

Belarus Headlines

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*Office for a Democratic
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We on the Web

www.democraticbelarus.eu

EU Policy: Sharing Knowledge with Belarus. Fourth Visit of Belarusian Experts to Brussels



Belarusian experts in Brussels

Office and Administrative Management team gave an overview on cooperation programmes and the functioning of University and reform processes.

Topics that were covered as

Foundation for Legal Technologies Development and supported by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). Candidates for participation in the programme are selected through an open call for applications. The organisers welcome participation of experts from both civil society groups and government-affiliated structures."

On the invitation of the Office for a Democratic Belarus in Brussels, Belgium and the Foundation for Legal Technologies Development (Ukraine), a group of Belarusian experts on Education and Research visited Brussels on November 23-27, 2009. The Belarusian delegation, which included representatives from government institutions, research group, took part in a training course "EU Education and Research Policy: Sharing Knowledge with Belarus".

Within the framework of the course, the Belarusian delegates had a chance to get acquainted with the work of the EU Institutions and meet with key experts from the Council of the EU, and the European Commission, working on the region and education policy. They also visited Ghent University, where senior members of the International Relations Of-

part of the programme included Life-long Learning Programmes, Intellectual Property, Educational issues and policy towards Belarus, EU policy towards Belarus and Re-reforming and creating international contacts for universities.

This visit is part of a larger programme for Belarusian experts, which is being implemented by the Office for a Democratic Belarus in cooperation with the



Belarusian delegation in the city of Ghent

27/11/2009

Source: ODB

Photos by ODB



Belarusian delegates at the University of Ghent

EU and Belarus

Council Conclusions on Belarus

On November 17, the EU Council adopted Conclusions on Belarus. The Council welcomed the increased high-level EU–Belarus political dialogue, the beginning of the Human Rights Dialogue, the intensified technical cooperation and the participation of Belarus in the Eastern Partnership initiative.

At the same time, the Council of Ministers recalled its Conclusions of 13 October 2008, and the areas of concern identified therein, including the need for progress towards reforms of the Electoral Code to bring it into line with OSCE commitments and other international standards for democratic elections, the freedom of expression and of the media, and the freedom of assembly and political association.

Due to the absence of tangible progress in the areas identified in the Council Conclusions of 13 October 2008, it was decided to extend until October 2010 the restrictive measures against certain officials of Belarus but to extend the suspension of the application of the travel restrictions for the same period.

The Council conclusions on Belarus also include an invitation for the Commission to prepare recommendations on negotiation directives on visa facilitation and readmission agreements with Belarus, taking into account the common approach on visa facilitation, the recent evaluation of the existing visa facilitation agreements, as well as the findings of a technical expert mission to Belarus, and with a view to

the possible adoption of these directives once relevant conditions are met.

The European Union reaffirms its readiness to deepen its relations with Belarus in light of further developments in Belarus towards democracy, human rights and the rule of law and to assist the country in attaining these objectives. Subject to progress in Belarus in these areas, the Council stands ready to take steps towards upgrading contractual relations with Belarus.

18/11/2009

Source: consilium.europa.eu, ODB

"The Eastern Partnership" Civil Society Forum in Brussels



"The Eastern Partnership" Civil Society Forum was held in Brussels on 16-17 November 2009. The Belarusian delegation, representing 27 public organizations in Belarus, took an active part in this event.

- The Forum has developed and introduced the position of civil society of the EU's eastern partners on the key areas to the European Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighbourhood Policy, Benita Ferrero-Waldner, and Carl Bildt, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Sweden, currently holding the EU Presidency. The position of the Forum includes the requirements of civilian oversight over the programmes that are being implemented within the framework of the EaP, compliance of partner countries with the EU's environmental standards, the strict respect of European standards of

democracy and human rights. In addition, civil society organizations in the region offered a number of project proposals aimed at improving energy security, expansion of economic ties with the EU, the intensification of contacts between people and the deepening of cooperation in the field of education. Separately, representatives of civil society expressed the need, as quickly as possible to move to a visa-free regime with the countries of the European Union.

- The position of the Civil Society Forum will be presented at an inter-ministerial summit of the Eastern Partnership in Stockholm by Syarhei Matskevich (Belarus, Assembly of NGOs), formally elected by the Forum as its representative at the meeting. Syarhei Matskevich and Uladzislau Vyalichka (International Consortium 'EvroBelarus') were also elected to the Board of the Civil Society Forum. The Belarusian delegation suggested that the structure of the Forum and the format of its work should be one of a full subject of "The Eastern Partnership". This proposal was endorsed by other delegates, as well as representatives of the European Commission.

- The Belarusian delegation to the Forum held a roundtable discussion and a press conference on the results of the meeting on 19 November 2009 at the Crown Plaza, Minsk.

