



Newsletter

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On 12 January Belarus and Russia signed an agreement on trade and economic cooperation in the field of crude oil exports. The dispute is said to have been resolved. Under a compromise solution, Belarus slapped the duty on the transit of oil, whereas Moscow reduced its duty on oil exports to Belarus from \$180 to \$53 per tonne.

In this way, Russia embarked on a gradual limitation of preferences that had been granted to Belarus in the field of energy raw materials. It is worth recalling that on New Year's Eve a compromise was also reached on natural gas. Observers note, however, that an economic conflict between the two countries has not ended once and for all.

It is difficult to predict whether the Belarus authorities will indeed ensure Russian goods free access to the Belarusian market, in line with an agreement which was concluded a part of the crude oil deal.

On the other hand, Russia, according to the officials in Minsk, is blocking the export of Belarusian products to its market. Limitations have already been imposed on the deliveries of Belarusian sugar. Some experts suggest that we may be witnessing fresh outbreaks of an economic war between Moscow and Minsk in the near future.

The conflict is being fomented by political circles. Russia's long-term objective is an incorporation of Belarus. If this proved unfeasible, it would like to make sure Minsk is a more loyal and predictable partner.

Meanwhile, the presidents of the two countries seem to be waging a PR war. President Łukašenka's speech on 14 January provoked many comments. Resorting to independence rhetoric, he warned that should the conflict become escalated again, Minsk can demand considerable sums of money for the lease of land to the Russian „Friendship” pipeline that goes through the Belarusian territory. The next day President Vladimir Putin reminded the Minsk regime that it holds on to power solely thanks to Russian subsidies. He said that in the field of liquid energy fuels alone, Russia's support is estimated at 5,8 billion USD (41% of the state budget of Belarus). Putin stressed that the scope of Moscow's support will be gradually reduced.

Local government elections were held in Belarus on 14 January. Two days before the vote, president Łukašenka signed Decree No. 21 „On the growing role of local government and self-government organs in the decision-making process relating to people's living conditions”.

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According to official sources, the document defines steps that are to be taken to increase the role of local government authorities in the nation's life. Skeptics say that nothing is going to change in what is the solely decorative function of local government bodies.

All the country's 1581 local councils were elected on 14 January. The total number of councillors is 22 639.

According to opposition sources, some members of the democratic forces won councillor's seats in the provinces. This has not changed, however, the overall situation on the election scene as in the predominant majority of constituencies there was no real choice between candidates as the average number of candidates per one seat was 1.04. As a result, the elected councils are loyal to the authorities and, as independent Belarusian commentators stress, the whole election process was exactly as during the Soviet era.

The election turnout of 79.2 percent can also be described as a reminder of the communist era. 24.9 per cent of the voters cast their ballots during the 5-day „early-ballot period” (9-13 January).

The authorities claim that the „early-ballot period” was introduced to make life easier for the electorate but the opponents of the regime argue that it was a perfect opportunity to forge election results.

Chairwoman of the Central Electoral Commission, Lidia Jarmoshina stressed that the election campaign proceeded peacefully and in „what was a surprising comfort for the organizers”. She said that only 17 complaints on minor electoral law violations were lodged with the Central Electoral Commission.

On the basis of reports by independent observers, representatives of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee said that the elections cannot be described as fulfilling democratic standards. A communique by the Foreign Affairs Ministry of Germany, which holds the current presidency in the European Union, contains similar conclusions.

Chairwoman of the Central Electoral Commission, Lidia Jarmoshina said that such critical remarks are not corroborated by the facts. „The Central Electoral Commission has no information pertaining to any arrests of politicians, police searches in the offices of political parties or any obstacles in access to election booths for candidates for councillors or observers”.

The opposition claims, however, that its ranks had been subjected to „pre-election purges”. The independent press cited instances of political opponents of the regime being detained. „Administrative arrest” has been used against some of them.

The leader of the opposition Belarusian National Front Vincuk Viaczorka described the election campaign as „technical”, both for the opposition and the authorities. Everything had been agreed upon beforehand, and the opposition used the campaign solely as an opportunity to organize meetings with the electorate.

