

Child of Age

On Ingar Krauss' Western-Eastern Portrait Project

Late in 2004, as the Ukrainians were preparing for a presidential election, the president-dictator of Belarus decreed to the children of his state that travel to Western countries would be banned, because, as you might have guessed, they would be spoiled by the values of consumer society. There was a strong reaction in Germany, where all kinds of institutions criticized the decree, pointing out that they were helping these children—many of them still suffering from the effects of the atomic reactor accident at Chernobyl—by bringing them to visit families and churches in the West. For the many people not involved in such efforts, it was surprising that there are actually hundreds of humanitarian entrepreneurs who regularly donate the cost of flights, make two-day bus journeys to pick up groups of orphans from Belarus so they can spend Christmas or the summer holidays with German families, or drive truckloads of donated goods there. And that is just Belarus; there are similar unsung examples of humanitarian aid to Russia and the Ukraine.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union took Western Europeans by surprise. Only slowly did they relearn names like Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. Some have returned from the city formerly known as Leningrad—St. Petersburg—calling it “fabulous.” Berlin, in the nineties, saw an invasion by the Russian mafia. Scandals involving prostitutes from Eastern Europe have mushroomed everywhere. As Western politicians, journalists, and humanitarian helpers visit hinterland towns, villages, and farmland communities, they are becoming aware that the “Space Age” U.S.S.R. has left its own people behind with ploughs and horses, in conditions bordering on the medieval.