



# Minsk Forum XVII

## The Place of Belarus in Europe.



Chances for foreign policy, economy,  
civil society and culture

4.-6. December 2019, Minsk

### Report

*The overarching theme of the Minsk Forum XVII was the geopolitical challenges that Belarus faces. Almost all the speakers agreed that Belarus 1) in the near future will remain a member of the Eurasian Economic Union and the Union State, but at the same time 2) is determined to develop relations with the West, especially in the economic and technological sphere. The challenge is how to harmonise these two vectors.*

### Day 1: 04/12/2019

#### Opening / Welcome speech

In his welcoming speech, the Chairman of the Minsk Forum and the German-Belarusian society Prof. **Rainer Lindner** emphasised that the event is a highly-regarded platform for exchange of views and cooperation between Belarusians, Germans and citizens of other EU and CIS countries. The speaker invited the participants of the Forum to discuss the role of Belarus in Europe in the political, economic and historical dimension, as well as the relations between Belarus and Germany in the framework of the Eastern Partnership. At the same time, he called for the paying attention to the fact that Belarus, together with Russia, is building the Union State. “For a long time it has been believed that the document [on the creation of the Union State] would remain only on paper, but today this project is gaining real weight.” In this regard, said Prof. **Lindner**, it should be taken seriously.

The Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany **Manfred Huterer** expressed gratitude to the organisers of the Forum, especially Prof. Lindner, and



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# Minsk Forum XVII

## The Place of Belarus in Europe.



Chances for foreign policy, economy,  
civil society and culture

4.-6. December 2019, Minsk

noted that these kinds of events contribute to dialogue and mutual understanding. After listing a number of other Belarusian-German events that were organised in 2019, the Ambassador turned to the issues of a more global nature, in particular, a new arms race. “At such times, the importance of shared rules is growing,” said Mr **Huterer**. Belarus, in his opinion, could become a bridge between East and West. He also expressed satisfaction that recently German-Belarusian relations have been developing positively “in all areas”. There are merely some „political topics that we see differently“.

Welcoming speeches were delivered by **Aleh Krauchanka**, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus and **Michael Siebert**, Representative for Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Germany. A report by **Helga Schmid**, Secretary General of the European Foreign Service, was also read.

**Aleh Krauchanka** emphasised that for two decades the Minsk Forum had been attracting those who care about Belarus and its role in the modern world. “There were different times in relations between Belarus and the EU, but the Minsk Forum has always persevered,” the diplomat noted. In his opinion, the situation in Eastern Europe is a stress test for the EU. At the same time, Belarus remains a provider of political and economic stability. “Our foreign policy is multi-vector, not that of exclusion” said Mr **Krauchanka**, referring to the fact that Belarus chooses not to defend its role in Europe by setting one country against the other. Concluding his speech, the diplomat on behalf of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus handed Prof. **Rainer Lindner** a certificate of honour for his contribution to the development of Belarusian-German relations.

**Michael Siebert** noted that the EU is quite successful in terms of values, especially the values of pluralism, free market and civil society. “We would like to offer these values to others, the speaker added, but not to impose them“. But he also



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for Strategic Studies



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# Minsk Forum XVII

## The Place of Belarus in Europe.



Chances for foreign policy, economy,  
civil society and culture

4.-6. December 2019, Minsk

praised the fact that Belarus plays the role of a mediator [between East and West], emphasised the importance of its rapprochement with the EU, and promised to support Belarus on the path to WTO accession and contribute to the strengthening of rule of law.

**Helga Schmid** noted in her welcoming letter that the Minsk Forum is a great place to exchange views. The EU, she wrote, appreciates the fact that Belarus continues to play a constructive role in solving the problems of the region. At the same time, she noted that, for the EU, the topic of human rights remains an important issue. As a positive point, the Secretary General noted the more active role of Belarus in the Eastern Partnership and expressed hope that the agreement on visa facilitation will contribute to contact between peoples. She assured that the EU will continue to stimulate the modernisation of the Belarusian economy: in particular, it is planning to allocate 30 million euros for this purpose. “We will continue the dialogue with Belarus, including the dialogue on values,” concluded Ms **Schmid**.

