

A range of diverse events that took place during the reporting period, including the appearance of a new President of Russia in the Kremlin, a visit of the Chief Deputy Prime-Minister of Ukraine Alaksandar Turchynau to Miensk, cancellation of the “golden” share and the first TV-Bridge Miensk–Vatican are most likely to exert influence on the situation in Belarus within the coming several months.

Judging by behaviour of Belarusian state-owned media and rare commentaries of Belarusian governmental officials, Dmitry Medvedev’s victory at the recent Presidential election in Russia has been met by the Belarusian official side without a mere sign of brotherly admiration.

As soon as Putin declared that the new President had had direct relation to elaboration of Russia’s policy in the CIS, the Belarusian top authorities understood it even more clearly that the Belarusian part of the virtual Union State had nothing promising to expect from the former Head of “Gasprom” Board of Directors.

Numerous observers are inclined to think that the relations between Belarus and Russia will be constructed in accordance with the previous scheme during D. Medvedev’s presidency. However, they note that Putin and Lukashenka had vividly controversial personal relations. It is no secret that they do not cherish kindly feelings for each other.

However, taking into account the solution of the recent energy conflict through issuing a large Russian credit to Belarus, it is practically for sure that the Russian stick and the carrot policy in relation to Belarus will be continued, as the present-day Belarus cannot be competitive in the market with the current global costs for energy resources. Consequently, it will require certain financial backing. It means that Belarus will be gradually getting into the Russian debt. It will be a completely different situation and it will be extremely hard for the highly restive Lukashenka to express his discontent further on.

According to D. Medvedev, he will take his first foreign trip in the Presidential status to a CIS member-country. The Belarusian state-owned media diligently emphasized that having congratulated D. Medvedev with his victory in the Presidential election, A. Lukashenka invited him officially to visit Belarus and that the invitation was accepted by the Russian newly-elected head of state.

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However, some experts believe that S. Medvedev is likely to pay the first official visit to Kazakhstan or Turkmenistan.

If D. Medvedev doesn't choose Belarus for his first official visit, a part of Belarusian officialdom and businessmen, completely tired of dictatorship, may regard the step as a signal of real hope. At the same time, it will be a signal of great anxiety for Lukashenka himself.

It should be noted that literally in a day after Medvedev's victory, the President of Belarus cancelled the special right of the state to take part in the management of economic subjects, i.e. the so-called 'golden share'.

Officially, the 'golden share' was withdrawn in order to foster "creation of favorable conditions for attracting direct foreign investments to the real sector of Belarusian economy and achieve the forecast parameters of economic development in the year of 2008 as well as to improve the international rating of Belarus and defend investors' rights in the equity market."

The Belarusian democratic opposition activists believe that Lukashenka was pressurized by the Kremlin to take the decision, as the Russian governmental officials appear to be lobbying the interests of large-scale Russian capital. The 'golden share' used to exist in Belarus since 1997. The 'golden share' usage conditions and the corresponding authorities of state institutions were broadened in 2004. Still, it was decided to abstain from using the 'golden share' in relation to banks in 2006. Incidentally, the activity of Russian banks in Belarus is highly noticeable in Belarus nowadays.

The Belarusian and Ukrainian governmental authorities highlighted the visit of the Chief Deputy Prime-Minister of Ukraine Alaksandar Turchynau to Miensk on February 29, 2008. It was reasoned with a meeting of the Interstate Belarusian-Ukrainian Committee on Trade and Economic Relations. The Ukrainian governmental official discussed with his colleague Uladzimir Siamashka a broad range of issues and problems of bi-lateral relations. The Belarus' Prime-Minister S. Sidorski had a formal meeting with A. Turchynau as well.

According to official information, the sides agreed to arrange a meeting of Belarusian and Ukrainian Prime-Ministers in March – April 2008. However, they didn't reach an agreement regarding the cost for the Ukrainian electricity, to be imported to Belarus.

It is expected that the planned meeting of top governmental officials will foster solving a range of principle problems, including the repayment of the so-called Ukrainian debt, remaining from the Soviet times. Moreover, it is not excluded that both Prime-Ministers will discuss variants of cooperation between Belarus and Ukraine in the East – West transit field.

According to unofficial updates, Lukashenka is eager to be invited to a Fuel and Energy Summit in Ivano-Frankivsk on May 23, 2008. However, the domestic battles between the Ukrainian government and the President Yushenko may prevent Lukashenka from coming to the important forum.

On March 1, 2008, Miensk and Vatican were linked with a TV-bridge under the title of "Europe and America Building Together the Civilization of Love". According to the archbishop of Roman-Catholic church in Belarus Tadevush Kandrusievich, the TV-bridge was of great importance for the Belarusian Catholic youngsters, as they had an opportunity of praying together with the Pope and their coevals from different parts of the globe. Moreover, it facilitated promotion of Belarus all around the world.

