



THE BRIGHT SIDE OF BELARUS

Let's admit it, little is said about good things that take place in Belarus. So rarely we hear anything positive about this country that one might even wonder – is there a bright side of Belarus? After receiving a good few of articles, I have no doubts that yes, there is. Here we publish the articles that looked at the positive aspects of life in Belarus from original, seldom discussed point of view. *Aliaksei Shota's* contribution overviews cultural developments in 2009 presenting new trends in Belarusian cinematography and music, uprise of new art spaces and media platforms created to talk about as well as promote Belarusian art.

Ekaterina Glod in turn goes deeper in analysing new tendencies in Belarusian cinema. The film festival *Listapad* could be a touchstone when assessing the quality of Belarusian cinematography and when discussing choices that Belarusians make in terms of international film industry.

Considering the topics of the articles mentioned above, cultural life in Belarus is the sphere experiencing an upturn: new ideas are appreciated, art experiments are feasible and international cooperation is productive.

As *Olga Tomashevskaya* puts it in her contribution, economic and political life in Belarus does not flounder either. We see the bright side here in changing mentality, the coming of a positive estimation of private entrepreneurship.

All three authors end their pieces by expressing their wish that good aspects of life in Belarus would endure, develop and push their way into other spheres. I join the contributors of the current issue by encouraging to find and to contribute to good things in Belarus.

Julija Narkeviciute, Editor

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CULTURAL DEVELOPMENTS IN BELARUS: THERE ARE A LOT OF THINGS TO DISCUSS

Aliaksei Shota, journalist

The year 2009 was remarkable for culture events in Belarus. In contrast to political or social spheres, culture was booming with life.

Certainly, Belarus still cannot beat the neighbouring countries in musical culture development. We lack publishers, art galleries, clubs, as well as ordinary coffee houses and bear pubs. Furthermore, the music on FM radio creates an image that there is only one music style. However, in the year 2009 there were some positive developments that cannot stay unnoticed.

Let's start with art centres and galleries. The beginning of the year seemed to be sad. The popular Minsk gallery *Podzemka (Underground)* was quietly shut down when its owner decided it format was 'not interesting'. Luckily, the loss was more than compensated by an opening of a new cultural centre under the name 'Ÿ'. The gallery 'Ÿ' is a book store, a coffee place, a concert and cinema hall, and a

lecture room in one building – quite an unexpected variety on Minsk culture map. Thus a former glass bottle return centre turned into a meeting point where exhibitions, presentations and debates take place. Cultural events offered by "Ÿ" are as unique for Belarus, as the letter of the Belarusian alphabet that became its name. It may well be that the famous conceptual artist Artur Klinau will change his opinion and Minsk will quit being the 'capital without galleries' for him?

In August – September 2009, the biggest modern art festival in the history of independent Belarus *Dakh-9* took place in the Palace of Arts in Minsk. The festival had a status of the international event, thanks to the artists of the German art centre *Tacheles* and other partners (artists from 11 countries participated in the festival). It's been the ninth year of cooperation with *Tacheles*, which was reflected in the name of the festival. Art lovers could take a look at pieces of fine arts, sculptures, photo exhibitions, as well as enjoy performances, literature,

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music, theatre and video-art. On the whole the festival generated considerable public excitement. There was no single day when the Palace of Arts was not crowded. Most importantly, the festival was talked about. The opinions differed greatly. In the Belarusian vacuum of debates, every discussion is worth its weight in gold.

Dakh-9 was preceded by an extremely interesting exposition of Belarusian modern art provocatively named *Belarusian pavilion at the 53rd Venice Biennale*. It was provocative as in 2009 Belarus again did not become a participant of this major exhibition. In line with the wisdom 'if Belarusian artists do not come to Venice, bring Venice to them', BelExpo exhibition centre for a few days turned into the city of gondolas, bridges and pigeons. One can presume it was the first such a large-scale presentation of Belarusian modern art. Along with enjoying the exhibition, the public could receive comments from critics, culture experts and authors.

