

Today we had the pleasure to talk to dr. Hienadz Siemienczuk, assistant professor of the Grodno University, who is also a lecturer at the Jagiellonian University. Dr. Siemienczuk was kind to answer some of our questions concerning the Byelorussian culture.

What is, according to your judgment, most important in the Byelorussian culture? Which accomplishments are worthy the attention of the audience of the European Community?

H.S. Firstly, I would like to say, that being a Byelorussian in present times, in this complicated political environment requires some spiritual strength and gives one's existence a certain value. In this complex situation the most serious characteristics of the Byelorussian culture is its "Europeanness", i.e. its inseparability from the European context. By intentional deformations and false Soviet interpretations the Byelorussian culture has been placed somewhere beyond the borders of the European domain. Yet the long coexistence with other European nations, such as the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and The Republic of Poland, endowed the Byelorussian culture with a European tone.

Secondly, a very specific characteristics of Byelorussia is its location: the borderland of Latin-European and Byzantine-Eastern-Slav worlds. In Byelorussia, in monuments of culture and thinking, one can observe the effects of influence of these two worlds, these two civilizations.

Now we know your opinion about positive aspects of the Byelorussian culture. What would you name as its weaknesses and shortages? Could it be "supplemented" by cooperation with the European culture?

H.S. The greatest misfortune of the Byelorussians is a general lack of national (state) identification. Even the fact that Byelorussia was one of the co-founders of the UN, the last 60 years have not served the evolution of culture. Today's Byelorussian culture, despite sports or scientific achievements, is "orphaned" by the lack of recognition for the Byelorussian language as the native tongue. Without thinking in national Byelorussian categories, its statehood is deprived of its soul. One could say that the population that speaks Byelorussian seems to be the "worse one", while the Russian-speaking population perceives the Byelorussian culture and language as "a marginal phenomenon with flaws". The Russian language and mass culture dominate in all spheres. We don't have national cultural politics, hence the language itself is neglected. The situation worsens in time, and if there is no language, the very soul of the nation withers.

Quite noticeable is also the lack of elementary culture in everyday life, in people's behavior and language. We do see examples of attempts undertaken to save their cultures by our neighbors, other Slav nations and in Lithuania and Latvia. Even Ukraine, despite its problems, demonstrates they may be overcome given the existence of a national community, by saving the language - the nation's soul. I would like to stress that Russians also care for their language, its purity, they address the problems of culture in mass media. In our country this area is taboo.

Sometimes we hear that the Byelorussian culture is a new phenomenon on the European map. Is it true that the Byelorussian culture is young?

H.S. Such opinions indeed have been uttered in the past. There are no "young" or "old" cultures. Byelorussia is a rather interesting object for cultural studies for ethnologists and historians. I would call the Byelorussian culture *tabula rasa*, an unknown, blank page of the European culture. This - on the one hand. On the other hand, the lack of Byelorussian national discourse is the cause of such overinterpretations. The considerations about "young and old cultures" is such an overinterpretation.

If we consider culture in the Christian sense, the origins of the Byelorussian culture starts at the end of the 10th or at the beginning of the 11th century. Yet within the area of Byelorussia a unique situation has been created, since after the country has been Christianized in the Byzantine rite at the end of the 10th century, Byelorussia has been Christianized anew, this time following the Latin rite at the end of the 14th century. Throughout the ages the coexistence of rites strengthened and became quite natural for the Byelorussians. Another experience which brings us closer to Europe is the long period during which the Magdeburg Law had been followed on the Byelorussian soil. The first Byelorussian cities were founded on this law at the end of the 14th century and in the 16th century the entire territory of Byelorussian belonged to this "zone". Other manifestations of ancient European influence on the historic tradition of our country include the codification of law in the form of the Statute of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the 16th century, the first book printed by Franciszek Skoryna in 1517, a number of historic monuments in various European styles (gothic, renaissance, baroque). The youth, educated at European universities, including Krakow, upon their return brought home new, inspiring artistic ideas and thoughts.

However the geographical location between mighty superpowers, between Europe and Asia, caused the political situation in this area to be very unstable. A fraction of the Byelorussian society (mostly elites) in the 16th and 17th century became Polonized, while another part became Russified, thereby creating an alternative part of the society. In some sense the Byelorussian culture during the last 300 years was reduced to folk culture. The language retained the most archaic traits not only of the Slavic culture, but of the traditional culture as well. This folklore also demonstrates the antiquity of our culture. In the times of unification and globalization such islands of tradition may be interesting for French, German and Slavic researchers.

In reference to your last statement I would like to ask which characteristics of the Byelorussian culture are most impressive, what could be Byelorussia's contribution to the European Community, what could the country give us in the future?

H.S. Firstly, Byelorussia retains its cultural identity and language on the borderline of two worlds - the European and the Russian one. This component of the Slavic culture serves the retention of its peculiarity. God forbid some element

of the Slavic civilization disappeared - this would lead to the collapse of the entire community.

Secondly, despite the fact that it may sound paradoxically, our provinciality is an important aspect for the European culture. The provinciality not in the sense of weakness or distance, but in the sense of transformation of culture and its local variations. Europe gets to know itself, its value, by interacting with areas that are further away. Baroque as an artistic expression was present in Byelorussia, and at the same it helped to shape the Byelorussian consciousness, identity and mentality - up to the very eastern borders of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. This is where the influence on Russian culture came from.

When future is concerned, I perceive the Byelorussians as a poetic nation. Despite the fact that the history of Byelorussian poetry is only about 100 years old, Byelorussians make up in this field remarkably quickly. Byelorussian authors write modern, postmodernist literature. The percentage of poets and free lance writers within the society is greater than in neighboring countries. We define Byelorussian writers as those writing in the Byelorussian language. Maybe there are scribblers writing in Russian, but even an average person on the street is unable to list their names, while Bykau, Baradulin, Arlou and Chadanowicz are well known. Young writers receive prestigious European literary awards.

Finally, I would like to stress that Byelorussia is a space where confrontation between the western and eastern Slavic cultures disappears. I shall even allow myself to opt for a peculiar cultural Pan-Slavism. Down with antagonisms! Byelorussia, just like Ukraine, has enriched the European culture in the past and will continue to do so in the future.