

# European Ambassadors

A conversation with Maria Kret (Lviv, Ukraine), Stsiapan Stureika (Hrodno, Belarus) and Oksana Tsybulko (Donetsk, Ukraine), recipients of the 2015 *Thesaurus Poloniae* scholarship Interviewer: Iwona Reichardt

**IWONA REICHARDT:** You have all been awarded the prestigious *Thesaurus Poloniae* scholarship by the International Cultural Centre in Kraków to do research in Poland. I would like to talk to you about this experience as well as your impression of today's Poland and your own countries and their people. Let us start with a simple question: Is this your first scholarship in Poland?

**STSIAPAN STUREIKA:** This is my first scholarship of this type. However, Poland is no strange country for me. First of all, I am from Hrodno in Belarus, where Polish culture is affectionately perceived. Secondly, for the last eight years I have been visiting Poland quite regularly, watching Polish news and communicating with Poles. Probably less than I would like to, but nonetheless...

**OKSANA TSYBULKO:** I have also been to Poland before. I was a beneficiary of a 2012–2013 scholarship programme which was offered by the Polish government to young academics. I was in Warsaw and Poznań where I

took courses at the Adam Mickiewicz University and I wrote my dissertation on contemporary art.

**MARIA KRET:** This is also not my first stay in Poland. In 2009–2010 I was also a beneficiary of the same scholarship as Oksana. I must say it was a very interesting experience.

**How would you say those in your home country view Poland today?**

**MK:** Poland is a country that inspires us. I know many Ukrainians who came here in the 1990s and they told me that Poland then was like Ukraine is today. This means we still have so much work ahead of us. Twenty-five years since communism ended in Poland I can see that Poland is really a European country. People here have opportunities. I do not know if they always take advantage of them, but they have perspectives. Unfortunately, this is something that we still lack in Ukraine. Even when you go to college and get a degree you still may

not be able to find a job. Corruption is omnipresent, even since the EuroMaidan, we are still fighting with corruption.

OT: For me Poland is a free and open country. It is simply my second home.

SS: As a cultural anthropologist, I can say that Poland has long become an element of the day-to-day livelihood strategies applied by the Belarusian people. My colleagues who are historians often visit Poland. They participate in conferences and co-operate with their Polish colleagues. The same applies to artists and writers. Many people from western Belarus also visit Poland for business and commercial reasons, including shopping. In fact, Belarus became the world leader in the number of Schengen visas granted per capita in 2014. Even in absolute numbers there are only three countries that are ahead of us: China, Ukraine and Russia. The substantial number of those visas is obviously issued by Poland. On our websites you find discount tickets for flights from Warsaw's airport, along with those from Minsk or Vilnius. A very large number of Belarusians start their foreign trips from Warsaw.

It is also important to mention the support Poland offers Belarus in terms of grants for cultural, social and political projects. And Poland provides asylum to the victims of political oppression in Belarus, including expelled students. Thus, in the eyes of a Belarusian, Poland is a reliable friend that almost never fails.

**How would you characterise your countries today? Let us start with Ukraine,**



**which has indeed undergone a significant change...**

OT: The question about today's Ukraine is a difficult question to answer. On the one hand, Ukraine has changed in a way that you cannot recognise it. After the Revolution of Dignity, Ukraine has focused a lot on achieving a higher standard of living for Ukrainians. It wants to become a real European country and it very much deserves to be. On the other hand, it is still a country that is foreign and cold to even some of its own citizens.

MK: I would say that today's Ukraine is a "post-Maidan Ukraine". However, it has been over a year since the Kyiv revolution and the country is still in deep chaos. There is an ongoing war in the east which makes it even more difficult to answer the question as to what Ukraine is today. I would also add that the country is about expectations. These expectations are not only directed at the



Olena Tsybulko, photo courtesy of the International Cultural Centre in Kraków

Ukrainian government but also at the European Union. However, in recent months people have become more disappointed that their expectations are not being met. Of course there are people who want to change things and are trying to do so.

#### And Belarus?

SS: Belarus is also very difficult to describe in one sentence or two. Belarus is very diverse. There are several parallel worlds which unfortunately never meet. I can say that 90 per cent of my friends are completely European. They are intellectuals and very open-minded. Yet, there are also a large number of people in Belarus who still live mentally in the Soviet Union. I have recently read a good interview with Svetlana Alexievich (our Noble prize winner in literature this year) where she said that 20 years is not enough time to change the public consciousness which has been cultivated

for decades. We exist within the framework of a post-Soviet and post-socialist development, of course not without our own peculiarities.

Faced with immense Russian propaganda we are reminded of the popular term “soft power”. This term, coined by American political scientist Joseph Nye, is used to describe a wide range of activities undertaken by a state and non-state actors that are aimed at attracting outsiders to their value system. Scholarships and exchange programmes fit this definition very well too. Since you are all beneficiaries of such a scholarship programme, would you agree that these visits have indeed changed the way you think to the point that once you return home you become a sort of “ambassador” of this country or its value system?

SS: Generally, yes. However, I would add to this that life in Poland, or any other European state, does not fundamentally change anyone but rather helps them better understand the social and cultural situation of their own countries. In my view, what people get the most from such programmes is experience and skills like inter-cultural communication. I know very few people that have dramatically changed after such a scholarship. Yet many of these people also admit that their stay abroad gave them more evidence that changes are necessary and provided a broader perspective of Belarus.

OT: I agree 100 per cent that such programmes change people for the better. They not only expand their horizons

but also encourage them to share their experiences with others and show them a different value system.

MK: I agree with Oksana. One example that comes to my mind is a well-known historian named Yaroslav Hrytsak. I read an interview with him where he said that he had a scholarship in Poland in the late 1980s. Now in Ukraine, it is people like him who have become the engines of change, even if it is only at the university level. When you return from such a stay you really want to change your country. You get more frustrated with the red tape because you know that things can be better. That is why I think that everyone from academia should participate in such a programme, even for a short time.