After welcoming speeches, a presentation was made by **Matthias Platzeck**, Chairman of the Board of Trustees of IBB Dortmund on the topic “German-Belarusian relations in the long run - 25 years of IBB Minsk”. He began his speech with the message that the President of Germany, **Frank-Walter Steinmeier**, sent greetings to all the participants of the Forum and wished them successful and fruitful work. The speaker then outlined the problems and challenges facing modern Europe, in particular the unprecedented increase in xenophobia and populism. At the same time, Mr **Platzeck** called not to confuse Europe and the EU, which is especially important in the context of developing relations with Belarus: Belarus is a European country, and this does not depend on whether it seeks to become an EU member or not.



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for Strategic Studies



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and Communication



# Minsk Forum XVII

## The Place of Belarus in Europe.



Chances for foreign policy, economy,  
civil society and culture

4.-6. December 2019, Minsk

After **Matthias Platzeck**'s speech, a discussion began on the topic "The place of Belarus in Europe from the point of view of Germany and the EU". It was attended by **Dirk Wiese**, Member of the Bundestag, Coordinator for Inter-societal Cooperation with Russia, Central Asia and the Eastern Partnership Countries, Federal Government of the Republic of Germany; **Aleh Krauchanka**, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus; **Dirk Schuebel**, Head of the EU Delegation to the Republic of Belarus; **Hanna Kanapatskaya**, Member of the House of Representatives of the National Assembly of Belarus of the VI convocation; and **Gediminas Kasputis**, Head of Eastern European Countries Division from Eastern Neighbourhood Policy Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania. The discussion was moderated by Prof. **Rainer Lindner**.

**Dirk Wiese** called for moving forward, despite the difference of opinion. One of the manifestations of moving forward is the simplification of visa regime. **Hanna Kanapatskaya**, answering the question posed by the moderator about the parliamentary elections, drew attention to systemic problems. She spoke about an attempt to promote a bill on changing electoral legislation in parliament. Although this initiative has not yet been successful, but, at least, there has been a dialogue on this topic in parliament. **Aleh Krauchanka** noted that Belarus and the West have 20 years of very complicated relations. He believes that many of the problems that arise now are the result of those difficult times. But, according to the diplomat, an open dialogue is ongoing, and this is very important. "We have yet to become allies," Mr **Krauchanka** said optimistically.

In the subsequent part of the discussion the following topics were raised: integration with Russia (in particular, expectations from the negotiations scheduled for December 7th in Sochi), simplifying the visa regime and optimising cooperation between Belarus and the EU in the framework of the Eastern Partnership.



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and Communication



# Minsk Forum XVII

## The Place of Belarus in Europe.



Chances for foreign policy, economy,  
civil society and culture

4.-6. December 2019, Minsk

### Night owl session: Ambassadors' Panel

After the evening reception, night owl session: Ambassadors' Panel began. It was attended by **Einars Semanis**, Ambassador of Latvia to Belarus, **Igor Kizim**, Ambassador of Ukraine to Belarus and **Arthur Michalski**, Ambassador of Poland to Belarus. The discussion was moderated by **Artyom Shraibman**, Founder and political analyst of Sense Analytics.

Mr. **Einars Semanis** positively evaluated the cooperation between Latvia and Belarus in various fields and expressed hope that next year Alexander Lukashenka would visit Latvia. "We are ready for this visit," the ambassador assured. Mr. **Arthur Michalski** noted that Belarus is a great meeting place for Western and Eastern worlds, "perhaps even more so than Poland." The disagreements between Poland and Minsk officials over the Polish minority in Belarus weren't ignored either. Without going into much detail, the ambassador called for perceiving national minorities as a "chance" for both countries.

