

# Belarus Headlines

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*Office for a Democratic  
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## Politics and Society

### US President Bush Receives Belarusian Opposition Leaders



US President George W. Bush received a delegation of Belarusian opposition politicians in Washington on December 6, the White House's press office reported.

The delegation, which arrived in the USA on December 2 and left on December 8, included Alyaksandr Mil-

inkevich, a former presidential candidate; Anatol Lyabedzka, chairman of the United Civic Party; Syarhey Kalyakin, leader of the Belarusian Party of Communists; Anatol Lyawkovich, acting chairman of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party "Hramada"; Zmitser Fedaruk, a 17-year-old leader of a youth opposition group Malady Front; Pavel Sevyarynets, a founder of Malady Front; and Enira Branitskaya, a 26-year-old civil society activist who spent six months in prison in 2006 for her work as co-leader of an unregistered election observation group Partnyorstva (Partnership).

The delegation met with the US State Secretary Condoleezza Rice on De-

cember 3 and attended a briefing "The Future Belarus: Democracy or Dictatorship?" on the following day.

The politicians also met with experts on Belarus representing US non-governmental organizations, visited the offices of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and the Washington Post newspaper.

They gave radio and television interviews, met with staff of the US National Security Council and the office of the US Vice President Dick Cheney. Meetings with US lawmakers, in particular Christopher Smith, a member of the US House of Representatives, also took place.

07/12/2007

Source: BelaPAN

### Belarus Wins the 5th Junior Eurovision Song Contest



Belarus wins the 5th Junior Eurovision Song Contest in Rotterdam, Saturday, 09 December 2007. The country was chosen as the winner of the 2007 Junior Eurovision Song

Contest. Alexey Zhigalkovich delivered an outstanding performance with his song S Druzyami, which received a total of 137 points. It was a very close call with Armenia, who came in second with 136 points.

"Congratulations to the winner and to all the artists for their excellent performances. And a special thanks to the host broadcaster AVRO, and to UNICEF for their collaboration on this event", says Svante Stockselius, Executive Supervisor of the Junior Eurovision Song Contest. The sold out performance at Ahoy stadium in Rot-

terdam also included the presence of two honoured guests Kateryna Yushchenko, the first lady of Ukraine and Mary Perdue, the first lady of the US state of Georgia. The event was broadcast live in the 17 participating countries and across the world through a live Internet stream on [www.junioreurovision.tv](http://www.junioreurovision.tv). Viewers in the 17 countries voted for their favourite song through the pan-European televoting system traditional to the Eurovision Song Contests.

08/12/2007

Source: EBU

### Belarusian Popular Front Elects New Chairman



The opposition Belarusian Popular Front (BNF) on December 9 elected Lyavon Barshchouski as its new chairman. Nearly

250 delegates who met at the BNF convention on December 8 and 9 in Minsk failed to elect a new leader during the first day of the convention. Vintsuk Vyachorka and Ales Mikhalevich, two nominees for the post,

each won about 50 percent of the vote, but neither managed to cross the 50 percent threshold required by the BNF's charter. Vyachorka and Mikhalevich then withdrew their candidacies and put forward Barshchouski as a compromise candidate to avoid splitting of the BNF. Barshchouski was a lawmaker in the Belarusian legislature between 1990 and 1995 and an acting chairman of the BNF between 1995 and 1999. "We respect the principles of the coalition [of the United Pro-Democratic Forces], but we care for the BNF first of all," Barshchouski said after his election. "We want it to remain one of the symbols of



the independence of modern Belarus," he added.

09/12/2007 Source: Radio Free Europe



## Politics and Society

### Belarusian Businessmen Protest against Proposed Tax Hike



More than 1,000 Belarusian businessmen and small traders marched in the capital Minsk on Monday to protest planned tax hikes on private commerce. The demonstrators

gathered in Oktober Square with banners reading "For the Free Development of Business!" and "Allow Commerce to Grow!". Some marchers chanted "Business has been rolled up by the government!" and "Down with the Presidential orders!".

Protestors had gathered to object to the tax law changes planned to go into effect at the beginning of 2008 which, if enforced, would make most small businesses unprofitable.