Now let's continue with discussing main developments on the country's 'music front'. FM stations with their cheap pop-music format did not change much. However, television did pay attention to an alternative stage. The new seasons of *Star Ring* and *Attention, Live Sound* programmes presented to the general public previously marginal Belarusian rock groups.

Talking of music bands, a few of them properly represented Belarus abroad. Rock revival band *The Toobes* from Minsk could be named the debut of the year. It played as a warm-up for *Franz Ferdinand* in St. Petersburg and awoken the interest of the British producer *Tricky*. Minsk band *Port Mone* recorded the best album of the year, according to the Croatian website *terapija.net.*, and interested a number of Muscovites during the Belarusian music festival *Mozhno! (You Can!)*. The festival also presented other bands popular among certain groups of the public, such as freak-cabaret *The Silver Wedding (Серебряная Свадьба)* or *Cassiopeia (Кассиопея)*.

The Toobes' main achievement is that their style differs from the mainstream Belarusian alternative music. They sound like a Western band. The same is true for the participants of *Mozhno!* festival – they incomparably differ from the 'heroes of the underground' – the formerly banned groups. Other interesting young bands were presented by the website *Experty.by* which filled in the empty niche with music reviews after the natural 'death' of the newspaper *Muzykalnaya Gazeta*. Among the 'good old guys' the traditionally strong position was kept by Liapis Trubetskoy (Ляпис Трубецкой) with his new leftish anarchistic album *Kultprosvet (Culture education)*, as well as Liavon Volski (Лявон Вольский) and Zmitser Vatsiushkevich (Змитер Вайцюшкевич), who gathered interesting musicians for their new joint projects.

The good old music festival *Basovishcha* celebrated its 20th anniversary in Poland, 20 km from the Belarusian border. The old timers of the festival –

N.R.M., Krama, and Ullis – remembered their youth by playing songs from the first albums.

Basovishcha's main competitor Belarusian – Ukrainian festival *Be Free* is very likely to finally stop travelling and get settled in Chernihiv this year. The main advantage of this music event is no visa requirements on the Ukrainian border. It is the need to get entry visas to Poland that makes great impact on the number of *Basovishcha* visitors.

Belarus can't boast of music festivals of such a scale. However, the festivals *BelaMusic 2009*, *Graffiti Picnic*, or *Navalnitsa (Thunderstorm)* cannot stay unremarked. Regrettably, all festivals were held around Minsk, leaving out the forgotten provinces again.

We should also pay special attention to the concerts of *Lacrimosa* and *Prodigy* in Minsk. Hopefully, thanks to them Minsk will finally become a regular stop in the world stars' tours and their fans will not have to go to Warsaw or Moscow anymore. For instance, *Rammstein* will make a stop in Minsk during its upcoming tour.

Let's now move on to cinematography. In his recent interview, movie critic Andrei Rasinski has fairly called the Belarusian cinema the most dreadful in the world, and criticized some of its latest movies, namely *Dnepr Frontier (Днепровский рубеж)* and *Assignment for You (Вам задание)* for bad script and poor acting. During the last years *Belarusfilm* got used to making ideologically correct military films with zero artistic and commercial value, since keeping a job there does not mean making a successful movie. *Belarusfilm* survives on income injections from the Russian movies which are often shot in Minsk due to lower prices.

Therefore, the return to *Belarusfilm* of the previously 'problematic' directors as Mr. Kolbyshau, Mr. Kananovich and Mr. Kudzinenka, the author of the cult movie *Occupation. Mysteries (Оккупация. Мистерии)*, has become a real sensation. The movies shot by these former 'partisans' are even more interesting, for instance, Mr. Kolbyshau's *The Wolves (Волки)*, a psychological anti-totalitarian drama. Mr. Kananovich with his graduate work *The Colour of Love (Цвет любви)*, has become super-popular among students. Currently he's working on a new comedy *Money Tree (Денежное дерево)* whereas Mr. Kudzinenka is working on a *bulba*¹-horror, the first Belarusian gothic horror movie with comedy elements.

