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On April 17 the plot that kept journalists and opposition in suspense for several weeks – will Lukashenka receive invitation to the founding summit of the new European Union programme of the Eastern Partnership – came to an end.

Days before icon opposition figures appealed to EU bodies not to make such a mistake.

“Inviting Lukashenka to Prague means signing by the European Union of an act of political surrender to the Belarusian regime. It helps to freeze the situation

in Belarus and strengthen Lukashenka’s legitimacy”, Anatol Labiedzka, co-chairman of the Political Council of the United Democratic Forces and chairman of the United Civil Party told to Radio Liberty.

Nevertheless, on April 17 Karel Schwarzenberg, Foreign Minister of the Czech Republic, the country that presides in the European Union, brought to Minsk an envelope with invitation to the summit in Prague scheduled for May 7 and handed it to Lukashenka. Later, European Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner explained that it was an invitation to Belarus as a country and not to its president specifically.

Thus, a new plot arose: will Lukashenka use the formal opportunity to head the Belarusian delegation in Prague?

As political analysts point out, from his point of view there are reasons “in favour” as well as reasons “against”. In particular, the Belarusian leader is not interested to irritate Moscow once again. There is also a hazard to get under obstruction promised by some European politicians. Thus, Czech President Vaclav Klaus announced that he would not hold out his hand to Lukashenka and would not invite him to his residence. The intention to speak out sharply against the authoritarian Belarusian leader in the case of his coming to the summit was expressed earlier by Dutch Foreign Minister Maxime Verhagen.

On the other hand, in experts' opinion, one should take into account Lukashenka's ambitiousness, and his craving for a revenge for years of isolation.

Observers believe that on April 23 he put out a feeler sounding out Europe's reaction to his eventual visit to Prague.

"It came to petty things: should we invite Lukashenka to Prague or should we not? he noted from the podium at the Oval Hall in the House of the Government while commenting on difficulties in patching up relations with the European Union. And how to invite without inviting? Dear friends, I want to say frankly in front of the diplomats who are present here. If someone, anyone, feels very uncomfortable in Prague on May 7 because representatives of Belarus will be there, do not invite us. We will not beg, and we will put up with it if it is uncomfortable or disadvantageous for you. Do as it makes you comfortable. If you are very comfortable that we are present there but not Lukashenka, please say me so as well."



So, analysts conclude, the Belarusian leader has probably not decided yet for himself at 100% whether he should go to the Czech capital.

Although, in some analysts' opinion, opposition and mass media blew out a personal issue in this case. "In two months everybody will forget whether Lukashenka went to Prague or not", political analyst Valer Karbalevich points out.

In his turn, his colleague Andrei Fiodarau stresses that "feelings of those who are categorically against this step may be understood. But it should be reminded that the Soviet Union was a dictatorial regime to a much greater extent. Nevertheless, Brezhnev travelled around the world and met, among others, leaders of the United States, the Great Britain, France, and the Federal Republic of Germany."

Experts point out: by the policy of conciliation itself with the official Miensk, and inclusion of Belarus to the Eastern Partnership Brussels de-facto gave to the Belarusian leadership a laissez-passer to the Old World. It is revealing that already before the Prague summit Lukashenka is expected in Rome. According to Vatican representative Federico Lombardi the President of Belarus will be received by the Pope Benedict XVI on April 27.

Italian media report that the eventual meeting may become a turning point in relations between Miensk and Vatican. In their turn, Belarusian analysts say about an ambitious plan of Lukashenka to arrange a meeting of the Supreme Pontiff with the patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church.

It promises laurels of moderator of the historical dialogue of confessions to the Belarusian leader. Anyway, the visit itself to the Pope is able to raise his rating among Belarusian Catholics who had somewhat clouded relations with authorities until recently.

So, taboo on Lukashenka's visits to Europe has been lifted, experts point out. And now other issues move to the forefront. To what extent is the process of normalizing relations with the European Union, and in

particular the participation in the eastern Partnership able to transform Belarus? What are the limits of country's integration in Europe under the current political regime? And how far is the regime itself able to transform under the pressure of new factors — crisis, several demands from Russia, and need to make petty concessions to Europe?

To some extent answers to these questions were given by Lukashenka himself at his traditional annual address to the nation and the parliament on April 23.

He refuted the rumour that some faction in the president's entourage pushes him to move away from Russia and to move closer to the European Union. "My dear, take it easy! I am still able to take decisions in this country. I will be still able to do it for many years... The president is in fully normal conditions", BelaPAN news agency quotes the speaker.

Analysts point out the aspiration of the official leader to inform bureaucracy and voters that he still controls the situation in the country and its foreign policy. It is also noticeable that Lukashenka accused the West in the financial and economic crisis and identified severe discipline, high standards for personnel, economy and thrift as the main factors of overcoming crisis ramifications in the Belarusian economy.

"The economic liberalization was mentioned in passing and not as a priority", political analysts Valer Karbalevich notes. "There is an impression that the country's leadership counts on solving acute financial and economic problems mainly with old tools and in the framework of the previous model."

