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Caught in the crossfire

When Belarusian journalist and editor Aliaksandr Zdvizhkov reprinted the Danish Muhammad cartoons in the opposition newspaper *Zhoda* he was sentenced to three years imprisonment for inciting religious hatred. Purportedly acting in the interests of the 30 000 strong Belarusian Muslim population, the authorities were clearly attempting to intimidate what little remains of an independent media in Belarus. Zdvizhkov has since been released, but the affair has brought to light another disturbing phenomenon: Islamophobia amongst the Belarusian opposition. Rashed Chowdhury reports.

This past January, the Canadian Broadcast Corporation (CBC) aired an episode of the sitcom "Little Mosque on the Prairie" under the curious title "Wheat Week". "Little Mosque", which depicts "small-town Canada with a Muslim twist", is currently, by some measure, the most popular Canadian sitcom, and has jumped across the Atlantic to hit TV screens in France and Finland.¹

In the episode, Ann Popowicz, the mayor of the fictional town of Mercy, which stands amid enormous fields of wheat and maize in Saskatchewan, decides to cancel the eponymous popular annual festival showcasing the area's agricultural production. Her aim is to use its budget to pay for a huge portrait of herself. And to keep the residents of Mercy from getting angry with Her Worship, Popowicz asks her assistant, the Muslim Sarah Hamoudi, to find people who, for some reason, do not like the festival, so that the blame for scrapping it can be placed on them. Sarah goes to a coffee shop and finds Babar Siddiqui, a man famous among the Muslims of Mercy for finding something to complain about in just about anything.

Popowicz quickly announces that the Muslim community of Mercy has expressed its opposition to Wheat Week, and that the festival must therefore be cancelled. The town is hit with a wave of comic Islamophobia: a demonstration in front of the mosque calls on Muslims to recant; the imam is pelted with wheat products; the hairdresser gives Muslim women a piece of her mind. The Muslims of Mercy are quickly transformed into a public enemy due to their alleged opposition to that great cultural institution, Wheat Week. Obviously, though, a comedy would not be a comedy were it not to have a happy conclusion. And so Hamoudi blows the whistle on the goings-on in town hall, and those who were fanning the flames of hatred against Muslims are forced to apologize. A Vietnamese company steps in to sponsor the festival. Wheat Week is saved.

Today's Belarusian reality has more in common with this comedy than you'd think. The story involves a level of high-handed manipulation on the part of the authorities, followed by righteous indignation on the part of would-be

defenders of liberty, not matched by the witty Canadian sitcom. And even though the episode has seemingly come to an end, it has left in its wake several important questions, not least among them the nature of the Belarusian nation and the role of the tiny Muslim minority within it.



Aliaksandr Zdvizhkov
(Source: www.foxnews.com)

The episode I am referring to began when the deputy editor of the former newspaper *Zhoda* (Concord), Aliaksandr Zdvizhkov, was sentenced to three years in prison in January,² having been found guilty of inciting religious and ethnic hatred towards Muslims by reprinting of the Danish caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad. Officially, Zdvizhkov was sentenced as a result of a complaint submitted to the State Committee on Religious and Ethnic Affairs by one of the two muftis of Belarus, Ismail Varanovich. The sentence gave rise to a storm of controversy in Belarus (though went underreported internationally). Nobody blamed the Minsk City Court, because no one, not even President Aliaksandr Lukashenka, pretends that Belarusian courts have any independence. So the blame that was apportioned by those opposed to the verdict fell on the shoulders of the Belarusian ruling elite, but also on those of Belarus's Muslim community.

One need not dig deep to find that the verdict was not the result of some conspiracy between the Muslims and the government, for the simple reason that the Belarusian Muslim community, while being quite vibrant in recent years, is not, in any sense, an independent centre of power. In Mufti Varanovich's version of the story, he did not see the offending cartoons until they were shown to him by the same committee to which he later submitted the complaint that served as grounds for the case against Zdvizhkov. And he would not have seen them were it not for the authorities, because the whole print run of the issue containing the caricatures had already been confiscated. Were it not the government's express desire that a complaint against Zdvizhkov should come from a Muslim scholar, no such complaint would have arisen. So it happened like in the fictional town of Mercy, Saskatchewan. A "dissatisfied" person was found, and whatever the authorities had planned to do they did in his name and the name of Belarusian Muslims: they shut down *Zhoda* and threw Zdvizhkov in jail. Once Varanovich understood that he had been used as a pawn, he tried to help Zdvizhkov, but it was too late.³

There are so few Muslims in Belarus (about 30 000) that the authorities did not stand to gain much in the way of social support by giving them what might seem like special treatment in this case. So if the authorities are not motivated by the principle of "divide and rule", what explains the well thought out game they played, with Zdvizhkov as its target? Why did Lukashenka personally promise to close the newspaper, and then follow through by means of the court?

