

The President of Belarus Alaksandar Lukashenka and his Minister of Foreign Affairs Siarhei Martynau delivered statements, touching upon the issues of relations with the EU and the United States, on the New Year eve. By all means, they didn't increase optimism in the Western capitals.

“A dialogue between partners cannot be grounded upon preliminary conditions. Otherwise, the dialogue will fail to be started or will appear ineffectual”, S. Martynau noted in his interview to the “Reuters” News Agency. The statement can be regarded as the Belarusian government's official response to the EU proposal to begin a dialogue on normalizing relations with Belarus. It should be reminded that the EU suggested that the Belarusian government would put into life the well-known twelve conditions as a ground for starting the dialogue. The simplest prioritized condition previewed the discharge of a small group of political prisoners in Belarus.

According to S. Martynau, the logic of setting preliminary conditions “can be hardly linked to the realities and the perspective”. Thus, it looks as if in the governmental official's opinion, the unified EU position in relation to Belarus that appeared due to continuous discussions, was unrealistic and having no future.

Naturally, a consequent question arises if the perspectives of opening the EC representation in Miensk are realistic and having any future in this case. The Belarusian Foreign Office assures everyone of carried on work upon the issue. However, it seems that the previous circumspect optimism, expressed by the European Committee, has become even less visible in the light of recent events.

In addition to the Foreign Minister's interview, the Belarus' President Alaksandr Lukashenka delivered a high-flown threat to Ms. Karen Stuart, the US Ambassador in Belarus. He promised “to throw out” the diplomatic representative for the announced economic sanctions and her active contacts with the opposition.

It looks that after such words even the most devoted supporters of starting dialogue with the Belarusian regime in power in the West have been made to say “good bye” to their hopes and illusions.

The dictator is far from being keen on reforms and compromises. Numerous independent observers believe that this reality is likely to foster development of Euro-Atlantic solidarity in relation to “the last dictator of Europe”. The US Ambassador in Belarus noted during her press-conference in Minsk in December 2007 that the official Washington and Brussels had common understanding of the regime in Belarus. However, it is not obligatory manifested simultaneously, she emphasized.

If the previous Christmas in Belarus was marked with another round of “gas war” with Russia and the increased costs for the imported natural gas, the beginning of the year 2008 was indicated with getting the Russian stabilization credit in the amount of USD 1.5 billion and mass protest actions of individual entrepreneurs. The implemented repression against the individual entrepreneurs is

stimulating their politicization and the foundation process of “Together” independent trade unions.

It can be stated that these two factors are playing a more and more significant role in the internal political life of today’s Belarus.

The feeling of obscurity and uncertainty is gradually growing in different social groups in Belarus. The so-called “stabilization” credit from Russia doesn’t exert influence on the rising dynamics of consumer costs in Belarus. It doesn’t prevent the decrease of living standards in the country either.

The independent observers note that the real role of Putin’s multi-billion generosity after the night talks with Lukashenka in Miensk suburb on December 13-14, 2007 is getting more and more obvious. Following the recently introduced Russian moratorium on the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty, the Kremlin may wish to install a full-value Russian-Belarusian military grouping along the border with the European Union and NATO. It is the so-called “Union State’s” field of defense that doesn’t show any discrepancies between the Russian and Belarusian governments. Thus, it appears as if the Kremlin has finally conceived Lukashenka’s statement about the free defense of Russian western border by Belarus. The fact that formally Belarus hasn’t terminated the CFE treaty support will mean little after Lukashenka’s public statements about the readiness to support Russia in its efforts against the allocation of American anti-missile defense armaments in Poland.

In this respect, the recently delivered statement by the Prime-Minister of Poland Donald Tusk on the matter appears to be well-grounded indeed. Among other, he noted as follows: “Our agreement to allocate the anti-missile shield in Poland is directly connected with the recognition of necessity to increase the country’s defense”. The Polish government hasn’t reached a corresponding agreement with the US top governmental authorities yet, he added.

Undoubtedly, it is hard to say so far if the currently implemented exchange of opinions between the East and the West may heighten international tension in the area that some policy strategists in Minsk are prone to view as a pre-condition of saving the authoritarian regime in power.

Lukashenka’s position in relation to the “revolutionary” according to Putin decision on creating a Customs Union of Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus with a supranational managing institution remains rather vague. In particular, the Belarus’ government disregarded a proposal of Kazakhstan President N. Nazarbayev to arrange a Kazakhstan-Russia-Belarus summit, dedicated to the issue, in Astana this February.

Reportedly, the Belarusian party would like to link the Customs Union with getting discounted costs for the imported oil and gas.

At the same time, the European governments must be interested to learn the latest news from Minsk.

The Belarusian government has approved the Ministry’s of Economy proposal to increase tariffs for the transit of Russian oil, transported with the use of “Homieltransnafta - Druzhba” pipeline.

Accordingly, a transit tariff on the route “Uniecha (Vysokaye) – Adamava zastava” towards Poland and Germany will be increased by 15.7% – i.e., up to EUR 2.8 (USD 4.05) per 1 ton of oil, since February 1, 2008.

The tariffs for the transit of Russian natural gas across Belarus have been increased approximately by 10.2% since January 1, 2008. In particular, the transit tariff for transporting gas with the use of

“Yamal – Europe” gas pipeline has been increased by 10.7% – i.e., up to USD 1.66 for 1 thousand cubic metres per 100 km.

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There are various sites devoted to events in Belarus, which are, however, little known in Western Europe, and among people dealing with politics towards Belarus who do not understand the Russian or Belarusian languages.

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

