

# Belarus Headlines

Issue XXI

December 17, 2007— January 10, 2007

Office for a Democratic  
Belarus

## Inside this issue:

**Schengen Zone  
Expansion:  
Consequences  
for Belarus** 1-2

**Politics and  
Society** 2-4

**EU and  
Belarus** 4

**Economic News** 5

**Culture News.  
Narodny  
Albom: Musical  
Journey to the  
Western  
Belarus of  
1920-30s** 6

## Schengen Zone Expansion: Consequences for Belarus

By **Dzianis Melyantsov** for  
the Belarusian Institute for  
Strategic Studies

Europe's Schengen arrangement, which allows people to cross borders without having their passports checked, expanded on December 21, 2007 to nine new members of the European Union – the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia. Three of these countries share borders with Belarus. *What are the consequences of the move for the Belarusian citizens and the country's relations with the EU neighbours?*

Unfortunately, things do not look so bright. Belarusians must pay higher visa fees to travel to EU countries, including the neighbouring countries with which Belarus maintains close economic ties. Before December 25, a single-entry visa to Lithuania cost €5 (a multiple-entry visa €25). Latvia did not collect a visa fee. After the area's enlargement, the countries introduced a standard fee of €60 for both single- and multiple-entry visas. The decision was justified by the costs of the updated Schengen database of criminal records.

Although Schengen agreements require member countries to collect the same fee from third-country nationals, countries can reduce or waive fees for certain

groups under national legislation aimed to promote cultural, foreign policy and other vital interests. Lower fees usually apply to children, schoolchildren, students, post-graduate students and accompanying teachers who travel to take part in training, and researchers travelling with scientific purposes.

Before the new rules took effect, Belarus entered into talks with some of the prospective members like Poland and Lithuania on lower visa fees and additional categories of persons eligible for simplified procedures. Since the negotiations have not been transparent, it is difficult to comment on progress before certain decisions are announced. Several foreign diplomats made it clear that the heads of diplomatic missions and consuls will be guided by the general rules and decide on discounts on a case-by-case basis.

*Who will be affected by more expensive visas? Will the wall dividing the Belarusians from the EU become higher and more difficult to climb?*

Most of those who apply for visas are students who study abroad, tourists, those with family abroad, businesspeople, and the so-called “chelnoki” or cross-border shuttle traders.

Students could be the most affected because they are not economically independent. However, Belarusian students

receiving education in EU countries are eligible for preferential treatment and are likely to get Schengen visas free of charge. The higher fee is unlikely to discourage tourists and business travellers who spend much money on air tickets and hotels. On the other hand, the Schengen area expansion creates new opportunities and benefits for travellers. For instance, flying from Vilnius to European capitals is cheaper than from Minsk or Moscow. Travellers no longer need to obtain separately a Schengen and a Lithuanian visa to fly from Vilnius. Shuttle traders, most of whom just smuggle goods across the border, will find it more difficult to substantiate their request for a multiple Schengen visa unless they have reliable “partners” or close relatives in EU countries. It will take them one trip to cover higher visa costs. It seems that the most affected will be people who often visit their relatives living across the border. But they are likely to become eligible for a simplified visa regime as a result of negotiations between Belarus and its neighbours.

**Therefore, in contrast with allegations by Belarusian officials, more expensive visas will not substantially reduce the flow of travellers from Belarus to the EU.**

The introduction of Schengen visas and new border and

customs control rules by neighbouring countries is more a political and diplomatic issue. Based on the principle of reciprocity, Belarus is supposed to complicate visa formalities for the nationals of EU countries. However, Belarusian diplomats realize that the EU states that entered the Schengen zone have little room for manoeuvre because their visa and customs policies must be in line with EU regulations. The Belarusian authorities are unlikely to take tough measures in response to the tight border controls. On the other hand, the government has used the occasion to accuse the EU of erecting barriers for Belarusians and isolating the country.

**The EU countries, especially Belarus' neighbours, have found themselves in an embarrassing situation. Despite declarations of willingness to boost ties with the Belarusian people (see the EU non-paper "What the European Union could bring to Belarus"), they must comply with the agreement and introduce more stringent requirements for citizens of countries outside the new Schengen zone. This is indicative of the lack of a consistent EU strategy with regard to Belarus.**

European bureaucrats would like to offer Belarusians cheaper visas but they have no legal grounds to make Belarus an exception from the general rule. The EU could negotiate a special agreement with Belarus if it participated in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) like Ukraine or Moldova. But the EU made Belarus' involvement in the ENP conditional on democratic change, which implies reform of the political system, something that authorities have flatly refused to accept. This means that Belarusian citizens pay for misunderstandings between the Belarusian government and European organizations.