Independent experts also stress that the opposition failed to display a sense of unity in these elections. The original idea of organizing a united campaign with a joint message to the electorate has failed to be translated into life.

Opposition leader Alaksandar Milinkievič said that the decision to combine the election campaign with the collection of signatures in support of delegates for the 2nd Congress of the Democratic Forces was a mistake. Many opposition leaders focused their activities on the latter task.

On 15 January the Political Council of the United Democratic Forces decided to give politicians rotating leadership in the opposition coalition. This is generally seen as an attempt to deprive Milinkievič of his leadership position. As a response, Milinkievič decided to rally support behind his efforts to create the „For Freedom” Movement. It seems that the chances for forming such a broad-based bloc are much smaller now than they were a year ago, on the wave of protests following the presidential elections.

On the economic front, experts predict that 2007 may be the last year of stability in Belarus. Skyrocketing prices for energy in a non-reformed economy are likely to provoke a crisis and exert a negative influence on the social sphere.

On 18 January, President of the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly René van der Linden, opened a visit to Minsk.

Some analysts claim that the West may be successful in using the difficulties suffered by the Minsk regime to force it to introduce some reforms. But there are also those who claim that Łukaŝenka is unable to change his mentality of an authoritarian ruler. ■

POLITICS

Belarus has a right to demand the withdrawal of Soviet bases

The Belarus government Respublika warns that following the Russian price hikes for energy the country has the right to demand that Russian bases be withdrawn from its territory.

The newspaper suggests that NATO is waiting to accept Belarus into its fold. This would pose a trap for Moscow, which is now putting pressure on Minsk. Respublika warns that NATO planes from Vitebsk airfield in Belarus would be able to reach the Russian city of Smolensk within five minutes. But the daily adds that the Belarusian nation and president won't allow this to happen.

An early warning base, which is capable of detecting incoming strategic missiles from a distance of 5,000 kilometres is based near Baranoviche. The radio technology centre of the Russian fleet is based in Vileyka. Belarus is also home to 42 airfields, where Russian combat aircraft can land. These facilities are available to Moscow free of charge.

OFFICIALLY

New Lithuanian ambassador to Belarus has been appointed

New Lithuanian ambassador to Belarus Edminas Bagdonas starts working on February 1st.

The president of Lithuania Valdas Adamkus appointed Bagdonas as the Lithuanian ambassador to Belarus on January 15th. During the official ceremony president Adamkus stated that „political processes which take place in Belarus are important for

the whole world society. Lithuania intends to continue its friendly relations with Belarus and help civic society in the country as it is responsible to its partners in the European Union and to the world's public opinion.

Edminas Bagdonas has worked for the Lithuanian Foreign Ministry for several years, also in Lithuanian embassy in Spain and for a while he was the president's advisor on international affairs.

Voter turnout 79%

Initial results say turnout at the local government elections in Belarus was 79% - informed Secretary of the Central electoral commission Mikalaj Łazavik.

24.9% of voters took part in the early ballot. On the main day of voting, January 15th, turnout was 54.1%; in the Mohylev district: 64.4%, Vitebsk district: 61.8%, Grodno district: 54.5%, Brest district: 53.8%, Homel district: 52% and Minsk city: 43.4%.

In comparison, turnout at the local government elections in 2003 was 73.4%, with 20.7% in the early voting. Participating in the presidential elections in 2006 were 92.9% voters and in the parliamentary elections in 2004 - 90.1% Belarusian citizens who have the right to vote, informed BelaPAN agency.

OPPOSITION

The leadership of the opposition coalition will be rotational

During the most recent meeting of the political council of the Democratic Forces voted a new resolution which introduces rotational presidency of the coalition.

As a result during the Second Congress of

the Democratic Forces there will be no election of the new leader of the coalition.

