

In the course of the last days trials were held over the participants of the non-sanctioned entrepreneurs' rally taking place in Minsk on January, 10th. Several dozen people were sentenced to administrative arrests. However, this may not be the end of the story as criminal investigation was opened by Minsk prosecutor's office with regard to mass riots. Simultaneously, the Ministry of Justice has filed a suit to the Supreme Court concerning the liquidation of the entrepreneurs' union "Perspektyva", whose leader Anatol Shumchanka was among the organisers of the action on January, 10th.

According to the observers, such a nervous reaction of the authorities on the protests of small-scale entrepreneurs indicates that they are afraid of public actions of protest. The number of participants in the manifestation was comparable to that of last autumn opposition rallies. However, the crucial difference is that now taking to streets were the representatives of a formerly politically indifferent group. What is more, during the action economic demands developed into political ones.

Repressions against the leaders and the activists of entrepreneurial movement are targeted at lessening the scope of the new rally of private proprietors designated for January, 21st.

However, repressions will not quite down small businessmen. Their main demand is to abolish one of the provisions of the presidential edict №760, which forbids Belarusian private proprietors to hire waged labourers from January, 1st.

As a way out the government suggests that entrepreneurs register their businesses as private unitary enterprises. However, according to the proprietors, the change implies hiring an accountant, filing huge paper-work and leads to a spike in taxes and other costs. For many entrepreneurs the edict makes their business unprofitable.

Entrepreneurs widely believe they have become victimized by the lobby of big business close to the authorities and interested in pushing out small-scale competitors. In their turn, the leaders of the country and the state-owned media accuse the entrepreneurs of employing "half-legal" business strategies, tax evasion and dumping which undermines the positions of state-owned industry.

A number of analysts believe that because of the absence of normal feedback the leadership of the country has lately made a number of grave mistakes which aggravated social tensions. These are,

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in particular, the abolition of social benefits in late 2007 affecting almost two-thirds of the population and the above-mentioned strife with entrepreneurs over the notorious edict №760.

Some experts forecast that the authorities will embark on a carrot and stick policy, namely they will proceed with intimidating entrepreneurs on the one side, while making minor concessions aimed at abating public outrage. The authorities will aim to relieve the tensions with the entrepreneurs by spring when the organised political opposition starts its traditional rallies.

In their turn, the leaders of the organised opposition have sensed the opportunity and are trying to head the protests of the entrepreneurs and add a distinct political element to their rallies. The heads of a number of parties took part in the events of January, 10th and the leader of the United Civic Party was even sentenced to 15 days of administrative arrest.

Moreover, the Ministry of Justice demanded explanations from the leaders of three political parties, UCP being among them, concerning the participation of their leaders in the non-sanctioned rally. The party officials believe that this may be a starting point for the authorities to initiate the liquidation of major opposition parties (this procedure is already under way against an opposition Party of Belarusian Communists).

Such “cleansing” of the political field may be attributed to the parliamentary elections which are scheduled for autumn. It is possible that the leaders of the country will conduct an imitation of democratic elections based on party-list proportional representation. At the same time, by applying administrative pressure, the authorities will secure the victory of a pro-governmental party which could be made on the basis of a public union “Belaja Rus” (“White Russia”) recently created “from above”. Under such conditions, a case of “neutralizing” the most formidable opposition parties, namely the Party of Belarusian Communists, Belarusian Public Front and United Civic Party appears to be logical.

However, one more issue has emerged which the opponents of the current regime may potentially use to criticize authorities and stir up the political activity of the population. According to official information, a “final political decision” was passed on January, 15th at the sitting of the Security Council headed by Aliaksandar Lukashenka to build a nuclear power plant in Belarus. However, the intention to build an NPS in a country which was most affected by the Chernobyl Power Plant disaster is publically viewed as ambiguous at best. Thus, the citizens of Horatski region of Mahiliou voblasts, a possible location for a would-be power plant, are already collecting signatures against its building.

The opposition challenges the secretiveness of the decision to build a nuclear power plant and criticises its inconsistency. In particular, the top authorities are disposed to buying the energy blocks for the NPS in Russia which will only deepen Belarusian dependence on the eastern neighbour. Besides, the price of uranium is soaring which may in the long ruin the hopes of saving money on nuclear energy. The independent experts believe that a viable alternative to nuclear energy may be the reduction of power intensity of industrial output (in Belarus the index is 3 to 5 times more than in the developed countries).