However, that might not be enough for serious, systemic changes in the Belarusian cinematography. *Belarusfilm* structure has not changed since the Soviet times. This is a bureaucratic organization not used to advertising, promoting and selling its products, not to speak about efforts to make a movie a success.

Finally, I'd like to say a few words about media platforms informing the wide public about cultural

1 bulba - potatoes in Belarusian, is a symbol plant of Belarus – translator's remark.

If earlier success of Belarusian music bands was often explained by their presence on the 'ban list', now people are primarily interested in music, texts, performance techniques, and not the ideological part of it.

events and assessing their cultural value. Besides the traditional media, during the last year we learned of cultural news thanks to the *Budzma* campaign. Based on a simple blog at Wordpress, the group of journalists and culture figures has significantly contributed to promotion of Belarusian culture. Budzma.org is not only a news portal, presenting event announcements and culture analysis. Campaign *Budzma* includes concerts, presentations, contests and projects united by a common promotion campaign. Its slogan is: 'Let's be Belarusians – this unites us and makes us unique!'

To conclude, the above mentioned trends and facts firstly represent an implicit penetration of the modern Western-like thinking into the Belarusian context. At last, a writer does not have to be a fighter for the national revival, he can simply write and tell his stories. A writer stops being 'saint', he becomes an ordinary man, no better and no worse than the others.

Secondly, even though former 'marginals' have not become 'part of the family' yet, they are conceived as being less suspicious now. They have comfort-

ably settled in the city centre, while some of them even got on the TV screens. Their existence as well as the high value of their work has been declared publicly. Furthermore, they got united and self-organized, which is so different from the popular saying 'where we have 2 Belarusians, we have 3 political parties'.

Moreover, the Belarusian culture demonstrated that it can be interesting abroad. If earlier success of Belarusian music bands was often explained by their presence on the 'ban list' (i.e. the public would come to see 'banned' artists despite the quality), now people are primarily interested in music, texts, performance techniques, and not the ideological part of it. The Belarusian independent culture has finally broke loose from the pro-government/pro-opposition framework, and has really become independent.

Finally, the Belarusian culture provokes discussions and disputes. It means it is diverse and attractive. No one would talk about weak, uninteresting art. Let's hope, we will have things to talk about in 2010 as well.

CREATING A POSITIVE IMAGE OF BELARUS: LISTAPAD FILM FESTIVAL

Ekaterina Glod, analyst

While negative epithets prevail when talking about Belarus, every now and then I feel a strong desire to talk about something positive – about the 'bright side of life' in Belarus. In particular, I'd like to refer to the international Minsk film festival *Listapad* which is one of the official cultural events worth appreciation for its contribution in creating a positive image of modern Belarus abroad.

The initial concept of *Listapad* was a film forum for the CIS countries and the Baltic States. As years went by, the festival grew and won its audience. Eventually, in 2003, after a decade since its launch, it officially became an international event. The main founder of the festival is the Ministry of Culture of Belarus. Since 2000 it is held under the sponsorship of the President. *Listapad* today is one of the biggest festivals organized in the post-Soviet area, giving way only to *Konotavr* and Moscow International Film Festival.

Listapad is the 'festival of festivals', as it offers viewers the movies that have already become nominees or prize winners of various national and international film contests. Although this concept leaves no place for novelty or discovering new names (and this is the main purpose of film festivals!), it gives Belarusian viewers a chance to watch the best pieces of the modern film industry and learn about new trends. This is especially relevant having in mind that the festival takes place not only in the capital, but in provinces of Belarus as well.