The Forum initiates an open platform for the participation of NGOs in the "Eastern Partnership". As part of this initiative, thematic platforms will be formed on the main directions of the EaP, including democracy and good governance, economy, energy security and the environment, as well as contacts between people. The Forum participants call on other social organizations, businesses, the public sector and individual citizens to cooperate within the framework of these platforms.

It is worth noting that "The Eastern Partnership" Civil Society Forum was organized by the European Commission with the aim of building confidence between civil society organizations in partner countries. The Forum was attended by delegations from Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

17/11/2009

Source: ODB

EU and Belarus

Silvio Berlusconi Pays Short Visit to Minsk



Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi was the first EU leader to visit Belarus in a decade and a half. For years, such visits have been taboo. The European Union largely regards Belarus as a pariah state for its regular crackdowns on opposition and rigging of poll results to keep President Alyaksandr Lukashenka in power.

The official reason is that Berlusconi is paying a reciprocal visit to Minsk as customary under international diplomatic protocol. Lukashenka paid a visit to Rome in April, where he met with Pope Benedict XVI and had dinner with Berlusconi and Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini. But the fact that Berlusconi went to Minsk at a time when Brussels and Lukashenka still have very guarded relations has raised eyebrows. Jean-Pierre Darnis, deputy head of the security and defence department at Rome's Institute of International

Affairs, says that Italy has a long foreign policy tradition of being a pilot in exploring relations with problematic countries, and Berlusconi's trip may fall within that framework.

"The visit of Mr. Berlusconi to Minsk is somehow the illustration of a quite traditional trend in Italian foreign policy," Darnis said. "Italy is an ally of the U.S.A. through transatlantic relations and NATO. And that is a strong pillar of [Rome's] foreign policy, and it is also a founding member of the European Union, and that is the other strong pillar."

"But then, outside of those two pillars, there is still a capability of action, of moving, of Italy making contacts with countries that might be perceived as problematic," he continued. "The example of Libya and the recent relations between Italy and Libya are an illustration."

Darnis explains that Italy's foreign policy reflects the realities of the country's long tradition of constantly exploring business opportunities worldwide. That gives an impetus for seemingly impromptu trips -- even to states that at a given moment might be pariahs.

RFE/RL Belarus Service correspondent Jan Maksymiuk agrees that Berlusconi is one of the few European leaders who can visit Minsk and explore better ties without committing Brussels to follow suit. But he says this is partly due to Berlusconi's own personal reputation as a somewhat extravagant politician who takes risks that more cautious leaders might avoid.

But Berlusconi, who most often attracts the media's attention for scandals associated with his private life, is a shrewd deal-maker who rarely travels abroad without

advancing Italian business interests, including his own.

Belarus, which has no significant natural resources, is important as a transit state for Russian pipelines delivering energy to the EU. It also has a sizable military industry which seeks Western technology to maintain competitiveness in the global arms export market.

Berlusconi, a media mogul reputed to own half of Italy's television and press, is closely tied to the country's state energy company ENI and the quasi-state aerospace and weapons conglomerate Finmeccanica.

On November 30, the Belarusian government and Finmeccanica Group signed a memorandum. The two sides agreed to cooperate in transport, energy, space and security systems. The document was signed following the negotiations between President of the Republic of Belarus Alyaksandr Lukashenka and Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.

"Thank you and thanks to your people who, I know, love you, as is demonstrated by the election results which everybody can see," Berlusconi told Lukashenka. The OSCE has repeatedly declared that the elections in Belarus were rigged. Lukashenka, meanwhile, has abolished presidential term limits and can effectively rule for life.

30/11/2009

**Source: Radio Free Belarus,
BelTA, ODB
Photo by nn.by**

Jacek Protasiewicz Expresses Concern about Situation with Belarus' Christian Democracy Party



"In my capacity of a Chairman of the European Delegation for Relations with Belarus I would like to express my deep concern about the situation of the Belarusian Christian Democracy Party (BCD). In my last statement of 17 April 2009 I had already communicated my disappointment about the denial of registration to the BCD," reads the statement.

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EU and Belarus

Jacek Protasiewicz Expresses Concern about Situation with Belarus' Christian Democracy Party

Mr Protasiewicz declared his solidarity with the Christian Democrats of Belarus and called upon the Belarusian state authorities to ensure the right of freedom of assembly in Belarus and to allow the registration of the BCD. He also stressed that Article 193.1 of the Belarusian Criminal Code, which provides for criminal charges participating in the activities of unregistered associations, religious organisations or funds, violates fundamental human rights and needs to be abolished.