Belarus' private sector is tiny and heavily regulated by the Lukashenko government, which supports central planning of most sectors of the economy and assumes private business should be taxed to a maximum.

Marchers said that if the new tax laws go into effect they would retaliate by shutting down their businesses - a move which potentially could deprive many Belarusians of a wide range of consumer items, staple foods, and modern services. The small business strike would, if it persisted,

make more difficult Lukashenko's hold on large cities.

Increased pressure on the Belarusian national government budget, in large part due to fuel price increases by Russia, has obliged Lukashenko to search for means of increasing tax revenues.



The leader of civil initiative "For Freedom of Entrepreneurship" Viktor Garbachou has been sentenced to 15 days of administrative arrest. The Central court of Minsk accused him of active participation in a non-authorized action. A businessman Aliaxandr Tsatsura was detained before the protest meeting and got 10 days of arrest. His colleague Aliaxandr Makaeu was sentenced to 7 days in jail.

The entrepreneurs were arrested after they met with the House of Representatives deputy Anatol Paulovich who recognised the problem and proposed a meeting with the businessmen to discuss the situation. He guaranteed that there would be no arrests or detentions.

10/12/2007

Source: Earthtimes

### Poland Launches Belarus TV Station



Belsat's Director Agnieszka Romaszewska-Guzy speaks to reporters in Warsaw, 10 Dec 2007.

Poland has launched a new television station aimed at Belarus that it says will broadcast independent news and other programming to its eastern neighbour.

The new Warsaw-based Belsat TV channel is funded by the Polish government and will be available to those Belarusians with access to

a satellite receiver - about one-tenth of the population.

Belsat's programming will be prepared by journalists working in both countries. The station will initially broadcast three hours a day but plans to eventually increase that to 16 hours.

Poland has had strained ties with Belarus for several years

and has voiced concern about the state of democracy in the former Soviet republic. Belarus has a large Polish minority. Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko has accused them of plotting to overthrow his government.

In October, Belarusian police arrested the president of a Polish association, Andzelika Borys and the editor of a Polish language magazine, Viktor Bancer, on charges of unlawfully cursing in public.

The international community has repeatedly criticized Mr. Lukashenko for his authoritarian policies, and the United States has called Belarus the last dictatorship in Europe.

10/12/2007

Source: VOA NEWS

## Politics and Society

### NATO Ready for Dialogue with Belarus



NATO is ready for a sincere and open dialogue with Belarus, the NATO headquarters in Brussels told Belarusian media.

"We believe that through a dialogue our relations can become more transparent and open, the trust between the sides can be increased," said the source.

The source said, sometimes the dialogue with Belarus becomes harsh, but "breaking all ties with Belarus would be non-productive and would not correspond to the purposes of the organisation".

NATO officials stressed, issues concerning relations with Belarus are discussed at all levels of the organisation. Practical cooperation of the sides continues as part of the Partnership for Peace programme. "We believe it is useful," said the HQ. The project for utilising Belarus' stockpile of antipersonnel land mines was successfully accomplished in 2006. Among possible avenues of cooperation between Belarus and NATO the HQ named utilisation of air space, counteraction of terrorism threat to the energy infrastructure, prevention and alleviation of consequences of emergencies and natural calamities.

10/12/2007

Source: BelTA

### U.S. Ambassador to Belarus Receives Diplomacy for Freedom Award and

#### Comments on US Sanctions against Belarusian Authorities

The U.S. State Department on December 10 presented U.S. Ambassador to Belarus Karen Stewart with the 2007 Diplomacy for Freedom Award, it announced on its website.

"Ambassador Stewart inspired her entire embassy to provide encouragement to embattled defenders of freedom," Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said, adding that the "Belarus regime has stepped up persecution of the opposition and ordinary citizens pressing peacefully for change." Stewart

art "has ensured that U.S. assistance is targeted to democracy initiatives, and she has found innovative ways to bring the message of U.S. support for freedom directly to the people of Belarus," Rice said in presenting the award.

At the press conference in Minsk on December 13, the ambassador noted that the move to introduce the sanctions proves "how seriously we take the development of democracy" in Belarus and shows "what is lost and what could be gained in our relationship."

