force us into accepting the role of a burden, in need of constant supervision.”

Ordinary Belarusians often display similar attitudes, pitying disability or seeing it as a drawback. Belarusian model Angelina Uelskaja aka Angel of Wales demonstrated how disabled people can fight these stereotypes. She built her career and achieved professional success despite the diagnosis of cerebral palsy.

Barrier-free: quantity over

quality?

✘ On 28 September 2015, Belarus signed the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, committing to the creation of an inclusive community. Recently, it also funded a series of initiatives to introduce facilities for the disabled into urban spaces. One of them was the state program of barrier-free environment for 2011 – 2015 aimed to improve the quality of life of the disabled.

According to the representative of the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, Anatol' Razhanec, the program turned out to be a success, overfulfilling its goals in the best traditions of the Soviet record-setting. Instead of initial re-equipment of 5,000 facilities to meet the needs of the disabled, the state constructed 9,000 barrier-free access points.

In Minsk alone, it has spent over \$3.5 million, creating 2,107 barrier-free objects. Minsk subway invested over \$150,000 into re-equipment of the stations: overall, 32 stations now have elevators, special platforms or ramps.

What this optimistic statistics does not reflect, is how many disabled people have benefited from the new barrier-free environment. Many of these new facilities are extremely difficult to use, while others are there just for a show-off or simply do not work.

In a recent incident at the train station in Puhavichy, Viktoryja Zhdanovich, suffering from cerebral palsy, wanted to use the elevator, installed on the bridge over the tracks. After failing to turn it on, she had to contact the station employees, who demanded to see a special ID, identifying her as a disabled person. In the end, Viktoryja still could not use the elevator – it did not work.

Campaigning for parking spots

According to Siarhej Drazdouski, who coordinates the Office on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, most problems of the disabled Belarusians stem in discrimination. Pointing out the chief responsibility of the state, he suggested amendments to the Law on Social Protection. New clauses should define discrimination of disability, provide for its prevention, and protect the rights of people with disability.

✘ Currently, discriminative practises surround all aspects of everyday life of the disabled. Many stores, administrative and residential buildings often lack necessary ramps for barrier-free access. If a wheelchair user travels abroad by car, he or she is stuck in lines for hours at the border crossings, which usually lack adequate restrooms.

Parking spots for the disabled started to appear in Belarus only about five years ago. Yet drivers often ignore this innovation and feel free to park their cars in these stalls. In April 2016, activists of the Republican Association of the Wheelchair Users launched an awareness campaign, reporting parking violations to the police and the media.

However, some recent trends show more promise for people with disabilities. For instance, barrier-free tourism directly addresses people with disabilities, seniors, and families with young children. One of the initiatives in this sphere is a collaborative project of several Belarusian NGOs and Valozhyn administration in the Naliboki Forest. Using the grant from the EU, they plan to create a tourist itinerary and a hostel suitable for people with disabilities by 2018.

For such projects to succeed, Belarusian society still needs to change its mentality and overcome stereotypes. Most of them root in the Soviet practises of marginalising the disabled people and removing them from public spaces, as it happened

with the disabled WW2 veterans on the eve of the Moscow Olympics in 1980.

Equally important is the challenge for the contemporary Belarusian state, which should abandon indifference and take the lead in securing basic constitutional rights of its citizens with disability.

In Search of Dignity: Childbirth and Childcare in Belarus

The Belarusian all-star Olympic biathlete Darya Domracheva will have a baby in October. The news came in April from the future child's father Ole Einar Bjoerdalen, also known as the "King of Biathlon", the most medalled Winter Olympic Norwegian.

Because Darya symbolises Belarusian pride and holds the title of "Belarusian Hero", some have insisted she must deliver in Belarus. While this particular international couple may pick and choose the country and hospital for their future childbirth, most Belarusians have few such options.

Belarus scores well in international indices of [gender equality](#) and maternal health. But this brings little consolation to individual women who have to deliver and raise children. In search of dignity during childbirth some go to neighbouring Lithuania, while others have launched local initiatives to advocate for transparency and a human touch during such pivotal moments in life.