03/12/2009

Source: EPP-ED press-release, ODB

Trilateral EU Eastern Partnership Projects of Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine Presented in Brussels

Lithuania's Minister of Foreign Affairs Vygaudas Ušackas took part in a meeting between Foreign Ministers from 27 European Union member states and six Eastern Partnership countries

(Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) that took place on 8 December in Brussels. Implementation of the Eastern Partnership initiative and priorities for 2010 were discussed at the meeting.

Minister Ušackas together with his Belarusian counterpart Syarhei Martynau and Ukrainian Foreign Minister Petro Poroshenko presented a list of



trilateral projects for the Eastern Partnership programme. These projects mainly cover border protection, social and energy security, common historic and cultural heritage.

Ušackas expressed satisfaction with the agreement to include Lithuanian proposals on transport, nuclear safety and cultural heritage projects into action programmes for the next year.

He noted that free trade, dialogue on visa facilitation and cooperation on energy issues were important elements of the Eastern Partnership. The Minister urged to end a discriminatory EU policy

towards the Belarusian citizens, who have to pay for a Schengen visa twice as much as citizens from other Eastern Partnership countries.

"We expect that in the nearest future the EU and Belarus will start a dialogue concerning the decrease in price of Schengen visa for the Belarusian citizens and it will be reduced from 60 to 35 euros", Minister V.Ušackas said.

Minister V.Ušackas also presented the proposals of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Seimas of Lithuania to develop parliamentary cooperation between the Eastern Partnership and the EU countries.

09/12/2009

Source: URM.lt

Politics and Society

Civil Activist Tatiana Shaput'ka Expelled from University



Tatiana Shaput'ka with Commissioner Ferrero-Waldner and Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt at the EP Civil Society Forum

Tatiana Shaput'ka, press-secretary of the Malady Front (Young Front) Organisation, has been expelled from the Department of Law of the Belarusian State University.

On December 3, Shaput'ka received a note, signed by the rector Syarhei Ablameika, stating that she was expelled for "violating the statute of the University". Tatiana Shaput'ka represented her organisation at the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum that took place in Brussels in 16-17 November 2009.

According to Belarusian legislation, students do not have the right to leave the country without permission of their university or the Ministry of Education.

Leader of Movement for Freedom Alyaksandr Milinkevich delivered an appeal to the Syarhei Ablameika calling him to restore Tatiana Shaput'ka status at the university.

04/11/2009

Source: mfront.org, Movement for Freedom, ODB

Politics and Society

Youth Activists Kidnapped in Belarus



Young democratic activists fell victim to the wave of kidnappings that swept the country. At least five young oppositionists were kidnapped by unknown people, who were allegedly equipped with portable radios, in different places of Minsk this year and later dropped off in the forests surrounding the Belarusian capital.

On December 5, five athletic-looking men grabbed Zmitser Dashkevich, Chairman of the Malady Front, as he was leaving his home in south-eastern part of Minsk to attend a ceremony marking the establishment of a coalition of opposition youth organisations.

Mr. Dashkevich had headgear pulled over his eyes so that he could not see anything and spent more than five hours in a minibus. He was dropped off near the village of Antonawka, the

Lahoysk district not far from Minsk.

After returning to Minsk, he filed a complaint with a district police department. Police officers visited his apartment afterwards, saying they needed to check whether his laptop had been stolen. "They found no laptop but saw what they described as strange books and documents," Mr. Dashkevich said, adding that the police seized 50

books and nearly 200 leaflets from his apartment. "I was told that the materials could help the inquiry into my abduction. I hardly understand how they can help," he noted.

On December 6, strangers also detained the coordinator of a civil movement "European Belarus" Yauhen Afanahel and took him out of Minsk. He complained about his abduction to the police when he got back to Minsk.

Malady Front activists Anastasiya Palazhanka and Dzyanis Karnow were bundled into a minibus and driven away from Minsk hours before a major opposition demonstration this past March. The young people later recognized one of the attackers as an officer of the interior ministry's Almaz counter-terrorist unit.

In a similar incident last month, opposition youth Uladzimir Lemesh was

grabbed by unidentified people, handcuffed, forced into a vehicle without license plates and brought to a forest around 25 kilometres south of Minsk.

Artur Finkevich, leader of the Young Belarus opposition group, was grabbed by unknown men, beaten and brought to a forest near Rakaw, a town some 40 kilometers west of Minsk, in December 2008.

The police have not found the perpetrators in any of the cases.

According to the Criminal Code of Republic of Belarus, those persons involved in kidnappings may face up to 10 years of imprisonment.

Belarusian opposition activists are going to start information campaign on such kidnappings to stop this practice. They believe that Belarusian authorities use such incidents to intimidate their opponents.

