

Belarus' Regime Included
in the Worst of the Worst
2009 List

The Capital Punishment
Can Be Cancelled Through
Referendum Only

A Politician Siarhei
Skrabiets Plans to
Establish a New Political
Party

The Inflation Rate
Has Totaled 5.4% Since
the Beginning of 2009

The Belarusians Believe in
Quick Termination of Crisis

A Music Video by "Liapis
Trubetskoi" Found to Be
the Best in Russia Once
Again



The EU Commissioner on External Relations and Neighborhood Policy Benita Ferrero-Waldner canceled her visit to Miensk all of a sudden last week. Undoubtedly, it was the most unexpected event of the week.

It had been announced before that the EU top executive was to stay in the Belarusian capital on March 12-13, 2009. However, the President of Belarus Alaksandr Lukashenka left abruptly for talks in Armenia on March 11, 2009. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus informed the public that B. Ferrero-Waldner's visit would be postponed till April 2009.

The EU Commissioner explained the postponement of her official visit to Miensk with a necessity of additional examination of Belarusian problematic.

Information sources in Brussels state that the visit was cancelled as soon as it became clear that the EU Commissioner's meeting with A. Lukashenka was up in the air.

The International Herald Tribune has noted that having postponed his meeting with one of the most important EU representatives, A. Lukashenka made everyone ponder over the real degree of independence from Russia his government would like to have.

An independent Belarusian analyst Aliaksandar Klaskouski believes that "most probably the Belarusian government didn't mean to irritate Brussels. It wanted to avoid teasing the Kremlin, first of all." Consequently, "the sudden departure for Yerevan didn't mean a severance of relations with the EU. It was a tactical move. It would be foolish to reject normalization of relations with the European Union

in such favorable conditions. Therefore, Lukashenka made up his mind to dissociate himself from the process in order to keep it going,” A. Klaskouski emphasized.

Apparently, the EU officials were ready for Lukashenka's maneuvering of the kind. According to unofficial updates, a scenario of inviting either the Minister of Foreign Affairs or the Prime Minister of Belarus instead of Lukashenka to the constituent summit of the Eastern Partnership program, initiated by the European Union, is elaborated at the present time.

Independent analysts note that this option would satisfy all the sides concerned. Thus, being worried about Lukashenka's "westward drifting", the Kremlin will have fewer grounds for irritation. The Belarusian opposition leaders with their recent overemotional statements will satisfy their ambitions. The President of Belarus will wash his hands of the matter. He will note his abstention from signing any documents about participation of Belarus in the new program. Finally, the European Union will meet its goal in this case, as its utmost objective is to engage Belarus in the Eastern Neighborhood program at any cost in order to start a gradual process of winning Belarus over to the EU sphere of influence.

At that, the EU officials confess in couloirs that they stake on the interest of Belarusian state authorities in getting as soon as possible certain economic benefits from normalization of relations with the West. This interest is strengthening, owing to severe consequences of the financial and economic crisis in the country. The economy of Belarus is facing highly serious problems nowadays.

Thus, the export reduced by 45.4% to USD 1,319,900,000 in January 2009 in comparison with the same period in the year of 2008. The deficit of foreign trade in commodities totaled USD 443.2 million in January 2009 to be compared with the deficit of USD 204.1 million in January 2008.

An independent economist Yaraslau Ramanchuk forecasts that through the probable abrupt plunge in export prices for potash, oil products, ferrous materials, tractors, and trucks, the Belarusian export may shrink by USD 13.5-14 billion. It means a real catastrophe for the export-oriented national economy of Belarus.

Presently, the country is facing an urgent need in a flow of foreign investments. Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Andrei Yeudachenka confessed during his speech at the seminar on Improvement of Conditions for Attracting Foreign Investments in Minsk on March 11, 2009 that Belarus badly needs net foreign investments. Also, the governmental official noted the inequality of present investments from different EU members. Thus, around 50% of all investments from the EU come from Austria and the United Kingdom. "Unfortunately, such large investing countries as France, Italy, Belgium, and Sweden still remain in

the shadow, in this respect," stated the Ministry's official.