There are two main theories current in Belarus on this account. According to one, the Belarusian authorities imprisoned Zdvizhkov so as to play the part of the defenders of the honour of Muslims before their Middle Eastern friends and potential investors, in particular the Iranians. According to the other theory, they clamped down on *Zhoda* in order to punish it for supporting Aliaksandr Kazulin, the leader of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party, who had had the audacity to run against Lukashenka in the 2006 presidential election, and, in general, to put an end to the existence of yet another non-governmental newspaper.⁴ (Kazulin is still serving a five-and-a-half

year prison sentence for organizing protests against the election results in 2006.⁵)

Concerning the motivations of the president and others in the ruling elite, one can only guess. One thing is clear, though: today's Belarusian authorities are not known to fight for the rights, dignity and honour of minorities, except, perhaps, the ethnic-Russian minority. Two examples suffice to illustrate the point. In 2005, the government undertook a campaign to persecute and destroy the Union of Poles of Belarus, accompanying its actions with a slew of anti-Polish propaganda.⁶ Then, last year, Lukashenka created a diplomatic scandal by saying that the former Jewish residents of the Belarusian city of Babrujsk had turned it into a pigsty.⁷ So this new battle on behalf of Muslims looks rather dishonest.

Over the course of the last 13 years, Belarusians have managed to get used to Lukashenka and the antics of his regime. But this whole episode has raised a further question: to what extent do Belarusian Muslims belong to Belarusian society in general? I find that the answer to this question coming from certain representatives of the anti-Lukashenka intelligentsia to be saddening and, quite honestly, frightening.

If Belarusian Muslims are foreigners who came unbidden to "our" Belarus 600 years ago and are still demanding something, we are likely to have a certain kind of attitude towards them. But if they are as Belarusian as anyone else and if, over the course of 600 years, they have earned the honour of being called part of the "native" population of the country and if we reject the division of the Belarusian people into "ours" and "not ours", the conclusions will be different.

The earliest recorded date at which Tatar Muslims started immigrating into and settling in what is now Belarus is 1397. Some of the early immigrants came as voluntary military allies of Grand Duke Vitaut of Lithuania. Others were brought by him as prisoners-of-war and settled on his domains. During their more than 600-year-long presence in Belarus, the Tatar Muslims have adopted the Belarusian language as their own, received Belarusian surnames, intermarried for generations with Belarusian Christians, and become a full part of Belarusian society while preserving their most distinctive feature, Islam.⁸ They are descended from medieval Belarusians as much as today's Christian Belarusians are. Yet today, certain non-Muslim intellectuals are using the Tatars' religion as an arbitrary marker of separation between them and the majority ethnic-Belarusians, choosing to ignore the idea that the membership of the Tatars in the Belarusian polity makes them as deserving of respect as any other group of Belarusian citizens or residents.

After the sentence against Aliaksandr Zdvizhkov was passed, Iury Drakachrust, a journalist with the Belarusian service of Radio Liberty, started warning on his blog that Belarusian Muslims wanted to take the country over and turn it into "Belarusistan", adding that non-Muslim Belarusians had to defend themselves from this alleged danger.⁹ They had to defend themselves, according to him, from a minority which makes up less than one per cent of the population of Belarus and has lived on its territory for centuries, in harmony with the majority. A member of the Rights Defence Alliance denigrated Islamic prayers and the traditional clothing of Muslim women.¹⁰ The deputy head of the Belarusian Popular Front Party, Ales Michalevich, said that Zdvizhkov had been sentenced for "expressing his Christian beliefs", and that the Minsk City Court had sentenced him "on the basis of the norms of Islamic

morality", rather than existing Belarusian laws.¹¹

Before going to prison, Zdvizhkov made comments that could be interpreted as anti-Islamic, such as "with us is God and the power of the Cross".¹² However, upon his release in February, Zdvizhkov declared that he would rescind his Belarusian citizenship, not because he was afraid of Belarusian Muslims or angry at them, but rather because, "I am ashamed right now to be a citizen of this country, which is headed by a personality known to everyone, a country with these kinds of courts, this kind of prosecution, and these kinds of prisons".¹³ Thus, it seems that Zdvizhkov has come to understand that his fight is actually with the regime, and not with the imagined threat of Muslim terrorists he had been shadow-boxing with before.

Once the Supreme Court of Belarus reviewed the case, Zdvizhkov's sentence was reduced to three months, which was the amount of time he had already served in prison. While it is possible that the reduction in the sentence was a result of EU pressure on Minsk,¹⁴ it is more likely that the original three-year sentence had been used as a scare tactic, in order to send a signal to what little remains of an independent media in Belarus. Once it had had its effect, Zdvizhkov could be safely released.