07/12/2009

Source: svaboda.org, [BelaPAN](http://BelaPAN.org), [ODB](http://ODB.org)

Photo by Radio Free Europe

Belarus Leader Lukashenka to Visit Russia Thursday

Belarusian leader Alyaksandr Lukashenka will visit Russia on December 10 for a session of the ruling body of the union state the two ex-Soviet neighbours are trying to build, the Kremlin said Monday.



Lukashenka will make a working visit to Russia at President Dmitry Medvedev's invitation for a session of the

union state's Supreme State Council, the Kremlin said.

Russia and Belarus have sought to form a union to ensure greater political, economic and social integration since 1996, but the process has stalled recently over a series of disputes.

Lukashenka reiterated his commitment to boosting ties with Russia last week,

but also pledged to improve relations with Western Europe.

Medvedev visited Belarus's capital Minsk late last month, when he and the leaders of Belarus and Kazakhstan signed a package of deals to create a customs union with common tariffs, paving the way for a single economic space.

08/12/2009

Source: RIA Novosti

Finance and Economics

EBRD Buys 25.5 Per Cent Stake in Belarus Retail Chain

The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development has bought a 25.5 percent stake in a Belarusian company managing supermarkets selling children's goods, the bank said in a statement on Wednesday. The investment in West Ost Union Commercial Industrial Group is EBRD's third equity investment in Belarus in the past decade and the first in its retail sector.

The EBRD declined to disclose the value of its investment. In the statement, it said that it 'views retail commerce as vital to the development of a successful market economy'.

West Ost Union, or WOU, runs a retail chain of 12 supermarkets in Minsk and other cities and wants to increase the number of supermarkets to 25 by 2013. 'This financing is very important because it will support our expansion plans,' the

EBRD statement cited Syarhei Misiachenka, WOU's general director, as saying.

The EBRD is working with a total of 24 projects in Belarus, with a net business volume of 244.1 million euro, according to the bank's website, www.ebrd.com.

18/11/2009

Source: Reuters

Belarus Increased Import Custom Duties for Several Commodities

Belarus increased import customs duties for 9-month term for several food commodities. The rates of the duties were confirmed by the decree of the head of the state No.542 of November 15 of the current year. According to the Ministry of Agriculture and Food of Belarus and the concern "Belgosharchaprom", the gov-

ernment took such measures in order to protect the interests of the domestic producers. The country produces the sufficient volumes of food for provision of the inner market. The raised import duties will allow limiting imports of such food commodities and competing in prices.

The government imposed import duties

for flour from soft wheat and spelt wheat, groats and crude flour from soft wheat and spelt wheat, rolled grains and grains processed to flakes at the rate of 20% from the customs costs.

18/11/2009

Source: Agrimarket.info

IMF Mission Reaches Staff-Level Agreement on Third Review Under Stand-By Arrangement

An International Monetary Fund (IMF) mission, led by Mr. Chris Jarvis, visited Minsk during November 10-19, 2009 to hold discussions with the Belarusian authorities as part of the third review of the country's Stand-By Arrangement (SBA). At the conclusion of the visit, Mr. Jarvis issued the following statement: "An IMF staff mission and the Belarusian authorities have reached agree-



ment, subject to approval by the IMF Executive Board, on the completion of the third review of the SBA with Belarus. The third review would be considered by the IMF Executive Board in late- December. Upon

completion of the review, an amount of SDR 437.93 million (close to US\$700 million) would become available for disbursement. [...]

"The mission and the authorities also discussed the issues that would strengthen the financial system and the independence of the National Bank of the Republic of Belarus. Consultations on the focus and the sequence of structural reforms could form the basis for a follow-up program after the expiration of the current program in April 2010." [...]

19/11/2009

Source: imf.org

Belarus Central Bank to Cut Rates by 50 Basis Points from December 1

Belarus' central bank has decided to cut the refinancing rate by 50 basis points to 13.5 percent effective from Dec. 1, the president's press service said in a statement on Thursday, citing the head of the central bank.

"An agreement has been reached with the IMF that we can start the process of cutting interest rates. We plan that already from December 1, 2009, the refinancing rate will be reduced by 50 basis points," Pyotr Prakapovich was quoted as saying. A central bank official told Reuters on Wednesday that Belarus would consider cutting the refinancing rate at the end of this month.

19/11/2009

Source: Reuters



Pyotr Prakapovich

Finance and Economics

Heineken Launches Zlaty Bazant Beer Production in Belarus

Dutch beer giant Heineken has started the licensed production of famous Slovak beer Zlaty Bazant in Belarus. This is the third beer brand which is produced by the company under license in Belarus. Earlier it has started the production of "Doctor Diesel" and Gosser brands.