During the sixteen festivals since 1993 Belarusians were able to enjoy Andrei Konchalovsky's *Ship of Fools* (*Корабль дураков*), Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's *The Lives of Others*, Dardenne brothers' *The Silence of Lorna*, Jacques Audiard's *A Prophet*, and many others.

Listapad offers a unique opportunity to watch post-Soviet directors' works and feel the flavour of national cinema schools. However, one should note that 'geographical boundaries' of Minsk cinema forum does not limit itself to CIS countries. The last year's 16th Minsk International Film Festival involved a record number of movies: about 300 films from 52 states were presented to the selection committee. For the first time Minsk film festival presented movies from Albania, Macedonia, Croatia, the Philippines, and Chile.

Beside the geographical criterion, another significant touchstone in *Listapad's* film selection is spirituality. In the opinion of the organizers, cinema must appeal to the best human feelings and educate viewers. Certainly, in the era of prevailing postmodernism, when art unambiguously denied all pretensions to authority and monopoly of the truth and viewers are expected to become co-authors of text as well as draw the meaning of a piece of art themselves, a purpose to teach viewers evokes many smiles. Not to mention the fact that an attempt to educate by determining what movies to watch smells totalitarianism. However, it might well happen that due to

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the so-called 'spirituality' *Listapad* always succeeds in avoiding 'glamourification' in the movies.

Listapad is also a cinema forum, an opportunity for the Belarusian public to communicate with local and foreign masters. During the 16 years of its life the festival was honoured by directors Nikita Mikhalkov, Stanislav Govorukhin, Krzysztof Zanussi, Kira Muratova, actors Vasily Lonovoy, Oleg Yankovsky, Alena Babenko and many others. They moderated discussions and debates, held press-conferences, presented their works and interacted with Belarusian viewers in cinema cafes. Again, these cultural events take place not only in Minsk but in the regions of the country as well. Tatyana Doronina, Oleg Tabakov, Alexander Mindadze and other stars of Russian and world movie industry shared their experience with young Belarusian cinematographers. This particular part of the festival becomes ever more important since Belarus has staked on investing in its own cinema makers. Organizers hope to see Peter Greenaway and Emir Kusturica among festival guests in the future.

Special projects within the framework of *Listapad* are a distinctive feature and advantage of the cultural event. During the last festival, for instance, Lidia Fedoseyeva-Shukshina, national artist of Russia, presented a retrospective show of the films by Vasilii Shukshin, dedicated to the 80th birthday of this famous writer, actor and film director. Another seasonal novelty was the programme called *Parallels*, organized in cooperation with the embassies of the countries which took part in the festival (Argentina, Chile, India, Kazakhstan, Latvia, and Estonia). The program is aimed at increasing the interest to the national cultures and promoting achievements of different cinematographic schools.

Listapad's main programme includes three contests presenting to the audience fiction and non-fiction movies as well as films for children and teenagers. The contest of documentary films is a part that *Listapad* can be proud of. As documentaries are rarely shown, Minsk cinema forum makes a great contribution to acquainting the audience with the genre and to 'cultivating' the society in general. More than 30 documentary makers from 26 countries of the world were assessed by the jury in 2009. For the first time the contest presented the films by directors from Australia, Macedonia, Croatia, Thailand, and the Philippines.

As regards the Belarusian cinema, certainly the promotion of the national cinematography is one of the main objectives of *Listapad*. *Listapad 2009* celebrated the 85th anniversary of the national cinematography. *Belarusfilm* products were presented in all festival programs: *The Sniper: The Punishment Weapon* (Снайпер. Оружие возмездия) by Alexander Yefremov and *Insight* (Инсайт) by Renata Gritskova in the fiction film contest, *Eternal Return* (Вечное возвращение) by Mikhail Zhdanovski in the documentary contest,

and *New Year Adventures in July* (Новогодними приключениями в июле) by Elena Turova and Ivan Pavlov in the program of *Listapadzik*. In the out-of-competition programme the public enjoyed *Cadet* (Кадем), a psychological drama by Vitaly Dudin, while Belarusian animation was represented by a series of new *Belarusfilm* productions: series of *The Story of Last Years* (Повесть минувших лет), *Nestserka* (Нестерка), *Once Upon A Time There Was The Last Fly* (Жила-была последняя Мушка), and others. Belarusian fairy-tale for children *New Year Adventures in July* received a special prize of *Listapadzik*, whereas the 'bronze' of the festival went to the military thriller *Sniper* by A. Yefremov.

