

Belarus Headlines

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Office for a Democratic
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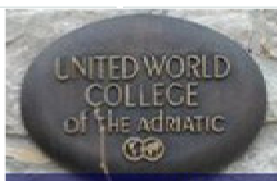
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Information Evening on Chernobyl in the United World College of the Adriatic

On May 4, on the initiative of the Office for a Democratic Belarus (Brussels), [the United World](#)



[College of the Adriatic](#) (Triest, Italy) organized an information evening dedicated to the 22nd anniversary of the Chernobyl catastrophe. The presentation was held in the framework of extra curriculum student activities called *Focus*. [The United World Colleges](#) is a unique net of educational establishments founded in the UK in 1962. The main goal is to promote peace through understanding among young people from

all over the World. During the discussion on May 4, the following issues were

raised: the scale of the Chernobyl catastrophe, the Soviet government's policy in regard to the disaster in the first days after the explosion, current situation in Belarus regarding the environmental issue and public health, situation with the liquidators (the servicemen and civilian emergency workers involved in containing the disaster and subsequent clean-up operations). Attention was paid to the international coverage of Chernobyl problem. In this context, suggestion of the

EPP-ED group in the European Parliament to annually organize hearing on Chernobyl was mentioned and highly welcomed.

The students and professors were particularly interested in the Belarusian government's policy on how to deal with the consequences of the explosion and how to protect people living in the contaminated area.

After the discussion, guests of the event had a possibility to see a documentary by Galina Adamovich "Once upon a time".

By ODB
06/05/2008

Belarus Becomes Part of the "Europe Day" Celebration in France



On the occasion of the Europe Day, the **House of Europe and of Orient**, the associations [Belprojet](#), [Office for a Democratic Belarus](#) and [Perspectives Biélorusses](#) decided to pay tribute to the cultural diversity of Europe in its geographical borders by concentrating particular attention on the cultures of Eastern Europe. The idea of the village of the European and French cul-

tural organizations with tents and stands laid out along the Daumesnil avenue and on the Viaduc des Arts (Paris), expressed the conception of Europe which promotes the dialogue and respects its plurality and its minorities.

On May 10 the public were able learning about various activities of associations present at the event and to degust multiple culinary specialities.

At the Belarusian stand the passers-by could find Belarusian books on art, art magazines, Belarusian dictionary Euro Thesaurus by L.Barshcheusky, which includes the translation from Belarusian into 28 European languages, Belarusian posters

and postcards, stamps with images of national costumes and architecture monuments, touristic booklets on Belarusian cities, etc. The stand was carefully decorated with the traditional embroidered towels and straw crafts.

Art was a common language at the event. If judging by the attention paid to the stand, proved that the Belarusian artists, designers and craftsmen speak it fluently.

By ODB
11/05/2008

A photo report can be found at the Photo gallery section of our web-site

We on the WEB

www.democraticbelarus.eu

Andrea Rigoni: I am in favour of dialogue as a matter of principle.



ODB: *Mr Rigoni, when speaking about relations of the international community with Belarus, you favour a “dialogue with the broadest spectrum” and mention that there are people in the current government ready to receive the European message. Do you have a concrete plan of action?*

I think that within the system of power in Belarus, at all levels, there are people who understand the message coming from Europe and who are prepared to respond positively to it. It is unwise to sever all contacts with the Belarusian authorities as such, as if the system of power was a single and compact block. If we do so, we deny ourselves the chance of having an influence on those who are within the system and receptive to our message, who could be some of the driving forces of democracy in the future. But to be completely clear, I am not in favour of dialogue with the authorities only because it is strategically sound: I am in favour of dialogue as a matter of principle. The Council of Europe is an organisation which accompanies its member States along the path of increasingly higher standards in the field of democracy, human rights and the rule of law in a spirit of co-operation. In fact, the Council of Europe even accepts that its own members are not perfect democracies. This is why a series of monitoring mechanisms have been set up, to identify shortcomings and assist member States in overcoming them, in a spirit of co-operation and not of condemnation. This implies continued dialogue together with continued and constructive criticism. I believe that the same approach of dialogue and constructive criticism should be employed with Belarus, even if at this stage

Belarus is not a member of the Council of Europe, neither is it conceivable to think about the restoration of special guest status in the short term. Of course it would be terribly pretentious for me to say that I have my own ‘plan of action’ for Belarus. Both the Council of Europe and the European Union have said very clearly what the plan of action is: that Belarus becomes a democratic country, respectful of human rights and the rule of law. For my part, as Rapporteur on Belarus for PACE, I think that my role is not only drafting a report which portrays the situation and makes recommendations but also contributing to setting a process in motion, to bring Belarus closer to Europe and European values closer to Belarusians.