**Igor Kizim**'s speech was less optimistic. He focused on the risks for Ukraine related to the integration of Belarus and Russia. On the one hand, Ukraine and Belarus are connected through cultural and trade relations (for example, 67% of fuel is supplied to Ukraine from Belarus). This could be considered as a plus, if not for the fact that Belarus is strongly attached to Russia, which Ukraine considers an aggressor. The Ukrainian ambassador was particularly worried by the fact that "the vast majority of TV channels in Belarus are Russian."



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# Minsk Forum XVII

## The Place of Belarus in Europe.



Chances for foreign policy, economy,  
civil society and culture

4.-6. December 2019, Minsk

### Day 2: 05/12/2019

#### **Plenary Session: Belarus and Eastern Partnership: The status quo and future opportunities**

The session was attended by **Hans-Jürgen Heimsoeth**, Special Commissioner of the Federal Government of the Republic of Germany for Eastern Partnership States; **Dzmitry Yarmaliuk**, Deputy Head of the Department for European Cooperation at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus; **Jan Löffler**, Member of the Saxon Landtag; **Evelina Schulz**, Head of the Political, Press and Information Division at the EU Delegation to the Republic of Belarus; **Tatsiana Karatkevich**, co-chair of the Tell the Truth civil campaign; and Dr. **Andrei Vardamatski**, Head of the opinion research centre “Novak”. The commentators were **Markus Meckel**, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the GDR and a member of the Board of Trustees of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, as well as **Dmitry Ofitserov-Belsky**, an expert from the Primakov Institute of World Economy and International Relations. The session was moderated by **Marcel Röthig**, Head of Regional office Ukraine and Belarus at the Friedrich Ebert Foundation.

**Hans-Jürgen Heimsoeth** noted that the Eastern Partnership (EaP) should not be perceived as a geopolitical project. It is, rather, a dialogue tool. **Dzmitry Yarmaliuk** expressed the wish for the EaP to develop in a pragmatic way and be oriented towards the development of economy and trade. He supported the statement of Mr **Heimsoeth** not to perceive the EaP as a political or geopolitical project. “Belarus as a country that has always professed a multi-vector policy would like this project to be devoid of politics, be as pragmatic and aimed at the socio-economic development of countries as possible,” Mr **Yarmaliuk** explained. In their speeches, **Jan Löffler** and **Evelina Schulz** focused on the opportunities offered by the Eastern Partnership for the participating countries.



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# Minsk Forum XVII

## The Place of Belarus in Europe.



Chances for foreign policy, economy,  
civil society and culture

4.-6. December 2019, Minsk

**Tatsiana Karatkevich**, in turn, noted that most Belarusians are not interested in international relations. They are interested in their own salaries, unemployment and healthcare. Do Belarusians really think about the European perspective of Belarus? No. Will the Eastern Partnership help with that? That's unlikely. The reason lies in the fact that the authorities are trying to depoliticise society, according to Ms **Karatkevich**. What is needed now is basic trust within the country and an established consensus. It is also important that Belarusians consider themselves to be subjects of public life, which is impossible without (real) local government. That's why the Tell the Truth campaign is now actively promoting the European Charter of Local Self-Government.

Dr. **Vardamatski** presented the results of opinion polls that were coordinated by him. As of August 2019, 55% of Belarusians are in favour of integration with Russia, and only 25% are in favour of European integration. Compared to January 2018, the dynamics are more in favour of the European choice: the number of adherents of integration with Russia has decreased by 9%, and the number of those supporting European integration has increased by approximately 4%. But here, the speaker emphasised, one needs to take into account different motivations of the respondents: supporters of integration with Russia have a motivation based on values and culture ("we have common values with Russia, history ..."), while the dominant motivation of supporters of European integration is pragmatic and materialistic ("higher standard of living", "visa-free regime"...).

