The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

It’s a Long Way to Tipperary for Belarus Opposition Leader Tikhanovskaya

By Jason Corcoran for bne Intellinews

August 25, 2020



Svetlana Tikhanovskaya spent several summers in Ireland through a program for children impacted by the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. **STR / EPA**

It’s a long way to Tipperary from Belarus for opposition leader Svetlana Tikhonavskaya, who cultivated an independent streak and a flair for leadership during almost a decade of visits to rural Ireland.

Tikhonavskaya, 37, was one of the “Chernobyl children,” whose health was directly or indirectly affected by the radioactive fallout of the 1986 nuclear disaster in neighboring Ukraine. She was just 12 years old when she first came to Ireland as a guest of the Chernobyl Lifeline project, an initiative set up by Tipperary man Henry Deane to help prolong the lives of those dealing with the ongoing effects of the world’s worst nuclear accident.

Henry’s son David remembers “Sveta” – as he knows her – well from the time his father and mother Marian hosted her in their Roscrea home from the mid-1990s to 2004. While still

shocked his friend is spearheading the opposition to Alexander Lukashenko dictatorial regime, he can trace Sveta's evolution from a shy and modest girl into a compassionate and outspoken leader.

"While in Ireland, Sveta and the others got a glimpse of a different political climate," David told bne IntelliNews in an interview from Nova Scotia in Canada, where he is an associate professor of theology at the Atlantic School of Theology. "They were very taken by [the] much higher standard of living relative to Belarus, despite Ireland being a two-bit country in the middle of the Atlantic with nothing going for it then. What Sveta and the kids were taking back was: what is holding us back from having what they have in Ireland?"

Over the past 25 years, Ireland has welcomed 30,000 children from Belarus, Ukraine and western Russia who have gained respite from the high levels of radiation. It is estimated that a one-month break in a healthy environment such as Ireland adds two years to their life expectancy.

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Most of the children who came to Tipperary came for a summer or two, but Sveta came for eight summers as she grew close to the Deanes and the local community. For a couple of summers, she got a job working at Gerry Meehan's meat factory in Roscrea to help pay for her studies in Brest in western Belarus and later worked as an interpreter for the younger children.

"All the children were hand-picked by the teachers and only the best citizens were allowed to go," says David. "One of the reasons Sveta became an interpreter for the other children was that was the only way she could keep coming back year after year. Most children were only allowed to come for one year, or two at most."

David says Lukashenko was very much against children travelling to Ireland, and other Western countries, to recuperate and it was difficult to get visas for them to travel. In 2004, there were reports in the Irish press that Lukashenko was about to block all travel because of the "consumerist" influence he believed was infecting his country's youth.

"With the prejudices of the former U.S.S.R., Lukashenko was against children leaving to spend time recuperating in Europe and he was right, because they were different kinds of kids with different kinds of perspective when they came back," he says.

Powerful Irish female role models made a big impression on Sveta, according to David. Ireland had elected its first female president, Mary Robinson, in 1990, followed by Mary McAleese in 1997. The office of the presidency in Ireland is largely ceremonial but the holder does possess strong legislative powers and the people's choice was an indicator of great social and cultural change.

"I definitely remember having a conversation with her and others about the Irish political system and the President," recalls David. "They were attracted to the idea that a woman like Mary Robinson and Mary McAleese could become a President while not conforming to a male archetype or a male in disguise like Margaret Thatcher."

“The girls would have been tuned into the cultural transformation of Ireland in the 1990s. The girls were strong, resilient, bright and talented but somehow that generation of her friends could break through a veil and maybe that was because of that experience in Ireland.”

The Belarus girls were also very taken by local Tipperary businesswomen like Pauline Coonan, who ran a jewellery shop and was prominently involved the Chernobyl Lifeline project: “She was a strong and independent woman and very different to her teachers, who were very traditional and stocky matriarchs.”

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Sveta and the other children were bowled over by how generously they were received and the wealth relative to their homeland. Ireland’s ‘Celtic Tiger’ economy was just beginning to emerge from perennial stagnation due to the country’s access to the European single market and its remarkable success in attracting foreign direct investment (FDI).

