



Newsletter

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The focus of the week was an energy security cabinet meeting organised by President Łukašenka on January 23 at the Naftan refinery in Novopolotsk. The course of the meeting resulted from Moscow's about-turn on natural gas and crude oil supplies to Belarus. According to Łukašenka, the state budget will be depleted by 3.5 billion US dollars. The meeting was devoted to ways of saving the petrochemicals industry, which used to bring Belarus hefty profit, but now teeters on the brink of bankruptcy.

Łukašenka intends to make Naftan appear attractive to foreign oil companies to lure them to co-operate with Belarus. He said it was necessary to stress the quality of oil processing, the quality of products, the alternative nature of energy sources and the efficient operation of all Belarusian companies.

The meeting was also focused on the state's economic strategy. The president ordered that the country's energy security be examined. Sources alternative to Russian sources were recommended, crude oil pumped from the Latvian port of Ventspils being one of them. Łukašenka spoke of the need to speed up work on the construction of a nuclear power station. He also outlined a series of cost-saving measures to draw foreign investment and develop private enterprise.

Observers detect signs of a new economic thinking emerging in Belarus. But experts are not so sure the regime is mentally ready to consistently implement reforms.

Łukašenka once again slammed Moscow for dictating prices to Belarus. Planned transit fees for Russian gas and oil were announced to make up for the Belarusian economic losses, as well as fees for the lease of land directly under Russian pipelines running across Belarus.

According to observers, this rhetoric indicates that the signing of an agreement on oil and natural gas supplies did nothing to lessen tensions between Minsk and Moscow. By making threats, the Belarus regime intends to force Russia to make concessions. At the same time, it looks like the concept of a Russian-Belarusian state has been finally laid to rest, which is good news to all those committed to an independent Belarus.

In the past few days, there has been a lot of talk of tentative bridges being laid between Minsk and the West. Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly leader Renee van der Linden was on a visit to Belarus January 18-20. His visit provoked an outrage among the Belarusian

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opposition. Its leaders argued that the regime should have been first pressured into meeting at least some small gestures to meet European demands for more democracy and less human rights abuses in Belarus.

The results of the visit appear very modest. Unofficial sources say Renee van der Linden refused to meet Łukašenka, because he was prevented from meeting ex-presidential candidate Alaksandar Kazulin, who the West regards as a political prisoner. Besides, the leader of the House of Representatives said that Belarus should not make any more effort to join the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly.

Observers believe, however, that not all the details about the dialogue were made public. Most probably, closer ties with Europe in solving energy problems might be on the cards, since both Brussels and Minsk are concerned over being made dependent on Russia.

Łukašenka expressed some interest in pursuing a dialogue with Europe in an interview for Die Welt published on January 25. He shrugged off accusations of being a dictator, while condemning what he termed as the imposition of standards of European democracy. According to Łukašenka Belarus has chosen its own path due to what he called „specific national interests”. He also said he thought that Belarusian society was not mature enough to be exposed to independent media.

Independent political scientists wonder whether Minsk is really ready to tighten relations with the West, or whether it is just toying with the idea of following a „third way” path of development. Even if the regime did agree to open up to the West, it would probably count on as many concessions as possible, without offering anything more than cosmetic changes in return.

At any rate, the influential Minsk analyst Andrey Fiodarau thinks, the regime has a chance of catching up with the civilized world, all the more so that a painful choice between Moscow and Brussels might very soon arise. Fiodarau ventures that the West must now be patient to try to slowly settle the Belarusian problem. ■

POLITICS

The Kremlin is afraid of Łukašenka

According to Nikolay Kuryanovich, an independent member of the Russian parliament, the Kremlin is afraid of president Alaksandar Łukašenka as they have seen through his plans.

The MP stated, quoting a „credible source of information”, that Łukašenka is willing to create a union Belarus and Russia on condition that he would become the Prime Minister of Russia.

„As a result of the approaching presidential election in Russia he may even become the president of the new union state” claims Kuryanovich. Such plans are a source of fear in the Kremlin. If the elites of the two countries cannot reach a compromise the formation of a union of the two states will be suspended. As he believes, the integration will not take place before March 2008 when the election of the president of Russian

Federation is scheduled. After the election the process will either speed up or will come to a halt.

Nikolay Kuryanovich stated that Russia should make Łukašenka an offer he would not be able to refuse – Belarus enters Russia with a special status, Łukašenka becomes the Prime Minister but does not have the right to run for presidency.