She stressed that the sanctions had not affected trade between Belarus and the United States in general.

Ms Stewart noted that Washington's economic sanctions were not meant to "generally hurt people of Belarus" but rather targeted certain officials.

12/12/2007

Sources: RFE, navy.by

### Belarus: No Quick Union With Russia

Belarus' president on Friday dismissed speculation that his two days of meetings with Russian President Vladimir Putin were aimed at a quick union between the two countries that Putin would head.

President Alexander Lukashenko's office said last week that a draft constitution for a unified country's government would be part of the agenda.

But at the start of a second day of meetings, Lukashenko said, "I was surprised that this visit has caused all this uproar in the West. There is no wider meaning here."

The Kremlin also moved Thursday to quash talk of an imminent merger, denying that Putin's talks with Lukashenko and other officials would touch upon the draft constitution.

While those statements discouraged expectations of a quick

union, Putin's trip to Belarus - his first since 2003 - underlined a growing interest in bringing the two countries together after more than a decade of sporadic discussions and arguments.

Russia will extend a 1.5-billion-dollar stabilization credit to Belarus for 15 years with a grace period of five years, according to the permanent committee of the union state in Minsk.

The relevant agreement is expected to be signed in Minsk later on Friday, where a meeting of the supreme council of the union state is taking place.

Belarussian and Russian finance ministers Nikolai Korbut and Alexei Kudrin will put their signatures to the deal.

14/12/2007

Sources: The Associated Press, Interfax

## Politics and Society

### US Condemns Beating of Belarus Protestors

The United States condemned the severe beating of pro-democracy protestors by police in Belarus on Wednesday, which left at least one activist hospitalized.

"We condemn the use of brutal force against demonstrators today in Minsk," State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said in a statement, singling out party leader Zmister Fedaruk, who he said had been "specifically targeted."

Fedaruk, co-chairman of the opposition group Young Front, was among 100 people demonstrating in central Minsk when nearly 200 police swooped and violently dispersed the

rally, according to reports.

The demonstrators were protesting a visit by Russian President Vladimir Putin and a project of political union with Russia. Putin was to discuss this with ex-Soviet Belarus' hardline leader Alexander Lukashenko.

The protestors gathered waving national flags on October Square, near Lukashenko's residence. When the police charged in, Fedaruk was knocked to the ground and fell unconscious.

"He has been hospitalized with serious injuries," McCormack said. "This incident is another in a long series of repressive acts by the Belarusian au-

thorities against their own citizens."

He said Fedaruk and another opposition party leader, Anatoly Lebedko, had been part of a Belarus pro-democracy delegation that met with US President George W. Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice last week in Washington.

"We again call on the Belarusian authorities to refrain from the use of force against their own people, and to allow the exercise of fundamental rights, including free speech and assembly," McCormack added.

13/12/2007

Source: AFP News

## Economics

### Belarus and Venezuela to Produce 50,000 Barrels a Day



Belarus and Venezuela will begin producing 50,000 barrels of oil a day in the South American nation within the next few years, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez said. Venezuela has given approval for the state

oil company of Belarus to operate in three more blocks, Chavez said today in comments broadcast by state-owned Venezolana de Television. Venezuela and Belarus began exploration and production operations this year.

"This bilateral cooperation is vital for us," Chavez said today at an oil installation in Venezuela's Anzoategui state.

Chavez and Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko also signed agreements today to share military technology and deepen trade ties.

State-owned Petroleos de Venezuela SA and Belarus Neft have already started operating in Venezuela's Junin I block, where they'll invest \$120 million to drill nine wells, the Venezuelan information ministry said today in an e-mailed statement.

The companies expect to certify that the block has 20 billion barrels of crude oil in place, according to the statement.

08/12/2007

Source: Bloomberg.com

### Belarusian Banks Cleared to Trade Diamonds

Belarusian banks have been given the go ahead to trade in diamonds on behalf of the National Bank of Belarus (NBB,) the local media reported. The NBB gave the directive aiming to "further liberalize the domestic diamonds market," the Belorusskie Novosti said quoting an NBB statement.