ODB: *During the debate that followed the presentation of the Legal Affairs and HR Committee rapporteur Mr Pourgourides’s paper on abuse of criminal law in Belarus, you said the Assembly has to be consistent in its policies towards Belarus. Do you expect consistent policies from the government of Belarus? So far it has not been the case, as one can see.*

I cannot deny that it is frustrating to see that the Belarusian authorities have not yet undertaken a clear and consistent path to bring Belarus closer to Europe. The liberation of six political prisoners some weeks ago showed that the authorities have a clear understanding of what steps they should take to achieve a normalisation of relations with the West. Unfortunately, the repressions around the demonstrations of 25th March, the imprisonment of Andrei Kim and the sentences handed down against some participants in the entrepreneurs’ rally of 10 January indicate that there is no serious and unequivocal political commitment to undertake such a path. On the other hand, the availability indicated by some European figures, including myself, to be open to dialogue, should not be mistaken for weakness: Europe will never content itself with mere tactical or cosmetic changes in Belarus.

Irrespective of the behaviour of the Belarusian authorities, however, the approach of the Council of Europe should be consistent. Consistent with its principles, consistent with its vocation, but also consistent with the policy it applies in its relations with member and non-member States. This means no double standards. I mentioned earlier that dialogue is a matter of principle and that continued dialogue and continued constructive criticism should go hand in hand, even before the restoration of any status for Belarus with the Council of Europe - even more so when one considers that recently the Assembly has declared itself ready and willing to establish a political dialogue with non-member States such as the Maghreb countries, or countries from central Asia, without the democratic and human rights record of these countries being considered

as an obstacle. Since 2004, the Assembly has even had a co-operation agreement with the Parliament of Kazakhstan. I repeat, I am not talking about restoring Special Guest Status for Belarus, but I am talking about engaging in a political dialogue,

consistent with the Council of Europe’s principles, its vocation and its policy towards other states.

ODB: *During the debate on Belarus last week some MP’s spoke in support of lowering costs of Schengen visas for Belarusian citizens. Belarus is the only country in the EU’s Eastern neighbourhood whose citizens have to pay 60 euro for a one-entry visa. Do you support this initiative? And what is the position of your government on the issue?*

I absolutely support it. Ordinary Belarusians should not suffer in any way because of the state of relations between their authorities and Europe. On the contrary, their mobility should be encouraged as much as possible, in order to acquaint them with European values and the functioning of democratic institutions. I think that PACE should play a more active role

I think that my role is not only drafting a report which portrays the situation and makes recommendations but also contributing to setting a process in motion, to bring Belarus closer to Europe and European values closer to Belarusians

in this area, given that its members are also national parliamentarians and can exert pressure on their governments to obtain a reduction of the cost of visas. I will discuss this issue further with Mrs Hurskainen, the Chair of the PACE sub-Committee on Belarus, to verify what action can be taken. I will also take up this issue with my own government.

ODB: *Mr Rigoni, you have visited Belarus once in your position of the PACE rapporteur, and you are planning a trip there again this summer. Will you present a report to the Assembly on your findings and suggestions for action?*

There is no set deadline for the presentation of my report on the situation in Belarus. It is true that I am considering conducting a second fact-finding visit to Belarus, if the Bureau of the Assembly authorises it. There are some very important events ahead, the most prominent being the parliamentary elections in September. The coming months are key to understanding in what direction the authorities really intend to move. In addition, there are two other projects in which I have engaged myself personally: one is the introduction on a moratorium on the death penalty, while the other is the opening of a Council of Europe Information Office in Belarus. I would like to see what concrete response is given to these two ideas by the Belarusian authorities before finalising a report. The moratorium on capital executions, in particular, would be an important step in the field of human rights, and would make Europe a death-penalty-free continent. During the meetings I

had in Minsk in October last year, I discussed this possibility with several high ranking officials, and I had the impression that some progress could be made. Therefore I was greatly disappointed to learn that 4 people were executed in the months following my visit. This is why I decided to launch an appeal in the form of an open letter to the chairmen of the parliamentary chambers, which was published by Narodnaja Gazeta. It was the first appeal of this kind by a European rapporteur published in Belarus. I hope that it will contribute to stimulating a domestic debate in the society and in parliament on the need to abolish the death penalty.