The film that particularly needs to be mentioned is R. Gritskova's *Insight* starring Bogdan Stupka. A very bright camera work was done by Tatiana Loginova while the film script written by Alena Kaliunova can be called a high quality cinema literature. It is practically the only recent script materializing existentialism - an absolutely new line for the Belarusian cinematography. The film keeps the spectators electrified until the very last seconds. The effect is achieved due to the clear rhythmical structure, as well as the compositional and dramaturgic alignment, which is typical for Gritskova's works, but quite rare in the Belarusian cinematography. The movie is so remote from what was produced by *Belarusfilm* earlier. It demonstrates that the Belarusian film industry is going in the right direction - creation of high quality movies along with European traditions.

Strange as it may seem, many of the new trends in the film studio are the result of the work of Vladimir Zametalin, who took over the studio a few years ago. Although while occupying the position of a deputy head of the President's office Mr. Zametalin seemed to be the opponent of everything that is Belarusian, *Belarusfilm* revived namely under his management. The film studio was technically re-equipped, its building went through major repairs. Its general manager puts serious efforts into returning the Belarusian heritage. It was Mr. Zametalin who initiated legal procedures for returning Belarusian heritage back home and who invites interesting Belarusian movie-makers to work at the studio.

We have a right to hope that under the direction of the new minister of culture Pavel Latushka, expert and connoisseur of both national culture and world culture heritage, Minsk international festival *Listapad* will only improve and get rid of its past drawbacks. No doubt, Belarusian spectators deserve an interesting and modern cinema forum. They seem to be ready to articulate their civilizational choice a lot more clearly. It's no coincidence that for the first time in 10 years the Belarusian audience gave 'gold' and 'silver' prizes to European, and not Russian, films, while the 'bronze' went to the national cinematograph.

Public opinion is favourable for the development of business in the country.

FORCED TRANSFORMATION

Olga Tomashevskaya, journalist

The impact of the world economic crisis and the shrunken support from Russia make official Minsk carry out economic reforms. Today the Belarusian Government is simply coerced to carry them out that is why it does this slowly and unwillingly. Whatever that may be, the given situation will hardly help Minsk to escape from the market transformations, which in due time will lead to the springing up of the politically active middle class in Belarus.

The gravest problem of Belarusian economy, which was called forth by the world financial crisis, was the radical contraction of export. Foreign consumers started to purchase fewer Belarusian goods due to their financial problems. As a result, the scope of foreign trade according to the statistics of 2009 was reduced by 30.7 % compared to 2008 whereas the deficit of the trade balance went up and exceeded USD 7.28 billion. The situation in the foreign trade gave rise to a number of problems in the Belarusian economy including the shortage of foreign currency in the country. The issue of the currency inflow may be aggravated in the near foreseeable future due to the contracted economic support from Russia. Moscow revoked all preferential terms to Minsk for the supplied oil and at the same time increased threefold the customs duty for it. This will inevitably lead to the decrease of income from the Belarusian oil refinement and the export of oil products. It was namely that export that used to be one of the most important sources of foreign currency.

