

Building Bridges

H.E. Alena Kupchyna spoke with SOCIETY-publisher Gerti Tauchhammer about her life as a diplomat in Austria and the similarities between Austria and Belarus.



You have been Ambassador of Belarus to Austria and to the International Organizations in Vienna since January 2017, how have your experiences been so far in Austria?

Despite the fact that I was appointed Ambassador of Belarus to Austria more than a year ago, I cannot say that I have managed to get to know your country to the extent I would love to.

Being Ambassador to Austria and non-resident Ambassador to Croatia, I also represent Belarus at the Vienna headquarters of the United Nations and in the OSCE. And Belarus plays quite an active role in all international organizations situated in Vienna.

I feel very comfortable in Austria. Vienna is a very convenient city to live in. We have excellent business relations with colleagues in the Foreign Ministry, Ministry of Economy, Chamber of Economy, other institutions of Austria. With some of my Austrian counterparts we established wonderful relationship both human and professional even before my appointment to Vienna during my work in

Minsk as the Deputy Foreign Minister in charge of European Affairs.

The conclusion I can draw after a year and a half of working here is that Austrians and Belarusians are quite similar in terms of mentality. Both peoples, not least because of their difficult and painful historical experience, highly appreciate peace, stability, social justice and absence of upheavals. This is reflected in foreign policies of both countries. Austria, like Belarus, plays an active role in international efforts aimed at reducing tensions, promoting dialogue, and

“building bridges.” Both Austria and Belarus belong to Central Europe. Being situated at the European crossroads, we are bound to live in partnership and cooperation with all our neighbors if we want to be successful and ensure the well-being of our citizens.

Belarusian-Austrian relations are developing dynamically in all spheres. I am pleased to see the growing interest of representatives of political and business circles, as well as Austrian public at large towards our country. And I am pretty sure that this interest will grow further,



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especially against the backdrop of the 5-day visa-free regime introduced by Belarus’ authorities in February 2017 for citizens of the EU member states and several dozens of other countries arriving to Belarus through the Minsk National Airport. There are plans to further extend the visa-free stay period.

As a mother of a son, would you say that there is a difference between female and male Ambassadors when it comes to combining work and family life?

Combining the work of Ambassador and family life is not easy, regardless of Ambassador’s gender. This work does not imply a fixed schedule and is connected with a lot of business travelling. If necessary, ambassadors work 24 hours a day.

In this situation, understanding and support of the family members is of vital importance. I live in Vienna with my son, Mikalai. He is 17 and a half years old. This year he is going to complete his bac in French language and literature at the Lycée Français in Vienna and at the same time pass graduation examinations in the Russian school, which he attends as external student. Additionally to Belarusian, his mother tongue, and Russian, Mikalai fluently speaks English, German, French, and Hungarian. Fortunately, my son is a real patriot of Belarus and understands very well the importance of my work for the benefit of our country.

But in spite of my always overloaded working agenda I try to do my best not to forget about things children normally expect from their mothers. I like to be occupied with my home routine. For instance, I cook for my son, and those are happy moments of my life. And Mikalai prefers my home cooking to any restaurant food.

On a very personal note, I daresay that I often, even non-deliberately, bring this motherly, caretaking approach into my profession. And it has proved to be very efficient, especially in my consensus-building efforts in multilateral diplomacy. The ability to sacrifice one’s personal interests, which is so indispensable for a family to be solid and happy, is more and more needed in diplomacy nowadays.

Gerti Tauchhammer speaking with H.E. Alena Kupchyna



CURRICULUM VITAE

H.E. Alena Kupchyna (born August 14, 1965) is a Belarusian politician, currently holding the position of the Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Belarus to the Republic of Austria and the Republic of Croatia non-resident, Permanent Representative of Belarus to the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

She graduated from the Belarusian State University with distinction, Faculty of Law (1987); post-graduate study at the Belarusian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Philosophy and Law (1987-1990); Doctor of Law (1991).

She was awarded with the Order of Honour of the Republic of Belarus and has the diplomatic rank of Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary.

Besides her native Belarusian and Russian, Ambassador Kupchyna speaks English and French.



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What is the Belarus government’s stance on women in the workforce, especially in the field of diplomacy? Is there any quota for female government officials?

In my opinion, the effectiveness of such measures as quotas for female government officials is questionable. We, women, do not need any advantages over our male colleagues to be successful in professional and social life. What we need is equal rights and equal treatment. Positive discrimination is something not close to my heart.

Women amount to over 53 percent of the population of Belarus and roughly 50 percent of all those employed in the economy. They are active and successful in almost all spheres of public life.

More than 70 percent of all civil servants in my country are women. We have achieved the goal to ensure a 30 percent representation of women at the decision-making level: women occupy the posts of the Head of Presidential Administration, the Deputy Chairman of the Upper House of Parliament, ministers and deputy ministers. The share of women among deputies of the National Assembly (the Parliament) is 33.7 percent.

Our achievements in the field of gender equality are confirmed by international ratings. Thus, according to the UN Human Development Report 2016, Belarus is among 21 countries of the world where the index of human development of women is equal to or higher than that of men. According to the report of the World Economic Forum, Belarus ranks 26th in the Global Gender Gap rating.

During my professional career I never experienced any gender discrimination. There are a lot of highly motivated and very successful female diplomats working both at the Foreign Ministry in Minsk and our embassies overseas. A number of key MFA departments and Belarusian missions abroad are headed by women. Before my appointment to Austria I served for four years and a half as one out of four deputy ministers of foreign affairs.

An unofficial motto of the Belarusian diplomatic service “Ad augusta per angusta”, which is imprinted on a Certificate of Honor of the MFA of Belarus, is equally valid for both female and male diplomats. And I am honored to be one of those who received this Award for my professional merits.