ODB: *Do you consider the opening of the info-point in Minsk to be an achievement in relations with the government of Belarus?*

The Council of Europe has excellent contacts with the Belarusian opposition and civil society. But these people, with whom we co-operate on a regular basis, who are familiar with us, with whom we speak a common language and represent an elite. The European message does not actually reach the great majority of the Belarusian population, as it is indicated by the research carried out by independent institutes such as NOVAK. The opening of a Council of Europe Information Point in Minsk, therefore, is first and foremost an achievement in terms of the outreach capacity of the Council of Europe towards the Belarusian society at large. It is important for our Organisation to be able to provide information on its work and to disseminate its values amongst the Belarusian popula-

tion. Democratisation is always the result of a process which is internal to every society and the Infopoint could be instrumental to facilitating this process.

At the same time, you may well say that the opening of an Infopoint is an achievement of the contact with the authorities. This proposal, in effect, was launched by the Assembly in 2006, in a recommendation whose Rapporteur was Mr Herkel. However, it didn't get off the ground due to the lack of contact with the Belarusian authorities: it is just utopistic to think about opening an Infopoint in a country without having any contact with its authorities. It was President van der Linden who insisted that this proposal should become a reality, during his visit to Minsk in January 2007, and then myself in October of the same year. I am proud to say that a few days after my visit the Council of Europe was informed by the authorities that they would give their green light to the project.

ODB: *Do you communicate with the rapporteur on Belarus in the European Parliament Foreign Affairs Committee?*

So far I haven't had any contact with the European Parliament in my capacity as rapporteur, even if I am aware of their activities on this issue. It is rather the Chair of the PACE sub-Committee on Belarus who maintains contact with the European Parliament, under the aegis of the Parliamentary Troika on Belarus.

By the ODB

05.2008

Campaign in the EP on Visa Reduction Costs for Belarusian Citizens Ends on May 8

The campaign initiated in the European Parliament by Genowefa Grabowska (PL), Justas Vincas Paleckis (LT) and Hannes Swoboda (AU) under the slogan "Say YES to Cheaper Visas for Belarusians" ended on May 8. The aim of the campaign was to collect signatures of more than 50% of the EP members under the declaration calling on cost reduction of the Schengen visas for Belarusian citizens. At least 392 parliamentarians needed to sign the appeal: with this number of supporters, president of the European Parliament would be instructed to forward the declaration text to the Council, the Commission and the parliaments of the EU member states.

The Office for a Democratic Belarus actively supported this initiative through collecting letters from Belarusian non-governmental groups, political parties and civil initiatives. ODB members visited Strasbourg during the Parliament's sessions in order to inform as many MEPs as possible about the current problems experienced by the Belarusian citizens when applying for Schengen visas. Despite very strong messages of support to the idea of reducing visa costs for Belarusians that were voiced during a debate on April 21 in the Parliament, only 161 MEPs have actually signed the declaration. ODB is determined to continue encouraging the European Parliament to pay attention to the issue. The Office will call on different political groups in the EP to initiate another campaign; to raise the issue in member states' parliaments; and to discuss the problem with governments of countries-- signatories of the Schengen agreement.

09/05/2008

By the ODB

Politics and Society

Belarus –US Diplomatic Conflict



On April 30 the Belarusian Foreign Ministry handed the U.S. charge d'affaires in Minsk Jonathan Moore a list of U.S. diplomats considered personae non gratae. The ministry said that at the meeting Mr. Moore was informed that as of April 30 Belarus was reducing the number of its personnel in Washington to six, including the ambassador, the Ministry said.

In response, the United States warned Belarus, it might close the US embassy in Minsk and make Belarus shut its US missions .

While calling Belarus's expulsion of the diplomats an "unwarranted and unjustified" action, Washington announced it

would comply with the demand that the envoys be removed from the country.

The decision left the U.S. Embassy in Minsk with just four staff members, down from more than 30 at the beginning of the year.

Tensions between the two countries increased after Washington imposed sanctions last November against the Belarus's state-controlled petrochemical company Belneftekhim and froze the assets of its U.S. subsidiary. American companies were also banned from dealing with Belneftekhim.

On May 5, just 2 days after 11 US diplomats left the country, a KGB spokesman Valery Nadtachayev told Belarusian television that the US Embassy had hired 10 local citizens to take photographs of police officials, airports and villages near the

state border.

The American Embassy in Minsk declined comment, but in Washington, U.S. State Department spokesman Tom Casey rejected the accusations.

The European Union's Slovenian presidency urged Belarus to reconsider its recent expulsion of 11 US diplomats, which it described as "unjustified and harmful."

It called on the government of Belarus "to reconsider its decision and to take immediate steps allowing for a normalization of the relationship between Belarus and the United States on the basis of mutually beneficial cooperation."

