

On February, 12 the president of the Republic of Belarus Aliaksandar Lukashenka addressed the students of the Belarusian State University with the report on the issue of “Belarus in Modern World”. The lecture seems to be a programmatic one and to reflect certain changes in the foreign policy of the country at the current stage, the major influence being the evolution of Russian stance.

Independent analysts believe that the growing pressure from the side of Moscow makes Mensk search for new allies (Venezuela is a priority partner) and enter a new stage of political fiddling with the West. In particular, Lukashenka has acknowledged in his address that the pre-term release of four political prisoners (the president used a euphemism to name them) is a step towards fulfilling the demands of Europe. Thus, according to the Belarusian president, the “painful issue” in Belarusian-EU relations is resolved and now Belarus awaits reciprocal goodwill gestures from the side of Europe.

It should be noted that on February, 13, in a week’s time, Mensk took another step when president Lukashenka signed an edict providing for the opening of the European Commission office in Mensk.

However, according to the representatives of civil society, jailed remain a number of other people whose criminal sentences are politically motivated, namely Aliaksandar Kazulin, Andrei Klimau, Aliaksandar Zdzvishkou, Andrei Kim. As for fulfilling other 11 conditions set up by the EU in late 2006, they are not even on the agenda.

The suggestion that “the painful issue” should be “left in the past” means that the Belarusian authorities plan to confine themselves with as few concessions and semi-measures as possible, believe the analysts. All the more that other statements of the president, voiced at the meeting with the students, clarify that he is not up to liberalizing the internal political arrangement in the country.

Meanwhile, judging by secondary symptoms, it is possible to suppose that at the Sochi meeting on February, 3 Aliaksandar Lukashenka was vehemently pressurized by the Russian side. It seems probable that the Kremlin has chosen the strategy of creeping economic expansion rather than of direct political incorporation with relation to Belarus. Analysts mull over the behind-the-scene political pledges made by the Belarusian leader. For example, there is an opinion that Mensk would forfeit the shares of lucrative Belarusian enterprises to the representatives of the Russian big business.

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A number of observers in Minsk and Moscow believe that the current ruling Russian elite do not regard the Anschluss of Belarus as an end in itself. The Kremlin is not dominated by the USSR nostalgia but is rather acting in a pragmatic way. That is why the Russian authorities promote the interests of Russian capital, which seem to be primarily financial. The Russians slowly buy up the shares of Belarusian banks and insurance companies.

Analysts believe that Belarus is facing a “financial loop”. In particular, credit debt to Moscow is growing. By the end of the previous year the government has secured a credit of one and a half billion US dollars, while Moscow is promising another one amounting to two billion USD. Moreover, Russian ambassador Alexander Surikov claimed at the press-conference in Minsk on February, 11 that Russia was willing to provide a credit to finance the building of the Belarusian atomic power plant.

Experts underscore that any credit needs to be paid back with interest on it. At the same time, the external debt of Belarus is sky-rocketing. In a number of years the debt may become insurmountable. At that stage the Kremlin may transfer financial leverage into political power, forcing Minsk to sacrifice at least part of its sovereignty.

These intentions were indirectly prompted by the Russian president Vladimir Putin at a big press-conference on February, 14. After a long halt, the Kremlin re-animated the resonant rhetoric of integration. Putin named the creation of the so-called “union state” with Belarus a priority of the foreign policy of his country.

“In my opinion, this should be first of all economic integration”, underscored Putin. In other words, the analysts proved right in forecasting the Kremlin’s strategy of creeping economic expansion.

It is indicative that central to Putin’s message on cooperation with Belarus is the issue of single currency or, to put it plainly, Belarus’ switching to the Russian rouble. “Today, when the Russian financial system is highly stable, I am sure that this will be a boon for Belarusian economy”, believes the head of the neighbouring state. Meanwhile, not only the opposition, but also Lukashenko himself has a number of times stated that introducing the Russian rouble imperils the Belarusian sovereignty.

However, the Russian leadership does not want to depend on the capricious Belarusian partner on the issue of transiting gas and oil. At the press-conference held on February, 11 ambassador Surikov made it clear that the project of constructing the second line of Jamal-Europe gas pipe (of which the Belarusian authorities expected to profit) is currently of little interest for the Russian side. Surikov has confirmed the Russian intention to build a gas pipe “Nord Stream” passing over Belarus over the bottom of the Baltic Sea – the idea which Aliaksandar Lukashenko had earlier passionately dubbed “the dumbest” Russian project.

Under the conditions of uneasy ties with Moscow, the Belarusian leadership is slowly materialising the long-ago declared principle of multidimensional foreign policy. Stressed is the alliance with the so-called “long arch of foreign policy”, including China, Iran, Venezuela as well as on “pragmatic dialogue” with the EU. Minsk expects that the interest in cooperation in the spheres of energy, fighting illegal immigration and ecology will force the West to alleviate its rigid position concerning democracy and human rights.

However, some commentators believe that the current multilateralism in foreign policy is totally fake and is aimed only at “squeezing” economic preferences from Moscow, which dreads the idea of losing the only strategic ally.

POLITICS

The Political Council of United Democratic Forces Approved Strategy of Participation in the Parliamentary Election 2008

The strategy of participation in the coming Parliamentary election 2008 got approved by the Political Council of United Democratic Forces during a meeting in Miensk on February 10, 2008

The Political Council leadership has urged the state authorities to put into life at least the minimum standards of democratic elections. Thus, it is suggested that the regime in power has to stop persecutions of political opponents, release the political prisoners, allow the UDF representatives to enter the election committees and get registered as candidates to MPs and observers.