The decision allows the banks to buy and sell diamonds for either Belarusian ruble or foreign currency. Depending on the state of the domestic and international markets and on how much a bank is allowed to profit from this trade, the prices of diamonds may range from 90 to 130 percent of the NBB's selling price, the news agency said.

09/12/2007

Source: Rapport News

## Economics

### EBRD Opens \$3mln Credit Line for Belarusian RRB-Bank

The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) opened a \$3 million credit line for RRB-Bank for a five-year term to provide much-needed financing for small and medium-scale businesses, RRB-Bank Deputy Chairman of Board Viktor Doronkevich told reporters on December 13. According to him, RRB-Bank and the

EBRD had long talks before signing the agreement. The work was supervised by the National Bank of Belarus. According to Michael Davey, Director for Caucasus, Moldova and Belarus of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the EBRD is satisfied with the deal. Thus, RRB-Bank became the sixth financial institution in Belarus cooperating with the EBRD.

"This is a good bank. It has good prospects," Michael Davey underlined and expressed hope that the bank will start immediately meeting all the goals set. Besides, the EBRD will also provide assistance to RRB-Bank in crediting small and medium-scale businesses.

13/12/2004

Source: BelTA

### Belarus' BPC Still Raising Potash Prices for Asian Countries

Belarusian Potash Company (BPC), which supplies potash fertilizer produced by Belarus' Belaruskali and Russia's Ural-Kali (RTS: URKA) to foreign markets, continues to raise potash fertilizer prices for Asian countries, the company said in a statement.

BPC informed UralKali that it would be selling potash fertilizer to Asian countries at a minimum of \$500 per tonne, which is 20% higher than the set prices.

The Belarusian company is confident that demand for potash fertilizers will remain high on Asian markets due to irregular

supplies of fertilizer and the lack of fertilizer production in these countries.

Belarusian Potash Company is the one of the largest suppliers of potash products in the world. The company delivers potash fertilizers to Africa, Europe, India, China, the United States, the Pacific region in addition to Central and South America.

BPC was set up in April 2005. Belaruskali and UralKali each own 50% of the company.

14/12/2007

Source: Interfax

## EU and Belarus

### Interview with the EU High Representative for the CFSP Javier Solana

**- In November 2006, the European Commission unveiled a document titled, "What the European Union Could Bring to Belarus." Could we talk about any improvement of the relationship between the EU and Minsk in the past year?**

While it is difficult to say that our relationship has changed much, our contacts have become more intensive. We have talked a lot more directly to each other, at Senior Officials level. These discussions have focused on the prospects for our relationship. We are also in the process of establishing a Delegation of the European Commission in Minsk.

What the EU wanted to do through the non-paper was to send a clear message to Belarus. This message is one of wanting to engage with her, build a real partnership. There is much that unites

us. The EU and Belarus are neighbours, and there would indeed be important reasons for us to co-operate closer.

However, this partnership can only be successful if it is based on shared values, as is the case with our developing partnerships with countries such as Ukraine and Moldova. These values are basically spelled-out in OSCE commitments, which both the member states of the EU and Belarus have signed up to, as well as in the conventions of the Council of Europe. Regrettably, these values



are not being realised in Belarus. As a result of this, we still stand very much at the beginning of our relationship. In this context, the ball remains in Belarus' court.

**- EU officials say that full-scale co-operation between Belarus and the European Union may start only when 12 conditions for the country's democratization, including the release of all political prisoners, are fulfilled. However, the Belarusian authorities insist that there are no political prisoners in Belarus. Here emerge two questions: Is it likely that the EU will give up one or several conditions by way of compromise? If Minsk continues to ignore the EU conditions, will this mean that the relationship between the EU and Belarus will remain frozen for an indefinite period?**



## Economics

It is clear that things do not change completely over night. We are realistic and naturally do not expect the Belarusian authorities to move on all twelve points in one go. However, we would need to see the beginning of a concrete and credible democratisation process, which in the medium term would cover all points mentioned in the non-paper. Concrete steps on the side of Belarus would make it possible to start building a real relationship.