*Why could not the EU offer preferential treatment to Belarus? If the EU can sign special agreements in the framework of the ENP, why can not it strike a special deal with Belarus under the document "What the European Union could bring to Belarus"?*

European policymakers seem to consider Belarus a country of minor importance that does not qualify for a special clause in the EU's rules and procedures. Belarusian opposition politicians and analysts have blown what they call "the Belarusian issue" out of

proportion. Belarus has been attributed a small role, which continues to diminish. For this reason, the EU makes no distinction between Belarus and other countries in its European Neighbourhood Policy, has introduced more expensive visas, lacks a consistent program to engage with the Belarusian civil society, and came up with the non-paper "What the European Union could bring to Belarus" instead of a fully-fledged democratization strategy.

**The Belarusian authorities seem to be benefiting from this frosty relationship. It helps reduce the EU's influence on the internal political situation in the country, while more expensive visas help limit Belarusians' contacts with the European reality. This explains the Belarusian government's unenthusiastic diplomatic effort to negotiate visa concessions with neighbours, its reluctance to introduce a visa-free regime with the EU and enact an agreement that would allow the EU to establish a delegation of the European Commission in Minsk.**

29/12/2007

## Belarus' main news for December 17, 2007 – January 10, 2008

### Politics and Society

#### 18/12/2007 Azerbaijani President Receives Belarus Defence Minister

Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev received the delegation headed by Defence Minister of Belarus Leonid Maltsau on December 18. Ilham Aliyev said that joint projects are implemented at high rate and Azerbaijan-Belarus partnership relations contribute to the security in the region. The president expressed his confidence that the visit of Belarus Defence Minister will serve the expansion of bilateral relations.

Learn more: [http://finchannel.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=2781](http://finchannel.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2781)

#### 19/12/2007 UN Approves Resolution Denouncing Belarus Human Rights Violations

The UN General Assembly approved a resolution slamming Belarus for human rights violations. The U.S.-proposed document was supported by 72 states; 33 voted against and 78 abstained. The resolution alleged that systemic human rights violations, and oppression and persecution of media outlets, the Opposition and rights activists continue in Belarus.

Learn more: <http://www.itar-tass.com/eng/level2.html?NewsID=12193234&PageNum=0>

#### 20/12/2007 Belarus Market Vendors Strike in Major Cities

Anatol Shumchanka, leader of the Perspektyva small-business association, said that nearly 80,000 market vendors took part in a one-day strike against a presidential decree restricting the activities of small businesses. Under the decree, starting from 1 January, 2008 certain small-business owners will be barred from hiring employees other than three family members.

Learn more: <http://www.rferl.org/newsline/2007/12/3-cee/cee-201207.asp>

## Politics and Society

### Belarusian Opposition Activist Artur Finkevich Sentenced to Prison

A Belarusian opposition member was convicted of violating the terms of his forced labour sentence and sentenced to 18 months in prison.

The one-day trial of Artur Finkevich, a leader of the Young Front organization, was held in the eastern city of Mahilew, where he is serving a two-year sentence of labour and internal exile for graffiti construed as criticism of President Aliaksandr Lukashenka.

The court found Finkevich, 21, guilty of violating the terms of his sentence and of bad behaviour, rights activist Inna Kulei told The Associated Press. He had faced a maximum sentence of three years in prison. Prison is more punitive than labour and internal exile, which requires con-

victs to live under supervision in a specific city and report to an assigned job, often manual factory labour, but usually allows some freedom of movement.



20/12/2007

Source: The Associated Press

### 21/12/2007 Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi Meets with Deputy Belarusian Foreign Minister

On December 19, 2007 Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi met with Deputy Belarusian Foreign Minister Viktor Hisionak, who is in China for the consultation between the two Foreign Ministries. Both sides exchanged in-depth views on bilateral ties, as well as other international and regional issues of common concern. Yang congratulated the achievements made in the consultation between the two Foreign Ministries and spoke highly of the status quo of bilateral ties. He said China is ready to work with Belarus to push for all-round, friendly cooperation and contribute to safeguarding regional and world peace, stability and development.