30/04/2008—05/05/2008

Source: RIA Novosti, the Associated Press, the Int. Herald Tribune

Belarusian Authorities Detain Activists on May Day



At least 30 activists were detained while holding a counterprotest near a May Day

rally in Minsk held by the progovernment Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus on May1. Riot police and plainclothes officers arrested a group of youth activists, led by opposition politician Mikalay Statkevich, who marched with European Union flags to meet the progovernment demonstrators. After several hours at the police station, all of the detainees were released except Mr. Statkevich. Youth activists Artur Finkevich, Zmitser Dashkevich, Zmitser Fedaruk, Pavel

Yukhnevich, and Yauhen Afanahel were released after signing a pledge to appear in court when summoned. Mikola Statkevich, leader of Belarus Social Democrat party, was sentenced to 10 days of administrative arrest for participating in an unsanctioned demonstration.

01/05/2008

Source: Radio Free Europe

Founding Conference for International Association of Chernobyl Veterans to be Held in Ukraine

A founding conference for an international association of Chernobyl emergency workers will be held in Ukraine this summer.

The decision to hold the conference was made in Kyiv during a meeting between Alyaksandr Vauchanin, leader of a Ukrainian-registered association of Chernobyl veterans in Belarus, and Yuriy Andreyev, president of a similar organization in Ukraine.

Members of the Ukrainian parliament, representatives of the European Parliament and leaders of the Russian association of Chernobyl veterans are expected to attend the conference, Mr. Vauchanin said. The purpose of the organisation is to defend the rights of former Chernobyl workers with the help of the international community, including the EU and UN institutions.

06/05/2008

Source: BelaPAN

Politics and Society

Milinkevich Meets with French President Sarkozy



Belarusian opposition politician Alyaksandr Milinkevich was received by the French President

Nicolas Sarkozy in Paris on May 9. The meeting focused on France's policy toward Belarus and efforts to improve the human rights situation in the country, the former presidential candidate's press office said. "France is a state that views human rights and freedoms not just as words

but as values. We need support for the process of reforms very much," Mr. Milinkevich was quoted as saying. The politician noted that France, which takes over the European Union's presidency on July 1, should have a specific plan of actions with regard to Belarus. He said that such a plan should be based on the European Union's 12 conditions for closer cooperation with Belarus. "It is very important to conduct a policy for restoring European values in Belarus. Europe's attention is vitally important for us," said Milinkevich. Mr. Sarkozy, for his part, asked the

Belarusian politician to tell him about the general situation in the country, the living standards and the relations with Russia. "You may count on France and its president," Sarkozy told. Mr. Milinkevich at the end of the meeting. While in France, Mr. Milinkevich also met with French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner.

09/05/2008

Source: BelaPAN, ERB
Photo by milinkevich.org

Did Chavez Try to Arm FARC with the Help of Belarus?



Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez allegedly tried to arm Colombian rebels with help from Belarus, the El Pais newspaper reported, citing documents from the computer of a slain rebel leader.

The Spanish daily quoted a February 8 e-mail from Ivan Marquez, leader of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of

Colombia (FARC), saying Chavez had considered with Belarusian authorities the possibility of providing weapons to FARC.

The e-mail was alleged to have been found in the seized computer of FARC second-in-command Raul Reyes, who was killed in March, El Pais said.

The partially coded message mentioned someone identified only as "friend of Belarus," who El Pais identified as Victor Sheiman, secretary of the Belarus Security Council and a close associate of Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

El Pais added that other possible arms sources for FARC, particularly ground-to-air missiles, were mentioned in computer messages, including contacts with "Australian traffick-

ers".

The newspaper claims that Belarus contracted to supply €720 million worth of weapons to Venezuela last year and the deal was negotiated by Mr. Sheyman.

Mr. Sheyman visited Venezuela between February 15 and 19.

The press office of the Belarusian State Secretariat told on Monday that "it is not serious to take note of all speculations that is being spread by Spanish journalists".

11/05/2008

Source: France 24
Photo by president.gov.by

Russia's Air Force to Take Part in Belarusian Military Exercise This Fall

Russia's Air Force will take part in a large-scale exercise of the Belarusian Armed Forces this fall, the service's press office reported with reference to the Commander Aleksandr Zelin.

"The Russian Air Force will participate in the exercise of the Belarusian Armed Forces. Everything is going according to the plan, we are the Union State," the military official was quoted as saying. Ihar Azaronak, chief of the Belarusian Air and Air Defence Forces, said last month that Russian aircrafts would be involved in the manoeuvres.

The scenario of the exercise was approved by Alyaksandr Lukashenka earlier this year.

12/05/2008

Source: ERB

Economic News

Lukashenka Says Commerzbank Aims to Enter Market

COMMERZBANK

Germany's Commerzbank plans to enter Belarus, Aliaksandr Lukashenka said.