There are some minimum pre-conditions which would have to be met for us to start moving forward. The most important among these is the release of all political prisoners and an end to further arrests and harassment of civil society and opposition activists. A serious commitment to proceed on other steps would also be needed. The 2008 parliamentary elections would give a good opportunity for Belarus to show positive movement. Among possible steps in this regard, I would like to mention the inclusion of opposition representatives in electoral commissions and the registration of opposition candidates. One thing needs to be clear -- concrete steps need to improve the situation, and not be overshadowed or countered by new negative developments.

In this context, let me mention our continued concern for the freedom of the media. We have earlier noted the need for independent newspapers being guaranteed distribution through the appropriate channels. As of late, we have been following closely the libel suit against the Novy Chas newspaper and its journalist Aliaxandr Tamkovich. The next hearing of this case is now scheduled for 19 December. It is important that courts would not be used for silencing independent media.

**- Not long ago President Lukashenka gave his consent to the establishment of the European Commission' delegation in Minsk. Please comment on this step?**

We very much look forward to the opening of the Commission Delegation and I welcome the recent initialling of its establishment agreement. The Delegation will provide the EU with a "face" in

Belarus. It is important to increase awareness of the EU, and facilitate the dissemination of information to the Belarusian public about the EU institutions, policies and programs, including study programs. On the other hand, a Delegation would provide us with up-to-date information and analysis on developments in Belarus. I am confident that the Delegation will play an important and mutually beneficial role in our efforts to develop our relationship.

**- A conference on energy security, "Responsible Energy for Responsible Partners," took place in Vilnius on October 10 and 11. That meeting showed once again that the EU worries about its energy security. Some experts believe that the EU may turn a blind eye to the human rights situation and the state of democracy in Belarus. Are there grounds to think so?**

Let me re-iterate that the EU is serious in wanting to engage with Belarus. There are many issues of our common concern. We are well aware that co-operation in fields such as energy and transport would be beneficial for both of us. However, what I have said about the need for our relations to be based on shared values remains the cornerstone of our approach. We will not compromise on those values on which the EU itself is built on.

**- The move to raise the Schengen visa fee to €60 let the Belarusian authorities announce that "the Belarusians are not wanted in Europe." EU officials say that the visa fee could be reduced if Belarus were fully involved in the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP). But do the EU officials realize that €60 is a too high price for common Belarusians? Is it possible that the EU will take a step of good will by reducing the visa price for the Belarusians to €35 without Belarus' full involvement in the ENP?**

A visa-facilitation agreement for Belarus can at present only be considered in the wider context of the European Neighbourhood Policy, and our posi-

tion on readmission. The EU would be ready to enter into negotiations on readmission and visa facilitation agreements with Belarus, once an ENP Action Plan is in place. Our offer to Belarus is based on our wish to extend the benefits of ENP fully to Belarus.

However, the EU is well aware of the importance of people-to-people contacts and is seeking ways to intensify them. We do not want to isolate Belarus -- quite the opposite. Let me stress that although the price of visa will go up to 60 EUR, there are a number of possibilities foreseen by the EU rules to waive this fee for students, teachers and researchers. Member States have the possibility to waive or reduce visa fees to promote and ease contacts with the Belarusian citizens and they are strongly encouraged to make full use of these flexibilities.

**- How do you assess the present political and social situation in Belarus?**

My earlier remarks will have already given you an idea of how I see the current political, but also social, situation in Belarus. This situation leaves a lot to desire, especially as regards democracy, the rule of law and human rights. The EU believes strongly that the realisation of our shared European values is the best and most efficient basis for moving a country forward.

While -- at least in the past years -- the economic situation in Belarus has provided stability and predictability to the population, I am not convinced that the fundamentals of this situation are tenable in the longer-run. The strengthening of the rule of law would also affect the investment climate, providing new important opportunities for the Belarusian economy, help to build a new and stronger basis for the prosperity and well-being of the Belarusian people.

07/12/2007

**Interview was conducted by  
the BelaPAN News Agency**

## Culture

### Christmas and New Year Celebration in Belarus



Remember in your childhood you dreamt about receiving a present from Santa Claus? Perhaps you still do? Then you should definitely come to Belarus, the country where people celebrate not just one but two Christmases!

