

At the beginning of 2008, the internal political situation in Belarus got supplemented by a range of factors, which influence in the future is still hard to be forecast with a high degree of probability. The list includes protest actions of individual entrepreneurs, a severe sentence to a journalist Alaksandr Zdvizhkov and the rise of activity of Belarusian “greens”, which stand up against the recent governmental decision to speed up constructing the APP in Belarus.

A protest action took place in Miensk on *January 21, 2008*. Its participants demanded to dismiss the Belarusian government “for ruining entrepreneurship” in the country. Also, they promised to start a long-term strike that may last for a month. For the first time, the protesters started demanding the dismissal of Belarusian president. Maybe, owing to these statements, the Minister of Internal Affairs Uladzimier Navumau personally participated in dispersing the demonstrators. As usual, numerous protestors got fined and sentenced to different terms of administrative arrest.

Having gathered again after January 10th at another non-authorized meeting in the very city center of Minsk, more than 1,000 of Belarusian small business representatives declared foundation of a civil forum “In Defence of Business Freedom” and announced the following protest action on *February 18, 2008*. Moreover, the individual entrepreneurs prepared appeals to the OSCE and the EU with a request to evaluate the situation in the field from the point of view of global practice.

Local observers believe that despite numerous protest actions, both in the capital and in the regions, the authoritarian regime in power will not make concessions to the individual entrepreneurs.

The small business representatives were invited to take part in consultations at the Presidential Administration in the period between the recent two protest actions. (However, the President didn’t attend the meeting himself.) The consultations appeared to be absolutely frustrating for the individual entrepreneurs, who made up their minds to take part in them. “We were told that our activity impoverished the domestic light industry”, they told in despair.

Lukashenka’s reaction appeared in his statement with a demand to prevent destabilization in the country, as if initiated by the opposition, “making use as a cover of slogans in some business defence”. Also, he noted as follows: “Money, businessmen are not fond of protesting in squares and all that uproar. It is evident that they (i.e., the opposition) need destabilization. We won’t allow turning calm and quiet Miensk into the turbulent one.”

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However, it is not obvious at all that despite the current scarce attendance of protest actions, the external tranquility of Belarusian capital will last infinitely.

The increase of protest moods among the Belarusian citizens is likely to be fostered by a system crisis of the country's non-reformed economy, strangled by the present inefficient executive system and the acute shortage of investments.

Alaksandar Zdzvzhkou, a former Deputy Editor-in-chief of „Zhoda” newspaper got sentenced to three years of imprisonment in a high security colony on January 18, 2008. Miensk City Court found the journalist guilty of „fomenting religious hostility”. It should be reminded that the „Zhoda” newspaper reprinted caricatures of Mohammed the Prophet from the “Jullands-Posten” newspaper (Denmark) in the year of 2006. The claim against “Zhoda” and A. Zdvizhkou had been submitted by the Head of “Religious Board of Muslims of Belarus.” The religious group head admitted he had been provoked to take this step by the state authorities.

The terrifying sentence to A. Zdvizhkou deeply shocked his colleagues. They accepted this event as an action of threatening on the part of the regime in power. Some observers are prone to regard the harsh court sentence as a friendly Lukashenka's message to his companion Akhmadinezhad.

It is evident that the jail sentence to an Orthodox journalist, who emphasized his religious affiliation, may result in diverse inter-congregational and other discussions on the issue. The signs of agitation can be seen even at the present moment. Thus, e.g., the archbishops of four Protestant religious associations have called upon the Belarusian state authorities to terminate immediately the policy of making youngsters enter the Belarusian Nation-wide Pioneer Organization and the Belarusian Nation-wide Youth Union as well as to stop the practice of publishing announcements about occult services in the media.

During a meeting with the Belarusian Orthodox Church Synod on *January 24, 2008*, A. Lukashenka noted that interaction of the state and the church makes the most important factor of unity in the Belarusian society. Lukashenka supported the Synod's attempts to open the first Orthodox radio-station in Belarus.

However, nothing has been heard yet about possible meetings of Belarusian president with the other heads of religious congregations in the country as well as about his attitude towards the opportunity of founding media outlets for the non-Orthodox believers in Belarus.

According to official reports, “attempts of holding activities by a number of pseudo-religious groups and destructive sects on the territory of Belarus” were registered in 2007.

The State Commissioner on Religions and Nationalities pointed out a necessity of “strengthening struggle against pseudo-religious activities in the country.” Also, he stressed a necessity of counteracting to the import of literature and video-materials that may destabilize ethnic and religious situation in the country.

In accordance to the sociological data, 80% of believers in Belarus belong to the Orthodox congregation. In this respect, it should be emphasized that A. Zdzvzhkou colleagues' appeal to the Belarusian Orthodox Church metropolitan Philaret with a request to solicit the judges to diminish the horrifying court verdict to the repressed journalist remained without reply.

The activity on starting the first Belarusian APP construction is stirring up in the country. The state policy on the APP building is not supported by quite a few people in Belarus.

The Belarusian “greens” in cooperation with the BPF Party have initiated public hearings on the issue, *starting from February 2008*. Both the supporters and opponents of building the APP in Belarus are expected to take part in the event. It should be emphasized that Lukashenka simply forgot about his promise to hold a national referendum on the issue.

