



Newsletter

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Toward the end of the Year, natural gas was the number one headache for Belarusians. Even those with little interest in politics are worried by the radical price increases of Russian-supplied energy sources.

The regime appears baffled. The very foundation of the „Belarusian economic miracle“ is being destroyed.

That is why the authorities in Minsk decided to hold out to the last in their talks with Gazprom. Another round of those talks in Moscow On December 26 failed to bring results. Russia claims that it offered unprecedented concessions for its ally by bringing down the suggested price from 200 US dollars to 105-100 USD per 1,000 cubic metres of natural gas. But the Belarusian side says it can only accept 75 USD.

The sale of 50 per cent of stocks in the Belarusian transit pipeline to Gazprom remains an unresolved issue. Russia has long demanded the sale, because it is keen to control the transit of gas to Europe.

The only progress that was made was that the sale price of Beltransgaz was agreed on at 5 billion US dollars. Minsk wants 2.5 billion straight off for 50 per cent of the shares. Russia does not intend to offer any cash, just cheaper gas for a period of time.

The two sides are blaming each other for deliberately breaking off the negotiations. Gazprom chief Aleksey Miller threatens to turn off the tap for Belarus on January 1, unless a contract for gas supplies is signed. Minsk says that it is ready to suspend gas transit to Europe, because – as it puts it – Gazprom does not have any contract for gas transfer across Belarus.

Analysts stress the many interdependencies between the two partners. They do not exclude the possibility of a new „gas war“ (a precedent was set in February 2004). Nevertheless, a compromise solution seems inevitable. Russia may reconsider its present tough stance, considering its future stake in transit deals with Belarus, as well as its overall military and strategic interests in that country.

Belarusian analysts wonder whether the authorities in Minsk could launch an economic reform faced by the current energy crisis. The presidential office is known to be working on a directive on backing private enterprise.

But according to analysts, the regime fears that economic reforms could trigger undesirable political processes.

For the time being, the Belarusian president appears to be fully in control of the local election

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campaign. In most areas, voters will simply have no choice. There is only 1.05 candidate for one mandate.

Minsk and several other places are the only constituencies, where voters will be able to choose from among at least two candidates. Even there opposition candidates report many obstacles. According to United Citizens Party (AHP) representatives, they were refused their requests to print leaflets in the capital. They say that printing houses are KGB-controlled. AHP leader Anatol Labiedźka, who is running for the Minsk City Council, the regime is making it difficult for the candidates to meet voters. In line with legislation amended on the eve of the elections, such meetings are tantamount to holding a picket or a demonstration, which is subject to official approval.

If foreign aid is known to have been offered to a candidate, their registration is withheld. The Belarusian state only offers symbolic funding for the campaign, up to 20 US dollars per council, depending on its rank. The regime looks keen to prevent the campaign from turning the electorate's attention to politics.

At the same time, according to independent experts, the opposition appears focused on internal problems within the democratic opposition, such as restructuring and a new division of responsibilities, which makes its stance less clear for the electorate.

AHP leader A. Labiedźka says that the idea of holding a mass action on the anniversary of presidential elections in March 2007 is in doubt, because the coalition members seem passive. It cannot be excluded that on January 4 the leaders of the opposition coalition will decide that all the democratic candidates should withdraw from the local elections, to make them look like nothing but an election farce. But official propaganda is bound to portray this step as the opposition's weakness.

Analysts say that Belarus currently lacks not just energy sources, but also fresh ideas and strong strategies. It is a safe bet that local authorities elected on January 14 will be loyal to the regime. ■

POLITICS

Interrogations in connection with the alleged case of smuggling of narcotics

Members of the Association of Poles in Belarus (ZPB) Zygmunt Piełuc and Wiktor Borys were interrogated on Tuesday by the Grodno branch of the Belarusian KGB – informed Andrzej Poczobut, a member of the Association.

The interrogations were held in connection with the alleged case of smuggling of narcotics. According to Belarusian authorities, the drugs were found on October 29 during a border control in a car coming from Vilnius that the head of the Association

Angelika Borys (who is not recognized by authorities in Minsk) was traveling in. Poczobut stated that Piełuc was mainly asked about Andrzej Lisowski – the driver and the

owner of the car who is suspected of smuggling. The interrogation lasted for about two hours. Wiktor Borys, Angelika's brother was interrogated for a shorter period of time.

According to Poczobut, when the conversation turned to his sister Borys refused to testify citing the Belarusian law granting the right to refuse testimony on one's family members as a reason. Ines Todryk, a journalist of the newspapers published by the Association abroad, i.e. "Głos z nad Niemna" and "Magazyn Polski" is to be interrogated on Wednesday. Andrzej Poczobut holds the opinion that those interrogations were only aimed at harassing people at Christmas time.

Meanwhile Belarusian customs officers claim they found a package of amphetamine at the border crossing in a car in which the head of the Association was traveling. The leadership of the Association claims that the narcotics were placed there by somebody else and the whole incident is a provocation of special services. The Association also requested that the Belarusian authorities stop oppressing its members. Customs authorities from Grodno

initiated investigation and then referred the case to KGB. One can be sentenced for 3 to 7 years on prison if found guilty of smuggling narcotics in Belarus.