**Markus Meckel** noted that the paternalistic approach dominated the EaP earlier. Now, he said, more flexibility is needed so that it would not appear as if the EU were exporting democracy. **Dmitry Ofitserov-Belsky** polemically noted that pro-Western forces in the post-Soviet countries are also nationalistic. Ukraine, he said, is a prime example of this. After all, this goes against the liberal democratic values of the West, noted Mr **Ofitserov-Belsky**. He also recalled that the EaP was origi-



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and Communication



# Minsk Forum XVII

## The Place of Belarus in Europe.



Chances for foreign policy, economy,  
civil society and culture

4.-6. December 2019, Minsk

nally intended as a preliminary stage before the accession to the EU. “It was not an honest approach [towards Russia],” the Russian expert said. But, he added, the opportunity for dialogue always remains.

### Round table I.

#### For a sustainable economy and environment: investments and innovations in Belarus

The round table was attended by **Dzmitry Yarashevich**, Deputy Minister of Economy of the Republic of Belarus; Dr. **Uladzimir Kouzmich**, Managing Partner of the Green City pilot project for the development of renewable energy in the Navahrudak District; **Aliaksandr Yauseichyk**, Senior Banker of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, in Belarus; Dr. **Alexander Knuth**, Expert on the issues of SME policy and economic development at Berlin Economics; Dr. **Ervin Kurtbetdinov**, General Director of Remondis Minsk; and **Uladzimir Karol**, Chief Executive Officer of the OJSC “Holding Management Company “Belkommunmash”. The discussion was moderated by **Stefan Kaegebein**, Head of Regional office Eastern Europe and Working Group Digitalization, East Committee – German Eastern Business Association.

**Dzmitry Yarashevich** spoke about the State’s efforts to create a favourable climate for investment in Belarus and equal working conditions for both national and foreign investors. He emphasised that special conditions have been created for conducting business in the Great Stone industrial park, whose residents are not only Chinese, but also German and American companies. The development of green economy is of great importance to Belarus: as an example Mr. **Yarashevich** spoke of the project to expand sustainable energy use, which is being implemented with the support of the World Bank.



Belarusian Institute  
for Strategic Studies



Office for European Expertise  
and Communication



# Minsk Forum XVII

## The Place of Belarus in Europe.



Chances for foreign policy, economy,  
civil society and culture

4.-6. December 2019, Minsk

Dr. **Kouzmich** shared his experience of attracting investment at the regional level within the EU Sustainable Energy Programme in the Eastern Partnership countries. Currently, thanks to renewable energy sources in Navahrudak, 150% of the district's needs are met, which means that 50% of the green energy can be exported, including to Europe.

**Aliaksandr Yauseichyk** noted that in Belarus the EBRD is implementing large-scale projects worth more than \$600 million. He emphasised that innovation is an integral element of every project supported by the bank. The EBRD also pays special attention to the projects aimed at developing green energy and energy efficiency. One example is the financing of the company „Modus“ that creates a bio-station on farm waste. According to the speaker, there is considerable potential in the use of wind and solar energy in Belarus.

Dr. **Alexander Knuth** presented the results of a survey of German investors working with Belarus. Based on the results of the study, 35 proposals for the reforming of the Belarusian legislation were formulated, taking into account international practices. According to Dr. Knuth, the recommendations of Berlin Economics do not constitute substantial reforms, but rather propose small amendments to the current legislation in the customs and tax areas. Listed among the difficulties faced by German investors in Belarus were methods for assessing the customs value of goods. In particular, Belarusian customs does not recognise invoices, as is customary in other countries all over the world. Mr **Yarashevich**, commenting on the proposals of Berlin Economics, agreed that it is necessary to take into account the proposals of investors and make efforts to simplify the procedures.

