



EUROPEAN IDENTITY AS SEEN FROM MINSK

Interview with Adam Globus, Belarusian writer

It may cause some surprise to read in this series an interview conducted in Minsk, beyond the European Union borders, in a country more often quoted in the context of authoritarian regimes and irradiated marshes than that of lively literature.

This choice deserves an explanation. In our view, it is warranted by the necessity to make the Union's citizens aware of the way their neighbours *identify* them and how they feel about a European project to which they are not fully associated.

This shift in focus is also an opportunity to re-address the notions of “centre” and “periphery”. Though these categories are a useful way to describe political, economic or geographic realities, there is much to be gained from criticising, nay reversing them when reflecting on European identity. For it is on the periphery that the sense of belonging to Europe is not *self-evident*; it is on the “fringes” that it gives rise to the urgent questioning on which may hang the future of peoples and individuals

In these in-between, tension-ridden lands, thinking Europe is no intellectual game but a vital necessity: we are convinced that the personal accounts we will find there have the potential to contribute to analyses of Europe a quality of unrest and lucidity it frequently lacks. With this interview, we hope, at any rate, convincingly to prove our point.

Adam Globus is a Belarusian poet and writer.

Alexandre Mirlesse is a student at the *École Normale Supérieure* in Paris.

Interview conducted during the course of Alexandre's six-month trip across Europe.



Interview with Adam GLOBUS

Belarusian writer

“Thinking Europe is like drawing a map: you start with the outline. It is on the fringes of Europe that you find tension. That’s where the hand trembles, where corrections are made all the time.”

Adam Globus was born in Kojdanovo, near Minsk. The author of short stories, novels and poetry translated into several Slavic languages as well as in English and in German, he is at the forefront of Belarus’ literary renewal, which began in the eighties, and is the most widely read writer of his generation.

Under the pen name of Vladimir Adamchik, he also publishes some cheap popular books aimed at a broad readership.

We met him in Minsk at the Café Aquarium, in the company of Miss Aliona Gluhova who was our interpreter for this interview and our host during our stay in Belarus.

As you probably guess, Belarus is a country hardly anybody knows...

Anybody told you you look like Frédéric Beigbeder? All you need is glasses!

Beigbeder? I am not very flattered...

Don’t take offence; I was just getting back at you. And showing you that the French may not know Belarus, but I know a thing or two about France...

You publish writers like Beigbeder?

I publish no authors but myself. All the books published under the name of Vladimir Adamchik (thirty to fifty a month), have been created by me. Like Dumas, I *turn out* novels: Vladimir Adamchik's books are commodities, goods, first and foremost.

How do you reconcile your two activities as novelist-publisher and poet?

By splitting into two. There is, to one side, the writer's project, a personal, private endeavour by Adam Globus, a Belarusian artist writing in Belarusian. And to the other, there is graft, business, literary production on an industrial scale, written in Russian by Vladimir Adamchik.

Why does Vladimir Adamchik write in Russian?

I first tried to publish that type of literature in Belarusian but it wanted for readers.

To the uninformed foreigner the Russian and Belarusian languages seem pretty close.**How would you define what stands between them?**

To me, language is the codified version of behaviour. For instance, in Russian, to say that two people are alike, the preposition used is *na*, "on" as if one was placed on top of the other. In Belarusian, we use *da*, "beside" as though they were side by side.

Consider now the Belarusian *kahannie*, as against the Russian *liubov*, both translated as "love". In fact, these are two wholly different things: *kahannie* only applies to the relationship between a man and a woman whereas *liubov* will do for parents, the fatherland, Europe, things and abstractions. *Kahannie* is more a process, an act, not a value. Besides, it is a demanding word: it cannot be used for a prostitute or a cheap woman.

Perhaps, it can be translated as "ideal love".

On the subject of Vladimir Adamchik: do you take any delight in writing and publishing trash?

Yes, the glee to win markets! This requires military valour: I am at war with other Russian writers to snatch their readers.