Currently the licensed brands occupy about 10% of the total portfolio of Heineken's brands produced in Belarus. The company is not going to stop and, according to the Marketing Di-



rector of Heineken Belarus Natalia Litvinova, planning to increase the share of its licensed brands.

The company has already received all the needed approvals from Heineken International and is going to start the licensed production Zlaty Bazant at the capacities of SYABAR plant in the city of Bobruisk.

During the next several months Heineken is planning to launch a massive promotional campaign of Zlaty Bazant

brand in Belarus with the help of TV and retail chains, while in early 2010 Heineken the brand will be presented in the segment of HoReCa where it in the form of bottled as well as draft beer.

At present Heineken owns two brewing companies in Belarus: IZAO "SYABAR" and OJSC "Rechitsapiva, which were acquired by the Dutch brewery in December 28, 2007 and May 2008 respectively.

26/11/2009

Source: Food Biz Daily

Customs Union Agreed With Belarus, Kazakhstan



Medvedev, Lukashenko and Nazarbayev walking and talking together before talks on a customs union.

On November 27, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia gave the go-ahead for the creation of a joint customs union. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev met with his counterparts Alyaksandr Lukashenko and Nursultan Nazarbayev in Minsk, where they agreed to the creation of a unified customs tar-

iff, which will start January 1, 2010 as well as a unified customs code, which will go into effect July 1, 2010. About 92 percent of the new tariff regime is based on current Russian duties. Russia has, on average, the highest tariffs of the group, that means that Kazakhstan and Belarus will be raising duties on a wide number of items.

"We had to agree with our partners on lowering certain customs tariffs on certain groups of goods, and our partners had to raise certain tariffs," Russian First Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov said.

The countries still haven't agreed to a set of automobile tariffs, but the Russian side is concerned that the tentative plan for duties would lead to a flood of used cars from Belarus and Kazakhstan and crush the domestic auto market. While tariffs for Belarusian dealers

would jump to the same level as the Russian tariffs, duties for individuals would remain several times lower, which could result in caravans of Belarusian auto runners streaming into Russia.

A number of decisions regarding the customs union don't correspond to the interests of Belarus in full, Lukashenko said, adding that he hoped that the decisions would nevertheless bring a balance of interests and "common results for all sides."

Medvedev repeated his assertion that entering the customs union would not affect Russia's plans to join the World Trade Organization.

01/12/2009

Source: The St. Petersburg Times

Photo by Vladimir Rodionov / RIA-Novosti / The Associated Press

Putin Links Belarus Economic Aid to Political Integration



ences for Belarus would depend on the

Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin on Thursday said further economic prefer-

degree of political integration between the two countries in a union state.

"The deeper this integration, the greater the possibility we can move to internal Russian prices," said Putin in an annual question-and-answer session with Russian citizens.

Putin said Russia had given enough financial aid already to Belarus.

03/12/2009

Source: Reuters

Finance and Economics

Gazprom, Belarus Discuss Future

Officials at Russian energy giant Gazprom welcomed government officials from Belarus to discuss increasing their bilateral ties in the energy sector.

Uladzimir Syamashka, First Deputy Prime Minister of Belarus, met in Moscow with Gazprom Chairman Alexei Miller to discuss the terms of a 2006 contract and a



2007 acquisition, the Russian energy monopoly states.

Gazprom and its Belarusian counterpart Beltransgaz in 2006 signed a deal that calls on Belarus to pay a price for its gas that is equal to European prices beginning in 2011. A 2007 purchase and sale agreement forecasts the completion of the sale of a 50 percent stake in Beltransgaz by 2010.

Gazprom in June ordered Belarus to

hand over \$244 million in gas debts or risk supply cuts. The dispute emerged over the differences between prices outlined in the 2006 contract and average market prices for gas.

Belarusian Prime Minister Syarhei Sidorsky said his country has submitted a proposal to Gazprom related to anticipated reductions in gas prices for 2010.

03/12/2009

Source: UPI

Belarus Leader Sacks Ministers as Economy Stagnates

Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka on Friday [December 4] sacked the economy, trade and tax ministers in the biggest government reshuffle in years as he seeks to overturn economic stagnation.

Lukashenka's office said Economy Minister Mikalai Zaichanka was replaced with the deputy head of presidential staff, Mikalai Snapkou. Defence Minister Leanid Maltsau and Security Council Secretary Yury Zhadobin swapped places.

Belarus, whose economy has been run along Soviet-style command lines by Lukashenka since 1994 and which is heavily dependent on subsidies from neighbouring resource-

rich Russia, suffered heavily from the global crisis alongside its bigger neighbour.

Its exports halved this year as demand and prices for Belarusian machinery and agricultural and chemical products plummeted. Gross domestic product fell 1 percent in the first 10 months after years of growth.