In Roscrea, a historical market town with a population of just 7,000, the children were given vital medical checks and taken to the optician and the dentist for treatment. They were also taken on picnics, shopping expeditions and trips to the cinema in nearby Tullamore or the swimming pool in Birr, County Offaly.

“My dad would go to a store with a bunch of kids, who would clear the shelves of whatever treats they wanted,” David said. “They would go to the counter and the shopkeeper would just wave them along. The whole town was welcoming the kids and would never ask them to pay — be it at the clothes store or in the cinema.”

In Ireland, Sveta became the first port of call for children when they were homesick, lost and afraid. “She had overwhelming compassion for young children,” he says. “They clung to her for comfort when they found themselves in a strange country, far from their parents.”

Adi Roche, a Tipperary activist who ran as a candidate for the presidency of Ireland in 1997, set up the Chernobyl Children International in 1991 in response to an appeal from Belarusian doctors to provide humanitarian aid to the 'forgotten children' of Chernobyl. David's father was originally part of that group before going his own way because he wanted to bring in larger numbers of children and play “a little more fast and loose” with the strict rules governing their stay.

His mother Marian used to help Sveta and the other children to sew cash into the lining of sweaters, teddy bears and jackets to take back to Belarus to prevent the authorities seizing the precious hard currency. “Our host families — some of whom were living on housing estates and didn’t have much — would have a particular close affinity with a family in Belarus and would risk the ire of the authorities by trying to smuggle money back,” says Deane, who travelled to Belarus in the late 1990s.

Among her female peers, David says Sveta wasn’t entirely popular because she “less prim and proper and less retiring” than the other girls: “Sveta always appeared more mature, tougher, less frivolous and more worldly than the others and she was very popular — particularly among the younger children. She also smoked and that was considered gauche by the others.”

During her last year visit in 2004, David can recall having a political conversation with Sveta about the U.S.S.R. and whether people had enjoyed better a sense of community and solidarity.

“I was asking her about nostalgia for Soviet culture and I was constantly saying wasn’t there a better sense of community before the wall came down and all their basic needs taken care of but Sveta wasn’t having any of it,” he says. “For her, it wasn’t about politics but basic human freedoms. From her perspective, they weren’t free to criticise Lukashenko for fear of reprisals and repression and she had no time whatsoever for my sentimentality and nostalgia.”

The Deanes remain in touch with Sveta to this day. David speaks to her via the secure messaging app Telegram, while his father received an email last week after she arrived in Lithuania.

Fearing for her life, Sveta fled her country for Lithuania on Aug. 11 to be reunited with her two young children as scores of her supporters were detained in protests after Lukashenko claimed another “landslide" victory. The former English teacher had only registered as a candidate in place of her husband Sergei, a blogger and filmmaker who was arrested in May.

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David doesn’t believe his friend is pro-Moscow, pro-EU or pro-NATO. “For her, it’s about how do we become a free people who can decide our destiny in a free and open way,” he says. “She is a Belarus nationalist, who wants [that] Belarus should have a larger say in its own destiny. She doesn’t want her country to be client state of Russia, nor does she want Belarus to be a client state of the EU.”

On Aug. 14, Tikhanovskaya released a video in which she claimed to have won between 60-70% of the vote.

From her exile, Tikhanovskaya has helped to establish a co-ordination council to oversee a transition of power but the Minsk regime is trying to launch a criminal case against it, accusing the body of attempting to "seize power."

Speaking at a hotel in Vilnius, Tikhanovskaya told Sky News on Aug. 22 she would go back to Belarus as soon as the government signals it is ready to speak and once all political prisoners are freed. "I think that will be the moment I will go back there and will be with my husband and people," she said, speaking in English.

Deane believes his friend may yet be convinced to stay on after heading up an interim government so fair elections can be held.

“She has grown so much as leader in recent months and you never know what the future may hold,” he says. “The alliance of disparate voices could easily crumble and Sveta may be encouraged to take a more active role if she sees sinister forces at play to seize power.”

This article first appeared in bne IntelliNews*.*

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