At [Mamonlineshop](#) you will find a lot of helpful information that will guide you in this journey of being a parent, topics like parenting tips, toys, accessories and much more.

Impressive maternal health care and benefits record

2015 marked a modest victory for Belarusian demographic policy as cumulative fertility rate reached 1.7 children per woman. While it may not seem enough for the [rapidly ageing nation to reproduce itself](#), this constitutes a considerable increase from 1.4 in 2010. And it fares well compared to the neighbouring Baltic states, where the highest birth rate is 1.6, in Lithuania.

Most women in Belarus both in urban and rural areas choose to have more than one child. Just like their European counterparts, women are getting married later – now at an average age of 25.5 – and give birth to their first baby at 26. Belarusian women begin families a little earlier than Polish and Lithuanian women who on average have their first baby at 26.7.

In 2015 the annual Save the Children Mother's Index assessed the well-being of mothers and children in 179 countries and ranked Belarus 25th in their list. Belarus came right after the UK, scoring better than neighbouring Poland and Lithuania. The index considers such vital statistics as lifetime risk of maternal death and children's mortality rate among other things.

☒ Compared to other countries, Belarus offers rather [generous maternity leave](#). It consists of 126 days of paid leave with 100 per cent retention of income, and a total of 165 weeks of possible time off work with an allowance of \$115 per child and

uncertain job security. Uncertain, because not many employers in a competitive business climate will hold a place for a woman for three years.

Generally speaking, generous maternity leave comes at the expense of benefits and compensation. The European champions in length of maternity leave, Poland and the UK, both offer 52 weeks to a woman, and compensate 87 per cent of her income and give a flat rate after the first 6 weeks. On the contrary, Lithuania offers only 18 weeks but at 100 per cent income compensation.

Statistics versus reality

The quality of health care during pregnancy and anticipated childbirth experience feed into women's decisions about the number of children they will have. While the labour experience will almost always be painful for a woman, it does not have to be lonely and humiliating. Yet for many women in Belarus it feels exactly that way. Facilities that offer no privacy and allow no partners or relatives to be present, along with callous personnel, leave women traumatised and therefore unwilling to go through the ordeal again.

Since 2000 it has become more common to have a partner present at childbirth in Belarus. According to zautra.by every tenth couple wishes to go through this experience together, although no official data is available. In order to make this happen, the couple has to take a special paid labour preparation class, but even then there is no guarantee that the father will be admitted. Doctors and medical personnel have the final say.

The decision on admitting a woman's partner to a childbirth depends on delivery room availability, the partner's medical record, and certainly the whim of doctors. Women get transferred to certain rooms during active labour, which they

usually have to share with two or three other women. This means no male can enter the room.

Yet according to Belarusian news outlets this is about to change, at least for those who can afford it. The Ministry of Health announced in May that one Minsk hospitals will now offer two individual rooms to accommodate pregnant and labouring women with better comfort, but most importantly to allow family members, including a woman's partner, to be present during the labour. They also mentioned that [A good feeding chair](#) is also of prime importance after child birth.

Childbirth with dignity

Giving birth in neighbouring Lithuania is becoming more popular among young well-to-do Belarusians who wish to go through this experience together. Located 180km (115 miles) from Minsk, the Lithuanian capital Vilnius may as well be in a different universe in terms of the childbirth experience. The average cost of natural labour is 800-1000 euro per family, and may increase to 1,300 in case of a Caesarian. The data suggest that 60 Belarusians babies were born in one major Vilnius hospital in 2013, and 70 in 2014.