The Political Council of United Democratic Forces emphasized that in case the conditions are not met by the state authorities, the elections to the Chamber of Representatives won't be fair and transparent. The election results will not be accepted by the international community, the Belarusian society and democratic forces.

OFFICIALLY

"Amnesty International" Call to Free Zdzvishkou

Former Deputy Editor-in-Chief of "Zhoda" newspaper has been sentenced to three years in prison for "inciting racial, national and religious hatred".

The activists of the international human rights organisation believe Zdzvishkou is a prisoner of conscience while by re-printing the caricatures of Prophet Mohammad the journalist effected his right for the freedom of expression. According to the address of "Amnesty International", the court verdict was opposed even by the leadership of the Muslim Union of Belarus.

"Amnesty International" calls upon all the people who care about personal freedom to send Zdzvishkou the letters of support to the pre-trial facility as well as demand freeing of the journalist from the Belarusian president, the Chief Prosecutor and the Minister of the Interior.

Profession for the Chosen

The applicants for a number of specialities in the Belarusian universities will face special requirements as well as be obliged to undergo a professional-technical test.

The list of specialities comprises state administration, international relations, international law, journalism and border service. It was initially planned that the applicants for these faculties should possess a special recommendation from local authorities. However, this point was omitted from the edict signed by Aliaksandar Lukashenka.

Apart from the above-mentioned alterations, other acceptance rules for higher and professional educational establishments were altered. According to the edict, the term of filing documents for both the paid and budget-sponsored form of education is being curtailed. The number of applicant categories possessing the right for out-of-competition enrolment has also been slashed. From now on only orphans and the victors of republican and international Olympiads will enjoy this privilege.

OPPOSITION

Opposition to Propose Alterations to Election Legislation

The representatives of Belarusian opposition parties will prepare their suggestions to improve the electoral legislation.

The findings will be directed to the Central Election Committee, international structures as well as be spread among Belarusian citizens.

However, the activists do not hope that the Central Election Committee embraces their proposed amendments. They intend to change public sentiment, which is to be founded on objective information.

Opposition parties suggest that the order of electoral committees forming be changed, propitious conditions for the work of observers be created, electoral campaign with equal opportunities for all the candidates be organised and fair vote count be conducted.

Milinkevich Met with Mensk Electors

Late on February, 12 a meeting of Aliaksandar Milinkevich with the electors of Mensk Pershamajski district took place. At 6 a.m. Aliaksandar Milinkevich with a group of supporters arrived at the building of the district administration.

As the request had been filed beforehand, the politician expected that he and his electors would be allowed into the assembly hall. However, Aliaksandar Milinkevich was refused the permission to enter the building. Thus, the meeting appeared to be spontaneous and took place at the entrance to the administration.

As it was rather cold outside, the politician stated that he would not keep the people standing for a long time. Aliaksandar Milinkevich reported in 20 minutes about his activity, foreign trips and prospects of Europe decreasing visa costs.

Present at the meeting were a number of militiamen as well as several security service agents in civil clothes. In 20 minutes the meeting was over.

ECONOMY

MAZ to Lay out Thousands?

According to Nasha Nova, which was referring to the site Expertby, Minsk Automobile Plant is facing over-the-board layoffs which will touch upon five thousand people.

The move is connected to the planned purchase of the plant. Layoffs are to be

conducted before the enterprise is sold, according to the conditions of the buyer. Thus, the responsibility for the unpopular decision will be taken up by the government, which so far remains the owner of the plant. The representatives of MAZ management have denied the information.

SOCIETY

Entrepreneurs to Come out with Tents and Sleeping-bags

Entrepreneurs will get to the Kastychnitskaja square on March, 25 with tents, according to the representatives of Baranavichy private proprietors.

During the meeting with the authorities the entrepreneurs have demanded to lower the taxes and the rent as well as to put forward a delegate representing their interests. They have decided to send a letter to president Lukashenka requesting to cancel his edict № 760. If the president does not listen to the entrepreneurs, they are ready to stage protests in Mensk on February, 18 and March, 25, says the leader of Baranavichy entrepreneurs Mikalaj Charnavus.

Mr. Charnavus claims that if President does not concede, the proprietors will arrive at the square with sleeping-bags and tents on February, 18 and March, 25.

The entrepreneurs demand that the protest rally held in Baranavichy on February, 11 be recognized legal. At that protest action a number of Youth Front activists and Mikalaj Charnavus himself were detained. A trial in their case is scheduled for February, 22.

CULTURE

"Unity" Presenting Debut Album

The Holy Cross Exaltation Church in Berastse saw the presentation of the debut album of the religious music group "Unity" titled "Not Afraid Because I Love"

The first album was comprised of the songs on religious issues.

The group “Unity” was founded in 1998 at the Holy Cross Exaltation Church and is made up of Catholic youth of the town. During the presentation the group presented 100 copies of their first disc to the Church. The money received as a result of selling the discs will be utilized for the renovation of the alter in the Berastse Church.

The repertory of the group is made up of the songs written in the Belarusian, Polish and Russian languages. During the musical events young people perform their songs accompanied by the guitar. Apart from religious songs the group “Unity” has a number of songs devoted to 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 site belarus-live fills this gap. The site allows to order weekly reception of news in English, Polish, Belarusian, Russian.