"Of course this is primarily linked to the crisis, to declining economic indicators," said independent political analyst Alyaksandr Klaskousky.

"But looking at the people, who came in, I would not say there are a new generation of people," he added.

Defence Minister Leanid Maltsau will become secretary of the Security Council -- an appointment likely to be viewed as a promotion rather than a downgrade because his new post is considered one of the most powerful in Belarus.

The former secretary, Yuri Zhadobin, will become the new defence minister.

Lukashenka sacked the country's tax, information and trade ministers as well as the head of state truck giant MAZ, whose exports plummeted sharply this year.

04/12/2009

Source: Reuters

Belarus Finance Ministry Submits 2010 Draft Budget to Parliament

The Finance Ministry of Belarus submitted on Monday a draft budget for 2010, with revenues expected to reach about \$20 billion and a budget deficit of about 1.5% of GDP.

Belarusian Finance Minister Andrei Kharkavets said the country's gross domestic product was expected to grow 12% in 2010 as compared with this year.

Kharkavets said taxes and excise

duties would account for 82% of the country's budget revenues next year.

"The budget will receive revenues from VAT, tax from foreign economic activity, excise duties, income tax and profit tax," Kharkavets said.

The finance minister said the government intended to increase VAT from the current 18% to 20% next year, which would yield an additional \$700 million for the budget.

At the same time, Kharkavets said that the 2010 budget stipulated a 14% increase in social spending as compared with this year and a 15% growth in real wages in the budget-financed sector.

The finance minister characterized the budget for next year as cautious.

07/12/2009

Source: RIA Novosti

Mysterious Belarus

The Black Lady of Niasvzh Castle. Romantic Story of the Most Famous Ghost of Belarus



Barbara Radziwill and Zhygimont August. Mateyka, 1867

A stripe of pale moonlight fell across the floor of a dark hall. The Niasvzh castle was quiet. Its majestic building loomed over the shore of a lake. The castle tower was mirrored in the lake's calm waters.

Old parquetry creaked under someone's foot.

"Hush! What do you think you're doing?!" someone whispered. "You don't want to scare away the ghost!"

"There's no way it'll be more scared than I am!" another voice answered.

Two shadows, each no taller than a child's, hid behind a large Dutchware fireplace. The eyes of this strange couple shined under the moon like four silver coins.

"It's almost midnight. The Black Lady may show up any moment", a boy's voice said.

"She better not, for I'm already frightened to death", his companion, likely a girl, squeaked.

To her utter disappointment and horror, a dark human shape appeared in one of the doorways. The children were petrified with fear. The figure seemed to hesitate a bit; then, after a long moment of silence, it sighed and made its way towards the small adventurers.

"Run!" the boy screamed, seizing the speechless girl by her hand. They dashed down the nearby staircase, leaving the ghostly creature behind. In a minute, the ghost hunters crawled out of a window and, panting, hurried across the castle's courtyard.

"We're safe now. Wasn't this great?" the boy asked when the couple made its way through a pitch-dark park.

"I've had the time of my life!" the girl replied sarcastically. "But you were scared too!" she smiled vaguely.

"Not even for a second" the boy said proudly. "What a story we have to tell tomorrow to the class!"

The boy and a girl were neighbours, who went to the same school and lived across the lake. There is hardly anyone in the small town of Niasvzh who hasn't heard the legend about the Black Lady, the ghost of a woman in dark mourning clothes who is wandering around the castle in the night. Like so many people before them, the friends decided to sneak into the castle and see the ghost with their own eyes. The recent hectic renovation of Niasvzh castle only made their task easier, with the castle yard being full of debris, many windows empty and its walls gaping with holes. After all, these local kids always know all ins and outs much better than any archeologist or construction worker.

Niasvzh is a small town in the western part of Belarus, which boasts the most remarkable castle in the country. For many centuries, it has been the unofficial capital of the Radziwill family, once one of the most powerful aristocratic dynasties of this land. The castle was founded in 1533, the same year Yan Radziwill took the possession of Niasvzh.

The masters of Niasvzh were mighty rulers, who rivalled kings in their treasures and power. No wonder the castle is surrounded by numerous mysteries and legends. One of the most famous of them is the legend of the Black Lady,

the ghost of Barbara Radziwil. Dressed in dark mourning clothes, she haunts the castle, filling it with sighs and weeping.

The love story between Barbara Radziwil and Zhygimont August, the heir to the throne of the King of Poland, developed into a truly Shakespearean tragedy. At that time, the Polish Kingdom and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania formed a union, which helped them to resist foreign threats. However, the relationship between Polish Kings and powerful aristocratic families of the Grand Duchy were never easy.