Belarusian families travel to Lithuania for three basic necessities: the importance of both parents being together for the labour, the ability to have the child stay in the same room as its mother, and friendly, well-wishing medical personnel. Daria Vashkevich and Siarhei Lisichonak, who had their first baby boy in February in Vilnius, tell their story:

In Lithuania they have already changed their approach to childbirth and delivery and view it as something very natural for a healthy woman. We wanted to be treated as normal human beings going through an important physiological and psychological act in our family, and not as those in an emergency situation. You know, the basic approach to

childbirth defines the rest: procedures, protocols, environment, hospitality, and etc.

Going back to the most celebrated athletic couple – the Norwegian father in accordance with family law in Norway will have to take at least 10 weeks off to take care of the newborn. By contrast in Belarus less than 2 per cent of men take any such paternity leave. While they have the same rights as mothers to take leave, they seldom take advantage of it.

One of the obvious reasons for such decision-making lies in higher earnings. Because men tend [to earn 25 per cent more than women](#) in Belarus, it makes no economic sense to forgo a higher salary. While this rings true for most countries in the world, the Nordic countries, including Norway, made such leave obligatory for men. Belarus is about to follow suit. On 12 May a representative of the Ministry of Labour announced that it will consider the possibility of introducing mandatory paternity leave. The availability of [nurseries](#) are also important.

It seems Belarus still lags behind at adopting forward-thinking family-oriented practices. It has succeeded in keeping up the high standards of pre-natal and post-natal health care developed during the Soviet era, but with it has not questioned old fashioned rules and rigid protocols. Maybe the time has now come to add to these high-quality services a much-needed human touch.

How Women's Rights Play Out

on Belarusian Stage

If you happened to be in Minsk on 4 April, you should have picked up your free ticket to the public reading of the play "Seven".

The acclaimed documentary play tells the true stories of seven brave women from around the world who fought and managed to significantly improve the lives of girls and women in their respective countries.

Artistic value aside the production has a very powerful political and social message. In Belarus public servants, experts, business, media and sports stars came together to give voices to the seven characters. And while the settings may be exotic – stories from Guatemala, Nigeria, and Cambodia – the narratives translate well into the Belarusian context: domestic violence, trafficking in persons, fighting for freedom and equality. The performance should ideally resonate with the local audience and lead to rigorous discussions.

Belarusian Renditions of Seven

Belarus joins 32 other countries who have already staged "Seven" translating the script into their respective languages. Written by American playwrights, produced by a Swede, it aims to raise awareness about women's rights in the world by engaging local prominent people as readers of the monologues. It presents a tapestry of stories that include fighting domestic violence in Russia, rescuing girls from human trafficking in Cambodia, and promoting peace and equality in Northern Ireland among others.

The first closed reading of Seven in Belarus took place on 2

November, 2015. The carefully chosen stellar cast of readers included [Alena Kupchyna](#), Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Aleh Karazei, representing Ministry of the Interior, Aliaksandr Rumak, Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Protection, [Kiryl Rudy](#), Aide to the President of the Republic of Belarus, and His Excellency Martin Oberg, Ambassador of Sweden to Belarus among others.

And this is where the play gets both politically and socially interesting. Amazingly enough rather high-ranking public servants agreed to act on stage. This meant adjusting their busy schedules to accommodate rehearsals. This also implies coming under the guidance of an artistic director, albeit as talented and outstanding as Ivan Pinigin. And on top of it all it may be the [first time since the diplomatic row in 2012](#) that the government representatives of Sweden and Belarus play together, literally and figuratively.

Irina Alkhovka, a recognised expert in the field of gender equality and chairperson of the NGO "Gender Perspectives" took part in the second "expert" reading of the play in March. She comments on her experience,

It happened so that during the second "expert" reading of the play I spoke with the voice of Marina Pisklakova-Parker, who founded the first hotline for victims of domestic violence in Russia in 1993. My organisation opened such a hotline 20 years later in Belarus with the support from the UN in 2013. However, neither Russia nor Belarus has adopted the legislation on domestic violence prevention yet. It remains a huge issue, which affects women from all walks of life, regardless of their education and place of residence.

Two more performances will take place until the end of 2016, one of them in Hrodna region.