The expert pointed out that Lukashenka was still less inclined to conduct a political liberalization, as it appears from his address.

“In fact, the official Belarusian leader confirmed conclusions of political analysts that he would balance between Moscow and Europe, squeeze practical benefits out of the Eastern Partnership, and wherever possible turn down axiological issues which are still reminded about by the European Union even if it is in a reduced form”, political analysts Alaksandar Klaskouski summarizes.

In the expert's opinion, the main conclusion from the address of the official leader is that “Lukashenka intends to deploy resources of the authoritarian system created by him to the bitter end, in the economy, as well as in politics and the public life. The question is how great these resources are. And what will happen in the case when crisis effects turn out to be more disruptive than it seems to the creator of the system.”

As for the Eastern Partnership, political analyst Andrej Fiodarau believes that it is “still hard to speak about its radiant future”: far too serious problems are faced by the European Union, as well as by the whole world. “But the programme gives Belarus a chance to move closer to the united Europe, the expert believes. Even if for several reasons our country will move on this way with difficulty and slowly.”

POLITICS

A Czech Senator: “We Should Not Allow Lukashenka to Leave the Plane”



Vlastimil Sehnal, head of the Czech Senate Commission on Support of Democracy in the World, spoke out against Belarusian leader Alaksandar Lukashenka's visit to Prague.

Sehnal's position was supported also by other members of the commission. They expressed their well-marked disapproval of Lukashenka's invitation by Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg.

According to Sehnal, Czechs welcome the Eastern Partnership programme and other efforts by the European Union to contain Russian influence on its neighbour countries including Belarus.

However, the politician pointed out, his commission is aware of numerous facts of persecution of Lukashenka's opponents.

“The time has not come yet for Lukashenka to walk in the streets of Prague”, the senator believes and adds: “We simply cannot allow him to leave the plane”.

Radio Liberty

OFFICIALLY

Foreigners Must Have a Medical Insurance Police for Five Thousand Euros When Entering Belarus

Belarusian authorities increased the minimum level for the medical insurance police for foreigners coming to Belarus from USD 5000 to EUR 5000.

This change is provided for in the presidential edict № 205 from April 16. The edict provides that foreign citizens, when entering Belarus, must have a mandatory medical insurance police of the insured value (limit of liability) not less than EUR 5000.

Respectively, insurance premiums for the mandatory medical insurance of foreigners who come for a temporary stay or live on a temporary basis in Belarus, have also increased because they will now be paid in Euro as well (the nominal rate is the same but earlier it was fixed in US dollars, so the rate was increased by the exchange rate of euro vs. dollar).

PRIME-TASS

OPPOSITION

Opposition Activists to Campaign for the Anti-Crisis Platform

The United Democratic Forces will prepare anti-crisis campaigners, aimed at promoting the UDF Anti-crisis program among the population of Belarus.



According to Anatol Labiedzka, the United Civil Party leader, it is planned to publish around 500,000 leaflets and brochures with information about the UDF Anti-crisis program.

Moreover, Stanislau Bahdankievich is planning to articulate the basic provisions of this platform during the coming session of the Public Advisory Council at the Presidential Office to take place on April 24, 2009.

BelaPAN

ECONOMY

Belarusian Authorities Put Up Five Hundred Enterprises for Sale in Germany

The delegation of Belarus brought a list of five hundred enterprises open for privatization to the Hanover Fair.

To investors, Miensk offers to buy, among other companies, a fish farm in Bierascie, a shoes factory in Homiel, a supplier of component parts for railways, power distribution enterprises, and producers of computers, *Deutsche Welle* reports.

Today two thirds of Belarusian enterprises are in State property. So, the decision to sell hundreds of enterprises was, as it seems, not an easy one for the country. But cutback of indirect subsidies from Russia, such as higher prices for energy resources, and the economic crisis compelled Alaksandar Lukashenko to change his position that the State was the most efficient owner.

Today Belarus is one of few blind-spots on the investment map of Europe. Foreign investments stayed at a minimum level because of the international isolation of the country.

Charter'97

SOCIETY

More than a Half of Belarusians Switched to Cheaper Products and Goods because of the Crisis

More than 60% of Belarusians in the last two to three months began buying cheaper food products and living essentials.

It is a conclusion of experts of the Sociological Centre "Lusterka-Info". And only 8,4% of respondents say that they have not begun saving.



According to study's results, dwellers of Mahilou region are the most penny-wise ones (44% of respondents try buying cheaper products and goods). Dwellers of Viciebsk region and Miensk think about how much they spend less than others (respectively, 17,7% and 11,3% do not think that they have begun buying cheaper things).

Mostly those who are over 60 (42,1%) and those who are now 40 to 49 (36,4%) have begun living in the saving regime. Those who have not begun buying cheaper products and goods are mostly among youth of 18 to 24.

Komsomolskaja Pravda v Belarusi



CENTRUM STOSUNKÓW MIĘDZYNARODOWYCH
CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS



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