Belarusian defence minister on a visit to Iran

The first round of talks between Belarusian defence minister Leanid Malcaŭ and his Iranian counterpart Mostafa Mohammad-Najir.

The Belarusian defence minister continues his official visit to Iran. Mostafa Mohammed Najjar said that his resort aims to intensify cooperation with Belarus in the fields of defence and security. According to the Iranian minister of defence, both countries share similar views on international and regional situation. The Belarusian defence minister on his part said that his country is ready to strike a defence deal with the

Islamic Republic of Iran and added that Iran plays an important role in the regional and international policy.

Council of Europe urges the release of political prisoners in Belarus

Chairman of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe Rene van der Linden met Parliamentary Speaker Vladimir Kanoplyov.

During the meeting Rene van der Linden said that the Parliamentary Assembly cannot stand idly by in a debate concerning the the principles adopted by the Council of Europe. He added that observing these principles was vital for the European states. Rene van den Linden listed the rule of law, human rights and democracy as the principal values of European nations, stressing that the release of political prisoners is one of the preliminary conditions for a rapprochement between Belarus and Europe. He said that the Minsk authorities should make the first step. Vladimir Kanoplyov told the Council of Europe official that Belarus would like to renew its status of a country invited as a special guest at the Parliamentary Assembly.

OFFICIALLY

Radio Belarus enlarges transmissions in 2007

Radio Belarus has expanded transmissions in 2007 up to 19 hours daily, said the editor of the Belarusian Radio Foreign Service Navum Halpiarovič.

According to the BELTA press agency Radio Belarus transmits 9 hours of programmes in Belarusian, Russian, English and Polish and 10 hours daily in English on the internet live.

Naum Halpiarovich said that since 2007 Radio Belarus has a Polish language broadcast every day, while in the past years such programmes were transmitted only three times a week. The official site of Radio Belarus operates in all five languages of the broadcasts.

67 new religious communities

67 new religious communities were registered in Belarus in 2006, according to the plenipotentiary for religious denominations and nationalities of the

Council of Ministers, Leanid Hulaka.

The number of newly-registered religious communities in 2006 was 67. The corresponding number for 2004 was 103, and for 2005 – 58. According to the Council of Ministers official, 2006 brought no changes in the overall denominational structure in Belarus. The total number of religious organizations at the start of 2007 was 3.103 (of which 2.953 are the communes of the faithful). Western Belarus is the region of the highest level of religiousness. The number of religious communities there is 20 per cent higher than in the east of the country.

Old age pensioners must work

Over 1000 pensioners aged over 80 still work in Belarus. They are over 700 women and about 300 men.

According to the data provided by the Department of Labour and Social Security there are 2,5 million old age pensioners in Belarus, every fifth of whom still works. Specialist point out the increasing number of working pensioners.

According to Belarusian law women may retire at the age of 55, men at 60. There are no official plans of increasing the age thresholds. Deputy Labour minister Valerian Karol the state foresees an increase in the number of old age pensioners but no source for financing their pensions has been found so far.

OPPOSITION

Shadow cabinet starts work on the Constitution

The national executive of the united democratic forces has announced that a committee has started work on what was termed „the small Constitution”, which would contain a positive vision of Belarus.

According to shadow PM Anatol Labiedzka, the document will lay down constitutional law for the period of transition from the authoritarian regime to democracy. A series of round tables are planned in various regions of the country to involve medical doctors, army soldiers and pensioners. The draft document is to be examined during the democratic congress next March, later to be submitted for national debate. The small Constitution is also meant to provide an

election platform to the Belarusian parliament in 2008.

KGB tries to retrain young people

„Viasna” organization for the defence of human rights points to a growing number of attempts by the KGB to recruit young activists of the democratic movement.

A KGB collaborator contacted by phone today a member of the Belarusian National Front Youth Jan Davidovič. He was asked to report at 10 Lenin Street, room 10, to “talk about common friends”.

Similar proposals had earlier been made to Pavał Kraučanka, Nasta Aleksandrovič, Andrus Ihnatovitchcz, as well as to members of other opposition organizations in Belarus. In return for passing on information to the special services, KGB men offered higher marks in their studies and other benefits.

ECONOMY

Belarus seeks alternative oil transport routes

Belarus does not exclude the possibility of transporting crude to the Naftan oil concern from the Latvian port of Ventspils, Belarus deputy Prime Minister Uładzimir Siamaška has informed Alaksandar Łukašenka.