### Round table II.

### Education without borders: Belarus in the Bologna process



Belarusian Institute  
for Strategic Studies



Office for European Expertise  
and Communication



# Minsk Forum XVII

## The Place of Belarus in Europe.



Chances for foreign policy, economy,  
civil society and culture

4.-6. December 2019, Minsk

The round table involved the following speakers: Prof. Dr. **Uladzimir Dunaeu**, Member of the Bologna Civil Committee; Prof. Dr. **Rimantas Jelvis**, Vilnius University; Prof. Dr. **Anatol Makarau**, the Republican Institute of Higher Education in Minsk; **Danila Lauretski**, Secretary for Foreign Affairs of the Belarusian Student Association; and Prof. Dr. **Pavel Terashkovich**, Expert at the Independent Bologna Committee. The moderator of the round table was Dr. **Andrei Laurukhin**, Senior analyst at the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS).

Prof. **Jelvis** spoke about the structural reforms in the Lithuanian education system that had been carried out over the past 20 years. He called them generally successful, but noted several problems. Firstly, a credit system for measuring performance. Credits, as a rule, reflect only the amount of time spent on the subject, but not how well the student understood it. The second problem is the methodology of quality assessment. Assessment by students has its own specifics (the most critical results for teachers, as a rule, are given by unsuccessful students). An external assessment usually has a “sanction character”, and this stimulates the “ostentatious” behaviour of representatives of the institutions being evaluated. The third problem is academic mobility. It is difficult to combine the requirements of different countries. Fatigue from mobility is also observed. According to the professor, it’s now difficult not only to persuade teachers, but even sometimes students, to go abroad as part of an academic exchange.

The speech by Prof. **Dunaeu** mainly involved the critique of the quality and pace of the Bologna process in Belarus. The country formally became a participant in this process in 2015 and a roadmap for 2015–2018 was developed. “The reforms envisaged in this roadmap have completely failed,” the speaker stated categorically. In his opinion, first of all it was necessary to modernise the legislation, but this was not done.



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for Strategic Studies



Office for European Expertise  
and Communication



# Minsk Forum XVII

## The Place of Belarus in Europe.



Chances for foreign policy, economy,  
civil society and culture

4.-6. December 2019, Minsk

Prof. **Makarau** did not agree with the opinion that Belarus “failed” the reforms within the framework of the Bologna process, and explained possible shortcomings by the desire of the Belarusian side to “combine traditions with innovations”. According to him, the “competency model” developed by domestic experts generally correlates with the Bologna project.

**Danila Lauretski**, focused on the following problems based on the data of the Baltic Internet Policy Initiative online survey conducted in December 2016: 1) low student involvement in the implementation of the Bologna process; 2) lack of dialogue between officials and the public; 3) dissatisfaction of many students with the implementation of the Bologna reforms; 4) lack of a full-fledged institution of student self-government (it exists only formally). The speaker noted that involving students in the process of reforming the education system is important in two ways: value based (the implementation of the principle of student centrism) and practical (students could help in collecting information and developing recommendations).

Prof. **Terashkovich** focused on the marketing aspect of higher education in Belarus. The main groups of foreign students interested in Belarusian universities, the speaker noted, are Turkmen and Chinese, who are not always interested in a high level of education. And due to the low demand for education in Belarus in most countries, many universities have to constantly lower the bar so as to not to lose these students. This negatively affects the level of education and academic culture.

After the reports, a heated discussion began, which dealt mainly with the following topics: the specifics of PhD studies in the Belarusian academic field, the possibility / impossibility of adapting the traditional model to the Bologna one, the relationship between higher education and the labor market, the distribution of students after (free) education, etc.



Belarusian Institute  
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Office for European Expertise  
and Communication



# Minsk Forum XVII

## The Place of Belarus in Europe.



Chances for foreign policy, economy,  
civil society and culture

4.-6. December 2019, Minsk

### Round table III.

#### Museum and History. New Conception of the National History Museum

The round table was attended by Dr. **Kristiane Janeke**, Member of the Board of the German-Belarusian Society; **Pavel Sapotko**, Director of the National History Museum of the Republic of Belarus; Prof. **Viktar Schadurski**, Dean of the Faculty of International Relations of the Belarusian State University and member of the German-Belarusian Historical Commission; and Dr. **Iryna Kashtalyan**, Head of historical programme named after Leonid Levin. The discussion was moderated by **Tatyana Bembel**, Head of the tut.by gallery and chairman of ICOM Belarus.

