

The most heatedly debated issue in the social-political life of the country has lately been the standoff over the politician Aliaksandar Kazulin and his family.

Kazulin was found guilty of organising mass unrest and received five and a half year prison term in a strict regime colony immediately after the presidential elections of 2006 where he was a contender. Many observers thought that the term came as the revenge for the harsh criticism of the head of state.

Nowadays Kazulin is being named “political prisoner №1”. During the last several weeks a number of prisoners have been released who the West believes to be the prisoners of conscience. However, the final release of all the political prisoners stumbled over Kazulin. Nevertheless, the West sets the release of all such prisoners as a preliminary condition for establishing dialogue with the official Mensk.

On February, 23 Aliaksandar Kazulin’s wife Iryna died of cancer. According to the legislation, Aliaksandar Kazulin could have been granted a leave of up to seven days with no travel included. However, the authorities had been dragging the issue before allowing a three-day-leave.

Analysts note that in this situation the top authorities have chosen the worst option politically, save the moral side of the issue.

In particular, there was a chance for final release of Kazulin under the tragic conditions. That could allow the authorities to simultaneously save the countenance in its view (namely, “we did not stoop to the Western pressure but rather showed humaneness”) and at the same time score a point in a political game with the EU and the US.

The authorities were able to secure temporal release for the “prisoner №1” immediately, without any conditions and foot-dragging. In this case one could avoid public outrage and corresponding statements from the side of international institutions.

In the end, the authorities yielded to internal and external pressure after Kazulin and both his daughters went on hunger-strike. The funeral was postponed, actions of solidarity sprang up all over the country which were also supported from abroad. Even the apolitical electoral was shocked by the amoral stance of the authorities.

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Independent observers believe that the leaders of the country have significantly undermined own image in the eye of their base in the course of these several days. The reasons for such behaviour of the leadership of the country are the fear of Kazulin who attempted a radical political move as well as the unwillingness to “show own weak spots” to the electorate.

On the other side, analysts note that the authorities conceded not only because of the activity of international community and internal protests, but also due to mounting circumstances, which bode ill for them. It is primarily explained by a latent economic and political encroaching of Russia and the general deterioration of economic situation. On February, 27 it was stated at the board meeting in Foreign Ministry that the negative external trade balance of Belarus had reached 2,75 billion USD.

In 2007 inflation reached 12,1%, which is two times as much as was in the previous year. Consumer prices surge is still continuing as only in January they went up 2,5%. People close to the government report about the preparation of a document on another increase in purchasing prices for milk and meat, which will inevitably lead to the increase in consumer prices for these products.

Such menacing economic development have propelled Lukashenka's interest in normalising relation with the West in order to receive a flow of investment, search for energy alternatives etc. Thus, Brussels and Washington receive certain leverage to influence “the last dictatorship of Europe”, believe independent analysts. However, they warn against euphoric moods in relation to this.

Firstly, the authorities have not dared finally release Kazulin. Some experts believe that he remains a trump in Lukashenka's deck which is being reserved for the future. At the press-conference before returning to the colony Mr. Kazulin himself claimed that he would not be released by March, 25, which is the date when in 1918 Belarusian People's Republic was proclaimed. March, 25 is a major holiday for democratic-minded people named Freedom Day, celebrating the creation of an entity which the opposition believes to be a crucial milestone in building up Belarusian statehood, while officials dub BPR “puppet state”.

Secondly, even releasing all the political prisoners is not enough for the political situation in the country to change. National legislation still contains a number of repressive articles which may be handpicked for the criminal persecution on the basis of political affiliation. However, the electoral legislation and especially its application leaves virtually no space for the opponents of the current regime to stand a chance at the parliamentary elections most likely taking place on September, 28.

POLITICS

USA and EU Expect Kazulin to Be Released

The statement of the US Department of State contains expectations concerning a definitive and final release of Aliaksandar Kazulin as well as sympathy with relation to the death of his wife Iryna, reports the internet-site of “Nasha Niva”.

According to the press-secretary of the US State Department Tom Casey, it was important that his release of the prisoner was final. If Kazulin is released pre-term, “the US would be ready to start a dialogue with Belarus concerning further steps on improvement of bilateral cooperation”.

The EU member-states are also closely following the situation in Mensk.

The members of the EU Committee on International Relations of the European parliament headed by Jacek Saryush-Wolski demanded for the final release of Aliaksandar

Kazulin. However, they commented on the fact that the authorities were not granting permission for the politician to be present at his wife's funeral as being scandalous and inhumane.

