



Newsletter

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The past week's focus was on the oil war between Minsk and Moscow.

One week earlier, a compromise on natural gas was reached two minutes ahead of the New Year. The pipeline remained open. But this time, Europe bore the direct consequences of the conflict. The Friendship oil pipeline running through Polish, Germany, Ukraine, Slovakia, Czech Republic and Hungary ran dry along the Belarus section. The Russians said they were forced to break supplies, because Belarus siphoned off crude, as it put it, in compensation for unpaid transit fees imposed by Minsk from the new year. Moscow described this move as being a contravention of international law.

Observers said the Belarus president tried to improve his image as a strong man in charge by taking these controversial decisions, after his image suffered a blow as a result of the unfavourable gas deal. Above all he intended to force Moscow to cut customs fees on oil exports to Belarus. As a result of the radical price hikes on energy sources, the Belarus petrochemicals industry found itself in a crisis.

At the end of the day, Russia won. The Belarusian transit fee was lifted on January 10 right after a telephone conversation between Łukašenka and Putin.

Oil started flowing through the Friendship pipeline again on January 11. Only then was Belarus PM Sidorsky able to fly to Moscow for talks.

The tough dialogue concerns not just oil, but all of the trade relations, which in some areas have entered the stage of war. Russia has blocked Belarusian sugar supplies.

When it comes to oil and other issues, Minsk is forced to give in to Russia.

This may spell ill luck not just for the concept of the Russia-Belarus union state, but also for the Belarusian economic system, which was based on cheap energy sources, independent experts say. Łukašenka is unlikely to carry out reform, so it cannot be excluded that a tough economic mobilization model will be introduced to keep inefficient state companies afloat. The leader of the Belarusian Union of Entrepreneurs Alaksandr Patupa has pointed to the fact that the regime is looking closely at this scenario.

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But such measures, which could spell disaster for the spirit of enterprise, could only provide a temporary respite for the regime. Unless reforms are introduced, experts predict that Belarus is in for an economic crisis within two or three years, entailing social unrest. Reforms are necessary. Thus Łukašenka will need to choose the lesser evil.

For the time being, the incorporation of Belarus into Russia as a way out looks very unlikely. Łukašenka's belligerent rhetoric containing nationalist traits suggests that he is ready to defend his unlimited power, as well as the sovereignty of the state, to the bitter end. He realizes that the incorporation of Belarus could neither guarantee him power nor personal safety. Economist Leanid Zaika remarked that Bel;arusian citizens will pay for his third term in office out of their own pockets.

The opposition could take advantage of these negative trends. But it is experiencing a profound crisis itself. Due to divergent views, its leaders were unable to come up with a united stance on the local elections. They were unable to agree on a joint declaration on the gas conflict and worsening energy security. As a result, an official propaganda campaign was launched against the opposition. It was branded as the fifth column in the context of the Łukašenka-Kremlin row.

Opposition leaders left the decision whether to pull out from running in the elections to individual candidates. In effect, they were left to their own devices.

At the same time, opposition leaders are involved in arguments in the run-up to another Democratic Forces Congress, during which the coalition is to be revamped. Power is being agreed within narrow circles, analysts stress.

Meanwhile, the regime uses the familiar methods of engineering election results. A system whereby voters can vote up to five days before the actual election applied in each campaign, is in force. Even up to 30 per cent of the electorate may have voted before the last day of the elections on January 14.

International experts say that the long period of voting lacks transparency and opens room for abuse. According to political scientists, early voting is gaining momentum only through inertia. The regime no longer needs to make an effort to form obedient local councils. In most constituencies voters have no choice at all. There is just one candidate loyal toward the regime, just like in the old Soviet days. ■

POLITICS

Brussels on the Belarus-Russia conflict

Brussels hopes that the introduction by Belarus of transit fees on Russian oil will not disrupt supplies to Europe

The Minsk authorities have informed that the fee will amount to 45 USD per tonne. According to commentators, the introduction of the fee is the consequence of Russia's tougher energy policy vis a vis Belarus.

According to a spokesman for the European Commission Ferran Tarradellas, despite current tensions on the Moscow-Minsk line, the European Commission sees no reason for concern as regards oil deliveries to the West. „We expect that the differences of view between the two countries will be ironed out and that consumers will receive the supplies at the earlier-agreed prices”.

The Commission holds the view that this is a bilateral issue and therefore does not intend to intervene in the talks between Belarus and Russia. Brussels commented in the same way on the Russia-Belarus agreement on gas deliveries signed on 31 December. It provided not only for a price hike but also for Russia's take-over of a 50-percent stake in the Belarus state gas pipeline operator. According to a Polish Radio report, the European Commission claims that it was not important who owned the pipeline network as long as oil deliveries were ensured.