In the 1540's, young prince Zhygimont August, son of the Polish King Zhygimont Stary ('the Elder') was the principal regent of Vilnius. He was a handsome man of open character and humanistic views.

The personal life of the prince was falling apart. His mother, Queen Bona Sforza, Italian by birth, and his aging father were worried about the future of their dynasty. The wife of young Zhygimont, Elizabeth of Habsburg, was neither pretty nor able to have children. She was said to suffer from epilepsy and died barely two years after the marriage, allegedly due to horse-riding accident. Rumours, however, had it that Elizabeth's mother-in-law had her hand in her death.

The sole heir of the Jagellonian dynasty had to remarry. To the utter surprise of his mother, who began actively searching for a good match, Zhygimont had already found a wife for himself. He was dazzled by the beauty and charms of Barbara Radziwill, a member of a prominent aristocratic family of the Grand Duchy.

However, the royal parents, the whole Polish court and senators were much less inclined to fall for nice looks. This news was to cause uproar.

Barbara Radziwill was the daughter of Great Hetman Yury Radziwill, one of the richest people of the Grand Duchy. When Barbara turned 17, she married Stanislaw Hashtold, the governor of the Navahradak province.

Mysterious Belarus

The Black Lady of Niasvizh Castle. Romantic Story of the Most Famous Ghost of Belarus

However, it was a mercenary marriage, with no love on either side. When her husband died five years later, Barbara did not mourn him too long. She often received merry companies of guests in Heraniony, an estate of her late husband. Her numerous male visitors openly flirted with the lovely widow. Rumours about Barbara's frivolous behaviour inevitably began to spread.

When the traditional period of mourning was over, Barbara began to appear in society again. Zhygimont August met Barbara during a ball in Vilnius. The prince immediately fell in love with her. Alas, he was still married to Elizabeth of Habsburg. The couple had to resort to cunning. Since Stanislaw Hashtold, the husband of Barbara, died childless, his estate was to be passed on to the state. Thus, in 1544, Zhygimont inspected the estate in Heraniony as its future heir. However, his stay turned out to be much longer than needed. The lovers have been discreetly meeting each other till the death of Zhygimont's wife in 1545. While some insisted that she was poisoned by Bona Sforza, others claimed it was Barbara who inspired the death.

In any case, Zhygimont did not mourn long. Balls and masquerades recommenced in Vilnius. It was not enough for Zhygimont August to meet his mistress – he wanted to be with her all the time. He ordered to build a gallery between his palace and the mansion of Radziwills, where Barbara and her mother resided. In this gallery, Zhygimont and Barbara could meet without undue interference from others. Barbara's mother encouraged these rendezvous. It was her dream to see her daughter wearing a queen's crown some day. Allegedly, she even used dark magic to ensure the loyalty of Zhygimont to Barbara. Perhaps, it was not really necessary, for Zhygimont-de facto King of Poland - was head over heels in love.

Mikalay Radziwill Rudy ('the Red-Haired'), Barbara's brother, and Mikalay Radziwill Chorny ('the Black'), her second cousin, were fully aware of the monarch's relationship with Barbara. They asked him to stop dishon-

ouring their house by visiting her without any obvious intention to marry.

Mikalay Chorny, the leading figure of the Radziwill clan, was playing his own game. He was the governor of Vilnius as well as the Chancellor of the Great Duchy. Mikalay craved for more independence of his land from the Polish Kingdom. His intention was to bring Protestantism to the Grand Duchy. This would challenge the spiritual power of the Roman Church, thus making the Duchy more independent from the rigorously Catholic Poland. In addition, Mikalay Chorny established printing houses in Brest and Niasvizh, where books in the Old Belarusian language were produced, which was another way of resisting the Polish influence.

The romance between Zhygimont and Barbara was a unique chance to strengthen the influence of the Grand Duchy aristocracy in Krakow, the capital of the Polish Kingdom.

Zhygimont August knew that by marrying Barbara he would cause a major scandal on a national scale. His powerful royal mother especially disliked the Radziwills, scoffing at them and calling them parvenus. He promised the relatives of Barbara to stop their relationship. Mikalay Chorny and Mikalay Rudy pretended to leave Vilnius, but never did. They suspected, not unfoundedly, that Zhygimont would not resist the temptation to visit Barbara once again.

Caught red-handed, Zhygimont had to promise that Barbara would become his wife. The same night the chaplain of the Radziwill family married the couple.

The rumours about the discreet marriage eventually reached the royal court in Krakow. Young Zhygimont was immediately



summoned to the capital. He was forced to confess to his father, who was very much displeased with the marriage. The mother was bathing in bitter tears. Being a King in the aristocratic republic of Rzeczpospolita had many peculiarities. For instance, the King could not marry without the approval of his bride by senators.

