



Newsletter
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The decision of the Russian government to impose a duty on petrol exported to Belarus turned out to be the breaking news of the passing week. Independent experts agree that this could lead to the collapse of the Belarusian economy which heavily depends on the re-exportation of cheap Russian energetic resources. The collapse is even more likely as a rise in prices of the Russian gas is expected at the beginning of the next year.

The painful passage to market prices for gas could be facilitated by selling a part of the shares of the company „Bieltransgaz“. According to some sources, both parties have prepared a project in which the Belarusian gas pipeline network has been valued at 7 billion dollars.

However, the sale requires political decision-making by the Belarusian leader who is hesitating. In expert's opinion, his fears of Moscow's economic and political expansion are the main reason for his hesitation.

Łukašenka's meeting with Russian president Vladimir Putin on December the 14th in Moscow will give the Belarusian president the opportunity to reveal his position on the subject.

For the time being the Belarusian authorities are keeping full control over the situation in the country. In the upcoming local authorities elections there will be no choice – an average of 1.1 candidates stand for one place. Since the end of the registration of candidates on December the 14th the election campaign has begun.

The opposition in these elections will be modestly represented. The idea of boycotting the election has even been risen, but it was eventually rejected by the United Democratic Forces. The official authorities declare that such a boycott would have been a fig leaf to cover up the inefficiency of the opposition.

The European Parliament's prize for the ex-presidential candidate Alaksandar Milinkievič might help console the opposition.

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Another highlight of the passing week was the termination by ex-presidential candidate and prisoner of conscience Alaksandar Kazulin of his hunger strike. Expert's as well as the public opinion's views on the issue are divided. Everyone appreciates Kazulin's brave step, but at the same time has no doubt that in the situation of information void and political apathy even such courageous gestures will not inspire the society to take action. According to experts, only external actions can provoke changes in Belarus.

Among recent examples of such actions, the maintaining in force of the „Act on Democracy in Belarus” as well as the examining of the Belarusian question by the U.N. Security Council can be quoted. The European Union has decided to use the „carrot-and-stick” tactic, by threatening to withdraw commercial preferences on the one hand side and by proposing on the other – a kind of „Marshall Plan” for Belarus if the country decided to introduce democratic reforms.

Bearing in mind the pressure exercised by Russia it appears that the Belarusian regime might find itself between the devil and the deep blue sea. ■

POLITICS

US Senate adopts „Act On Democracy In Belarus”

The „Act On Democracy In Belarus” has been unanimously adopted by the US Senate – the United States Embassy in Minsk has informed.

Following the review of the document by the House of Representatives on December 8th, it now awaits the approval of the US President.

The „Act On Democracy In Belarus” envisages economic sanctions against the government of Alaksandar Łukašenka for breach of democratic standards. Additionally, it places an obligation on the US President to inform legislators on Belarusian deliveries of „arms and military technologies” to countries listed as sponsors of international terrorism.

A separate chapter of the „Act On Democracy In Belarus” requires the US President to report to the Congress on all information available to the US administration concerning „the quantity of personal wealth of Alaksandar Łukašenka and other top ranking Belarusian officials” contained in foreign deposits.

The text of the „Act On Democracy In Belarus” also contains the definition of „representatives of the Belarusian regime”. The category embraces the president, government members, representatives of

state administration, judges, prosecutors etc., as well as persons „who have been engaged in implementing policies of the regime, which violate international standards in the sphere of human rights” – informs Charter '97.

A. Milinkievič is to meet EU leaders

Leader of the united democratic opposition in Belarus Alaksandar Milinkievič is in Brussels taking part in a meeting of the European People's Party (EPP), one of the largest political parties in the European Parliament.

The meeting, which is accompanying the current EU summit held in the Belgian capital, has brought together representatives of 10 of the 25 Union member countries.

Apart from his official talks, Milinkevich is also scheduled for unofficial meetings with many EU member leaders and EPP officials.

Two Belarusian parties have an observer status in the European People's Party: the Belarusian National Front and the United Civic Party – the press service of Alaksandar Milinkievič has informed.

OFFICIALLY

End of registration of candidates to territorial self-government bodies

December 14th marks the end of the registration period for candidates to territorial self-government bodies in Belarus, thus launching the successive election campaign stage.