**As we all know, the EuroMaidan Revolution in Ukraine has pushed the country beyond the point of no return when it comes to its pro-European orientation. What does Europe mean for Ukrainians today?**

OT: For Ukrainians, Europe is a dream. This means it is something that is not fully known yet. But also, unfortunately, for some Ukrainians Europe is still a place “where we are not present”. It is, for sure, a place that is better than where we are now.

**And for Belarusians?**

David Lowenthal wrote an excellent and well-known book titled *The Past is a Foreign Country*. One of the themes analysed in this book is a tendency to romanticise the past without under-

standing that the way we imagine this foreign country is just our self-projection, which has little in common with historical truth. In my opinion, this is exactly the way Belarusians see Europe. Belarusians want to live as those in Europe, but not actually in Europe. Few people truly understand what Europe is (and by the way, how many EU citizens understand this?). This idealisation of Europe can be seen in everyday life in Belarus where an expensive renovation of an apartment is called “Euro-renovation”, the most popular store chain is called “Ev-roopt”. They like to use the prefix “Euro” to name companies like “Evropejski” grocery store in Minsk or “Evrodveri” (“Euro-doors”) and even “Evrokrepezh” (“Euro-screws”) also in Minsk. A Belarusian would label any manifestation of good taste as “European”. Even if, frankly speaking, it is horrible. But if a Belarusian likes it then it is “European”. This is a common feature for townsfolks as well as country inhabitants.

There are large complexes, too. For example, when Gérard Depardieu was visiting our country in July of this year he said that “Belarus reminds him of a little Switzerland”. But he is wrong, at least because Belarus is five times larger than Switzerland.

**What do your societies need the most today?**

SS: I would agree with Siarhiey Dubaviec, a Belarusian intellectual, that what we need most of all is freedom. Just give us real freedom of speech, freedom of



Maria Kret, photo courtesy of the International Cultural Centre in Krakow

political opinions, freedom of art, and maybe a little more economic freedom (although I am not an expert here), and in two years you would not recognise this country.

OT: The tragic events and the tense political and social situation in Ukraine in recent months are a consequence not only of some hidden factors, like external political influence, but also some internal factors, especially the low level of awareness about the problems faced by Eastern Europe as a whole. An incomplete or misshaped identity of Ukrainians as representatives of an Eastern European country leads to catastrophic mistakes not only in the sphere of politics but also in the mental transformation of our society. In my view, insufficient knowledge of our own history and culture can be very dangerous. I am convinced that today's Ukraine needs therapy. It needs to rethink its own history in the context of the Soviet Union and

other similar countries of the former Soviet bloc, for example Poland, the Czech Republic, Romania or the Baltic states, which are today examples of a productive and positive transformation from the Soviet experience.

MK: In my opinion, Ukraine needs to be able to decide about its own future. Personally, I do not like the division between the two Ukraines. I think it is a very outdated way of thinking. There is one Ukraine today and we need to find one united vision of our future.

**How would you describe the situation of academics in your own countries, especially now that you have spent some time conducting research in Poland?**

SS: I can only speak about humanities, particularly Belarusian history and ethnology. Everything is complicated. Although Belarusian scholars often take scholarships to Poland and elsewhere, we are still short of academic contacts and isolated from the European intellectual sphere. This is reflected in the areas of research as well as their quality. We can look at books published by Belarusian universities and academic state publishers – in the best case, they are good empirical studies. But more often these are compilations of ideological notions and attempts at self-praise. A lack of critical reflection is a weak point of the Belarusian liberal arts and humanities. It can get more interesting when it comes to non-state publishers and non-state researchers. They sometimes demonstrate a truly European level. But again, these

two realities rarely meet. I think that over time the non-state sector will prevail simply because it is more competitive. However, a lot depends on maintaining international contacts and participation in joint projects. We still need support and partnership.

MK: In Ukraine the life of researchers and academics is difficult. On the one hand, we are under pressure to enter the international academic stage. And rightly so, Ukrainian academia cannot develop in isolation. But, on the other hand, we do not have the resources like our peers in the West. Thus, a researcher is often very alone. The truth is that our academics do not even ask for high salaries. All they want is to be able to do their work. And here again, we can return to the

benefits of foreign scholarship. In my case, I not only have a stipend, but my cost of living is also covered. This allows me to deeply focus on my research and prepare publications, which in turn gets me closer to European academia. In Ukraine attempts have been made at increasing the universities' autonomy, but this process has just started and will take years. The grant system is still very small but Ukrainians are now entitled to apply for some funding from the EU, like the EU Horizon 2020 programme. Here again differences are visible between the older generation that is not used to such a system and those who have earlier been to other countries and are thus more accustomed with European programmes. 

*Translated by Olena Shynkarenko*

Maria Kret is a researcher with the Ivan Franko National University of Lviv. She was granted a scholarship to Poland to conduct research on Polish experiences in the area of revitalization of monuments in urban areas.

Stsiapan Stureika, originally from Hrodno (Belarus) has a PhD in ethnology and is a lecturer at the department of history at the European Humanities University in Vilnius (Lithuania). He was granted a scholarship in Poland to write an introductory chapter on the "Preservation of architectural heritage from the perspective of social anthropology" for a book with the working title *Magic Stones: Anthropology of architectural heritage in Belarus*.

Oksana Tsybulko is a researcher with the Donetsk National University. She was granted a scholarship to Poland to conduct research and complete a book on the development of conceptualism in Ukraine, Poland and Russia.

Iwona Reichardt is the deputy editor in chief of *New Eastern Europe*. She holds a PhD in political science.