

The top-news items from Belarus have contained updates on the Belarus – US official relations within the recent weeks.

On April 2, 2008, the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Viktor Haysionak stated to journalists that Belarus would reduce the number of diplomatic personnel at its embassy in Washington DC to 7 people. Consequently, he called upon the US governmental authorities to implement similar steps in relation to its diplomatic mission in Miensk in the near future. After the recent forced reduction of staffing, 17 specialists continue their activity at the US diplomatic mission in Belarus.

The US State Administration considers the newly-delivered proposal of Belarusian authorities to reduce the number of diplomats in Belarus to be “groundless and unjustified”. Reportedly, the US state authorities are regarding variants of “retaliatory actions”. The US State Administration official confirmed that the United States didn’t have an intention to cancel sanctions in relation to the “Belnaftakhim” Concern that largely provoked the present crisis in bi-lateral relations.

Also, the US Deputy Secretary of State David Kramer stated that patience of the United States in relation to the actions of Belarus’ government “had its limits”. However, apparently, the head of Belarus decided to put the relations with the United States on serious trial. Independent experts believe that nobody knows the reasons of the crisis, apart from Lukashenka himself.

The consequences of the violent anti-US policy, demonstrated by Lukashenka’s regime have reflected in a NATO decision to restrict the number of Belarusian delegation for participation in the recent summit of Euroatlantic Partnership Council in Bucharest (Romania).

Consequently, the Belarus’ Foreign Office regarded the NATO decision on restricting the level of delegation participants in the EPC as unacceptable. Consequently, the Belarusian government decided to refuse from participation in the EPC summit in Bucharest in general. It should be emphasized that due to the authoritarian regime in power, Belarus became the only country in Europe as well as the only member of “Partnership for Piece” NATO program that had no official representatives during the summit in Bucharest on April 2-4, 2008.

With much more anxiety, the Belarusian authorities are waiting for possible EU sanctions, to be added by the EU sanctions in the nearest future. A European deputy Jacek Protasiewicz declared a possibility of such actions in a short while. However, the level of real influence of EP resolutions upon concrete EC decision shouldn’t be overestimated. Still, it would be a blunder to underestimate them either. According to preliminary reports, the EC is planning to introduce new sanctions against Belarus since April 7, 2008. It is surmised that the sanctions will not be

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connected with the economic field. Most likely, the EU institutions will make additional symbolic steps.

An official representative of the Belarus' Ministry of Foreign Affairs Andrei Papou refused to discuss possible joining of EU to the US sanctions in relation to Belarus. "This question has to be addressed... to the European partners directly." At that, the Belarusian diplomat confirmed a desire of Belarusian authorities to engage Russia in the Belarusian – Russian conflict. Among other, he reminded that Belarus and Russia had agreed to adjust their actions in the field of foreign policy. It should be especially emphasized that the Kremlin has been keeping silence and restraining from public statements in support of Lukashenka's regime.

The silence of Kremlin is a poor sign for the Kremlin.

Another poor piece of news came to the authorities from the German F. Ebert Foundation that started a process of its representation closure in Belarus. The Foundation has been highly active in arranging meetings and discussions of new ideas and concepts of dialogue and cooperation between Belarus, Ukraine, the European Union in general and Germany in particular.

Lukashenka's hopes to revise favorably the present formula of pricing for the natural gas, imported from Russia, have not been justified yet. A Belarusian delegation, sent to hold negotiations with "Gazprom" came back from Moscow without any positive results.

The dynamics of price growth for gas will be kept. In accordance with recent updates, the price may increase up to USD 200. Numerous independent experts and economists forecast that it may become a real catastrophe for the economic well-being of the ruling regime in Belarus.

POLITICS

"Pole's Card" Initiative Alarms Belarusian Diplomats

The Belarusian side pledged to launch a similar initiative in response to the "Pole's Card" Programme on April 2, 2008.

The official Miensk has expressed its concern and astonishment, caused by the actions of Polish authorities on starting the process of arranging the so-called "Pole's Card".

The Belarusian Ministry's of Foreign Affairs spokesman Andrei Papou has stated that the Polish side adopted the law in breach of the international legislation and practice with no preliminary consultations with Mensk.

Belarus has suggested Poland should apply a moratorium on issuing "Poles' Cards" as well as to submit the initiative for consideration to the Venetian Committee of the Council of Europe.

