



Newsletter

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The most important event in Belarus in recent days was the European Parade on 14 October organized by the opposition. According to different evaluations, 5,000 to 7,000 participants took part in it.

The European Parade was a test for the opposition, as well as for state authorities.

The opposition promised a turnout of 20,000 to support massive support for the European integration in Belarus. Observers emphasize that the turnout was negatively affected by the authorities' tactics of preventive arrests. All over Belarus tens of democratic activists were arrested on charge of using swear words in public places (analysts have already dubbed this standard charge the "authorities' repressive know-how").

Apart from that, pupils, students and other potential participants in the Parade were given "educational lectures". All of that conflated with the usual fear of baton charges and being put behind bars. It definitely discouraged many people from showing their support for European ideals.

On the other hand, many analysts account for the low turnout at the Parade saying that for common people there are things of greater importance (e.g. sausage) than the abstract idea of European integration. It turns out that the opposition lacks concretes and convincing arguments while agitating for the pro-European option. Their success is also undoubtedly hampered by the lack of possibility of obtaining information on the subject.

As for the tactics employed by the authorities, quite unexpectedly for the observers, they decided not to block the October Square in the city center, where the opposition traditionally attempts to begin the marches. According to analysts, the authorities in Minsk were trying to show the West that they are ready to handle the inner political opposition more calmly. In the context of negotiations with Gazprom concerning the supplies of Russian gas in 2008, Belarusian authorities will need, if not loyalty, then at least some sort of friendliness of Brussels.

17 October the ambassador of Russia to Belarus, Alexander Surikov, estimated the price to be around \$ 125 for 1,000 square meters. Economists say this is the optimistic forecast. Political scientists explain, that it would be unreasonable for Moscow to spoil relations to Belarus during the election marathon (parliamentary elections are due this December and presidential elections will be held March next year). It is because of the fact that for a substantial number of

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Russian voters the ideals of “Slavic unity” and “brotherly integration” are still of great importance.

It is precisely stereotypes of the sort that the Belarusian president was trying to use during a press conference organized for the Russian journalists on 12 October. Alexander Lukashenko reminded them of the traditional fight of the two nations against raids from the West and he emphasized Belarus’ readiness to remain Russia’s strategic shield in this territory. He also hinted at the need of friendly economic relations of Russia and Belarus and, most importantly, of low prices of energy sources.

The Belarusian leader criticized Moscow’s plans concerning the building of the North European Pipeline on the bottom of the Baltic Sea and instead proposed expanding the Yamal pipeline by another thread that would stretch over Belarus to Europe. Lukashenko declared that if Russia conceded, it would not have to pay transit fees for the period of five years.

Independent experts emphasize that another thread of the Yamal pipeline would cost Russia about 3 or 4 times less than the North European pipeline. But in their opinion it is unlikely that Russia should give up on its plan to build a pipeline circumventing Belarus. It is worth reminding that apart for the North European pipeline, Russia has also planned to build the Uniecha-Primorsk oil pipeline, which will be an alternative to the Belarusian route (currently around 80 million tons of Russian oil are pumped through Belarus).

And thus, after a few energy conflicts, which have already been dubbed “gas wars”, Moscow is ready to incur extra costs in order to diminish the dependence on Belarus in terms of energy transit to Western Europe. This was confirmed, albeit not directly, by the Russian president, who, soon after Lukashenko’s press conference, declared that the Baltic pipeline will be built according to the plan.

## POLITICS

### European Parade in Minsk

**For the first time in several years the police have not prevented activists from gathering on the October Square.**

Around 5,000 people took part in the European Parade. The participants gathered at the October Square, from where, led by Alexander Milinkevich, they headed for the Academy of Sciences. Several times they tried to march off the pavement onto the streets but road police pushed them back to the pavement, which caused some rough and tumble. However, no-one was arrested. Probably for the first time in many years no police officers were to be seen in the streets of Minsk. They were replaced with KGB workers dressed as civilians.

The event ended in the Park of Freedom Among Nations. Around 1,000 participants took part.

The leader of the “For Freedom” movement Alexander Milinkevich thanked Belarusians for their participation in the European Parade.

“We have showed that the opposition is to be taken seriously by the authorities. But let’s not forget the tens of activists detained and unfairly sentenced in the eve of the European Parade. Let’s not forget political prisoners and repressions against the Belarusian society”, said Milinkevich.