Against the Belarusian Backdrop

☒ Belarusian society could definitely benefit juxtaposing and discussing the issues brought up in the play. Domestic violence continues to be [a widespread crime](#). According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) statistics every fourth woman in Belarus experienced some form of violence or aggression from the partner within her lifetime. And yet, only 29% of women survivors of physical or sexual violence choose to tell their story to lawyers, doctors or law enforcement. This low number testifies to the fact that the society has a high tolerance for violence, and women choose to suffer in silence.

The number also reflects the lack of trust that women have towards state-provided services. The Ministry of Labour, responsible for rehabilitation services to victims, claims the existence and availability of 105 'crisis' rooms nationally. In reality, however, very few of them admit domestic violence survivors. The overwhelming red tape, lack of respective protocols, and outright ignorance on behalf of personnel makes such services virtually unattainable for women.

One of the few consistently operating shelters for domestic violence survivors in Minsk receives funding from abroad, namely from a private UK citizen. Altogether four NGO-run shelters for domestic violence survivors in 2014 admitted as many clients as all 105 of the state-sponsored together.

Table 1. Number of clients assisted by the NGO and state-run shelters for domestic violence survivors (according to Belta.by and NGO data)

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Another prominent Belarusian women's NGO "Gender Perspectives"

operates the only national toll free hotline for domestic violence survivors in Belarus. Since its launch in 2013 it has accepted over 8000 phone calls. They, too, completely rely on foreign and private funding.

National Priorities

Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs prides itself in introducing international initiatives against [trafficking in human beings](#). Namely, it successfully created a Group of Friends United Against Human Trafficking at the UN in 2010. It also introduced a UN resolution on improving the coordination of efforts against human trafficking. Belarus has capitalised and will continue [to do so on such initiatives](#). Such actions become a potent way of inserting itself into the international arena.

Unfortunately all too often domestic efforts in human trafficking prevention lack lustre. US Department of State 2015 Trafficking in Persons report downgraded Belarus to Tier 3: “Countries whose governments do not fully comply with the minimum standards and are not making significant efforts to do so.” The Belarusian government places significant efforts on law enforcement and prosecution components, while the victim rehabilitation services are yet again scarce.

Belarus could definitely do more for women who find themselves in similar situations as the play's seven characters. While a play is a great happening in itself, the ultimate goal should be to use it as a potent tool for driving the changes in respective areas. It could help spearhead much-needed legislation on domestic violence prevention, or expand the opportunities for women's NGOs, or empower real women. Or alternatively it may sadly remain a great foreign-funded story about women being successful against all odds.

Belarus 110 Years Later

In 1905 his grandmother Ida left the village of Novy Svierzhan, about 60 km (46 miles) to the southwest of Minsk. At the age of 13 she set out to travel with her family to the United States of America. She never returned.

In her perfect English with no trace of an accent she rarely reminisced about her past. One hundred and ten years later at the age of 65 he travelled back to her birthplace to discover his roots and another country.

He found the places, but they carry no memories. He found a country which preserves [few traces of his ancestors](#). And yet Professor Krohn thought it was a trip worth making. But without a local, this would have been nearly impossible.

Belarus remains a country with little infrastructure for English-speaking visitors. The newly appointed Head of the National Tourism Agency, Veranika Darozhka, recognises the potential of 'nostalgic' tourism and seemingly has the proper experience to make it work.

Getting to Belarus

According to Belstat, 140,000 tourists visited Belarus in 2015. Roughly 70 to 80 per cent of these were from Russia. By contrast, neighbouring Lithuania accepts around 2m visitors each year. Sweden, comparable to Belarus in terms of population with 9.8m inhabitants, attracts around 5m tourists, and the UK, comparable to Belarus in size, attracts a staggering 31m each year.

Professor Krohn had to start planning the trip in advance. A journey to Belarus cannot be made on a whim. US citizens need to obtain a visa from the Belarusian Embassy in Washington or Consulate in New York. The process requires extensive preparation and financial investment. Preparations in his case included obtaining an invitation from a former student residing in Belarus, confirming that he could stay with them. The cost of a visa was \$130.