How is it possible?

Today most of the world lives according to the Gregorian calendar. The Orthodox Church, however, still adheres to the old, Julian calendar. This is why all holidays are celebrated with the 13-day delay.

Most of Belarusians are Orthodox Christians, but the share of Roman Catholics and Protestants is also very significant. That is why major religious holidays like Christmas and Easter are marked as non-working days in the official calendar. People are free to choose which one they want to celebrate.

In Belarus, the ritual of Christmas is therefore closely tied to the folk holiday of *Kaliady*, with people not only going to church, but also observing rituals of pagan origin, and both traditions fused into a single fest. In the present Belarusian language the word “*Kaliady*” describes the whole period of Christmas celebrations. It originates from the Latin word *Calendae* – the name of the first day of each month in the Ancient Rome. Belarusian *Kaliady* is a folk holiday, which has its roots in the pre-Christian time. It is connected to the winter solstice when the day begins to grow longer and the year turns towards the summer. As Christianity became the main religion on Belarusian territories, *Kaliady* were timed to the holidays of Christmas and Epiphany.

The main idea of *Kaliady* ritual of the

pre-Christian time was to precipitate the spring and ensure the rich harvest through certain rituals. In every family, three *Kutsia* (sacral suppers) should be served during *Kaliady*.

The first one, Lenten (or Great) *Kutsia* is celebrated on the evening before Christmas. The table is full of Lenten dishes – herrings, all kinds of pancakes, fish and mushrooms, oatmeal *kisel* (a dessert made of fruit, berries and potato starch and sometimes served with milk). There is straw beneath the tablecloth. Each family member picks straws in order to determine who will be the most long-living. The dish served last is *Kutsia* itself – porridge with honey, poppy seeds, nuts and raisins. The master of the house is the first one to try *Kutsia*. A spoon of this traditional porridge is always being placed on a separate plate outside the house for the night. In the ancient times it was the offering to *Zuzia*, the god of winter.

*Kaliadavanne* is one of the most characteristic Christmas traditions in Belarus. Groups of dressed-up people wander from house to house, singing *Kaliady* songs – “*kaliadki*” and “*shchadrouki*”. The most characteristic personage of this performance is *Kaza* (goat), the person dressed and masked like a goat. The master of the house visited during *Kaliadavanne* is supposed to treat the group with sausage, snacks, and sweets.

The Rich (also known as Fat, Generous) *Kutsia* is served on the New Year’s Eve. During this evening one finds on the table *Kustia* porridge with butter and fried bacon, as well as various meat dishes.

Another Lenten (also called Hungry) *Kutsia* is served right before Epiphany – that is why it is sometimes called *Water Kutsia*.

*Kaliady* are also used for telling fortunes, especially by young unmarried women. The fortune telling is done in all kinds of ways. Here are some of them:

On the first day of *Kaliady*, in the

morning or in the evening, a young girl goes to a crossroad, with a piece of a pancake or a bit of *Kutsia* porridge with her and listens from which direction dogs will be barking. Her future husband should take her away from home in the same direction.

Young men and women go outside and hug a fence, reaching with their hands as wide as they can. If the number of the hugged poles is even, that means that they will be in a couple next year.

A married woman hides some items – for example a piece of bread, a ring, a brush, a needle, and other small things, and asks her girlfriends to come into the room one after another and find the items. The one who finds bread will have a rich husband; a ring promises a handsome husband; the brush will bring a bad-tempered one; the needle means her future husband would be a tailor.

Of course, with many Belarusians living in large cities, it is becoming quite difficult to observe these rituals. But urbanization is not the only reason why Christmas traditions are not preserved by most Belarusian families.

During the Soviet times all holidays connected with religion were fiercely eradicated. Churchgoing as well as *Kaliady* rituals were strictly forbidden – especially for the younger generation. Owing to the efforts of Soviet ideologists, Christmas was substituted by the atheist New Year. It is no longer “*Svyaty Mikalaj*” (Saint Nicolas) who is bringing presents to children, but “*Dzed Maroz*” (Daddy Frost). Now the traditional Christmas is slowly coming back. People are free to attend Christmas services – and many do so. Those who don’t often watch Christmas services live on TV. *Kaliadavanne* ritual is also being slowly revived.