The press-service of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs underscores that the Polish side

ignored their attempts to solve the issue through negotiations. However, Mr. Papou has stated the Belarusian government was awaiting a signal from the Polish partners to start dealing with the controversy. Otherwise, Miensk reserves the right to take corresponding diplomatic moves in return.

OPPOSITION

Andrei Kim on Trial

A court session in relation to a democratic youth activist and human rights defender Andrei Kim was started on April 1, 2008.

He was detained during the private entrepreneurs' protest action on January 21



Photo by Yulia Darashkevich

and got arrested for 10 days. However, afterwards he was transferred to an isolation ward. Consequently, it came to general knowledge that a criminal case had been filed against the civil activist in accordance with article 364 of Belarus' Criminal Code "The use of force in relation to a policeman with the purpose of preventing him from carrying out duties".

SOCIETY

193.1 Campaign – For Freedom of Associations in Belarus

An international "193.1 Campaign – For Freedom of Associations in Belarus" has been started in Sweden, the "Viasna 96" Human Rights NGO (Belarus) reports.

The campaign got organized by the Swedish Initiative on Human Rights and a Belarusian Human Rights Defender Ales Bielatski.

The campaign organizers aim at drawing the attention of common people and politicians in Sweden to the restrictions of freedom of associations in Belarus. Correspondingly, the Swedish Initiative on Human Rights is eager to provide moral and financial assistance to the Belarusian organizations that suffered from the official persecution in Belarus.

The Campaign is directed against article 193.1 in the Criminal Code of Belarus that envisages harsh penalties for "illegal arrangement of NGO, religious organization or foundations and participation in their activity."

ECONOMY

Gas Price to Remain Stable till 2009

The price for the Russian gas will not change significantly till the end of 2008, the ambassador of the Russian Federation in Minsk Aleksandr Surikov said.

The Russian diplomat stated that the price may be up no more than by 7 percent, i.e. from the current 119 to 128 USD. At the same time Surikov disproved the statement of Deputy State Secretary of the Union State

Vasil Hrol that the price for gas will reach 200 USD per cubic metre in 2009.

"Hrol may say whatever he likes", the ambassador retorted. According to Mr. Surikov, the 2009 price will not exceed the limit of 80% of the European pricing.

CULTURE

"Miensk Spring – 2008"

The 26th international festival "Menskaja Viasna" commemorating the 70th anniversary of the Belarusian State Philharmonic Hall opened in Minsk on April 3, 2008. Until the end of April musicians from 14 countries are expected to take part in the event with 29 musical events planned within the festival.

Liana Isakadze, a violinist and a National Artist of Russia; Gintaras Rinkavicus, the founder of the Lithuanian Symphonic Orchestra and one of the best-known world conductors as well as jazz bands from Poland will present their programs in the halls of the Belarusian State Philharmonic Hall.

The festival is scheduled to open on April, 3rd with the concert of the "Masterpieces of World Organ Music". April, 10th will see the readings of Bela Ahmadulina, while on the Orthodox Easter a choir from Slovenia will perform in the Smaller Hall of the Philharmonic.

ACCIDENTS

Barbarians Drew Sickle and Hammer

Unknown people attacked the headquarters of the Belarusian Popular Front Party (BNF) situated in Minsk, Masherau Avenue 8, on March 31. They drew the communist sickle and hammer with the inscription "NBP" (National Bolshevik Party) in black paint on the entrance door and broke two windows.

As the weapon the barbarians used pieces of asphalt which they probably brought with themselves. They also broke windows in the neighboring office, which they might mistake

for the BNF Party administration office. The chairman of the BNF Party Liavon Barshcheuski regards this assault as a provocation by the special services.

Liavon Barshcheuski: I do not think the National Bolshevik Party could have done it from Moscow. NBP has never officially mentioned its branch in Belarus. The police arrived only because the assaulters broke windows of the near-by quarters of the housing and operational service. And only owing to this circumstance did the police drew up a report.

This is not the first assault on the office of BNF by national Bolsheviks. The first one

happened three years ago. In addition, on the eve of the Freedom Day unknown people broke flagstaffs holding the white-red-white and EU flags.



BPF office door, photo by Svaboda.org



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.