Learn more: <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx/t391938.htm>

### 21/12/2007 Belarusian Court Orders Paper to Pay Damages to Belarusian Lawmaker

A district court in Minsk on December 20 ordered the publisher of the independent "Novy Chas" newspaper to pay 50 million rubles (\$23,225) and journalist Alyaksandr Tamkovich to pay 1 million rubles in damages to Mikalay Charhinets, a lawmaker of the upper chamber of Belarusian legislature. Charhinets, who heads the standing Committee on International Affairs and National Security in the Council of the Republic, accused "Novy Chas" of running a story on September 24 that "insulted his honour and dignity". Charhinets initially demanded 500 million rubles from the publisher and 100 million rubles from the journalist, but revised his claims to 50 million and 5 million, respectively, after Tamkovich sent a letter to him expressing regret over the politician's reaction.

Learn more: <http://www.rferl.org/newsline/2007/12/3-cee/cee-211207.asp>

### 30/12/2007 Belarus' President Threatens Expulsion of US Ambassador if More Sanctions Imposed



Belarus' president on Sunday threatened to expel the U.S. ambassador if Washington imposes more sanctions on the country. Ambassador Karen Stewart said earlier this month that the United States could add new sanctions against Belarus over its refusal to free political prisoners and allow democratic freedoms.

Learn more: <http://www.pr-inside.com/belarus-president-threatens-expulsion-of-r365904.htm>



### 02/01/2008 Small Businessmen in Belarus Go on Strike against Restrictive Decree

Small market vendors who have sole entrepreneur status went on a two-week strike on 1 January in protest against Alyaksandr Lukashenka's Edict No 760, which bans business owners holding sole entrepreneur status from employing workers other than three family members. The strike will be held in the form of "forced vacation" during which no taxes will be paid, Viktor Harbachow, a leader of small business owners' association called For the Free Development of Enterprise, said. According to him, up to 30,000 people will take part in the strike at an initial stage and then increasingly more sole entrepreneurs will join them and the total number of strikers may reach 100,000. The protest is expected to last until 15 January.

More: [http://www.blackenterprise.com/yb/ybopen.asp?section=ybsb&story\\_id=113291291&ID=blackenterprise](http://www.blackenterprise.com/yb/ybopen.asp?section=ybsb&story_id=113291291&ID=blackenterprise)

## Politics and Society

### 04/01/2007 Belarus Imposes Travel Ban on Anatol Liabedzka

Belarus has banned United Civil Party leader Anatol Liabedzka from travelling abroad, the veteran opposition figure told Reuters on Friday, calling it a political move after he met U.S. President George Bush last year.

Mr. Liabedzka, leader of one of several liberal opposition parties which have tried to unite, said he received papers from the interior ministry banning him from travelling abroad, which it said was in connection with a libel case against him.

'The travel ban is a political decision,' he told Reuters by phone. 'The problems began after I visited the United States, where I and my colleagues had a meeting with President George Bush.'

Learn more: <http://www.signonsandiego.com/news/world/20080104-0439-belarus-opposition-.html>



### 09/01/2008 Belarus to Open Arms Wider to China Investors

Belarusian President Aliaksandr Lukashenka promised on Monday to create more favourable conditions for Chinese investors in his country, during a meeting with the head of China's central bank.

"The most favourable conditions will be created to bring Chinese investors into Belarus," Lukashenko was quoted by his press service as telling Zhou Xiaochuan, president of the People's Bank of China.

Learn more: <http://www.todayonline.com/articles/231211.asp>

### 10/01/2008 Perspektyva Leader's Talks with Presidential Administration Official End in Failure

Anatol Shumchanka, leader of the Perspektyva small business association, met with an official of the Presidential Administration on Thursday afternoon as several thousands of people were demonstrating in downtown Minsk against an employee restriction on sole entrepreneurs.

Mr. Shumchanka and a couple of other small business activists were delegated to the talks by participants of the unauthorised demonstration.

According to the most recent reports, around 4,000 people took part in the demonstration held on central Kastychnitskaya Square in protest against Alyaksandr Lukashenka's edict that banned business owners holding the status of sole entrepreneur from hiring workers other than three family members.

According to the latest reports, about 20 meeting participants have been arrested, among them Mr. Shumchanka and Mr. Liabedzka, head of the United Civic Party (UCP).

10/01/2008

Sources: BelaPAN, nn.by, ERB

## EU and Belarus

### Slovakia Encourages Belarus to Work on Criteria for Joining the CoE

**01/01/2008** Slovakia intends to contribute during its six-month chairmanship of the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers to make changes in Belarus' attitude towards meeting the criteria for membership in this pan-European organisation.