During the seminar, there was presented information that since 2000 the bilateral trade between Belarus and the EU has increased 12 times and amounted to USD 23 billion in 2008. The export of Belarusian commodities to the EU states reached USD 14.4 billion last year.

More than 4,000 joint ventures and foreign businesses exist in Belarus nowadays. 53% of them contain the EU capital.

According to Yeudachenka, the EU states have to be the main source of technologies, know-how and investments in such fields of Belarusian economy as transit, power engineering, and standardization. The Ministry official believes that Belarus and the



European Union should sign a new agreement on partnership and cooperation in order to develop economic and political relations more efficiently.

It is worth mentioning that the previous agreement between Belarus and the European Union was frozen by the united Europe after the referendum of 1996 that led to sharp redistribution of powers in the country in Lukashenka's favor. The Supreme Soviet of Belarus was illegally dissolved by the President then.

The Belarusian side hasn't fulfilled in full any of 12 criteria for normalizing relations with the EU since the time they were articulated by the EU authorities in 2006.

At the same time, the government of Belarus has to save the financial system by means of getting new credits. Thus, Russia transferred the 2nd installment of its credit to Belarus in the amount of USD 500 million on March 12, 2009.

As of January 1, 2009, the gold and monetary reserves of Belarus, calculated according to the IMF standards, amounted to USD 3,061,000,000 million. Belarus received USD 1.4 billion from abroad in January-February 2009, including USD 788 million from the International Monetary Fund in January 2009 and USD 625 million from Russia for the sale of 12.5% shares of "Beltransgas" in February 2009. The funds were directed to replenish the Belarusian international gold and monetary reserves.

Consequently, the amount of Belarusian gold and monetary reserves had to increase up to USD 4.5 billion. However, as a BelaPAN News Agency's financial



analyst Alaksej Areshka noted with a reference to updates from the National Bank of Belarus, as of March 1, 2009, the reserves, calculated according to the IMF standards, amounted to USD 3,327,000,000 only. Thus, in fact the received money was spent to satisfy the augmented demand for foreign currencies on the part of individuals, enterprises and banks after the devaluation of Belarusian ruble in January 2009, a BelaPAN News Agency's economic analyst Zmitsier Yarmak remarked.

Independent experts note that the onetime devaluation of Br by 20% didn't solve financial and economic problems of Belarus. However, the government doesn't risk devaluating Br abruptly once again, being afraid of social protests. Therefore, the government has chosen the tactics of creeping devaluation of Belarusian ruble instead.

POLITICS

Belarus' Regime Included in the Worst of the Worst 2009 List

Freedom House international human rights watchdog released Worst of the Worst 2009 report in Geneva on March 10, 2009. The Belarus' regime can be found there among 17 offensive governments of the world.

According to the report, Burma, Equatorial Guinea, Libya, North Korea, Somalia, Sudan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan again ranked as the worst human rights abusers; inhabitants of two territories, Chechnya and Tibet, were also included on the roster of worst abusers.

South Ossetia, a disputed province of Georgia, is included in the report for the first time as a disputed territory. A total of 17 countries and four territories, including Belarus in Europe, are profiled in the report.

These countries are drawn from the 42 countries and nine territories that are currently ranked Not Free in Freedom in the World 2009, Freedom House's annual survey of political rights and civil liberties.

"The countries and territories in Worst of the Worst are precisely the ones that the Human Rights Council should focus on," said Paula Schrieffer, Freedom House director of advocacy, at a press conference for the release of the report in Geneva. "In these countries, regimes control the daily lives of citizens by denying them basic human rights such as freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and freedom of belief."