Some analysts believe that the propagandist campaign on the necessity of building the APP can be regarded as a campaign for A. Lukashenka’s life-long presidency in Belarus. Moreover, it should be recollected that the Belarusian president noted in 2005 as follows: “The countries with nuclear reactors are not bombed.” Thus, the APP can be treated as a political insurance against external influence on the regime in power. Saying so, the apologists of Belarusian regime are keen on referring to the independent policy of today’s Iranian government that is building an APP on its territory in Bushehr.

Lukashenka’s state policy has to be considered more closely by the global community, taking into account the statements of his Minister of Defence, delivered from Moscow.

Accordingly, Belarus regards the planned allocation of the US anti-missile defence installations in the Eastern Europe as a threat to its national security. The Belarus’ Minister of Defence **Leanid Maltsau** presented this opinion during his speech at a scientific conference, dedicated to the problems of ensuring the Russia’s national security in Moscow on *January 19, 2008*.

It should be emphasized that Leanid Maltsau delivered the statement on the eve of the first visit of his Polish colleague Radoslaw Sikorski to Moscow.

L. Maltsau also proposed to dedicate the next scientific conference of the kind to the problems of ensuring the military security of the so-called Union State of Russia and Belarus from the potential threat that might come from the western borders.

OFFICIALLY

The Belarus’ Council of Ministers Adopted New Procedure of Sending Children for Studies or Medical Treatment Abroad

In accordance with the newly-adopted procedure, all children under 14 years old will be directed to study abroad with their legal representatives only.

Orphans and social orphans can be directed to study abroad if the hosting side may provide them with accommodation.

If the children are directed to study abroad for more than 30 calendar days, the organizers will have to present the required consent from the Ministry of Education. Otherwise, the permit is issued by the District or Regional Committee on Education. The

positive or negative decision is taken within a month’s term.

SOCIETY

The Number of Surnames in the “Black Lists” Increasing

There exist at least several “black lists” with the surnames of people, who can’t go abroad from Belarus, the “Belarusan Partisan” Web-portal reports.

Thus, one of them, for example, contains surnames of more than 100 outstanding scientists, who can be useful to the state. Another “black list” includes surnames of around 250 high-rank state officers, who can go abroad if personally permitted by the President only. The list of such officials includes VIPs from the Presidential

Administration, the Council of Ministers, the Parliament, the Heads of Executive Committees, the general managers of large state-owned enterprises etc.

Moreover, separate ministries and state institutions are preparing their own lists of officials, who shouldn't leave Belarus without special permits..

POLITICS

The Council of Europe Condemned Belarusian Authorities

Participants of the Conference of International NGOs of the Council of Europe have called upon the Belarusian government to enable existence of independent media outlets in Belarus and to release all political prisoners in the country.

The statement is declared in a special resolution on Belarus, adopted in Strasbourg on January 22, 2008. The resolution supporters expressed deep concern with «the abrupt worsening of human rights situation in Belarus in 2008." According to the resolution, "the authoritarian rule in Belarus has led to the discrimination of the rights of most Belarusians."

Among other, the conference participants appealed to the Belarusian authorities with a demand "to respect freedom of information, including full access to independent information in respect to elections, including exit-polling, and allow activities of independent mass media."

OPPOSITION

Will Opposition Take Part in Parliamentary Elections 2008?

The democratic forces will take part in the parliamentary elections only if the authorities abide by a number of specific conditions, stated Vintsuk Viachorka in Strasbourg.

The Deputy Head of the Belarusian People's Front spoke yesterday at the sitting of the parliamentary committee of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of

Europe (PACE) dedicated to the situation in Belarus.

The conditions which the Belarusian authorities are to fulfill are the release of political prisoners, registration of the democratic candidates and allowing independent observers into electoral committees.

The representative of the upper chamber of the Belarusian parliament at the PACE session Natallia Andrejchyk stated that Belarusian authorities were interested in having a dialogue with the Council of Europe and then told everyone present about the "hooligans" provoking fights at the streets of Belarusian towns.

Another side of Belarusian reality was presented by a special PACE reporter on Belarus Andrea Rigoni who visited the country last year and met with the representatives of the democratic forces and the authorities. Speaking were also former reporters on Belarus Andreas Herkel and Christos Purguridis.

The democratic forces were represented at the PACE session by the First Deputy Head of Belarusian People's Front Vintsuk Viachorka, Deputy Head of the "For Freedom" movement Viktor Karneenka and one of the leaders of the Belarusian Social-Democratic Party (Hramada) Ales Straltsou.

ECONOMY

Belarusians Buy less Sugar

The amount of stored sugar in Belarus exceeded by 5.6 times the average monthly production volume last year.

The present amount of stored tinned goods exceeds 180% of the average monthly production volume. The amount of tinned vegetables and fruit in stock totals around 55 million conventional tins.

The production of wine and cognac increased more than twice in Belarus last year. At the same time, the amount of tobacco products increased by 20%.

CULTURE

“Free Theatre” Actors on Tour in the United States

The Belarusian “Free Theatre” is touring in the USA.

Nine performances have already been staged in New York. Presently, the actors are heading for Los-Angeles, where they are going to take part in a theatrical symposium and put on stage the “Jeans Generation” performance.

The performances are presented in the original language version with captions.

“The theatre hall was 80% full at the first night. However, all other performances were sold out after a highly laudatory notice in “New York Times”, the theatre producer Mikalay Khalezin told to the Charter’97 Web-site.

M. Khalezin added that though the theatre group had received a large number of proposals to continue their work abroad, the “Free Theatre” actors rejected them, preferring to remain a Belarusian theatre anyway.



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.