According to Slovak Ambassador to the Council of Europe (CoE) Emil Kuchar on Tuesday, under the leadership of its President Aliaksandr Lukashenka since 1994, Belarus remains the only European country outside the 47-strong Council, the goals of which include protection of human rights and strengthening of pluralistic democracy.

"Nowadays, Belarus is far from fulfilling the CoE's standards, however, the issue of Belarus has to remain on the table. It's unacceptable that an essentially European country should stay completely outside this value-based system," said Kuchar.

Learn more: <http://www.tasr.sk/30.axd?k=20080101TBB00253>



## Economics

### 17/12/2007 Russia Offers Belarus \$1.5 Billion Stabilization Loan

Belarusian President Aliaksandr Lukashenka and Russian President Vladimir Putin signed in Minsk on December 14 a memorandum on bilateral economic relations and a joint statement on the results of their talks, Belapan reported. Both sides pledged to meet their obligations under earlier economic agreements and to honour a long-term deal signed on December 31, 2006, which provides for a gradual increase in the price of natural gas supplied to Belarus. Russia also pledged to provide Belarus with a \$1.5 billion stabilization loan to ease the effects of the higher gas price.

Learn more: <http://www.rferl.org/newsline/2007/12/3-ccc/ccc-171207.asp>

### 21/12/2007 Gazprom Increased Share in Authorized Capital of Belgazprombank

The Open Society "Gazprom" has increased the share in the authorized capital of the joint Belarus-Russian Open Society "Belgazprombank" to 42.73% Gazprom report reads. Earlier the share of Gazprom in the authorized capital of Belgazprombank made 33.91%.



"Belgazprombank" is formed in 1990 and joins the number of 10 largest banks of Belarus on size of actives and own capital (85.46% of shares of Belgazprombank belong to the Open Society "Gazprom" and Gazprombank).

Learn more: <http://www.akm.ru/eng/news/2007/december/21/ns2172876.htm>

### 21/12/2007 Russia Considers Sale of Hi-Tech Anti-Aircraft Missiles to Belarus

Russia plans to sell some of its most sophisticated anti-aircraft missiles to Belarus, Russia's ambassador said on Friday. "We are prepared to sell to Belarus the weapon according to the internal (reduced) pricing of the Russian market," said Aleksander Surikov, Russian Ambassador to Belarus. "Our military cooperation is developing successfully."

Surikov said the Kremlin was planning to deliver to Minsk "several" S-400 missile systems, as part of joint air space defence planning between the two countries.

Learn more: <http://www.earthtimes.org/articles/show/162739.html>

### 28/12/2007 Heineken Buys Belarus' Syabar Brewing Company



Heineken NV said it is buying the Syabar Brewing Company in Belarus for an undisclosed sum. Heineken will acquire Syabar's Cypriot parent company from a consortium led by Detroit Investments Limited (Cyprus) from the International Finance Corporation, an affiliate of the World Bank. Heineken said the transaction will be funded from existing cash resources and will be earnings enhancing in 2008 and value enhancing in 2012.

Learn more: <http://www.forbes.com/markets/feeds/afx/2007/12/28/afx4478644.html>

### 09/01/2008 Average Price for Gas in Belarus in 2008 to Reach 125 Dollars



Belarus has started buying Russian gas for 119 dollars for one thousand cubic metres on January 1. But the price has been set only for the first quarter of the year.

The "Belarusians and Market" newspaper refers to some sources in both Ministries and informs that the agreement about prices for the whole year has already been reached and the price will be 125 USD.

Learn more: <http://belradio.fm/en/353/news/11994/>

### 10/01/2008 Belarus Sets up Directorate to Oversee Nuclear Plant Project



Belarus has set up a state-controlled directorate to oversee a project of building the country's first nuclear power plant, a deputy energy minister said on Wednesday. Mikhail Mikhadyuk said the body had been set up to "organize work before and during the project, develop documents on operating rules, oversee the construction of the nuclear plant, train staff and prepare documents for a tender."