What is the typical post-Soviet New Year’s ritual in Belarus like?

Picture yourself as member of a typical Belarusian family, living in a two-room flat in a panel apartment block in Minsk. On December 31 your father takes a good nap before the exhausting



## Culture

### Christmas and New Year Celebration in Belarus

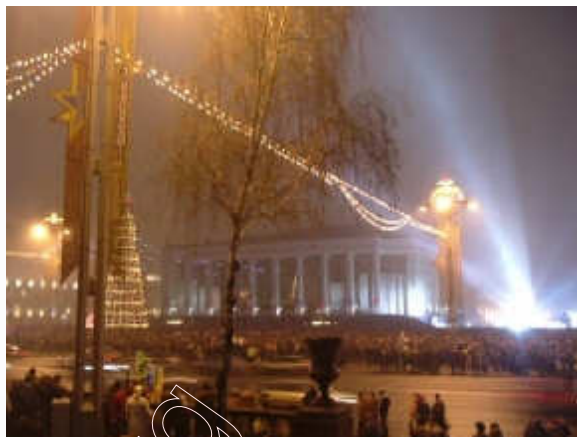
festive night, which, he knows, will involve a lot of eating. The mother doesn't have this privilege – she is busy cooking: similarly to the traditional Christmas celebration, the New Year's table should be full. The main "sacred" New Year's dish is "Olivje" salad – a mix of mayonnaise, potatoes, green peas, pickles, and some other ingredients. Don't be deceived by the French-sounding name – French people have never heard of such a salad. The children have winter holidays: they eat tangerines and watch New Years' movies on TV.

The evening comes and the table is set. The mother is already tired from all the cooking, the father is rather hungry – he's been saving his appetite for the New Year's festive meal. Your TV will not be turned off – it will lead the family through the celebration, providing entertainment, music, and necessary ideological sermons. The traditional assortment of TV entertainment includes: never-ending stand-up comedies, pre-recorded music shows, and re-runs of old Soviet comedy films. The comedy "S Legkim Parom" is an absolute "must" – it is shown on every single New Year Eve. The name can be translated like 'have a light steam' – this is a saying which people tell each other after sauna. Filmed in the 70s, the movie is a story of a man, who, having had too much vodka in sauna with his friends, ends up in Leningrad instead Moscow, in a typical Soviet apartment which he mistakes for his own. The lady living there wants to throw him out, but in the end falls in love with the uninvited guest.

At 11 p.m. New Year comes to Russia (Moscow is in another time zone than Minsk). Russian TV can be received by most Belarusians, and many of them watch Putin's speech, which precedes the chime of the Kremlin clock. An hour later, shortly before midnight, the familiar image of Alyaksandr Lukashenka appears on the screen. This year he will deliver his annual New Year's address to the nation for the 14<sup>th</sup> time. Every time Alyaksandr Lukashenka tends to speak long enough to get people anxious about missing long-awaited 12:00. Of course, this never happens since the address is most likely pre-recorded.

When the New Year arrives, people pour in "Soviet Champagne" into their glasses (another relict of the Soviet times) and attack the food. Children run to the New Years' Tree in order to find their presents. By 1 a.m. everyone is completely full. Nevertheless, many people find strength to go for a walk downtown. Such New Year strolls are especially favoured by Minsk citizens. The main avenue of the city is closed for transportation, allowing huge crowds to wander up and down, drinking beer out of bottles or champagne out of plastic glasses, listening to the Belarusian pop-music from the street loudspeakers and waiting for some miracle to happen. They come home late after midnight, exhausted, tipsy, with running noses and shiny eyes. Someone is happy; another one is looking for his/her cell phone that had been lost somewhere on the corner of Lenin street while calling an aunt in a faraway village. The new year has begun.

By Ales Kudrytski  
for the ODB



*New Year's celebration in a central square of Minsk*



*Father getting ready for the Christmas dinner*



*Father Frost caught at the Belarusian border  
(by Andrey Liankevich)*

We on the WEB

[www.democraticbelarus.eu](http://www.democraticbelarus.eu)