For me, the main conclusion of this whole affair is that Belarusians must not forget that they are one people. What Tariq Ramadan describes as "the new racism", that is, a refusal to acknowledge Muslims as part of one's society, has no place in a country like Belarus, with a centuries-old tradition of inclusivity. All native inhabitants of Belarus, but also those who have come to Belarus from abroad and are helping build the country with their labour, their taxes or their ideas, in other words: anyone who loves Belarus either by birth or by virtue of his or her choice is part of the Belarusian people. Let me conclude by citing Zianon Pazniak, leader of the opposition party Conservative-Christian Belarusian Popular Front:

Belarusians never persecuted the ethnic groups that lived on our land, and will not persecute anyone... All of us are the nation; let us not forget about that. Ethnic Russians, Jews, ethnic Poles, Tatars — all of us. Never forget that!¹⁵

This article is an altered version of the one that first appeared in Belarusian in Arche 1/2008.

¹ Heidi McKenzie, "Little Mosque's Sitara Hewitt head home — to the GTA — for the holidays", *Toronto Star*, 7 February 2008. Available at <http://www.thestar.com/printArticle/300649>

² See: Margot Buff, "Belarus: Authorities Free Another Political Prisoner", in RFERL, http://www.rferl.org/features/features_Article.aspx?m=02&y=2008&id=940502B3-5EB7-4253-B0B6-FA345B053638; English PEN, <http://www.englishpen.org/writersinprison/bulletins/belaruseditorialiaksandarzdvizhkovreleased/>

³ "Ismail Varanovic pra spravu Zdvizhkov: 'Mianie prymusili napisac hety list'" [Ismail Varanovich on the Zdvizhkov case: 'I was forced to write that letter'], *Nasa niva*, 18 January 2008. Available at <http://nn.by/index.php?c=ar&i=14443>

⁴ Aleksandr Klaskovskii, "Gipertekst: Sekir-bashka" (Hypertext: Off with His Head), *Belorusskie novosti*, 22 January 2008. Available at http://naviny.by/rubrics/opinion/2008/01/22/ic_articles_410_155098/

⁵ BBC, "Belarus opposition leader jailed", <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/5178714.stm>; RFERL, "Imprisoned Belarusian politician threatens hunger strike", <http://www.rferl.org/newsline/2008/02/250208.asp>

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- ⁷ Aleksei Zolotnitskii, "Belarus' — Izrail: trudnosti perevoda" [Belarus and Israel: Difficulties of Translation], *Belorusskie novosti*, 13 July 2007. Available at http://naviny.by/rubrics/society/2007/10/19/ic_articles_116_153467/
- ⁸ S.U. Dumin and I.B. Kanapacki, *Bielaruskija tatary: minulaje i suchasnasc* [Belarusian Tatars: Past and Present] (Minsk: Polymia, 1993).
- ⁹ Iury Drakachrust, "Sprava Zdvizhkova, abo niama Boha, akramia..." [The Zdvizhkou case, or there is no god except...], Radio Liberty, 21 January 2008. Available at <http://www.svaboda.org/Article.aspx?id=871591>
- ¹⁰ Vladimir Gutkovskii, "Allakh akbar! Chego? Akbar govoriu!" [Allahu Akbar! What? Akbar, I tell you], Pravozechitnyi al'ians, 25 January 2008. Available at <http://belpa.org/news/10661/>
- ¹¹ Sergei Pul'sha, "Vladyku Filareta prosiat zastupit'sia za Sdvizhkova" [Filaret is being asked to intervene on Zdvizhkou's behalf], *Belorusskie novosti*, 23 January 2008. Available at http://naviny.by/rubrics/society/2008/01/23/ic_articles_116_155138/
- ¹² Siarhiej Bohdan, "Faraonavy sud, farysejstva i ulada" [Pharaoh's Trial, Pharisaism and Power], *ARCHE*, January–February 2008, 12.
- ¹³ Sergei Pul'sha, "Aleksandr Sdvizhkov: v Belarusi ia ne chuvstvuiu sebja v bezopasnosti" [Aliaksandr Zdvizhkou: I do not feel safe in Belarus], *Belorusskie novosti*, 26 February 2008. Available at http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2008/02/26/ic_articles_112_155734/
- ¹⁴ See: George Dura, "The EU's limited response to Belarus' pseudo 'New Foreign Policy', Centre for European Policy Studies, <http://www.ceps.eu>
- ¹⁵ Zianon Pazniak, *Zianon Pazniak: Sapraudnaje ablichcha* [Zianon Pazniak: His True Face] (Minsk: Palifakt, 1992).

Published 2008–05–23

Original in English

Contribution by Arche

First published in Arche 1 (2008) (Belarusian version)

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