More: [http://www.indianmuslims.info/news/2008/jan/09/belarus\\_sets\\_body\\_oversee\\_nuclear\\_plant\\_project.html](http://www.indianmuslims.info/news/2008/jan/09/belarus_sets_body_oversee_nuclear_plant_project.html)

## Culture

### Narodny Albom – musical journey to the Western Belarus of 1920-30s



Western and Eastern Belarus – why are they different? Sociologists have long since discovered that people living

in the western part of Belarus are more likely to support democratic changes than their fellow countrymen from the east. The latter are also less keen on keeping their houses neatly painted and fences fixed – the further you drive to the east of Belarus, the less active people become in their private initiatives, the more hope they put into the state. This phenomenon has its historic reasons. In 1920-30s the territory of Belarus was cut in two pieces. Eastern Belarus belonged to the totalitarian Soviet Union, while Western Belarus was part of the bourgeois-democratic Poland. In 1939 Belarus reunited under the Soviet rule. Citizens of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic rejoiced to see their western brothers liberated from the “Polish capitalistic exploitation”. However, for western Belarusians who got used to living in a relatively free country, Soviet collective farm system and Stalin’s brutal rule became a major shock.

What was it like to live in those times in Western Belarus? The idea to put Belarus of 1920-30s into words and music first came to Mikhal Anempadystau, well-known Belarusian designer and poet. In 1996 he brought together prominent rock singers of that time – Lyavon Volski and Kasya Kamotskaya. Together they developed the basic concept of „Narodny Albom“ („people’s album“). „We saw our goal in creating the cultural myth of life in Western Belarus of that time as an example of the non-soviet Belarusian tradition”, says Mikhal Anempadystau.

Having learned about the project, a number of other Belarusian musicians joined it. Meanwhile, the new Belarusian president was already tightening ideological screws – the only independent Belarusian-language radio station 101.2 FM was shut down. Its journalists eagerly participated in the

project, helping the singers to record the album. The team was impressive – more than 20 people--„cream“ of the Belarusian music society, participated in creating „Narodny Albom“. This is not just a mere coincidence that the cover of the new album was decorated with a purple heart. Indeed, this music project managed to win hearts of thousands of listeners. Today it is no less popular now than 10 years ago.

The album consists of 27 songs. Many of them are stylized as folk songs (for example, „Nadzenka“, which tells a story of a poor Belarusian girl, who was naive enough to fall in love with the cynical Russian military officer). Some of the songs are sung in Russian (such as the march song of Russian soldiers), other in Belarus-Russian mix „trasyanka“, other in Belarusian-Polish mix, very typical of Western Belarus (for example the song „Ja spiewam po polsku“, which is mocking a Belarusian singer who thinks he is a star of the Polish scene). There is even a song in Yiddish („Lomir Zech Iberbetn“) performed by Alyaksandar Pamidorau, who back then worked as a radio DJ and now is a famous hip-hop singer. The assortment of music genres is also very wide – polka, tango, ballades and romances, hip-hop and psychedelic experiments.

The album became a great New Year’s present for the public – it was first performed on 28. December 1997 in Minsk and immediately gained huge popularity. The singers even made a tour in Poland presenting „Narodny Albom“ to Polish listeners.

Uladzimer Kolas, director of the Belarusian Lyceum, the free-thinking Belarusian-language school which was shut down by authorities several years ago, liked the idea of „Narodny Albom“ so much that he decided to create a musical based on it. He brought together a group of Lyceum’s students. They formed a student theatre and prepared the new play for performance on theatre stage. The opening night of the Lyceum’s “Narodny Albom” took place in 1999 in one of Minsk major theatres and drew a large crowd of spectators. Later the musical play was



presented in Poland and Lithuania. Of course students, who were actors then, have long since graduated from the Lyceum, but the idea of “Narodny Albom” lives on. In 2007 Uladzimer Kolas, who runs the shut-down Belarusian school underground, revived the musical play with his new students. They already performed it in Minsk (not as open as in 1999) and presented their “Narodny Albom” in Poland. It is planned to transform the play into a TV musical and have it broadcast on the first independent Belarusian satellite TV channel BelSAT.

Uladzimer Kolas was not the only one who remembered the anniversary of “Narodny Albom”. Its creators, most of them pursuing their own ambitious musical careers, found time to come to Minsk for the reunion concert in December 2007. Even now, 10 years after the album was first performed, the club was so full, that the organizers had to postpone the beginning of the concert in order to let all visitors fit into the hall. Interesting fact: while some singers forgot lyrics, the audience helped them out by singing along. It seems that even those fans who ten years ago were in elementary school, knew the words by heart. Indeed, the album has already taken its rightful place in the treasury of Belarusian musical classics.

**By Ales Kudrytski for the ODB**

We on the WEB

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