OFFICIALLY

Constitutional Act Draft Ready

The head of the Chamber of Representatives Vadzim Papou stated to a BelTA correspondent that the Draft of the Constitutional Act of the Unified State is ready to be examined at the Supreme State Council.

"I believe that after the Russian elections and the inauguration of the new Russian president we will have the opportunity to discuss the draft", added Mr. Speaker.

If the Supreme State Council endorses the document, Belarus and Russia will have to pass through the stage of a referendum when popular vote will decide the fate of the document.

Vadzim Papou underscored that "if the Supreme State Council decides it necessary to look into the issue of presidential administration, the Committee would be ready to do so".

Fixed Military Service Duration Reduced

The duration of fixed military service in the Belarusian army is to be reduced, says the Minister of Defence Leanid Maltsau at a press-conference for journalists.

However, the minister underscored that the military draft would not be lifted, which means that army service would remain compulsory.

Leanid Martynau stated that the duration of military service would go down from 18 months to a year. Now young men having no education are obliged to serve 18 months, while those having higher education – 12 months.

Defence Minister has also stated that 1,33% of Belarusian GDP was allocated for armament in 2007.

OPPOSITION

Kazulin Meeting EU Ambassadors

Yesterday Aliaksandar Kazulin met with a number of ambassadors of the EU member-states, which was confirmed to the Belarusian Radio by his lawyer Ihar Rynkevich. However, Aliaksandar Kazulin himself did not mention the details of the meeting.

Ihar Rynkevich: The meetings took place, notwithstanding the fact that public meetings were reserved for Thursday. Nevertheless, after certain arrangements he met with a number of ambassadors, of which Aliaksandar Kazulin himself has not spoken so far.

Franak Viachorka Hopes to Avoid Conscription

Franak Viachorka, a BPF Party activist is making attempts at avoiding conscription to the obligatory military service. The political activist connects his expulsion from the Belarusian State University with a draft, which is planned to be started shortly.

F. Viachorka: "The draft starts in March... I believe that everything has been planned. They put me behind bars in January and expelled from university for the arrest. I'm pretty sure the conscription office is getting ready to give me call-up papers".

ECONOMY

The State Has to Decide How Much Private Entrepreneurs Have to Pay to Employees

The Ministry on Taxes and Charges proposes to revise the minimal level of payroll, which an employer has to pay to its workers.

The Deputy Minister on Taxes and Charges of Belarus Vasil Kamienka noted that there were cases, when the salaries were below the

living-wage or weren't issued at all. The institution prepared a draft of a corresponding document that introduces the minimal sum of salary, the individual entrepreneur has to pay out to its workers as well as the responsibility for failing to meet this requirement.

SOCIETY

Medical Staff Shortage in Minsk

The number of doctors and nurses is presently insufficient in the Belarusian capital. This problem was dwelt upon during a round table discussion on the importance of development of family medical care in the country.

The system of Belarusian polyclinics lacks around 400 medics, including both GPs and such particular specialists as traumatologists, surgeons, and endocrinologists.

Although, the graduates of Minsk Medical University prefer to stay in the capital, the prestige of work at the polyclinics remains to be rather low, and certain measures have to be taken in order to attract new specialists to the system.

According to a recent decision of Minsk City Council, some categories of medics will enjoy 8% surcharge to their salaries, if they decide to work in the hospitals and polyclinics, located in Minsk. Moreover, a family dormitory for doctors will be built in Minsk

in the near future. The absence of accommodation is the main obstacle that prevents regional medics from coming to the capital.

50 Thousand Signatures in Support of Freedom of Conscience

The representatives of organizational committee on founding the Belarusian Christian Democracy movement have passed more than 50,000 signatures to the Presidential Administration.

The people protest against a highly repressive law "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations", adopted by the Belarusian legislative authorities not long ago.

Previously, the signatures had been passed to the Constitutional Court and the Chamber of Representatives of Belarus.

CULTURE

Leo Sapieha's 450th Anniversary: Essay Contest Results Evaluated

A ceremony of summarizing the results of an essay contest for pupils, dedicated to the 450th anniversary of Leo Sapieha, the Great Chancellor of the Great Duchy of Litva was held in Minsk on February 28, 2008.

Numerous schoolchildren wrote about the Great Chancellor's political and social activity on the European stage.



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.