The European Parade has begun the campaign of united democratic forces, whose objective is spreading information concerning European perspectives for Belarus. The campaign will continue on

4 November with the Social Parade, also to be held in the streets of Minsk.

## OFFICIAL

### Lukashenka didn't sign the social services bill

**As of yet Alexander Lukashenka hasn't signed the social services bill. As his press service informs, Lukashenka ordered a debate during which "problems connected with social services will be discussed thoroughly".**

It is worth reminding that meaningful social help should to some extent replace the benefits and reliefs for those who live on less than a minimum wage.

## OPPOSITION

### After the European Parade it's time for Social Parade

**The organizers of the Social Parade are counting on a dialogue with the authorities, informs the BielaPAN Agency. "The case concerns making the Parade happen", said Valery Uchnalou, head of the Organizational Committee.**

15 October a letter containing an offer to settle the matters concerning the organization of the event as well as the state's social policy was sent to the President's administration.

"We expect to be able to get into contact with the authorities. The organizers of the Parade are resolved to collect as many as 300 signatures under appeals to individual MPs. Each MP will then be obliged to hold a meeting with their voters explaining why a bill was passed depriving the majority of Belarusian society of social services", declared Uchnalou.

The organizers applied for permission to hold the Parade at the municipal executive committee on 21 September. The Parade is planned to take place 4 November – its route stretches from the October Square to the National Library.

## ECONOMY

### Belarus introduces unusually high customs duties

**Customs duty on a plasma TV is € 1,000.**

On Christmas Day, i.e. in 2 months' time, President Alexander Lukashenka's regulation No#503 "On reliefs for transporting goods for individual use over the customs border" will come into force. The regulation will significantly increase customs duty on the most popular products, which are very often brought from abroad.

The National Customs Committee explains that such measures were taken in order to legalize the turnover of many good which are currently transported as goods for individual use and are subsequently sold on the black market. Another reason for doing so is forcing citizens to buy Belarusian products.

Currently one can transport up to 50 kilograms load without paying customs duty. Under the new regulation it will only be up to 36 kilograms, because one cannot transport more when traveling on a train anyway.

But the new regulation also features some treats. As of Christmas they there will be no customs duty on vacuum-cleaners and VCR's as long as they are for individual use.

But the best part is that instead of 1 liter, one will be able to transport 2 liters of alcohol through the border without paying the customs duty. Which is of considerable importance, since in European stores 1 liter of Finlandia vodka costs around \$12, while in Minsk it costs \$ 43. However, beer with over

7% voltage will be included in the 2 liters. The Customs Committee is not keeping the numbers confidential. In two months' time customs duty on a microwave oven will be € 25, on a refrigerator - € 50, on construction materials - € 4 per kilogram, on LCD screen (19 inches and more) - € 110. Whereas if one wants to transport a big plasma TV into Belarus, one has to part with € 1000.

Experts think that new regulations will stimulate the people to find loopholes and various ways of circumventing them. "There have been cases when the husband transported the casing of a washing machine, while the wife transported the engine and thus they avoided paying the customs duty as none of them were transporting a load heavier than 50 kilos", informs a Polish Radio correspondent in Minsk.

## SOCIETY

### An Orthodox cross was put up at the tombs of those killed at Homel

**An Orthodox cross was put up at the mass tombs of people shot in the vicinity of Homel. This was an initiative of the authorities. It is worth reminding, that in May this year sappers from the Ministry of Defense found more graves of the massacre's victims.**

It has been officially declared that they may have been the victims of the fascist

occupants. However, social activists have proven that people were shot by the NKVD before the war and even witnesses from local community have been found. As a result, experts have not given a clear answer as to whose tombs these are and when the people were shot. It was the district executive committee's (District Council) initiative to put up the cross, which was consecrated by an Orthodox clergyman. Among those present at the ceremony were a representative of the Ministry of Defense, vice-chairman of the district executive committee (District Council) as well as member of the Belarusian Republican Youth Association.

## CULTURE

### Publishing of the "Fatherland" calendar in the Belarusian language suspended

**From the beginning of the next year the publishing of the "Fatherland" calendar in the Belarusian language will be suspended. The state-owned publishing house "Belarus" declared it is causing losses, due to a very low selling rate.**

Of the 7,000 copies printed in 2006 only 1,500 were sold. On the other hand, some bookstore employees claim that many people bought it. However, advertising was insufficient and the calendar was not published on time.



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

