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Suspension of visa sanctions against 36 Belarusian top governmental officials, including the President Alaksandr Lukashenka was the most significant event of the recent week in Belarus. This decision was taken by the EU Council of Ministers in Luxemburg on October 13, 2008.

The EU officials hope that the Belarusian government would take concrete steps towards democratization and demonstrate more respect to human rights and civil liberties during the half-year corrective term.

The Belarus’ Minister of Foreign Affairs Siarhei Martynau was invited to Luxemburg in order to take part in the talks with the EU top officials. It should be noted that the EU contacts with the Belarusian governmental officials used to be limited to the level of Deputy Ministers before.

The EU introduced a “black list” of Belarusian officials, who were



banned to enter the European Union after the Presidential election 2006. (It was considered by the West to be non-democratic.) Presently, only five people have been left in the list, including the Head of Central Election Committee Lidziya Yarmoshyna and four suspects that may have connection to the scandalous cases of kidnapping the political opponents of Lukashenka regime in 1999 – 2000.

The Belarusian government treated the EU Council’s decision as a diplomatic breakthrough and as a victory of its concept of pragmatic dialogue. At the same time, the Belarusian independent analysts treat the decision from Brussels as “an advance”. A part of democratic opposition is criticizing the EU for the “betrayal of principles”, as the liberation of its policies on the Belarusian issue has been taking place directly after the election to the Chamber of Representatives of Belarus that failed to meet democratic standards, according to the OSCE observers, as the vote counting procedure was not transparent and even a single representative of the political opposition didn’t win the Parliamentary election, according to the official calculations.

On October 15, 2008, the Presidium of the Political Council of the United Democratic Forces (UDF) announced the struggle for the revision of electoral legislation to be its chief objective for the nearest future.

“There should be arranged a strong pressure upon the authorities in order to change the Election Code after all. If we fail to do it from inside

and outside, we will take part in the Presidential campaign again in order to get proofs of its non-democratic manner instead of fighting for a victory”, the United Civil Party leader Anatol Liabiedzka noted in his interview to the Radio Liberty.

Under the auspices of the United Democratic Forces, there has been founded a working group that has to elaborate drafts of changes in the Belarus’ Election and Criminal Codes. According to A. Liabiedzka, it is necessary to do in order to ensure holding “the elections instead of election campaigns in Belarus”. The democratic activists believe that it is equally important to repeal the legal norms that envisage criminal responsibility for holding civil and political activity.

In particular, a person can be sentenced to two years of jail for acting on behalf of non-registered organizations, in accordance with article 193-1 of Belarus’ Criminal Code. At the same time, it is impossible to register an organization, if the responsible state officers consider it to be oppositional. Moreover, a politician or a journalist may be sentenced to up to two years of jail for criticizing the government, according to article 369-1 of Belarus’ Criminal Code (“Defamation of the Republic of Belarus”).

The working group is going to present its proposals till October 20, 2008. The opposition leaders believe that if the Belarusian authorities agree to meet the respective conditions, they will facilitate the re-entrance of Belarus to the Council of Europe.

In the meanwhile, Belarus is starting to suffer from the consequences of the global financial crisis.

The stored resources of gold and currency in Belarus, calculated in accordance with the International Monetary Fund’s standards shrank by USD 460,000,000 (approximately by 10%) in Belarus in September 2008. The resources amounted to USD 4,120,000,000 on October 1, 2008. The Belarusian National Bank’s



spokesman has told that the crisis in Russia led to the situation, when the Russian non-resident banks’ representations in Belarus started receiving much less currency for operations in the Belarusian market. Moreover,

the spokesman emphasized that “the Belarusian banks started creating air-bags in order to support their liquidity, i.e. to ensure the existence of resources for serving their clients”.

The Belarusian experts note that the situation in the auto-crediting market has considerably deteriorated since recently. Thus, some banks that used to work actively in the field have temporarily seized issuing credits in international currencies for the purchase of cars. At the same time, some other banks have significantly revised the conditions of signing new credit agreements. In particular, they propose to sign credits in the Belarusian rubles at 19-21% interest per annum only.

A Deputy Minister of Economy Tatsiana Starchanka believes that the financial crisis will have a negative influence on Belarus in the medium-term perspective, taking into account the openness of Belarusian economy. In particular, if the economic growth of the main trade partners gets retarded, the Belarusian production will be much less in demand. Moreover, T. Starchanka has noted that the global financial crisis may cause the shrinkage of foreign crediting of Belarusian economy and influence negatively the plans of attracting new investors to the country.

At the same time, the governmental official emphasized that the

Belarusian financial system remained to be sustainable due to the small progress of the domestic financial and stock market development and owing to a comparatively small amount of foreign funds (up to 14%) in the resource base of banks in the country.

The governmental officials admit that the global financial crisis may complicate the objective of keeping the high tempo of economic growth in the country. However, the country’s GDP has been steadily growing so far. Its amount in comparison with respective period in 2007 has increased by 10.6%. Also, the amount of investments to the basic capital has increased by 23%. Still the Belarus’ Minister of Economy Mikalai Zaychanka admits that the amount of investment reflects predominantly the domestic resources. However, he has noted that the government is taking pains in order to attract direct foreign investments to the country.

The first Belarusian Investment Forum will take place in London on November 18, 2008. It is stated unofficially that the President of Belarus A. Lukashenka is going to take part in the event so far as he has been permitted to travel to the European Union since recently. (It was stated earlier that the Prime-Minister of Belarus Siarhei Sidorski would lead the Belarusian delegation.)