Alaksandar Milinkievič detained three times in one day

On Saturday, Milinkievič's car was stopped three times by road inspectors of the Homel region as the leader of the democratic forces in Belarus headed for meetings with voters.

In the morning the car was stopped near Salihorsk on the pretext that the driver and Milinkievič himself were under the influence of alcohol. Two-hour medical tests at a local hospital did not confirm the police's suspicions.

Later the politician's car was said to have participated in a traffic accident. When Alaksandar Milinkievič finally arrived in Homel, where around 400 voters had gathered waiting, the car was again stopped 20 kms outside the city because allegedly Milinkievič was not wearing safety belts. Two hours later the politician was released. However, his plans of visiting several cities were reduced to Dobrush.

OFFICIALLY

Embassy of Republic of Belarus in Warsaw

Polish Economy Department asks Belarusian ambassador for explanations.

On January 8th Pavel Latushka the Ambassador of Republic of Belarus met Maciej Wozniak the director of the Department of Oil and Gas in the Economy Department of Poland.

The ambassador handed in the following statement:

Republic of Belarus did not stop the transit of crude oil through its territory and is still ready to guarantee such transit. The pressure of crude oil in pipeline decreased at the Russian-Belarusian boarder. Belarus as the owner of transit pipelines on its territory introduced a crude oil transit fee which is not a custom tax.

The new fee was introduced according to Belarusian law and is meant as a compensation for the costs of custom tax introduced by Russia. Belarus has repeatedly informed Russia of its readiness to enter

negotiations concerning delivery of crude oil and it is still to start a constructive dialogue.

Raw materials should not be used as a tool for blackmail

President of Belarus Alaksandar Łukašenka has said that energy should not be the subject of blackmail against the Belarusian nation. He added, nonetheless, that Belarus would resist all attacks and pressure.

„We do not have such raw material resources as other countries. These resources, however, should not be used to blackmail our nation. That is why I am so rigorously defending the interests of the state. Our conduct is legal and civilized” stressed the president during the Christmas service at the Cathedral of the Holy Spirit in Minsk.

President Łukašenka particularly underlined that the Belarusian people would withstand any attacks and pressures. But – he added – Belarusians should learn to live economically.

Belarusian Foreign Ministry on the introduction of transit fees on oil deliveries

The activities of the Belarusian side do not in any way limit transit deliveries of oil to third countries, says the press spokesman for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus in a communique on the introduction of transit fees on Russian oil.

Andrej Papoŭ explained that the introduction of customs duties on Russian supplies which pass through Belarus territory is his country's response to the Russian government's earlier decision on the introduction of export duties on oil supplies to Belarus.

The Belarus Foreign Ministry spokesman assured that Belarus is fully abiding by its international obligations concerning free transit through its territory. He said that 50 percent of Russia's oil supplies to Europe pass through Belarus. „Having this in mind, we once again reaffirm our commitment to the principles of free transit”, he added.

OPPOSITION

A. Milinkievič critical of the opposition's election campaign

A. Milinkievič says that the participation of the opposition in the campaign for local elections and the congress of the democratic forces is ineffective.

According to the leader of united democratic forces, the opposition has failed to organize a well-publicised, nationwide election campaign.

In Milinkievič's view, reports of 1 thousand opposition candidates in 24 thousand constituencies are greatly exaggerated.

„I think that the election campaign should be described as ineffective. Our proposal to organize a single political campaign, with a single formation, a single election slogan and a single scenario, has not gained support among the Belarusian opposition parties. For this reason, everyone acted on one's own accord.” he summed up.

The leader of united democratic forces in Belarus is also highly critical of the state of preparations for the second Congress of democratic forces, which is scheduled for the end of February and the beginning of March. According to Milinkievič, individual political parties have so far failed to fulfil the obligations which are contained in an agreement approved by the Political Council. Such an attitude undermines the confidence in the Council and the Congress itself.

„What is particularly worrying is that many party leaders do not demonstrate any will to change the situation”, Alaksandar Milinkievič stressed.

Authorities obstruct meetings with voters

A meeting with candidate in the local government elections, leader of the local chapter of opposition United Civil Party Uładzimir Malarčuk was held at the Culture House in Vilejka.

Also the party's leader Anatol Labiedźka arrived for the meeting which was chaired by head of the electoral commission and deputy of the Vilejka executive committee Mikalaj

Karotki. The meeting began with the chairman requesting for all of the employees of the Culture House to leave. Practically all of the staff had wanted to listen to the democratic candidate.

On Saturday it became known that the deputy of the local executive committee had told police to restrict access to meetings with the opposition's only candidate in the city.

The local government elections are scheduled for January 14th but the pre-election votes are to be held tomorrow.

ECONOMY

Oil delivery resumed

Prime Minister of Belarus Siarhiej Sidorski has left for Moscow for talks on the delivery of crude oil.