A representative of the Party of Belarusian Communists Aliena Skryhan stated in an interview for the BelPan press agency that: „Alaksandar Milinkievič has fulfilled his duties well but in a new political situation there is no need for one-man leadership. We must seek new solution”.

The current leader of the opposition Alaksandar Milinkievič stated previously that the new leader should be elected by the Second Congress of Democratic Forces which should take place in the end of February. If such an election takes place all the leaders of opposition parties would have to subordinate themselves to the new leader for the length of his term. The new rotational system of leadership in Belarusian opposition will emulate the system applied in the European Union.

ECONOMY

Crude oil at new prices reach Belarusian companies

Last Friday Belarusian oil refinery Mozir started receiving crude oil from Russia at new prices agreed by the two countries for 2007.

The refinery uses 25 thousand tons of crude oil daily. Deputy CEO of Mazyrski NPZ company for crude materials and production Siarhey Saladonikou informed that the company has not prepared estimates concerning the new situation resulting from change of crude oil from Russia in 2007.

The company has already sent the proposals of new prices of their products to Belnaftakhim for the internal market which take into consideration the new prices of crude oil.

Conflict over crude oil and gas impacts on housing construction

Grodno company "GrodnaZylBud" which monopolises housing construction in the region is putting a halt to new contracts until July 2007 at the earliest.

According to the company's financial director Anton Markievich, the company intends to realize only its contracts for 2006 because of uncertainties over future prices for construction materials, which are produced

using natural gas. The company's management is not able to predict how much costs will increase and so, until the situation clarifies, new contracts will not be accepted.

Experts say that if such tendencies spread to other regions in Belarus there may be an artificially-induced hike on housing prices in the country – informs European Radio for Belarus.

Russian-Belarusian talks on eliminating trade restrictions

Russian-Belarusian talks on abolishing trade restrictions, including Russian crude oil supplies to Belarus, are underway in Moscow.

A behind-closed-doors meeting of Prime Ministers started on Friday.

Agencies recall that the main problem, the resumption of crude oil transit through Belarus, which was halted on Monday, was resolved when Minsk pulled out from its earlier insistence that it would start charging customs fees for the transit.

Moscow explained its move to suspend pumping crude as a retaliatory move for Belarus siphoning off crude from the pipeline in lieu of the customs fees.

SOCIETY

Young people do not want to join the army

Over 6000 criminal enquiries will be prepared in cases of young citizens of Belarus who failed to report to draft boards on time.

The head of the General Office of Draft Organisation in Belarusian Armed Forces Ihar Hlod announced that documents concerning all such cases will be sent to the Interior Ministry and public prosecutor's office on February 1st. In the autumn 2006 6006 young men failed to face the draft boards.

The young men could avoid punishment if they met the appropriate boards until January 9th. Last year there were over 8 thousand such cases, 206 were fined. Ihar Hlod informed that majority of young people who failed to face the draft boards either study or work abroad.

However, in order to avoid punishment they need to register with Belarusian embassies in the countries where they currently reside.

Belarus interior ministry to abolish foreign travel and temporary residence permits

Belarusian authorities are planning to abolish foreign travel and temporary residence permits before the end of the year.

Belarus interior minister Uladzimir Naumav citizens will no longer be required to obtain a stamp in their ID card that authorizes them to travel abroad. The requirement will be lifted as soon as an automated border crossing registration system is introduced. One option currently being considered is that an ID card alone would be sufficient for foreign travel.

The interior minister also announced that temporary residence permits will be lifted, since more and more Belarusian citizens migrate in search of work. This is to be phased in as old passports are replaced by new ones. The process should commence no sooner than in 1.5-2 years" time.

Hurricanes in Belarus

1254 towns and villages in Belarus were hit by recent hurricanes, three people were injured.

An elderly woman was hit by a billboard overturned by the wind in downtown Minsk. In Soligorsk a group of people waiting for the bus was hit by the falling roof of a bus stop. Two people were seriously wounded and had to be taken to the hospital.

The Minsk and Hrodna regions were the most seriously hit. 500 towns and villages experienced power shortages while over a thousand shortages of gas. 102 houses were damaged as well as 564 farm buildings.