Members of the opposition sentenced

Two Belarusian members of the opposition were sentenced for 5 days of arrest. The court found them guilty of hooliganism.

Deputy head of the Belarusian People Front Aleś Michalevič and one of the leaders of still unregistered Association of Belarusian Students Vasil Lepieš have been in jail since Friday after police entered a private flat of Michalewicz where the Christmas musical meeting of almost 30 students was underway.

Meanwhile Cimaŭ Drančuk who had been sentenced for a year of jail time for his participation in unregistered organization called „Partnership” was released. The organization was to observe march presidential elections. Drančuk was released two months earlier as a reward for good behavior.

OFFICIALLY

Criticism of Belarus by Russian media harms Russia

Provocative commentaries by some Russian journalists are harming not just the integration process (between Belarus and Russia), but also the interests of the Russian Federation itself.

They undermine the value of patriotism, the idea of brotherhood and friendship between nations. A statement to this effect was made by Belarusian ambassador to Russia Vasil Dauhaloŭ.

Some journalists present biased information about events in Belarus, Dauhaloŭ said. I have always been against glossing over the Belarusian reality, but the deliberate ignoring of this country's attainments is dishonest and unprofessional – the Belarusian ambassador told newsmen.

OPPOSITION

Andrej Klimaŭ is released

Political prisoner Andrej Klimaŭ was released on Friday morning from a police station in the village of Barshchovka on Friday morning. He was handed back the passport and his release papers.

Friends, family and opposition politicians greeted Klimaŭ in front of the police station with champagne.

Klimaŭ said he was determined to stay in politics and to carry on his activities within the United Citizens Party (AHP). He is also going to public a book of memoirs from a penal colony.

Klimaŭ was sentenced to 1.5 year to prison for having organized a protest action against Łukašenka, He had served earlier another three year sentence on charges of embezzlement.

ECONOMY

Belarus – prices for gas

The issue of the prices of Russian gas to be delivered to Belarus remains unclear. Russian information portal Gazeta.ru informed that an agreement on that matter has been reached and Gazprom was to effectively frighten Łukašenka.

Gazeta.ru claims that the Belarusian leadership will probably make concessions. Meanwhile other Russian news agencies, including RIA Novosti claim that the case is still up in the air. A Belarusian delegation which arrived to Moscow for talks with Gazprom did not accept the company's conditions although Gazprom did make some concessions. Among them was the offer to lower the price from over 200 USD to 110 USD per thousand cubic meters of gas.

Gazprom also proposed that Belarus pay for half of it in cash and for half with the shares of "Bieltransgaz" – a company controlling pipelines running through that country. Those conditions were to be binding for 4 years in order to make it easier for Minsk to get used to the new market prices of gas. As of now, Belarus pays 45 USD for a thousand cubic meters of gas.

Authorities in Minsk declare that they are

ready to pay 75 USD. Deputy PM Uładzimier Siamaška was the first to reveal that in his interview with BIEŁTA agency. There are a few days left till the present contract for gas delivery to Belarus ends.

SOCIETY

Russian political scientist cannot spend Christmas with his family in Minsk

A Russian political scientist was denied the right to spend Christmas with his family in Belarus by the country's authorities.

Andriej Suzdalcev received a negative response to his motion submitted on December 11 to the Department of Citizenship and Migration at the Belarusian Ministry of Internal Affairs. There was no reason for his denial to enter and stay in the republic of Belarus given in the document. On March 17 the authorities annulled Suzdalcev's right to stay in Belarus. On March 27 this citizen of the Russian Federation who for the past 13 years had been living in Belarus received an official decision on his deportation from Belarus.

He was prohibited from entering the country for 5 years. Suzdalcev came to Minsk from Vladivostok. His wife holds Belarusian citizenship and lives in Minsk. They have two under-age children. While in Belarus Suzdalcev worked in his profession – political science. He used to write critical commentaries on the actions of Belarusian authorities for independent media and Internet news editions.

Belarusian orphans from children's homes free to travel to Italy if governments sign agreement

Children from Belarusian orphanages will be allowed to go to Italy for treatment as soon as a bilateral agreement has been signed on a government level.

In that document, Italy should guarantee that the children will return by a defined date – Dźmitry Jumanaŭ, secretary of the Belarus embassy in Italy informed.

According to him, following the publicized case of Vika Maroz, the Belarus government needs Italian government guarantees written into a document of appropriate rank.

CULTURE

A sanctuary was burnt in Mozyr during Christmas

A sanctuary of St. Gregory the Winner situated in the locality of Mozyr which was burnt on December 25 will be rebuilt.

According to the parson of this orthodox church, father Valery works are to begin in spring.

Fire has consumed the wooden church in spite of the quick rescue action. Although firemen manage to locate the center of the fire it was too late to save the building. According to initial investigation, the reason for the fire was arson. Arsonists poured oil over the internal walls of the sanctuary while leaving inscriptions of satanic nature on its outside. After the arson had taken place investigation has been initiated. This has been the second time that St. Gregory Orthodox Church was set on fire.

A month and a half ago unknown wrongdoers unsuccessfully tried to set the wooden building on fire. This time their attempt proved successful.



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](http://belarus-live.eu) site fills this gap. The site allows to order weekly reception of news in English, French, German, Polish, Belarusian, Russian and Ukrainian.