The transit of oil via the „Druzhba” pipeline resumed last night, three days after deliveries were cut off following a conflict between Russia and Belarus on the conditions of transit.

The Russian side is satisfied with the decision of the authorities of Belarus to cancel the transit fees on Russian crude oil deliveries to Europe, among others to Germany and Poland.

According to Leonid Zaika, director of the „Strategy” Analytical Centre, the conflict was resolved because it threatened the position of the Belarusian president. The head of the Belarusian state was hesitant to pull the bear's whiskers any more. Revoking customs fees means that Belarus will not be getting 10 million USD daily for the transit of oil, however Russia will not be introducing tariffs on goods imported from Belarus.

Gridlock of sugar transport trains brings sizeable losses to Belarusian railways

Belarusian state railways incur considerable losses as a result of gridlock of Russia-bound sugar transport trains.

According to the data of 31 December 2006, the losses over the previous two months amounted to about 600, 000 USD.

According to a press spokesman for the Board of Belarusian Railways, Tačciana Bondarava, 210 wagons of sugar are waiting at the border: 140 in Orša, 60 in Mahiloŭ and 10 in Žabinec.

All the necessary documents have been prepared and the safety of the cargo has been secured. Representatives of the Belarusian Railways hope for a speedy solution of problems relating to the sugar deliveries to Russia.

On 29 December 2006, the Russian customs services stopped the execution of all procedures relating to sugar transports as a result of which Belarusian sugar exports to Russia have almost come to a halt, the European Radio for Belarus informs.

SOCIETY

The „Belarusian Helsinki Committee” will monitor the local elections

The social organisation „Belarusian Helsinki Committee” intends to monitor the local elections in Belarus.

The executive director of the organisation Aleh Hulak has informed that the observers intend to follow the process in several election counties, both during early elections as well as during the official election day. The representative of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee has said that the observers have been selected through a poll of support staged among the society.

„Already we can observe problems our representatives encounter while attempting to enter the election meetings. The chairmen of the election commissions have suddenly began to question the credibility of the signatures on the lists of support of the observers and have decided to verify the issue in the coming three days. This way some of our observers are already at the polling stations while some have been denied access.” Said the executive director of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee Aleh Kulak.

On January 9th early elections began selecting candidates to the local authorities of the 25th term. Polling stations opened at 10 am. and will work until 13th of January between 10-14 and 16-19 hours...

The official election date has been set at the coming Sunday January 14th – informs the BelaPAN agency

Russian will pay for their cars on Belarusian territory

Belarus plans to introduce obligatory payments for Russian citizens entering Belarus in their private cars – stated Siarhey Barysiuk, the head of the state custom tax control office of Republic Belarus.

The official informed that the decision is a response to similar Russian decision. Each Belarusian citizen has to pay 9 US dollars when entering the Russian Federation. The first effect of the new tax were long queues at Russian-Belarusian boarder crossings.

Get your ticket on the Internet

A central computer system for ticket sales on Belarusian public transport to open in mid 2007

The Ministry of Transport and Communications of Belarus has informed that an information network will link all coach and railway stations in Minsk.

The residents of the city and visitors will be able to receive the necessary information and book their tickets on the Internet. It will be possible to pay in cash or by credit card for coach, rail or air travel at any place where you start your journey. The tickets will also be on sale in the network of special information kiosks in various districts of Minsk, informs the „Zviazda” daily.

CULTURE

Bears from Rasonry star in a German movie

Natural reserve Chyrvoniy Bor near Rasonry was the location where a documentary film was recently shot.

The stars of the movie were two young bear cubs Paša and Maša. The producer of the film is a German company Blue Paw Artists.

The work on the film continued for over a year, it is to be broadcast soon by the

Channel 1 of the German TV, in January it will also be presented by the National Geographic TV channel. The bear cubs played orphans who learn to cope without their mother. After the shooting was over the bears returned to the local zoo.

Tourist Information leaflet – „the Augustow channel”

Thanks to the financial help of the Belarusian Information Ministry the Belarus publishers have issued a tourist information leaflet The Augustow Channel and is preparing a Polish version of the publication.

According to the editor, the chairman of the photographers club Grodno, Alaksandar Lasminski, the leaflet contains some 100

photos by Grodno photographers, showing the Belarusian part of the Augustow channel. The majority of the pictures have been taken from a plane.

Other illustrations, showing historical objects and monuments of culture, have been described by renowned Grodno historian Ihar Trusav. For the first time maps of the channel have been published with detailed descriptions and investment projects which will be implemented in the area of the Augustow channel.

The Augustow Channel, published in 2 thousand editions will be on sale soon. The Bialorus publishers are preparing a Polish edition which will appear in bookstores by spring this year-informs the Belarusian agency BELTA.



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.