Like Boris Vian who wrote novels under the pen name of Sullivan just to show the Americans a European writer could compete with them on their “noir” novel market, I have written sequels to great popular American novels: *Scarlet 2*, *Scarlet 3*, *Gone with the Wind 8*...

So, now, whom are we going to discuss Europe with? Vladimir Adamchik or Adam Globus?

Either way, you are speaking to a European.

You are European?

Yes. Is this news to you?

I was born in Belarus, Europe: I was born a European and I will die a European.

Yet many Belarusians only started to be European belatedly, after the fall of the Soviet Union...

I don't understand them; they must have skipped their geography classes. Or else, nobody ever offered them a map of Europe.

Is it enough, for you to have been born on the European continent to be a European?

Well, it's a start, don't you think?

Identifying with a united Europe, feeling European comes next. But, for Belarusians, the big problem is that the ideology of the USSR long offered us another identification model: *Homo Sovieticus*.

How did you begin to feel European?

I was born in a country locked behind the Iron Curtain where education and teaching were restricted. Nevertheless, I was able to discover in our books great European works

which gave me the urge to go and see them. When I was finally able to go, I was in a position to compare the idea I had acquired of Europe with the reality: at first glance, Europe disappointed me.

For instance, I saw works by Picasso in museums and I felt they were better displayed back home, in books, on television... then, I found that to see the Mona Lisa, I had to walk past twenty odd policemen.

You look surprised ... and you are right...only kidding.

You are forgiven. After all, with two personalities, you can be but half accountable!

Quite so! That is typical of Belarusians: a Belarusian always has two souls, to cover himself on both fronts...

So a Belarusian identity is a double identity?

Yes. We have two religions (here, Jesus rises twice¹); we also have two capital cities, whichever way we think (Minsk and Moscow for some, Minsk and Warsaw for others, Minsk and Vilnius for those nostalgic of the Great Duchy of Lithuania...); we have two official languages, two flags, two national emblems...

It is also what distinguishes us from our Russian neighbours: They have one tsar, one state, one language, one religion. It is also what distinguishes us from great nations like France. I find small nations, like Catalonia or Brittany much easier to understand than France, bemoaning her lost greatness! The Belarusians admit to a multiple identity and can still welcome those who are not like them. To that extent, they are more European than the French!

Do the Europeans share, broadly speaking, a common language?

Yes: road signs.

Is that it?

1 Depending on the Julian or Gregorian calendar observed in Eastern and Western churches

In any European culture, there are Latin texts: that is our only common language and I should like it to be taught everywhere at school, along with art and music. Of course we will never again communicate in Latin but if we all learn a little poetry by Ovid, it will bring us closer. We must remember that this is the language which binds us together.

That language and currency. You can find fault with European politicians but never forget that they succeeded in agreeing to create a common coin. What is truly amazing is that they achieved it peacefully!

Then, there is music, painting, architecture, which are languages also.

Europe evolved the notion of style and the European continent was aesthetically unified in successive waves: Romanesque, Gothic, Baroque, Rococo, Romanticism, Modernism, Postmodernism.

And all these movements reached Belarus. Look at Mir Castle on this 50.000 roubles note: that's a European castle don't you think?

Sure, but here, in Minsk, nearly all European architecture was destroyed in the wars. Where, then, is one to seek traces of European identity?

In the way people behave.

Seen this way what connects the Europeans?

An idea, a sentiment.

Which sentiment?

The most complex sentiment a literary text might summon: the sense of being close. And that is what I try to express in Adam Globus' literature.

I have long fancied turning it into a novel: *The European*. But I could never bring it off. For the time being, I have settled for publishing my European travel diaries.

So that sense of proximity cannot be described?

Yes, it can: literature can not only summon this feeling but also create it, lead individuals and peoples to feel close to one another.

