

History and Business. The Belgian Approach

Honorary Consul of the Kingdom of Belgium to Belarus Filip Vandebroele is a successful European businessman who has been doing business in Belarus for nearly 20 years. The interest of this charming man in Belarus goes beyond business. In the 18th-19th centuries his ancestors lived in the picturesque places not far from the ancient Belarusian towns of Braslav and Pinsk and were related by blood to noble families from different European families. Mr Vandebroele is proud of this part of the family history, and willingly helps Belarusians build economic bridges with entrepreneurs from the European Union.

For many years the Honorary Consul of Belgium has also been a professional consultant on Belarus for European companies. Simultaneously he runs his own business. In an interview with the Economy of Belarus Magazine Mr Filip VANDENBROELE talks about the Belarusian-Belgian trade and economic relations and about his dreams.

Mr Vandebroele, you have family connections with Belarus...

True. The Vandebroeles preserve the memory about this important page in the history of our ancient family. It was with great pleasure that I visited those

places where my ancestors lived in Belarus.

I generally like to go seeing ancient manor houses and castles. Many of them have survived in Belarus, and many are in good condition. They are the "magnets" for tourists, a resource that Belarusians should use more actively. After all, in the past the castles were not purely defensive structures. They bustled with life,

ran small-scale manufactures of, for example, cheese, sausages or beer. Today Belarusian castles and manor houses can get back to basics and serve as platforms to promote large-scale tourism, which will contribute to the economic growth of Belarus.

I like to travel to the Belarusian regions. From my first visit to Belarus, the infrastructure (transport, hotel, and logistics) has improved markedly. However, it is





Belgium is one of the world's biggest investors. I would like to see Belgium invest more in Belarus

important not to rest on the laurels. You need to work further. After all, the tourism industry shows impressive growth worldwide, and competition between countries and regions is high.

I often invite my Belgian friends and partners to visit Belarusian historical places. Mir and Nesvizh are a must-see, of course.

Apart from the historical architecture what else can attract Belgian tourists to Belarus?

I think your indigenous farmsteads and even medical tourism. The quality of medical services is quite high and the prices are affordable.

Thanks to the good infrastructure, Belarus can host large-scale international sports, scientific, cultural and business events, seminars for businesspersons and potential investors. Today Minsk can accommodate a large number of guests, and do this at a good level.

I would also like to highlight the high level of organization of the 2014 IIHF World Championship in Minsk. Many foreign tourists had an opportunity to enjoy the event and see the country.

Do you often come across Belarusian tourists in Belgium?

Nearly 80,000 tourists from Belarus and Russia come to my

native city of Bruges annually. It is great to see people who are interested in the Belgian history, culture, traditions and cuisine.

Belarus and Belgium are small countries with almost no natural resources of their own. What advantages and business opportunities do you cite while presenting Belarus to prospective investors?

Belarus possesses important natural resources such as wood, potash fertilizers, raw materials for making building materials, mineral and fresh water. Belarus has also a well-developed petrochemical industry that exports to the European Union, including Belgium. However, this is not enough for maintaining robust economic ties.

Today it is important for the two countries to develop mutual trade in part of value added goods, investment products and equipment. This means the trade should not be limited to the supplies of chocolate, beer and cheese, the products the majority of Belarusians usually associate with Belgium. Belgians are ready to share their advanced

technologies. We need to search for common interests.

Belgium is one of the world's biggest investors. I would like to see Belgium invest more in Belarus. However, the amount of foreign investment in Belarus is still very small. There are several reasons for this. First of all, Belarus is still poorly known in the West as an economic partner. Secondly, investors should be ready to wait a couple of years before getting profit. I am, for example, a partner of a winemaking company in Bulgaria and know well that this business starts bringing profit in 10 years' time at the very least.

Thirdly, Belgium is expected to revise and expand its investment policy in the near future. This may play an important role in the development of cooperation with Belarus.

The interest in the development of economic contacts is mutual. What is more important is that the general background and the context of our cooperation has improved lately. Belgian politicians visited Belarus in 2016. Work is in progress. Let's hope there will be a positive result.

Not so long ago, I gave a series of seminars on business

In 2015, Belgium was Belarus' seventh major trading partner in the European Union in terms of export

environment in Belarus for Belgians. This year, your country hosted representatives of Belgian companies, including Agoria, a well-known association in Europe. Important business meetings were held within the framework of the project B2B Belarus-Belgium 2016 in Minsk on 29 February – 2 March. The event was organized by the Wallonia Export and Investment Agency and the Belarusian-Belgian import-export agency BELEXIA.

During the negotiations, Belarus invited the Belgian private sector to participate in the projects in

the Chinese-Belarusian industrial park Great Stone and the National Science and Technology Park BelBiograd.