According to the deputy PM, the modernization of the pipeline could cost 15-30 million US dollars. The project would take two years to complete. During the energy conflict with Russia Łukašenka hinted that Belarus had obtained alternative offers from the EU and US.

Belarusian citizens increase purchase of hard currency

Belarusian pay cash to buy hard currency in banks. 2006 statistics point that citizens of Belarus have bought some 33% more of hard currency than in 2005, and the sum amounts to around 4, 218 billion USD.

Only in December last year 502.8 million USD were purchased. Statistics show that in 2006 some 907.5 million USD more were bought than sold to banks.

22% of enterprises in Belarus register losses

In January-November 2006 period, 22.6 per cent of enterprises in Belarus registered losses, a drop of 0.6 per cent on 2005 – says a report by the Ministry of Statistics and Analyses.

2006 was a non-profit year for 517 production enterprises in Belarus. Their total losses amounted to 302 billion Belarusian roubles. Food processing plants (72,6 bln), engineering equipment plants (69,9 bln), and light industry factories (67,7 bln) are at the top of the list, followed by paper industry, forestry and timber processing.

The profitability in the production and services spheres was 15.6 per cent for the November-December period. The most profitable enterprises are those in the extraction and processing of crude oil and the chemical industry.

SOCIETY

Trial of Mieczysław Jaśkiewicz postponed

Court of Justice in Hrodna postponed until January 30th the trial of Polish activist Mieczysław Jaśkiewicz.

The official reason was absence of several witnesses but representatives of the Union of Poles claim that the authorities were afraid of protests of friends of Jaskiewicz who gathered in the courtroom. They were approximately 150 people present.

Jaskiewicz is a close co-worker of Andzelika Borys, the president of the Union not recognized by Belarusian authorities. He faces up to three years behind the bars. Jaskiewicz is accused of attacking a man in a bus stop in Hrodna. He claims he is innocent and the whole trial is a provocation. A journalist from Hrodna told the Polish Radio that since the conflict between Belarusian authorities and the Union of Poles started this is the first case of using Penal Code regulations against a Polish activist.

New tasks for the press

Ideologists in Mohilev are dissatisfied with small number of critical articles in state media.

They expect the journalists to increase the

„ideological level” of the mass media.

The head of the ideology department of the Mohylev province Valery Ilankoŭ stated that majority of press articles and radio broadcasts are of secondary character, while newspapers an insignificant amount of critical articles. The official also expressed his satisfaction at the contents of the social and economic articles. He also appealed to the journalists to pay a special attention to the ideological level of their newspapers and websites.

At the same time journalists of few independent media which publish critical materials constantly complain about the pressure from the authorities. Journalists claim they are forced to practice self-censorship.

The vicar of „New Life” Man of the year

Vicar of the Belarusian protestant church New Life Viačasłaŭ Hančarenka was granted the Man of the Year title by the Christian portal In Victory.

Each year the portal selects people who had an impact on Russian language Christianity. Hancharenko was awarded the title Hero of the Year, for his unprecedented fight in the post soviet era- a hunger strike in defence of the church building.

The issue of the church building ownership has not been clarified. A trial continues against the authorities of Minsk, and the verdict is to be known by January 23rd.

200,000+ Belarusians to lose jobs

Private businessmen in Belarus are reported to be worried over the president’s latest decree 760. They fear

that the new piece of legislation will ruin the livelihood of thousands of small traders.

The decree, which was signed late last year, imposes serious restrictions on small business operations. From April 1 private trade in household electronics, white goods and leather products will be banned. From January 1 2008 small businesses will only be allowed to employ the closest family members.

From 2009 the present VAT collection system will be abolished.

As a result of the decree, the ranks of the unemployed could swell by up to 200,000, since all employees who are not the company owners’ closest family would need to be laid off.

CULTURE

Belarusian girl runner-up in the world beauty contest

15-year-old Viktoryja Machota of Minsk placed second in the prestigious „Supermodel of the World” contest in New York on 17 January.

The Belarusian entrant outclassed a field of forty participants from around the world. The Dutch entrant came first and the Danish model placed third. In addition to 150,000 USD in cash, Viktoryja Machota has been offered a year-long contract with the Ford Models agency.

Viktoryja attends a school in Minsk and has had no previous experience in modelling. Kaciarina Damankova of Belarus won the Supermodel of the World contest last year. It is open to girls in the 14-20 age bracket. The first contest was held 25 years ago.



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.