Investors' interest in Belarus has increased since ratings agencies Standard & Poor's and Moody's gave the country its maiden ratings last August and signs appeared that the largely command economy could be unwound. "Recently I was told that Commerz-

bank is coming here. It wants to create its own bank in Belarus," Lukashenka told parliament in his annual state of the nation address.

Russian banks VTB and Gazprombank, and two Ukrainian investors already own several small Belarusian banks. The country's largest, state-owned Belarusbank, said last year it wanted to sell a 10 percent stake to a foreign investor. Commerzbank is active in Ukraine, where it controls Forum bank, plans to

up its stake in Russia's Promsvyazbank, and plans to set up shop in Azerbaijan. Commerzbank had no immediate comment.

29/04/2008

Source: Reuters

Mobile Subscribers in Belarus up 4.3% in Q1



The number of mobile communications subscribers in Belarus rose to 7.3 million in the first quarter, an increase of 4.3% from the beginning of the year, the Communications and Informatization Ministry told Interfax.

The Belarusian affiliate of Mobile TeleSystems (trademark MTS) saw its subscriber base increase 3.8% in the quarter to 3.495 million.

Belarusian Telecommunications Network (BeST) increased its subscriber base by 3,000 users to 184,600, a gain of 1.65%.

BelSel (Dialog), which operates on the CDMA 2000 standard and provides mainly data transmission services but handles some voice traffic, increased its subscriber base to 100,000 as of April 1.

Mobile Digital Communications (VELCOM and PRIVET) increased its subscriber base 20.45% to

3.68 million.

The four companies represent all of Belarus' mobile communications providers. The number of subscribers nationwide could reach 8 million in 2010, the ministry reported.

04/05/2008

Source: Interfax

IAEA Mission Arrives in Minsk to Prepare Construction of NPP in Belarus

IAEA mission for the preparations for the construction of the first nuclear power plant in Belarus arrived in Minsk on May 6, 2008.

"Belarus closely cooperates with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in the fulfilment of the project aimed at the creation of a new nuclear power plant, including the choice of the site for the future plant and personnel training," Deputy Director of the Belarusian Research and Design Institute



Energoprom Vladimir Bobrov told reporters.

In his words, experts from Pakistan, Germany and Italy, who have rich experience in various spheres of research, including geological engineering, meteorology, hydrology and seismology, will hold consultations for Belarusian specialists within three days of their visit.

In particular, there will be roundtables to discuss reports drafted by Belarusian specialists pertaining to the site for the future nuclear power plant.

Currently, they consider three plots of land: two in the Mogilev region and one more in the Grodno region. Under the decision of the Belarusian Security Council approved by the president, a 2,000-megawatt nuclear power plant will be constructed in the country.

The first power unit will be commissioned in 2016, while the second - in 2018.

06/05/2008

Source: Itar-tass

Economic News

Beltelecom: Communications Investment to Reach USD150 Million in 2008

Belarus' national fixed line operator Beltelecom plans to invest USD150 million to develop its communications networks and services in 2008, reports online news portal e-belarus.org. The state-backed telco will spend part of the sum on expanding and upgrading its fixed line network with the addition of 300,000 new lines. It also intends to install new Wi-Fi hotspots and roll out IPTV services to residential users.

07/05/2008

Source: Telegeography.com

Beltopgaz to Sell Peat Briquettes via BUCE

State production association Beltopgaz plans to start selling peat fuel briquettes via the Belarusian Universal Commodity Exchange (BUCE), BelTA learnt from representatives of the Belarusian Ministry of Energy. The company plans to attract new foreign buyers and increase export through commodity exchange. The trade sessions are scheduled for May 15.

The source explained, that this year's domestic peat consumption is lower than expected, which is why it is necessary to boost exports. In line with the state programme Peat, this year Belarus is supposed to manufacture 1.27 million tonnes of peat briquettes, including 1.046 million tonnes

for domestic use and around 224,000 tonnes for export. However, according to signed contracts, supplies for the home market stand at only 893,500 tonnes.

The lower peat consumption for heating purposes is attributed to higher air temperature in winter and intensive development of gas distribution networks as well as larger utilisation of wood fuel. This year oblast fuel distribution companies have decreased their planned purchases. In Q1 2008 peat companies sold 195,800 tonnes of peat briquettes on the home market, 18.7% of the annual target. As the home market has no need for about 150-200 thousand tonnes of peat briquettes, it is advisable to export them, noted the

source.