According to the Belarusian Central Election Committee, statistically there is 1.1 candidate per each post to be elected. Over 24 thousand candidates have filed obligatory registration documents throughout the country. They will be competing for 22,658 seats in the country's local administration bodies.

More than half of the candidates (14, 029) has been nominated through compiling lists with signatures of support. The remaining 10 thousand have been nominated by the crews of various companies.

The biggest competition is expected in Minsk, where 237 candidates will be vying for 55 seats – informs Belta.

Local elections in Belarus are to be held on January 14th, 2007.

Information gathered by independent Belarusian media reveals some 600 opposition candidates running in the elections, mainly from the United Civic Party, the Belarusian National Front, the „Biełaruskaja” Communist party and the Belarusian Social-democratic Party „Hramada”. It will be known today, how many of them have successfully completed their registration process.

Russia cuts allowances for oil to Belarus

As of January 1st 2007 Russia has introduced custom tariffs for oil and oil products exported to Belarus.

According to Russian authorities this step had been taken to defend the economic interests of the Russian Federation as well as in response to the decision of Belarusian authorities to break the agreement on custom tariffs on goods exported through Belarus to the West, and produced from Russian resources. This refers to fuels produced from

Russian oil. In 2006 Minsk imported 19.7 million tonnes of oil from Russian and from this exported some 13.5 million tonnes. Since December 1st 2006 the Russian import tax for oil stands at 180.7 USD per tonne, for oil products at 72.2 up to 134 USD per tonne. According to the Polish

Rzeczpospolita daily Belarus would have to pay Russia an additional 3.5 billion USD for the amount of oil, with the profits dropping to null.

The Individual Partnership Programme of Belarus and NATO is being debated on in Brussels

A meeting is held in the NATO headquarters in Brussels devoted to the coordination of events of the Partnership Programme of the Republic of Belarus and NATO, a press representative of the Belarusian Defence Ministry has informed the BIELTA agency.

The meeting, attended by representatives of the Belarusian defence ministry, is devoted to the results of the programme for 2006 and establishing new items on the agenda for 2007. Also the participants plan to discuss the improvement of the military cooperation and assess the results of the Partnership for Peace Programme aims implemented by Belarus.

OPPOSITION

A.Milinkievič receives an award

The chairman of the European Parliament Josep Borrell has awarded the leader of the Belarusian United Democratic Forces, the Andrei Sakharov award „For the freedom of thought”.

After the ceremony Alaksandar Milinkievič has delivered a speech before the European parliament, thanking the deputies for the award and saying that there are people in Belarus ready to offer their country a lot in order to help the democratization process. Alaksandar Milinkievič also reminded of the many opposition leaders who had disappeared and the many political prisoners.

Participants of Human Rights Day observations prosecuted in Minsk

A court in Minsk today sentenced the participants of a rally held to observe Human Rights Day. On December 10th about 50 people gathered on Minsk's October Square. 30 were arrested.

4 activists of the unofficial "Young Front" organisation and leader of the oppositional United Citizens' Party (AHP) Anatol Lyabedzka were charged with petty hooliganism and sentenced to between 3 and 15 days in jail and a fine. Anatol Lyabedzka is to come before the court tomorrow.

ECONOMY

Customs tariffs with Russia on oil derivatives to depend on oil prices

It is only possible to equalize Belarusian customs tariffs on exports of oil derivatives with Russian tariffs if domestic prices are applied to oil deliveries to Belarus – said Belarusian Prime Minister Siarhiey Sidorski in an interview for Belta.

In the negotiations, Belarusian experts underline that Belarus is buying oil at world prices. The Belarusian PM believes that the Russian side should reconsider its prices for Belarus.

Siarhiey Sidorski pointed out that the Belarusian government received with understanding the proposal that part of the proceeds from customs duties on export of oil derivatives should go to the budget of the Russian Federation.

The current negotiations are being conducted by experts of the Ministry of the Economy of Belarus and the Ministry for Economic Development of Russia.

The Russian side has proposed, among others, a way to equalize customs tariffs by introducing duties on oil deliveries. Belarus believes that this would violate earlier state agreements on free trade and the joint customs area and hopes that Russia does not opt for this variant.

Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy: a political support for Belarus is necessary

On December 14th Alaksandar Milinkievič met with German Chancellor Angela Merkel. The meeting was held in Belgium during the session of the European People's Party (EPP).

During the meeting with the leader of Belarusia's United Democratic Forces Chancellor Angela Merkel underlined that Germany is closely watching the events in Belarus. Angela Merkel said that a democratic Belarus lies in Germany's interests, and added that her government is ready to begin cooperation with Belarus and provide various forms of aid, among them economic assistance.

The problem of Belarus was also touched upon by the French Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy. „Speaking of the perspectives of the European Union, we should concentrate not only on the extension of borders, but on the principles on which the EU is founded. There are states on the map of Europe like Belarus, where there is no freedom and democracy, where the nation is oppressed by its authorities”, said Nicolas Sarkozy. „Europe should change its attitude towards Belarus. But moral gestures are not enough, political support is needed. All diplomatic possibilities of the EU members should be used to achieve this help” – said the French interior minister Alaksandar Milinkievič took part in the congress of the largest EU party – the European People's Party (EEP). It is the highest level meeting of state and government leaders of 10 from among the EU's 25 states, as well as opposition leaders from states where power is in the hands of the center right parties.

SOCIETY

7 days of arrest for going out to the pharmacy

A contributor to the „Magazyn Polski” or Polish Magazine newspaper in Grodno has been sentenced to 7 days arrest for using foul language and not obeying police orders.

Editor in chief of 'Magazyn Polski' Andrej Pačobut told Polish Radio that witnesses in the case had been only policemen. The judge did not allow for calling witnesses named by the defendant.

Alaksiej Salej was detained yesterday when he walked out of the newspaper premises to the pharmacy. He was approached by several plain clothes police officers. Since they were not in uniform, Salej resisted them. He spent the night in arrest.

„Magazyn Polski” is printed in Poland and distributed unofficially in Belarus.

140 students of the Belarusian State Technical University (BDPU) have stood in defence of a sacked lecturer

Over a 140 signatures gathered by second year students of the history department in support for Jury Baščyč, were sent to court and included in the files in the case to reinstate him back to his post as lecturer.

The students have decided to collect the signatures despite threats from the university authorities that 5 students may be expelled for this action.

Jury Baščyč was deprived of his post for taking part in the presidential elections as an independent observer. The university authorities proposed that he files the resignation himself, but the lecturer refused. Several days later he was informed that he is being sacked for an „immoral deed”, though he was not told what the „deed” was.

Jury Baščyč has filed the case to court demanding he is returned to his post. In response the university accused him of propagating material among the students abusing the Belarusian head of state. The prosecution has not confirmed the accusations.

Echo of Stalinist repressions in the monastery in Mahiloŭ

During repair works at the monastery in

Mahiloŭ, workers have found human remains. It is the first such find in the last 15 years.



Human skulls and bones were found in the old church of St. Nicolas order, where repair works are being conducted before the ceremonies marking the 370 years of the temple. According to specialists the remains must be those of victims of Stalinist repressions. The nuns explain that the church stands on the site of an old burial ground. In the 1930's a prison was located in the church. When the building was handed over to the faithful in 1991 remains were discovered with bullet holes in the skulls.

Witnesses state that prisoners who died were buried near the church walls, human remains are still found on the area, informs the correspondent of the Belarusian section of Radio Polonia.

CULTURE

2007 Year of the Belarusian language and literature?

The Franciszek Skaryna association promoting the Belarusian language is collecting signatures in a run-up to the 125th birthday anniversary of Janka Kupala and Jakub Kołas.

The initiators of the project want 2007 declared year of the Belarusian language and literature – informs the human rights organisation "Viasna".

"We, the citizens of the Republic of Belarus, want to remind that in 2007 we shall be celebrating the 125th birthday anniversaries of Janka Kupala and Jakub Kolas, classics of our literature, social activists, politicians and scholars" reads an open letter addressed to Alaksandar Łukašenka.

The petition can be signed by every citizen of Belarus.



There are various sites devoted to events in Belarus, which are, however, little known in Western Europe, and among people dealing with politics towards Belarus who do not understand the Russian or Belarusian languages.

The belarus-live site fills this gap. The site allows to order weekly reception of news in English, French, German, Polish, Belarusian, Russian and Ukrainian.