OFFICIALLY

The Capital Punishment Can Be Cancelled Through Referendum Only

A decision on canceling the capital punishment in Belarus can be taken at a referendum only, according to the Constitution of Belarus, Piotra Miklashevich, the Chairman of Constitutional Court of Belarus has noted at a press-conference.

P.Miklashevich emphasized that 2-3 court verdicts on applying the capital punishment to criminals are taken in Belarus a year. The number of such verdicts amounted to 50 a decade ago.

The Parliament and the Head of State have the right to announce a referendum on the issue of canceling the capital punishment in Belarus. According to official data, around 80% of voters in Belarus rejected the idea during a referendum in 2004, the Interfax News Agency reports.

OPPOSITION

A Politician Siarhei Skrabiets Plans to Establish a New Political Party

Siarhei Skrabiets, an ex-deputy to the Chamber of Representatives of Belarus has declared his resignation from the Belarusian Social Democrat Party (Hramada), led by Stanislau Shushkievich.

The politician announced the creation of a new political party at the same time.



According to Skrabiets, his faction members haven't managed to find a common language with the party leadership. Neither Skrabiets, nor his supporters were satisfied with the "cautious and passive position of the party leaders as far as the recent Parliamentary elections, the coming Presidential hustings and the party's international policies was concerned."

Siarhei Skrabiets is going to arrange and hold a constituent meeting on establishing a new Social Democrat 'Liberty' Party in the country, the BelaPAN News Agency reports.

ECONOMY

The Inflation Rate Has Totaled 5.4% Since the Beginning of 2009

According to the Belarusian Statistic Committee, the inflation rate amounted to 1.2% in February 2009. However, it totaled 5.4% since the beginning of 2009, the Interfax News Agency reports.

The prices hike was caused by the devaluation of Belarusian national currency on January 2, 2009.

It should be mentioned that the official forecast for 2009, approved by the Belarusian government envisages 9-11% inflation in 2009. It is worth mentioning, the inflation growth amounted to 13.3% last year, Radio Liberty reports.

SOCIETY

The Belarusians Believe in Quick Termination of Crisis

The Belarusians believe the global financial crisis will come to an end soon.

These sociological survey results have been presented by the All-Russian Center for Public Opinion Studies. (The survey was held at the beginning of March 2009.)



44% respondents in Belarus believe the crisis will defeat soon. The opinion is shared by 25% of Russians and 17% of Ukrainians only.

Only 32% of Belarusians are convinced that the crisis is a continuous process without a quick way out. At the same time, 69% of respondents in Ukraine and 58% of respondents in Russia share this point of view.

The residents of Russia and Ukraine believe that their countries have suffered from the financial crisis most of all. However, the residents of Belarus believe that the crisis is firstly related to the United States.

62% of respondents in Ukraine and 56% of respondents in Russia noted that they the crisis had

negatively touched upon them. However, only around 30% of respondents in Belarus expressed their concern on the matter.

According to the survey results, the respondents in Belarus mentioned the prices hike, the shrinkage of income and the refusal from some commodities and services as the main indicators of the crisis, they encountered in January – February 2009.

CULTURE

A Music Video by “Liapis Trubetskoi” Found to Be the Best in Russia Once Again

The second annual ceremony of awarding the “Baker’s Dozen. Top 13” prize took place at the “Olympic” Sport Complex in Moscow on March 7, 2009.

The award is considered to be the most important one in the field of Russian rock music.

It is pleasant to learn that music videos by “Liapis Trubetskoi”, a Belarusian by origin rock music group, filmed by Belarusian film makers, have been acknowledged to be the best in the “Music Video” nomination at the contest.

“Liapis Trubetskoi” was awarded the prize for the “Capital” music video, shot by Alaksei Tsierakhau a year ago. The “Little Lights” music video by the same film director has won the first prize in the nomination in the year of 2009, Charter’97 reports.



EUROPEAN RADIO FOR BELARUS



Polish aid

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.