Meanwhile, new energy facilities are being built in the country. They will allow increasing the utilisation of peat and peat briquettes within the next few years. For instance, there are plans to deploy a 3.7MW mini cogeneration plant in Pruzhany. The unit will use wood fuel (60%) and peat (40%). The facility can use up to 26 tonnes of peat daily. The construction of a steam boiler is in progress at Zhodino cogeneration plant. The unit is supposed to use 72,000 tonnes of peat annually.

09/05/2005

Source: BelTA

Belarusian Inflation at 1.2% in April, 5.3% in Jan-April

Belarusian consumer prices increased 1.2% in April 2008 after growth of 0.8% in March, the Statistics and Analysis Ministry said in a statement.

Belarusian inflation in January-April 2008 was at 5.3%. Belarus' average monthly inflation in January-April 2008 increased to 1.3% against 0.7% in the same period of 2007. April-to-April inflation came to 14.8%.

The country's trade deficit decreased 60% year-on-year to \$220.5 million in the first quarter following an increase in exports of 65% and imports of 56%. Total foreign trade in January-March 2008 went up 60.3% year-on-year against a forecast yearly increase of 14.5%-15.5%.

In accordance with the country's socioeconomic development forecast for 2008, the government and National Bank intend keep inflation at 6%- 8%, or 0.5%-0.6% on average per month. In 2007, Belarusian inflation rose to 12.1%, against a 6%-8% forecast, from 6.6% in 2006. Belarus' trade deficit is forecast to not exceed \$1.42 billion this year. The country's trade deficit came to \$2.685 million in 2007, up 60% from 2006.

12/05/2008

Source: Radio Free Europe

Bank of Georgia Says to Buy 70 pct of Belaruski Nardony Bank for \$34.2 mln

JSC Bank of Georgia said it has agreed to buy a 70 percent stake in Belaruski Nardony Bank (BNB) in Belarus for a total of \$34.2 million and that it has an option to acquire the remaining 30 percent equity interest in BNB over the next three years. The company said BNB will continue to operate as a standalone bank owned and controlled by Bank of Georgia.

14/05/2008

Source: The Thomson Financial

Analysis

Belarusian President Blackmails the EU Using the Energy Resources Trump Card



Yesterday [Reuters](#) published an interview with Belarus' President Aliaksandr Lukashenka where he threatened the EU with energy sanctions for the first time should it let the USA push itself around making the line on his country tougher. Besides, the Belarusian leader stated for the first time that he was going to run for president for the fourth consecutive time. Mr Lukashenka can abandon this plan only in case he becomes the politician of the Russia-Belarus Union scale.

Russian-style blackmail

Aliaksandr Lukashenka discovered new means of effectively confronting the West that has recently built up its political and economic pressure against Minsk. Yesterday the [Reuters](#) agency published a second interview with the Belarusian leader within a year. In it, Mr Lukashenka bluntly warned the EU against following the USA and imposing economic sanctions on his country (this spring Washington imposed sanctions on the "Belneftehim" concern – an enterprise accounting for the lion's share of the Belarusian budget). Other-

wise Minsk will respond severely. "The Americans want the Europeans to introduce sanctions against Belarus, which will only hamper Europe. The Europeans fortunately haven't taken up the U.S. position," Aliaksandr Lukashenka praised the EU for that but warned it immediately, "Now they want the Europeans to join in. You can if you wish. But don't forget that 50 percent of your oil and oil products and 30 percent of your gas passes through Belarus." After this the Belarusian leader urged the EU to consider its current steps regarding Belarus' government. "You criticised the Soviet Union for creating an iron curtain. And just what are doing now? Have we frightened you to such an extent that you bar individuals, including me, from entering Britain and other EU states? We are located between two very powerful blocs that differ so much from each other. We are a sort of bridge that must somehow bring together those differences," Aliaksandr Lukashenka censured his western counterparts.

According to the President of Belarus, when trying to implant democracy in his country, "the West attempts to destroy the bridge, or at least to make it wobbly." "Why do you do this? I just don't understand. Today when the situation is tense and energy is a determining factor in our lives, you are starting to destroy the bridge along which oil, oil products and gas flow," Mr Lukashenka resorted to threats once again.

The Belarusian President has never used energy blackmail during his numerous rows with the EU. Moreover, Mr Lukashenka has been the first leader of a post-Soviet state to dare use the specific location of his country, which is a transit way for oil and gas pipelines going from

Russia to Europe, to his foreign policy ends. Until now only Moscow has used this unique instrument. It has got accustomed to taking advantage of its energy resources in its relations with the West.

For all that, the treats that Mr Lukashenka made public yesterday, may be carried out. The Yamal-Europe gas pipeline and the "Druzhba" ("Friendship") oil pipeline cross Belarus, with the latter being the key route of Russian oil supplies to the EU. Time was when the latter transported up to 70% of Russian oil.