At the same time, the political scientists stress that it is hardly possible to say about the Western trend of Belarusian governmental authorities. Most probably, Lukashenka's regime will continue to maneuver between the Kremlin and the West.

The pendulum policy was brightly illustrated during the Belarusian Security Council's meeting, held by A. Lukashenka on October 16, 2008.

Among other, the President of Belarus stated that the West wouldn't reject its attempts to build the one-pole world. He emphasized that "NATO was actually drawing new boundary lines in Europe" and that the tension on the continent was growing. "New risks and threats to the Union State of Belarus and Russia as well as to other fraternal states have come to light," A. Lukashenka said. He proposed to discuss the issue of creating a united system of anti-aircraft defense with Russia.

Independent observers believe that thus the President of Belarus is assuring the Kremlin that he wouldn't like "to join the West". It appears to be especially important to show the loyalty on the eve of the decisive round of negotiations on the cost of the Russian gas to be imported to Belarus in 2009.

POLITICS

The EU Going to "Put Up" with Belarus

The EU top officials are going to pay an official visit to Belarus. This information was wide-spread during the recent summit of EU Ministers of Foreign Affairs. It should be reminded that the Belarus' Minister of Foreign Affairs Siarhei Martynau took part in the event.

The EU representatives are going to Belarus in order to determine the direction of developing political and economic relations with Belarus. Siarhei Martynau noted during the summit that the Belarusian government was ready to develop high-standard relations with the European community. Similar statements were delivered by a range of EU politicians, including Javier Solana, the EU Commissioner on International Policies.

OFFICIALLY

The Central Election Committee Dismissed Candidates' Complaints

The Central Election Committee has evaluated the results of the

recent election to the Chamber of Representatives of the National Assembly of Belarus.



7 claims of parliamentary candidates were considered during the Committee session.

The former candidates were pressing for admitting the election invalid at some polling stations and urged the Central Election Committee to arrange the recalculation of votes there. However, all the claims were dismissed.

According to the CEC Head Lidziya Yarmoshyna, the complaints were grounded upon the candidates' "emotions" instead of "concrete proofs".

OPPOSITION

The United Democratic Forces Plan to Struggle

for Changing the Election and Criminal Codes

The United Democratic Forces (UDF) are eager to change the Election and Criminal Codes of Belarus. A working group has been created for working out the contents of the new legal documents.

The UDF activists emphasize that the changes in the election legislation are required for holding normal elections instead of "election campaigns" in Belarus. At the same time, the democratic activists have declared a necessity of changing a range of articles in the Criminal Code of Belarus that provide for severe responsibility for holding activities in political and non-governmental organizations.

Moreover, there have been processed the proposals on creating equal working conditions for the state and non-state media as well as the proposals on introducing more liberal working conditions for NGOs and political parties.

It is planned that the working group will present its proposals till October 20, 2008.

ECONOMY

Ukraine May Be Left without Sugar from Belarus

Export of Belarusian sugar to Ukraine is under threat nowadays.



The Ukrainian government is considering the possibility of applying restrictions in the free trade cooperation mode in connection with a rocketing rise of import of Belarusian sugar to Ukraine. It should be mentioned that Ukraine had applied a restriction of the kind some time ago. The Ukrainian government suspects the Belarusian sugar producers in exporting vane-sugar to Ukraine.

During the first half year 2008, the Belarusian sugar amounted to 95% of all imported sugar to Ukraine.

SOCIETY

Solidarity Day: Three Years of Protest

A solidarity day with the kidnapped Belarusians' families was held again on October 16, 2008. Three years have passed since the first solidarity action by now.



The first solidarity action was initiated by Iryna Krasouskaya, whose husband had disappeared without a trace, a journalist Iryna Khalip and a youth activist Mikita Sasim. Presently, the monthly solidarity actions are arranged and held in Belarus and abroad (including Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine, Russia as well as the Czech Republic, Belgium, France and the United States.)

Apart from the kidnapped journalists and public activists, the solidarity action participants recollect the people, who were given suspended

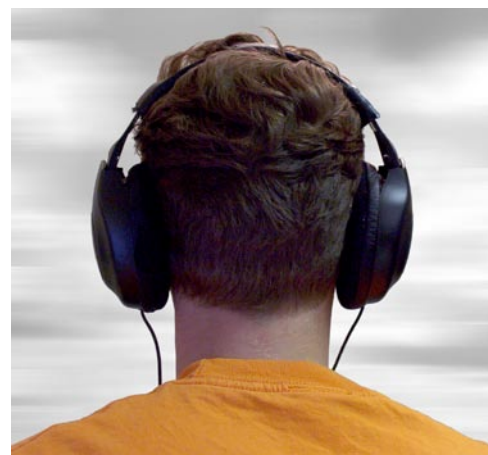
sentences for their participation in the protest actions.

CULTURE

Belarusian Music Fan Club

The Belarusian Music Alternative (BMA) creates a fan club of Belarusian music. The core of the club will be formed from subscribers to "Piesni Svabody" (Songs of Freedom) and "Nie zaganaiysya" (Chill Out) CDs, BMA says in its press release.

According to BMA head Vital Soupranovich, the first CD tells about the past and the present Belarusian music festivals. The disc comes with a booklet describing concert activity in Belarus, its past, present and future. Sound tracks with the songs from



the festivals will help listeners to feel the unique atmosphere of these concerts. There is also information about new albums and much more. The fan club members will get the CD free of charge.



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