The round table was held in the form of interactive communication, where the topic and direction of the discussion were set by the moderator. Below we reproduce the main points of this discussion. After the opening speech of the moderator, **Pavel Sapotko** spoke about the idea and the goals of creating the National History Museum. The main goal is to show the history of Belarus as a nation. As a response to this Dr. **Janeke** wondered if there is a single Belarusian national narrative and if this is even possible. In addition, according to her perception, the concept of the museum is based on the idea that the State is the homeland. Mr **Sapotko** emphasised that the idea is to show the historical path of Belarus as a nation and to show its role in modern processes.

Ms. **Bembel** (referring most likely to the question of Dr. **Janeke** about narratives), noted that the museum had already begun to admit alternative narratives in the form of exhibitions. Prof. **Schadurski** urged to remember who the main visitors would be, namely, schoolchildren and tourists. In this regard, he recommends not to overload the museum with exhibits and an abundance of information. Turning to the topic of narratives, Prof. **Schadurski** noted that there are now four national



Belarusian Institute  
for Strategic Studies



Office for European Expertise  
and Communication



# Minsk Forum XVII

## The Place of Belarus in Europe.



Chances for foreign policy, economy,  
civil society and culture

4.-6. December 2019, Minsk

narratives in Belarus. He also recalled that the official narrative may change: “it is not a fact that the official narrative will remain the same in the future.” Dr. **Janeke** added that the museum also has a recreational function, namely, people can come there to have a good time and socialise.

Dr. **Kashtalyan** spoke about the tasks and specifics of a historical studio. The studio is located in the same place where the Jewish ghetto was located during the Second World War. This is due to the fact that the main task of the studio is to maintain and preserve the memory of the ghetto, the deportation of Jews and their annihilation. This is especially important in Belarus, because until recently, the word “Holocaust” has not even been included in history textbooks.

### Round table IV.

#### Current trends in civic development: environment, youth, sports, gender

During the round table, moderated by **Ihar Schary**, a consultant in the field of organisational development, self-government and active citizenship, the participants discussed trends and intersectoral intersection of the spheres of ecology, youth policy, gender issues and sports. The participants were **Maryna Sakalova**, Academic Director of Baltic Internet Policy Initiative (BIPI); **Stanislava Gusakova**, representative of the NGO Assembly; **Harald Zulauf**, CEO of the international holding Media Consult; **Iryna Salamatsina**, Head of the Belarusian Organisation of Working Women; **Jauhen Labanau**, Head of the Centre for Environmental Solutions; and **Hanna Dapshevichute**, Secretary General of the Rada Youth Council.

In her speech, **Maryna Sakalova** announced the results of a 2019 BIPI study on the awareness and inclusion of Belarusians in the activities of public organisations. Only 6% of respondents are active participants in NGOs. The same



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# Minsk Forum XVII

## The Place of Belarus in Europe.



Chances for foreign policy, economy,  
civil society and culture

4.-6. December 2019, Minsk

indicators were obtained in the surveys of 2017 and 2018. The survey showed that the majority of respondents, although they can name a few civic initiatives, do not know how to join such activities, and are not personally familiar with the specific activities of NGOs. The respondents are most interested in environmental initiatives, as well as movements for a healthy lifestyle and the protection of human rights.

Continuing with the topic of the role of civil society, **Stanislava Gusakova** cited the results of a study of the legal status of NGOs. According to the results of surveys of 118 NGOs, 30% of organisations noted that they were involved in the development of recommendations for state bodies, which indicates that the state is actively making contact with civil society. An interesting result of the survey was that the organisations do not consider the rules for reporting to be too difficult, but not one of the respondents answered positively to the question, “Do NGOs have it easy in Belarus”.