The Ministry of Emergencies directed 450 firemen units and approximately 2000 rescue workers to help removing the results of the hurricanes.

Pensioners waiting for official registration of their organisation bring out newspaper

The first issue of a low-circulation newspaper for pensioners appeared at the beginning of the New Year, published

by a new civic organisation bringing together older people.

The issue, brought out in 299 copies, has four pages in the A-4 format. Its front page features an appeal to the citizens of Belarus.

In the appeal, the initiators of a social organisation grouping older people and named "Stareyshina" present the priorities and main objectives of a movement intended as an alternative to the pro-government Veterans' Council.

Representatives of the organisation say that the fundamental aim of older people, whatever their political convictions, should be to preserve human dignity and respect for law.

For more than six months the organisation has made efforts to be officially registered. In July 2006 an initiative group filed a set of required documents with the Belarusian Justice Ministry but after three and a half months the application was rejected.

Last December two complaints against the rejection were lodged with the Supreme Court of the Republic of Belarus – informs the Association of non-governmental democratic organisations.

Lithuanian Court of Appeal orders extradition to Poland of Belarus citizen suspected of espionage

The Lithuanian Court of Appeal has ordered the extradition to Poland of Sierghey Monich, a Belarusian citizen suspected of espionage against Poland.

Lawyers for the defence argued that under an agreement between Poland and Lithuania, Belarusian citizens in the latter country enjoy the same rights as Lithuanian citizens, while the Lithuanian constitution bans the extradition of its citizens to other countries.

Siarhiej Monič was detained in Lithuania on November 25 on Poland's motion. He is currently in custody in Vilnius. His custody was extended until January 26. The Lithuanian State Security Department does not exclude that the Belarusian citizen could have also spied against Lithuania.

CULTURE

Carry on working

A German-Belarusian dictionary written and edited by Mikalaj Kurjanek is newly available in bookshops in Belarus.

The dictionary contains more than 50 thousand words, phrases and expressions. In the introduction the authors say that the dictionary may be fundamentally helpful to users translating into Belarusian texts in popular or official-political German.

That is why it could prove useful both to learners of German as well as those, who in the course of their work have to deal with a variety of linguistic styles.

The dictionary has been published by Żmicer Kolas publishers, who six months ago also brought out an English-Belarusian dictionary by Valancina Paškevič from Canada.

Polish premiere of „Kalinoŭski Square”

A new Belarusian documentary “Kalinoŭski Square” by Jury Chaščavacki had its premiere in Warsaw.

It tells the story of young Belarusians, presenting the motives that led them to Kalinoŭski (October) Square in Minsk following the rigged presidential elections.

The director wonders what brings together young people from big cities and small villages and how those living in the countryside view democracy and the changes taking place in the country.

The director calls the documentary an action movie. He describes the young as a new force that holds different values from the regime

and is not afraid to fight for its views. These young people can speak Belarusian well. They know their country’s history and they are calling for the revival of Belarusian culture – the director says.

Jury Chaščavacki’s earlier film „The Ordinary President” won acclaim in a number of foreign countries.

Second volume of two-part encyclopaedia on Grand Duchy of Lithuania published

The second part of an encyclopaedic work on the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in two volumes has been published in Minsk.

The encyclopaedia contains materials on the history of a multi-national state which existed in Eastern Europe for more than 500 years: from the beginning of the 13th to the close of the 18th century – informs BelTA agency.

The second volume contains information on important historical and international events which influenced the position of the Duchy in that time. Much space has been given to acts of law, and the structure of local and central government. The encyclopaedia also features the biographies of representatives of magnate and noble families, as well as prominent figures in cultural and religious life. Readers can also learn about the monetary system and fiscal policy in the Duchy. The book contains many illustrations, drawings, maps and plans.

The first volume of the encyclopaedia appeared in 2006. The published material was gathered from archives in Belarus, Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine. The encyclopaedia is the fruit of the labours of scholars from leading research institutions 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.