## OFFICIALLY

### **Constitutional Court Disregarded the Christian Believers**

**The Constitutional Court of Belarus will not consider proposals of liberal changes in the religious legislation of Belarus, signed by more than 50,000 Belarusian residents.**

The judiciary institution sent this response to the "New Life" protestant church's administration. It was emphasized in the reply that common citizens are not authorized to address with legislative changes to the Constitutional Court. It can be done by a state institution, the government of the President. Consequently, the Protestants were advised to appeal to the head of state with their proposal instead.

### **KGB Elaborating a Law on Leaving and Entering Belarus**

**A draft law on entering and leaving the Republic of Belarus will be elaborated by the KGB, the Ministries of Foreign and Internal Affairs and the State Border Committee till the midsummer of 2008, [www.ej.by](http://www.ej.by) Web-portal informs.**

The necessity of working out the legislative document is explained with the recent adoption of numerous amendments to the existing regulations, related to the procedure of leaving and entering the country.

## POLITICS

### **'The Belarusian Week' in Strasbourg**

**The Belarusian Week with a range of public events, dedicated to the 90th anniversary of Belarusian People's Republic will be held under the title of in Strasbourg from March 10 till 13, 2008.**

The list of guests will include Mr. Hans-Gert Poettering, the President of the European Parliament, Mr. Joseph Doge, the Head of EPP faction in the European Parliament and Mr. Jacek Sariusz-Wolski, the Head of EP Committee on External Relations.

The Office "For a Democratic Belarus" (Brussels) is helping to prepare the events within "The Belarusian Week".

Volha Stuzhynskaya: Representatives of Belarusian political parties and NGOs, such as A. Milinkievich, L. Barshcheuski, Zhanna Litvina, V. Viachorka, and S. Shushkievich have been invited to take part in the celebrations within the Belarusian Week. The President of Belarusian People's Republic Ivonka Survilla will also come to the event. 'The Square' documentary by Y. Khashchavatski is planned to be presented during the Belarusian Week in Strasbourg. Also, art exhibitions with the works by A. Marachkin and R. Sitnitsa as well as photo exhibitions with the works by I. Krasheuski and A. Tukhlinski will be open during the Week.

It is expected that during the Belarusian Week the participants will touch upon the problem of decreasing the cost of Schengen visas for Belarusians.

The Belarusian Week is arranged and funded by the largest EP faction of European Democrats.

## OPPOSITION

### **Elena Bonner Supporting Kazulin**

**A number of leading Russian public figures have signed a letter in support of Aliaksandar Kazulin's candidacy for receiving an annual Andrei Sakharov Prize awarded by the European Parliament. Elena Bonner, the widow of Academician Sakharov and the head of Andrei Sakharov Foundation was among the signees.**

Aliaksandar Kazulin's daughters Volha and Julia wrote a letter to Elena Bonner expressing their gratitude for her support coming at a difficult time for their family.

## SOCIETY

### **Presidential Ordinance No. 760 Generates Unemployment**

**Only 2058 individual entrepreneurs got registered as private unitary**

## **enterprises on preferential terms in the Bierascie region by the end of February 2008.**

It equals around 20% of general quantity of private entrepreneurs with employees. The list includes owners of route taxis, hairdressers', Internet cafes, repair shops and small trading houses. Consequently, the unemployment rate amounted to 18-20 thousand people in the region, "Viecherniy Brest" reports.

## **ECONOMICS**

### **Prices for Milk and Meat Increased Again**

#### **Another rise of prices for products is taking place in Belarus.**

The purchasing prices for milk and meat have increased by 10% and 5% respectively. The Ministry of Economy specialists say that the rise in prices will not be painful for the common customers, as it is planned to increase the retail prices by 1.5% - 2% a month. Reportedly, the dynamic is connected

with the rise in prices for artificial fertilizers, fuel and agricultural machinery.

## **CULTURE**

### **"One World - 2008" Film Festival in Hrodna**

#### **A festival of documentaries "One World - 2008" has started in Hrodna this week.**

"One World - 2008" Film Festival is one of the leading movie forums in the world, dedicated to the problem of human rights. The festival in Hrodna has been arranged by the „People in Need" human rights NGO from the Czech Republic. The event of the kind is taking place in Belarus for the first time. Simultaneously, the festival was open in Brussels, Bucharest, Lublin, Madrid, Paris and other cities of the world.

Hrodna dwellers will have an opportunity of watching the best modern documentaries, dedicated to human rights, including "The Free Cuba", "Tibet: the Lost People", "Kosovo 1999". All the films have been translated into Belarusian.



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.