**Harald Zulauf** presented the results of a media campaign during the European Games, the purpose of which was to promote a positive international image of Belarus. The speaker noted the importance of the country's national branding in the context of tourism development, attracting investments, increasing the attractiveness of the country's export products in the markets, as well as for the reputation of the education market.

The campaign resulted in a positive coverage of Belarus in the foreign media - out of 2,000 materials devoted to Belarus during the European Games, about 80% of the articles were positive. During the campaign visits of delegations to the European Parliament, meetings with European business associations and sports organisations were organised. One of the most effective tools turned out to be holding press tours for European journalists who had the opportunity to visit Belarus and



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# Minsk Forum XVII

## The Place of Belarus in Europe.



Chances for foreign policy, economy,  
civil society and culture

4.-6. December 2019, Minsk

learn more about the country, visiting not only the sports venues that hosted the European Games, but also business centres such as the High Technology Park. As part of the PR campaigns, a roadshow of the mascot of the European Games Lesik was held in 10 European capitals, which helped more Europeans to learn about Belarus.

Responding to a critical question from the audience, whether such a campaign is a “devil advocacy” that turns a blind eye to political problems in the country, Mr **Zulauf** noted that Media Consulta also has EU institutions among its clients, in particular the EU Delegation in Belarus, and choosing this project it was guided by the fact that the European Games are primarily related to the development of sports and tourism, not politics.

**Iryna Salamatsina** pointed out the gap between the high rates of Belarus’ international ratings for gender equality and the real situation in the country. According to Ms **Salamatsina**, the state policy on gender equality is correctly formulated, however, problems can be traced in the way the media cover women's issues. In particular, the media often reduce or hush up women's professional achievements, while emphasising the marital status of women. There are often cases when a female MP, instead of being asked how she influences politics with her decisions, is asked about her favourite dish she cooks at home or how many children she has, while a similar question is not asked to men holding the same position.

One of the areas of gender inequality in Belarus is sports, where women, on the one hand, show good results, but on the other hand, do not always have the opportunity to realise their professional ambitions. The case of Panther women's hockey team shows exactly that. The team showed excellent results in 2010-2013, but the club was subsequently closed due to lack of funding. It is significant how the officials announced that they are not going to financially support the club: supposedly



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# Minsk Forum XVII

## The Place of Belarus in Europe.



Chances for foreign policy, economy,  
civil society and culture

4.-6. December 2019, Minsk

the success of the women's team may present male teams in this “traditionally male sport” in an unfavourable light. The unwillingness of the state to create equal conditions in the sports infrastructure, as well as a large pay gap (and according to Belstat, gender pay gap is up to 40% in the sports sector) are pushing athletes to look for opportunities outside of Belarus.

Touching on environmental topics, **Jauhen Labanau** pointed out some patterns. In the whole country there is an increase in public interest in ecology, but this is mainly observed in large cities. The level of material wealth also affects the ability to make green decisions, so, for example, buying energy-saving green equipment may not be available to everyone. There is also a business interest in eco-friendly trends: there are cafes that do not use disposable plastic, shops offering goods without packaging. In turn, the state is also starting to respond to trends: legislation is gradually being reformed, in particular, the Council of Ministers has recently initiated a reduction in the use of plastic until 2021, which is in line with international practices and the European plastic strategy. At the same time, there is a conflict between environmental values and economic interests, as illustrated, for example, by the situation surrounding the construction of a battery plant in Brest. At the state level, priority will continue to be given to traditional sectors of the economy, rather than the development of green economy.

**Hanna Dapshevichute** dedicated her speech to youth policy. First of all, she drew attention to high staff turnover in the youth sector and the related problems with the systematic implementation of projects. According to Ms **Dapshevichute**, young people tend to take up popular projects without thinking about the development of infrastructure and strategic issues of youth initiatives. One of the trends is the increase in individual activism. It is easier for young people to create their own blog and conduct independent activities than to be united in an organisation. One of the challenges of implementing youth policy is that, in comparison with



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# Minsk Forum XVII

## The Place of Belarus in Europe.



Chances for foreign policy, economy,  
civil society and culture

4.-6. December 2019, Minsk

the experience of European countries that have ministries of youth, Belarus does not have one institution that could comprehensively address issues on the youth agenda. We have to simultaneously cooperate with the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Tourism and Sports, as well as the departments of ideological and educational work, the speaker noted.