Belarusian-style game

Mr Lukashenka's intention to use the traditionally Russian weapon in his confrontation with West is unlikely to please Russia's government. Yesterday's statement of Russian Prime Minister [Vladimir Putin](#) can be regarded a circumstantial evidence proving it. He said that Russia should launch the BTS-2 oil pipeline, which will transport oil to Europe omitting the territory of Russia's partner within the union. All the same, time will be needed to fulfil it. So far – and Mr Lukashenka knows it perfectly well – there is no alternative to the Belarusian route of Russian energy supplies to Europe. Feeling master of the situation, the Belarusian leader, whose current presidential term expires 2011, announced in his interview to Reuters his intention to run for president for the fourth time. "Let me say openly that if the situation remains as it is today in the country and for me personally then, of course, I will run again for another term. If the situation with me or the country changes, I can change my mind, too. For the moment, I am healthy. The people are not

Analysis

Belarusian President Blackmails the EU Using the Energy Resources Trump Card



especially critical of me and the West is beginning to understand that it is entirely possible. But we will have to wait and see. So you can expect the worst,” stated Mr Lukashenka.

Curiously, Mr Lukashenka barely mentioned Russia in yesterday’s interview. At that, last February when speaking to the journalists of the same Reuters agency, the Belarusian President confessed to the West that he was carrying out a univector policy heading for Moscow only. Offering friendship to the West, he criticised Russia for its “imperial policy” and even threatened to make Russia pay for exploiting military facilities on the territory of Belarus and using the country as a transit route to the Kaliningrad region. But these threats haven’t been carried out yet.

The fact that Mr Lukashenka didn’t say a word concerning the relations between Russia and Belarus doesn’t mean that he pays no due attention to them. At the end of April, on his visit to one of the regions of the country, he poured scorn on Moscow for its desire to merge Belarus acting like its partner. “The way suggested by Russia is unacceptable for us. We can’t become part of any state, not only Russia.” The proposals Mr Lukashenka spoke of could be made last December as Vladimir Putin visited Minsk. At that time unofficial information appeared that a Constitu-

tional act would be signed at the session of the Supreme State Council of the Union of Russia and Belarus. The act was to establish the union state, where Vladimir Putin would be President, and Aliaksandr Lukashenka – Chairman of the Parliament. It’s difficult to say for sure where this variant of integration was proposed to Minsk. But it is known that the two-hour talks of the presidents brought no results: No Constitutional act was signed, and the union still continues existing in the documents only.

All-union ambitions

Nonetheless, Aliaksandr Lukashenka hasn’t abandoned the idea of setting up a union with Russia based on the principles that’ll be beneficial for him personally. During his latest address to the people and the parliament he stated, “If I say that we are committed to building a union with Russia – it is true. It is no game.” It means that the Belarusian President reckons to make his dream come true someday becoming head of the union state – an idea he once discussed with Russia’s First President Boris Yeltsin. Alexander Lukashenka often hints that he could handle Russian resources better than the current rulers of the neighbouring country. He has made it a tradition to regularly meet with Russian journalists whom he tells that in his country even a milkmaid earns \$500 in a hot summer. He compared his state with Russia in the mentioned address to the nation, too. Interestingly, when speaking to his countrymen, Mr Lukashenka uttered the word “Russia” 26 times, and “Belarus” – only 18 times. In most cases he compared economic and social indexes of both states, where Russia, of course, was not placed in a good light.

Experts have no doubt that in case Aliaksandr Lukashenka had permanent access to the Russian mass media, he could compete on equal terms with Dmitry Medvedev and Vladimir Putin. “If he were given the opportunity in Russia, his rating would rocket. He is a player, and he likes unpredictable situations. And if Medvedev governed the country without Putin’s “wardship,” Lukashenka would certainly outdo him,” Leonid Zaiko, Head of the Belarusian Analytical Centre “The Strategy” told [Kommersant](#).

By the way, the Belarusian leader can soon get the opportunity the expert spoke about. The thing is that in September the Telebroadcasting Organization of the Union was revived. It was set up according to the treaty between Russia and Belarus as far back as 1998, but until now it hasn’t worked. 2006 a famous showman Igor Ugolnikov became its head, and at the end of the last year the channel began broadcasting via satellite. Yesterday Mr Ugolnikov told [Kommersant](#) that the channel will be broadcast within all cable networks of Belarus starting with June 1. The head of the organization is planning to turn it into a true federal channel covering the entire Russia. “We want to develop, and we’ll present a project of the development of the channel during the next session of the ministers of the union. We want the channel to become a federal one. I regard it as another First Channel (of Russia),” Mr Ugolnikov said.