I remember for instance a passage in *Camera Lucida* where Barthes writes: “The picture most precious to me is that of my mother”². This picture so precious to him is nothing to me but when I read his description of it, I too have a sense of proximity with his mother.

Writing about Europe consists in creating “blood books”, accounting for the family album which would help readers feel close to this family.

How is this to be done?

First, history books should introduce positive figures, creative spirits, artists; not history schoolbooks oozing war history – national history, which boils down to roughly the same – in which killers and criminals leap from every page.

We must shift from the history of war to the history of culture.

More precisely, can you think of a style of writing suited to stirring up a sense of Europe?

In order to create Europe, one should think and write in Empire mode. Politically, this is not correct but aesthetically it is indispensable.

What do you mean by “writing in Empire mode”?

Empire is firm, strict, exacting. It is above all a non-ironic form.

Epic writing?

What, like a Saga? No thanks! We’ve got *Gone with the Wind*...

What kept you from writing your European novel?

² Translation by the author of this article

I felt the time had not arrived yet. You can't write a great novel if it does not meet public expectations and there is no demand for such a book. At the moment, people prefer reading Beigbeder, Delerm or Houellebecq, to quote just French writers.

Those writers are too *vjalyjl*³, too ironic, too cynical to write about Europe. You know Theophrastus, Aristotle's pupil? In his *Characters*, he is quite clear that the Ironic man is the worst of them all: he may joke, entertain you, make you laugh, be merry – but he cannot *create*.

You can't expect such writers, who deconstruct everything, starting with themselves, to build the common European house when their own is in ruins.

But who then is going to awaken in the Europeans this “want” for a great shared work, be it a novel or a political project?

It is down to artists and writers like me to create this demand: it is my responsibility, my *personal duty*.

That's where I am different from my French counterparts: yesterday, I was fighting off the Soviet Empire; today, I must fight for the union of Europe.

Do you think that the men who wish to create this house are mostly to be found in the peripheric regions of Europe?

Perimetric, not peripheric.

How so?

When scrutinizing an object, there is a tendency to think that the best is at the centre. But thinking Europe is like drawing a map: you start with the outline. It is at the margins of Europe that you find tension. That's where the hand trembles, where corrections are made all the time.

³ *Vjalyjl* is a Russian word meaning all together: loose, flabby, wilted and indolent.

You are a writer but you are also a painter and a draughtsman. How would you draw a map of Europe?

You'd have to distinguish geopolitics from "Geopoetics". The political map is changing all the time but the poetic map changes very slowly. To arrive at a very stable map of Europe, I'd write in it first, broadly, the names of Homer, Shakespeare, Cervantes...

Then, I'd put in Hrodna, our former capital city (where my father was from), not very far from where Adam Mickiewicz was born (who was a Belarusian before he became Poland's national writer). In Paris, I would fit in the monument Bourdelle sculpted to his glory. For me, between these two Mickiewicz monuments, lies the whole of Europe

Why Mickiewicz as Europe's poetic emblem?

Because I can't think of another writer who has so many monuments everywhere in Europe: Minsk, Vilnius, Paris, Warsaw...

What would be the place of Belarusian artists on your "geopoetic" map?

I would enter the odd émigré: Apollinaire (Kostrowitsky by his real name), or Chagall of course, Soutine, and Fernand Léger's wife.

And maybe one day, Adam Globus.

Out of curiosity, one last question: like most artists we have met in Minsk, you arranged to meet us at the Café Aquarium. Why this particular place?

Because it is a cult place. We write in this café. We meet with other Belarusian poets. Then there are "cool" young people and some activists: Irish, Basques, Russian Fascists. They all fetch up here.

You write in a café?

Yes, because, like all artists, I need an audience! Writing in a café is important to me. It is already poetry in itself. I have written my best pages on my knees, in a café.

By the way do you want to know what we are going to lose with joining Europe?

Tell us.

Cafés. Artists' cafés like this one. All the poets are going to leave to earn money and they will no longer have time for discussions like ours...

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