### Plenary session.

### Epoch shift and change in Eastern Europe: What we have learnt for the future

The speakers were **Enrico Seewald**, Assistant Professor of Diplomacy at the Free University of Berlin; **Matthias Dornfeldt**, a member of the group of researchers of the socialist united party of Germany; **Uladzimir Arlou**, historian, writer and member of the Board of the Belarusian PEN Centre; Prof. **Valiantsin Holubeu**, Head of the Center for Special Historical Sciences and Anthropology, Institute of History, National Academy of Sciences. The discussion was moderated by **Jacob Woellenstein**, Head of the regional Office Belarus of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation.

**Uladzimir Arlou**'s speech was essentially a presentation of the German version of the book "Faszination Belarus", which he co-authored with Zmicier Herasimovich. "This is the first ever illustrated book about Belarus in German," the speaker noted. The main message of Mr **Arlou** was the following: Belarus is a European country, or rather, the eastern outpost of European civilisation. To the east of Smolensk, a completely different civilisation began, Asian one, which did not experience the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Magdeburg Law, religious tolerance, or analogues of the Statutes of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and where printing was very late. The speaker also mentioned the fact that President



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civil society and culture

4.-6. December 2019, Minsk

Lukashenka, who in the past ignored the pre-revolutionary history of Belarus, speaking on December 5th in the Belarusian parliament, recalled the Polotsk veche as a prototype of the modern parliament.

**Matthias Dornfeldt** and **Enrico Seewald** talked about the project “500 Years of German Diplomacy”, in which German-Belarusian diplomatic relations in the first half of the twentieth century were also investigated. In view of the fact that Belarusian statehood was still in the process of formation in those days, it was rather difficult to find the relevant documents. But intuition often helped: many documents were found, for example, in archival departments such as “Occupied Regions of the Russian Empire”. The researchers noticed that during the First World War, the Germans practically had no derogatory attitude towards Belarusians. “They were completely different Germans than those who came in 1941,” the German guests emphasised. **Uladzimir Arlou** added that during the First World War, the occupation government of Germany recognised Belarusians as a separate people.

Prof. **Valiantsin Holubeu** in his speech drew attention to some shifts in the historical policy of the Belarusian state. For a long time, it was “not recommended” to discuss all that went beyond the framework of the history of the 19th and 20th centuries in state institutions of Belarus. Now the situation is different. The state institutions already actively discuss the history of the Principality of Polotsk, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and even the Belarusian People's Republic without any particular dogma or prejudice.

### Closing remarks

Prof. **Rainer Lindner**, closing the Minsk Forum XVII, noted that the speeches and the discussions during the Forum helped to realise that Belarus is now per-



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ceived in the eyes of neighbouring states as a stable country and a country capable of dialogue, not as a country of risks. He also announced that in the future, the Minsk Forum intends to involve the Belarusian regions to a greater extent in the discussion of important topics on the political, cultural and economic development of the country.

After his speech Prof. **Lindner** thanked the volunteers for their excellent work during the event and handed them the certificates.

### Evening programme

After the discussion part of the event was over, the guests of the Minsk Forum XVII were invited to an evening program at the Aginski restaurant. In addition to a delicious dinner, the guests enjoyed the legend of jazz music in Belarus - Apple Tea.



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### Day 3: 06/12/2019

#### **The cultural program**

On the last day of the “Minsk Forum XVII”, everyone could visit the exposition “Old Belarus” in the National Historical Museum of the Republic of Belarus. This opportunity was used by approximately 20 participants of the Forum. Thanks to the exposition, it was possible to trace the cultural history on the territory of Belarus, starting from the time of Neanderthals and ending with the third section of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1795.



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