The economic problems in question became a strong headache for the official Minsk since they may give rise to serious social consequences. In particular, they may result in the contraction of budget programs and wage decrease in the public sector. Besides, problems related to the selling of products may call forth a sudden rise of overt or disguised unemployment. Rumours about a number of enterprises cutting the time of the working week and even common talk of mass sackings in major enterprises come up periodically. For instance, at the end of February the Belarusian Service of the Radio Freedom (Radio Svoboda) announced about the possibility of staff reduction in Minsk automobile plant (MAZ) – one of the major enterprises of the country.

Belarusians are anxious about the economic problems more than anybody else. As the public survey carried out last December by the Independent Institute of Social-Economic and Political Research registered in Lithuania shows, four of the five most important events in 2009 for Belarusians are associated with the situation in economics. Thus, rise in prices was the main event in the opinion of 59.7% of citizens, 38% of people pointed to the salary and pension cuts, 31% - devaluation of the Belarusian

ruble and 22.8% - deepening of the economic crisis in the country.

At the same time, Belarusian authorities are so far able to solve their financial problems, at least partially, by means of the increase of foreign loans. Last year for the first time in many years Minsk was granted a loan from the IMF within the framework of the stand-by program. It amounted to USD 3.63 billion. It is quite possible that the parties will discuss the possibility of granting a new loan after the work in the said program is finished in April 2010.

Belarusian authorities as well as international financial organizations are well aware of the fact that loans are nothing more than temporary solution of the problems. One of the major conditions imposed by the IMF for its loans is the execution of privatization in the country. In the opinion of the international experts it would allow not only to attract necessary finances into the Belarusian economy but also to modernize enterprises. The development of private ownership in Belarus would be instrumental in increasing budgetary income and decreasing the threat of mass unemployment. Apparently, official Minsk also starts perceiving the necessity of the development of private initiative. It may not be by chance that for more than a year the officials continue talking about the liberalization of economy.

Last year the procedure of the registration of enterprises was simplified considerably. According to Alexander Kalinin, the head of the Belarusian Union of Entrepreneurs, it was that measure alone that increased the business activity by one fourth in the country. Minsk has also taken a number of other steps that were conducive to business development.

World Bank and the International Financial Corporation in their report *Doing Business* published in 2009 went so far as to title Belarus as one of the leaders in the sphere of reforms. At the same time experts are of the opinion that Belarus will have to make a considerable effort to form a really favourable climate for the attraction of investments and development of business activities.

“For a long time Belarusian government was cautious about the introduction of market transformations since the prevalence of state property forms the basis of an authoritarian power whereas the development of business may form a middle class, which forms the basis of a civic society. The ruling elite still makes effort to restrain the process of reforms although in the end it will have to carry out full-fledged transformations” – said Alexander Klaskovskij, an independent Belarusian political scientist in his interview to Bell.

According to experts, public opinion is favourable for the development of business in the country.

The more representatives of small and medium business are established in Belarus, the more intensive their search for the ways to unite and defend their interests will be.

Although in the wake of the disintegration of the USSR in early 1990 Belarusians distrusted private entrepreneurship the situation today is radically different. Olga Abramova, a political scientist and an ex-MP is of the opinion that “Belarusians had a chance to appreciate the merits of the competitive economy, which exercised a favourable influence on their money bags and the quality of life – prices went down and the amount of goods as well as the number of services increased. One more reason for the alteration of the attitude towards entrepreneurship was the fact that in Belarus there are more and more people who have become better versed in making their private business”. According to

professor of sociology Oleg Manaev “the number of the supporters of market reforms makes up no less than two thirds of the country’s population”.

Alexander Klaskovskij is persuaded that irrespective of the unwillingness of the ruling elite the processes of market transformations in Belarus will persist and in due time they will cause the transformation of the political system as well. “The more representatives of small and medium business are established in Belarus, the more intensive their search for the ways to unite and defend their interests will be”. The political scientist thinks that present authorities will try to obstruct those processes but they have small chances to delay them for a long time.

Opinion expressed by the authors of “Bell” does not necessarily correspond with that of the Eastern Europe Studies Centre.



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