His teaching obligations brought him to neighbouring Latvia from which he managed to take inexpensive trains to Lithuania and then to Minsk. He got lucky, as no low cost carriers will bring you to Belarus. He found ground transportation services swift and reliable. The only downside was that trains had no designated space for suitcases in them. Upon arriving in Belarus, he realised that English would not suffice. He taught himself to read Russian, but understanding the spoken language was harder.

Discovering Jewish Heritage

Novy Svierzhan remained where it used to be, 46 miles southwest of Minsk. However, for Professor Krohn there was little to discover. The population of Novy Svierzhan currently totals 2,086 people according to the 2009 census. Interestingly, in 1900 according to the International Jewish Cemetery Project, the Jewish population was 732.

Even according to current figures, it accounts for one third. That number of people must have left some heritage behind. However, there remained only two traces, neither of which well preserved. The locals easily directed Professor Krohn and his two guides to the remnants of a synagogue and the Jewish cemetery. Interestingly, everybody, even the youth, knew exactly where to look for them. Both looked dilapidated and abandoned.

The next stop was Mir and Niasvizh. Both cities boast well-preserved major tourist attractions listed by UNESCO as World Heritage sites, [including the sixteenth century Mir Castle and a palace](#). Few people know, however, that the 1921 census of Mir showed that 55 per cent of the population was Jewish. Mir or Mirrer Yeshiva was established in 1815 by prominent local Jews and gained a reputation far beyond the little town, attracting students from many parts of the world.

Except for a small private museum run by a local enthusiast  by the name of Viktor Sakiel, no other places in Mir contain information about the once vibrant community. One of the four rooms in his private museum features Jewish culture and exhibits collected in the cellars and attics of his neighbours. He works as a collector, fund-raiser and a tour guide for his little enterprise. Some of the exhibits are for sale, many can be touched, and all can be photographed.

Reworking the Past, Looking at the Future

A few Hollywood celebrities trace their ancestry to Belarus, including actors [Kirk Douglas](#) and [Lisa Kudrow](#). Many other less famous descendants of Jews from the former Russian Empire have re-discovered their heritage. However, 110 years seems too long ago for Belarusian history. Except for a few private or foreign sponsored initiatives, there seems to be little effort by the state to either preserve or feature the Jewish past of the country.

Yet maybe the government has recognised the historic, cultural and financial potential of Jewish heritage in Belarus. In early March the National Tourism Agency selected Veranika Darozhka from among eight candidates to become its director. Darozhka's profile features work for the Jewish NGO network and a fellowship at the University of Jerusalem.

In her interview with the traveling.by portal she states the following: "I take deep interest in promoting Belarus in the international arena. I understand the challenges of the current situation and have a vision of how to deal with them and move forward". Most importantly she notes among her priorities: "This is so called 'nostalgia' tourism because so many people had left Belarus in the past and have now become interested in it. Our country has a diverse, rich heritage to offer to various nations".

This rings true for many Jews in the United States, including Professor Krohn, who trace their ancestry to former shtetl or miastechka in Belarus. And while he certainly admired the nature, hospitality and culture of modern Belarus, he just wished he could see more of his own once vibrant culture preserved and featured. Professor Krohn says:

Except for the incredibly moving memorial to the Jews descending to the killing pit, there is a notable paucity of Jewish sites in Belarus. But then I expected little in this regard and I cannot say I was disappointed. The other point I can make with total honesty is that my first trip to a country in the current Russian orbit was fascinating and enjoyable in its own right. The food was good, the transport well organised, the parks absolutely glorious and the broad thoroughfares remarkably clean and well tended for such a large city.

Belarus continues to be expensive to get to and hard to get around without knowledge of Russian or Belarusian. The new leadership at the National Tourism Agency should generate much-needed initiatives reflecting historic cultural diversity and do away with the unnecessary entry restrictions.