Barbara spent the first months of her second marriage in a faraway estate of Dubinki. The mystery of her union with Zhygimont eventually slipped into the public. The royal court,

the polish aristocracy, and the whole family of Zhygimont hated her. Barbara could not see her husband, and could only exchange letters with him. The anonymous ill-wishers accused her of lechery, black magic and even of being a mistress of her own second cousin, Radziwill Chorny. By all counts, it was too much. She miscarried and almost died when a floor in one of the rooms suddenly collapsed – either by accident or not. Barbara began to fear for her life.

In 1548 the old King died, and Zhygimont August became the new head of state. Only then he dared to present his wife to the Pany-Rada, the senate of the Grand Duchy. The aristocracy of the Grand Duchy accepted their marriage as a fact. Polish noblemen, however, were furious. Some asserted that Barbara's coming to Krakow would be worse than the Turkish military occupation; others claimed that Barbara was an illegitimate daughter of their late king Zhygimont Stary, therefore his son is committing a horrible sin by uniting with his own sister. Eventually, voices calling for the decrowning of Zhygimont were raised. Barbara risked to be lynched by drowning in the Wisla River, if she showed up in the capital. Was it a mere hatred, or was it the fear of the Grand Duchy's nobility increasing its influence in Poland?

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In 1548, a session of the Polish Sejm turned into a real battle between the young King and the noblemen. As a result, the nobility failed to make Zhygimont August leave Barbara; the King, on his part, failed to persuade the parliament to allow her crowning as a Queen. Zhygimont August was ready to throw away his crown and remain "without my last shirt, but with my wife". His allies barely managed to make their King abandon this idea.

Bona Sforza fought the battle in her own way. She gave up all hope to change her son's mind, and therefore decided to hound his wife to death. She ordered to bring a famous witch Agazina from the southern Belarusian swamp region of Palesse. The plot failed. Agazina was captured by the King's people, put into a cage and brought to Brest. Agazina was just about to be burnt, when Zhygimont August pardoned her.

After three years of wrangles, the Zhygimont finally pushed through the coronation of his bride. He even brought Barbara to Krakow. The young King's mother Bona Sforza demonstratively left the city. The people of Krakow, however, streamed to the cities eager to see their new Queen, which was rumoured about so much.

After all, it seems that the worries of Polish nobility about Barbara henpecking her husband were not fully unfounded. As a new mistress of the royal palace, she acted by her own rules. The King had effectively abandoned his duties and spent all of his time with his wife. Royal dignitaries, arrogant aristocrats and even the King himself had to wait hours till the Queen showed up for official receptions.

However, this did not last long. Just five months later, Barbara was stricken by a terrible illness. The rumours circulated that Queen Bona had been up



The Ghost of Barbara Appears before Zhygimont August. V. Gerson, 1886

to her poisonous tricks again. While Barbara battled her illness, Zhygimont managed to win over the majority in the Sejm with the help of Mikalay Radziwill Chorny. Barbara was finally acknowledged and crowned as Queen. Even Bona Sforza sent a messenger with a note, in which she wished Barbara quick recovery and called her "daughter and beloved daughter-in-law".

Barbara Radziwill died when she was 30. For three years she has been the Great Duchess of Lithuanua, and for one year the Queen of Poland.

The King set off on a long journey to Vilnius with the cortege of his late wife. He followed it on his horse and dismounted it every time the cortege passed a village or a town. He wore black clothes for the rest of his life and retired to the remote castle of Knyszyn.

Once, the King went to visit Mikalay Radziwill Chorny in Niasvizh castle. There he attempted to conjure the

ghost of his bride with the help of a sorcerer. One of the conditions of seeing Barbara again was that Zhygimont would remain silent and without movement. However, the very moment he saw the image of Barbara, he flung himself to her with a cry of admiration. There was an explosion, and the ghost disappeared. Since then, the spirit of Barbara settled in Niasvizh castle in the form of the Black Lady. There she roams the hallways of the castle, while Zhygimont is said to haunt the Krakow palace.

The ghost of the Black Lady started after the kids, but soon tripped over some piece of old dust-covered furniture and almost went sprawling on the floor. Its acting was not truly ghostly, not less so its use of words:

"Darn! The battery must be dead."

The "ghost" stood up and flicked a switcher on its pocket flashlight a couple of times – to no avail. "Kids will be kids" the night watchman sighed and continued his round about the castle under the moonlight. He was too old to believe in ghosts, let alone to be scared of them. In a couple of minutes he returned to his small room, turned on an old TV-set and poured tea in his glass. The castle corridors were quiet, and only the wind was sighing in flues. Or was it really a wind?

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By Ales Kudrytski for the ODB



The Radziwills Palace in Niasvizh, Belarus