In addition, the website Emerging Europe has launched the Emerging Europe Outlook on Belarus 2016 project. Its main objective is to inform American and European business about cooperation opportunities with Belarusian companies, and to assist in establishing contact with potential partners. I have also contributed to this project by sharing my vision of Belarus and business opportunities there.





How big is the trade between Belarus and Belgium?

The official figures reported by the Belarusian side are as follows: in 2015, Belgium was Belarus' seventh major trading partner in the European Union in terms of export. The bilateral trade was \$377.4 million. Belarus' exports earned \$187.9 million. I think this is quite big, especially bearing in mind that Belgium's trade with many other countries, including some that are bigger than Belarus, is considerably lower.

Belarus' major exports to Belgium are metalwork, timber products, petrochemicals, fertilizers, linen goods, glass fiber, frozen fruit and vegetables.

The analysis of the bilateral trade over a longer period of time reveals a record growth in 2012 when the trade increased by 15.9% to total \$568.7 million, the export went up by 23.6% to reach \$224.7 million, and the import amounted to \$344 million, up by 11.4%.

In its trade relations with Belarus, Belgium would like to achieve export/import parity necessary for stronger cooperation. We will be working to achieve this goal.

What can be done in the near future to intensify the economic cooperation?

Belarus' key assets include its location in the center of Europe, high

The Belgian side has received an invitation from Belarus to attend the international conference "Laying the foundation in the UNECE region for economic integration and sustainable development towards 2030" which the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus will hold on 26-27 October 2016. It can also be a good opportunity for thoughtful talk about bilateral cooperation.

Officially registered in 2015, BELEXIA aims to promote Belarusian export to Belgium and other EU countries, to attract investment in Belarus and the Eurasian Economic Union. Is the agency up and running already?

As the Honorary Consul I applaud this economic initiative and find it promising. The Agency has opened offices in Belgium and Belarus. So, yes, things are getting off the ground.





I often invite my Belgian friends and partners to visit Belarusian historical places. Mir and Nesvizh are a must-see, of course

intellectual potential of Belarusian people, and highly qualified specialists. All these elements can draw foreign partners to Belarus and boost the development of local enterprises.

I was interested to learn that the Eurasian Economic Union has recently set the objective to raise the level of localization of pharmaceutical production to 50%. I think that this target opens up great prospects for Belarus, as the country will be able to attract foreign capital for hi-tech ideas and projects.

Many European businessmen believe that your country is a

good platform for branching out into the markets of the Eurasian Economic Union and Central Asia.

In fact, Belarus is a gateway to the Eurasian economic space with the total population of more than 180 million. Investors can enjoy duty-free access to Russia, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan and benefit from the free movement of goods, services, capital, and workforce in the EEU. So why not to use these advantages?

What comes to your mind when you think of Minsk and Belarus?





Peace and cooperation. I think that the Minsk talks on Ukraine have done a lot for the image of Belarus on the international arena.

Peace is a crucial factor in all walks of life. The same applies to culture. I am doing my best to promote interpersonal and intercultural contacts between Belarus and Belgium. I was able to do more before the global economic crisis that affected our economies and countries. Now I will be working to keep the existing solid ties intact.

I have already organized a concert of renowned composer and guitarist Francis Goya in Minsk, and Belarusian fans were delighted by the evening of Belgian music. My dream is to organize one more concert of this virtuoso musician in Belarus. I will also do my best to bolster cooperation between small towns of Belarus and Belgium, intensify

people's diplomacy, and promote the exchange of students between universities under the auspices of the Emergencies Ministries. By the way, the cooperation between Belarusian and Belgian firefighters has been increasingly vibrant for many years.

I would like to say that Université de Mons and Minsk State Linguistic University are expanding their cooperation. They run student exchange programs, the Center of the Russian Language and Culture has a Belarusian literature section. Université de Mons regularly hosts events highlighting Belarus' history, culture, literature, and art.

Belgian NGOs provide sufficient humanitarian aid to help Belarus mitigate the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster. In the period from 1992 to 2012, Belgium hosted more than 37,000 Belarusian children from Chernobyl-hit regions for recuperation.

Sport is another area of common interest where we can implement many joint projects.

For example, the Agoria association is interested in the Belarusian sports infrastructure. This association operates a number of enterprises providing technologies and equipment to airports and oil refineries. The company also offers construction, trade, and education services, supplies sports equipment. I hope that these cooperation plans will be fulfilled in the future.

I would like to mention another powerful tool which can help Belarus stimulate the development of diverse foreign ties. It is the World Federation of Consuls (FICAC), of which I am a member. We hope to step up the activities of this organization next year. I am convinced that together we will work out and implement a number of ambitious and creative projects.

Marta ASTREIKO