According to the Belarusian Minister of Finance Mikalaj Korbut, the building costs of a nuclear power plant will reach 4 billion US dollars. Independent experts claim that the sum is about two times as high. Some of them think the nuclear power plant project to be a gamble and believe it can sap the economic resource of the “Belarusian model” which has already been undermined by the hike in prices for Russian gas and oil.

POLITICS

Final Decision on NPP

The Security Council of Belarus has adopted a final decision on building a nuclear power plant, reports BelTA information agency. President Lukashenka will be given a final draft of the resolution by the end of January.

The head of the country will undoubtedly sign the resolution as he has already stated that “there is an understanding in the Belarusian society that Belarus has no alternative to nuclear energy”.

Two NPP blocks will be erected simultaneously. The first one is to be set in operation in 2018, while the second one - within one to two years from that date. The Belarusian NPP will be operating at its full capacity by 2020. However, the location of the would-be station still remains unknown. A final decision on that will be passed by the end of 2008. A number of potential places are being scrutinized, one being in Mahiliou voblasts near the town of Horiki.

The Internet site of “Charter’97” claims that local citizens have created an anti-nuclear group there and have started collecting signatures against the building of NPP.

Belarusian Foreign Ministry Satisfied with Belarus-EU Relations

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“We believe that the opening of EC Representation Office will create grounds for further intensification of our relations with the European Union in such fields as power engineering, transport, transit and many others”, Andrei Papou resumed.

OFFICIALLY

Minister of Interior Navumau Regarded the Private Entrepreneurs’ Protest Action as Hooliganism

The Belarus’ Minister of Internal Affairs Uladzimir Navumau considers the private entrepreneurs’ protest action to be an act of hooliganism.

“I won’t treat it as a meeting. I will insist on naming it an act of hooliganism”, the state official said to journalists. According to the Minister, the protest action participants acted “as if they were hooligans”. According to the governmental official, they were “jumping on buses and beating people”.

Moreover, Uladzimir Navumau believes the opposition parties made use of the private entrepreneurs’ meeting for the sake of their PR campaigns.

“Perspective” Trade Union May Be Closed Down

The Ministry of Justice submitted a claim with a demand to terminate activity of “Perspective” Nation-wide Civil Association.

The claim is connected with the Association leader’s participation in an unauthorized meeting of private entrepreneurs in Miensk.

As stated on the Ministry’s of Justice Website, the protest action participants “brought losses to the society and the state”, “damaged the public transport” and “petrified the traffic in the city center”.

The “Perspective” NGO was among the protest action initiators. The Ministry of Justice officials note that in accordance with the Belarusian law “About Civil Associations”, a non-governmental organization can be closed down in case of breaking the law on holding and taking part in mass public events.

OPPOSITION

Youth Front Registered Abroad

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In accordance with the founding documents of an international public association Youth Front, it is allowed to open branches and act in all the countries of Europe including Belarus and Ukraine.

ECONOMY

Inflation Rate 2007 Broke the Forecast Twice

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The Belarus' government is planning to decrease the inflation rate to 6.8% this year.

SOCIETY

Blacklisting for Minor Offenses

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Thus, it turns out that if one has an unpaid fine for wrong parking or free riding in public transport he or she is not allowed to quit the country.

CULTURE

Protestants against Youth Union and Occultism

The bishops of protestant churches have issued an address to the authorities calling upon the end to the practice of forcible entries into Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRYU) and Belarusian Republican Pioneer Organisation (BRPO) and lashed out against media advertising of occultism.

Two letters were directed to the head of the presidential administration of Belarus Hienadz Niavyhlas, to the Ministry of Education and to the state TV Company.

Antoni Bokun, the pastor of St. Joan the Precursor church says that the current situation smacks of Communist times.

Antoni Bokun: Students and schoolchildren are forced into BRYU which triggered the

address of episcopos as protestants refused to enter Komsomol and the pioneer organisation in Soviet times. Nowadays the attempts of the organisations which succeed to them to forcibly recruit young people are met with resistance. In the name of all the believers the episcopos are addressing the authorities to stop such practice. Another address deals with occultism advertising which is abound in newspapers and on television. The episcopos claim that such advertising needs to be

terminated as it is a sign of the degradation of society. The religious leaders claim that instead of embracing God it makes people turn to astrologists.

Antoni Bokun underscores that the problem has been growing for three years and is now at its peak when one needs to be a member of BRYU to enter some universities. The latter measure was among the latest recommendations of the Education Minister Aliaksandar Radzkou.



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 fills this gap. The site allows to order weekly reception of news in English, Polish, Belarusian, Russian.

