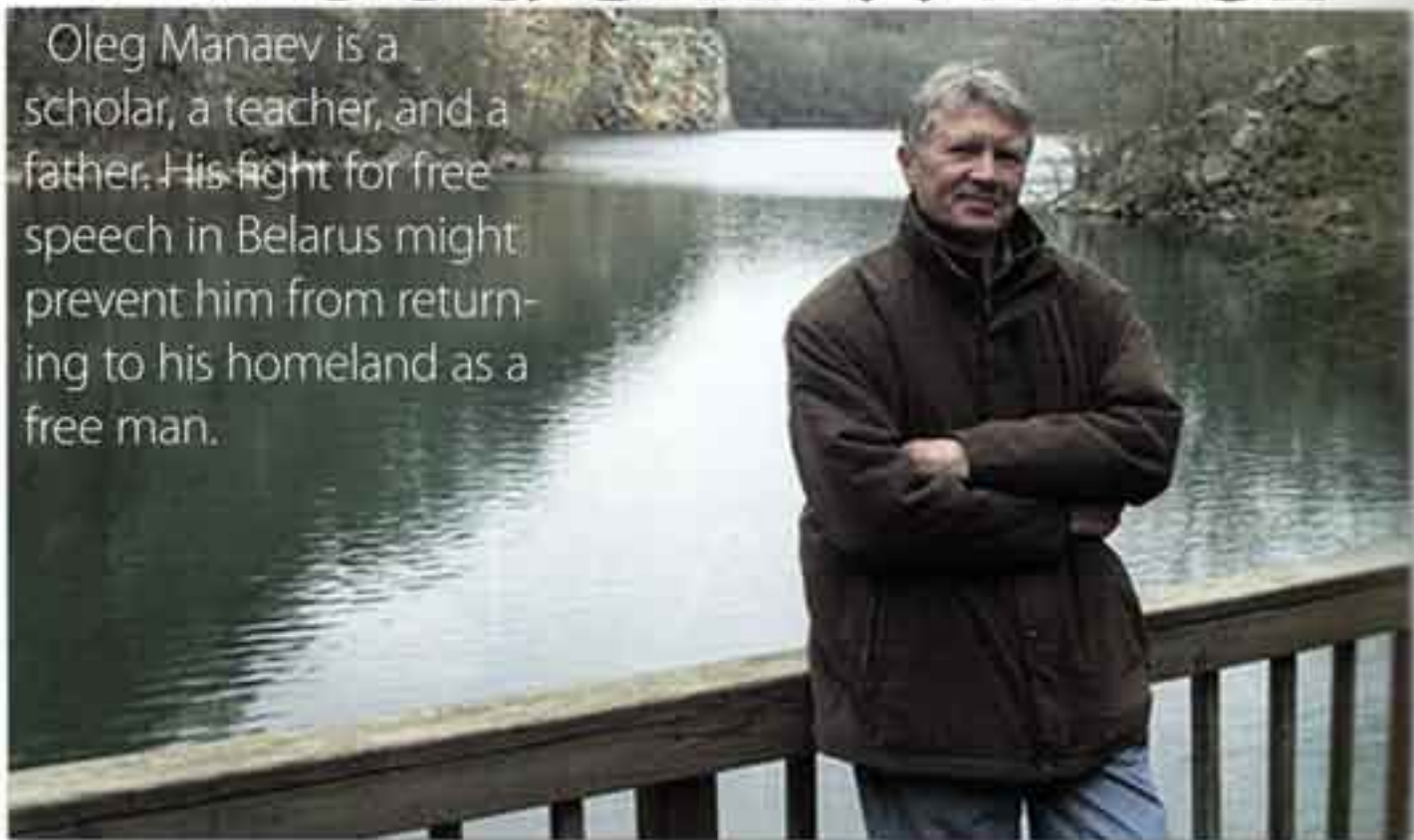


FreedomWriter

Oleg Manaev is a scholar, a teacher, and a father. His fight for free speech in Belarus might prevent him from returning to his homeland as a free man.



story by

Kate Humphrey

Photo provided by Oleg Manaev

Think of your last vacation. Do you imagine hand-held walks on a downtown path and balconies overlooking sunsets? What would happen if the time comes to go home and you leave not knowing if you can ever freely come back?

This might be the case for Professor Oleg Manaev and his family.

Who is this expatriated scholar who, once back in Belarus, might not be allowed to freely return to America? Why did this shrinking world bring him to Knoxville?

Manaev, founder and Director of the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, came to the University of Tennessee this year to be free of repressions in his native Belarus. He published the results of a public opinion poll about an election that was not liked by the

government of President Alexander Lukashenka.

"I tried to apply for many scholarships here in the US," Manaev said. "Even if I do get some scholarship, I'm not sure I could freely live in this country next time... will it be possible for me to leave [Belarus]? I don't know," said Manaev.

In 2004, Lukashenka organized a national referendum about changing the constitution to abolish the time limit during which politicians could serve in office so he could serve for an extra term. Manaev and his colleagues conducted an exit poll of the Belarusians.

"According to our polls, less than

half the population, 49 percent, voted in favor of deleting [the term limit] from the constitution. The next day, the central electoral committee announced that almost 80 percent voted in favor of it," said Manaev.

After this poll was published, Manaev knew he would have many challenges to face. The police conducted night searches of Manaev's office. It was eventually shut down and moved to Lithuania.

"A senior investigator told me that if my colleagues and I continued our work, I could be imprisoned for two years according to the special article of the criminal court," said Manaev.

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So what is he doing in America? The scholar, director, and Chairman of the Belarusian Association of Think Tanks (BTT) is teaching graduate classes with Dr. Ben Bates and Dr. Peter Gross, spending time with his daughter and wife and using Skype to talk to friends and family back home.

Technology is obviously an important part of Manaev's professional and personal life but he believes it has different pros and cons depending on the culture that surrounds the media.

"A good example is my country, Belarus," Manaev explained. "The country spends millions and millions of dollars supporting state run media, both in research and practical terms. For what? To limit the citizen's picture of the world and to prevent citizens from getting information from the outside."

Despite growing up in a communist state where both media and education-

al institutions were state-controlled, Manaev harbored a strong desire to question authority. Earning degrees in journalism, sociology and philosophy, and with training in research methodology, Manaev gained the tools he needed to understand the reality of the

"We are free from Communism, but to overcome all this negative cultural heritage, we need at least one generation of change before a change can really begin."

-- Oleg Manaev

state of his homeland. Once he understood the reality, he was able to effectively communicate it to others.

Manaev has called himself a "civil constructor," citing that through his work with ISEPS and BTT he has made attempts to reorganize the foundation of Belarusian society.

Manaev ultimately thinks that anyone has the ability to be a 'civil con-

structor'. To the scholar, 'civil construction' is when someone responds to a public issue and actively expresses their opinions through mediums such as media and debates.

"There were many structures, not only political but also business, research, and media that I was involved in initiating," said Manaev. "All this means civic construction: constructing some foundation for a new society at the institutional, mental and cultural level."

The Western perception of technology exists on a narrow field. With the world at our fingertips, all types of information seem to always be within reach. The 'shrinking world' applies to all places with modern technology, but in countries like Belarus that are still emerging from Communism, the changes are slow. **SI**



Dr. Oleg Manaev and Dr. Peter Gross discuss their journalism graduate class.

Photo by Caitlin Rockett