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By Vladimir Solovyov
Photo by Dmitry Azarov
Source: Kommersant

Culture

The Man, Who Brings Angels to Belarus



The man with a hooked nose sings before the empty hall. The dark space erupts with applause, but there are no people in sight. This strange scene is not real – it's just a video clip from "Sad Belarusian Blues" <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FxoXZQWrUWU>. In reality, Viktor Shalkevich, the singer and guitarist, rarely performs without a full house. However, there is some sad truth in this video clip: Viktor Shalkevich, one of the most talented and charismatic artists in Belarus, is often prevented from reaching the broader public.

Viktor Shalkevich was born in 1959 in the midst of a winter storm, on a sledge that was taking his mother to the local hospital in the western Belarusian town of Porazava. "Perhaps, this has determined my vagabond future," says Viktor. Today he lives in the city of Hrodna (Grodno), the Western outpost of Belarus. Like many other people from this part of the country, he believes (not too seriously) that the sun rises in the West. Viktor Shalkevich likes Hrodna because it is situated in the centre of the Minsk-Warsaw-Vilnius triangle, making it possible to shift easily between these three different countries that share somewhat similar cultures. However, his fondness of Hrodna is not appreciated by the city's authorities. Viktor Shalkevich says that he simply can't work in Hrodna the way he wants to. He could easily name about a dozen of songs he has written about Hrodna, but this is of no interest to the city fathers, who see him as a hard-core opposition activist – something the singer completely disagrees with. Indeed, he of the country's leader (you can see the video clip here <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5fDYzys3jHc&feature=related>).

But humour is not harmful, isn't it?

Well, in some cases it is. Viktor Shalkevich used to work as an actor at the Grodno Drama Theatre, but was left no breathing room by the theatre's board, and had to leave it for the Grodno Puppet Theatre. However, all this trouble doesn't mean that he failed – in fact, Shalkevich is a picture of success with his 5 recorded albums, dozens of national and international music awards, non-stop concerts in the country and beyond its borders, let alone his career as a talented actor. Viktor Shalkevich is always looking for new challenges; for example, he is working on writing an opera called "Galilean Story". It tells about the Messiah being born in a small kibbutz in Israel and the controversy it aroused. "However, I'm not sure which theatre in Belarus would have enough courage to stage it," doubts Viktor Shalkevich.

In his songs, Shalkevich makes fun of adults, singing serious songs for children – for example, about "Sviaty Mikalaj" (Santa Claus), as opposed to the artificial Soviet surrogate called "Daddy Frost". Shalkevich plays musical jokes on serious politicians and at the same time seriously believes in Santa. His attitude towards his own nation is even more complicated. It can be described as melancholy, nostalgic for the good old days of the Great Duchy of Lithuania, the multinational state, with Belarusian lands in its core. At the same time there is sarcasm at the present time of the neo-soviet kitsch. This is very well reflected in his song "Nation of Jerks":

Good morning, the nation of jerks,
The goggle-eyed Sun is rising
Good morning, the nation of jerks,
Nobody wants to marry you,
stupid!

In English, this sounds kind of harsh, but in Belarusian there is more pity, bitter pity, in these words, than anger.

These four lines are Shalkevich's diagnosis for the whole nation.

But we shouldn't repeat the mistake of the Belarusian ideologists and label Shalkevich as a "critical singer". "There is a whole category of people in Belarus, who tour foreign countries telling about the bloody dictatorship. I don't belong to this group. I glorify Belarus", says Viktor Shalkevich. In his albums and during his concerts he also sings about angels, which bring rain to Hrodna, about a suburban train, which brings an unknown girl to the small town of Koydanava about time, which is running away from him while driving the old Ukrainian "Zaporozhets" car down the street which once used to be called Lenin Avenue... The songs of Shalkevich are the unrequited romance with his Motherland. As famous Belarusian culturologist Maxim Zhabankou puts it: "Shalkevich is the lost hero of the Belarusian culture".

However, Viktor Shalkevich is definitely a newly found hero of Belarusian business. He is one of the few professional auctioneers in Belarus. He doesn't simply slam down the wooden hammer, but instead, brings his artistic talent into the trade. "An auction is also a performance. It takes a lot of skill to act in it", says Viktor Shalkevich. "Once an elderly lady approached me after the auction, and told me, 'Thank you, young man, I always go to theatre, but I've never seen such a performance before!'"

During his many travels, Viktor Shalkevich has developed a tradition – from every trip he brings a figure of an angel as a gift to his daughter. Now she has more than a hundred of angels in her collection. Giving out music and angels as presents – quite a pleasant occupation, isn't it?

By Ales Kudrytski for the ODB