

On January, 28 the meeting of Aliaksandar Lukashenka with the head of the Central Election Committee Lidzija Jarmoshyna determined the date of next parliamentary elections, though the president has not yet signed a corresponding edict. According to Jarmoshyna, it is most likely that the elections will be set for September, 28. The previous date stated by Ms. Jarmoshyna to be optimal was October, 12.

According to analysts, the authorities have decided to set the elections for summer and early autumn to restrict the opportunities of the opposition. Summer is traditionally a season of political lull, while the central issue of September for Belarusians is the harvest. This turns pre-term voting into a natural act of concern for common people. Namely, by voting ahead of schedule one could be free to spend a weekend out of town.

The Belarusian Election Code provides for five days of pre-term voting while the share of voters using this opportunity has been significantly growing lately. Thus, at the 2006 elections the ration of those voting pre-term reached 31,3%.

The opponents of the current regime claim that it forces people to cast the ballot ahead of the voting day. The most widely abused are the categories of electorate which are directly dependent on the immediate authority, namely students, servicemen, employees of state enterprises etc. According to the opposition, the non-transparent procedure of pre-term voting creates favourable conditions for rigging. For example, it is difficult to control whether the bulletins are not substituted during the night.

Nevertheless, on January, 28 the president of Belarus stated his intent to conduct democratic electoral campaign and not to restrict the number of foreign observers. According to independent experts, such statements signify that there is a latent mechanism of election rigging devised which the foreign observers are unable to grasp.

Belarusian political analysts tend to believe that the strategy of the authorities will be to de-politicise parliamentary elections as political debates threaten to de-stabilise the current status quo especially in relation to the sharpening of economic troubles and stripping population of social benefits. In particular, the majority of social benefits was cancelled in December, 2007.

According to analysts, the option of conducting elections using the elements of proportional system becomes less plausible, while the rapidly created pro-presidential movement "White

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Russia”, viewed by many as a prototype of the party of power, is a long-term perspective tool of Belarusian political technologists.

"The regime is not going to transform or to liberalize the existing electoral legislation”, believes political analyst Viktor Charnou. According to him, there are no internal or external sources of pressure which could force Miensk to change the Electoral Code and the aggressive way to conduct electoral campaigns.

However, independent analysts state that boycotting elections suggested by a range of politicians would be ineffective, as it will not cause public upheaval against the authorities. The aim of the opposition would be to draw its counter-plan of conducting the electoral campaign, to electioneer creatively and in an aggressive manner, underscoring the drawbacks of the ruling elite and the vulnerable issues for the current authorities, namely social security, inflation, nuclear power plant controversy etc.

However, the opposition is currently barely ready to conduct an electoral campaign. The single list of the candidates from the Unified Democratic Forces still remains a matter of future, despite the fact that it should have been compiled in the previous year. According to the head of the United Civic Party Anatol Liabidzka, the activity is being hampered by the subverting activity of some opposition leaders. However, the analysts believe that worst of all is the absence of a sound ideology within the opposition camp, lack of consolidation within the opposition camp and disregard of preparation for 2011 presidential campaign.

Meanwhile, on January, 29-30 Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov visited Miensk. During his meeting with president Lukashenka, the latter stated that his country is ready to coordinate its foreign policy with Russia. Lavrov, in his turn, voiced his concern about the Western pressure at Belarus and made it clear that the Kremlin is still ready to stand for its ally on the international arena.

Analysts note that the relations of Russia and Belarus have lately grown warmer. In particular, Belarus secured a Russian credit of 1,5 billion USD on most favourable terms and was promised another one amounting to 2 billion USD. Moreover, Russia supplies gas to Belarus at 119 USD per thousand cubic metres which is lower than to any other European country, including CIS member-states.

Experts believe that the generosity is explained by some clandestine agreements reached at a January meeting of the presidents. The opposition voices its concerns that it can undermine Belarusian independence through the current expansion of Russian capital and the signing of the Constitutional Act of the Union State in order to incorporate Belarus into the Russian Federation.

POLITICS

Elections Set for September, 28

Parliamentary elections will be held on September, 28 2008. It was initially planned that they would take place on October, 12. However, the date coincided with the elections into the Council of the Republic.

The head of the Central Election Committee Lidzija Jarmoshyna stated that a number of calendar events and documents have been worked out as the election date was settled. The Committee will soon direct a law draft to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs which regulates the principles of voting abroad.

Hugo Chavez Coming to Belarus

It is expected that the President of Venezuela Hugo Chavez will pay

another official visit to Belarus in the spring 2008.

According to the temporary plenipotentiary ambassador of Venezuela in Belarus Americo Dias Nunes, the visit is being planned for March..

The diplomat stated that the desire of Venezuelan President to visit again Belarus shows great interest of Venezuelan government to bi-lateral cooperation with the country.

OFFICIALLY

Number of Observers not to be Limited

The head of the Central Election Committee Lidzija Jarmoshyna has discussed with the President Lukashenka the issues of the forthcoming electoral campaign.

Parliamentary elections will be held in late September while the official electoral campaign begins in August. At the meeting with Ms. Jarmoshyna Aliaksandar Lukashenka stated that foreign observers from both OSCE and CIS would be invited to monitor the elections and underscored that no limitations on their numbers should exist. At the same time it was stressed that the representatives of the political parties may nominate their representatives to the Central Elections Committee as well as debate the issues related to organising the electoral campaign..

OPPOSITION

Respite for Communist Party

The Ministry of Justice has directed an appeal to the Supreme Court asking to suspend the examination of the suit concerning the liquidation of the Party of Belarusian Communists.

The Ministry of Justice requires time to study the documents which it has received from the party. In these documents the party claims that it has cleared all the violations, leading to suspending party activity and entering the stage of liquidation.

The activity of the party is under suspense from August, 2 2007 till February, 2 2008. The leader of the Party of Belarusian Communists stated after February, 2 the party would continue its activity and would immediately hold a sitting of the Central Committee. Siarhiej Kaliakin believes that the decision of the Ministry of Justice is logical but underscores that it does not mean the end of party hardships.

ECONOMICS

Residents of Free Economic Areas Will Enjoy Special Legal Regime

The residents of Belarusian Special economic areas will enjoy additional discounts, while implementing their investment projects.

The President of Belarus has signed an ordinance, introducing changes and amendments to several legal regulations on the activity of Free Economic Areas, the BelTA News Agency reports.

In particular, the residents of the areas will have the guaranteed special taxation regime for 7 years. Moreover, they will enjoy the discounted rates for renting ground areas, aimed at implementing their investment projects. In addition, the residents of Free Economic Areas will be exempted from the real estate tax and the taxes for buying automobile transport facilities. Moreover, the state will facilitate funding the construction and development of infrastructure objects in the Free Economic Areas. The ordinance will come into force on April 1, 2008.

Belarus Losing Millions of USD

The economic losses of Belarus in connection with the running protest strike of Polish customs officers and the consequent cargo standstill at the Polish-Belarusian border have mounted to dozens of millions of USD, the "Interfax" News Agency informs.

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have mounted to dozens of millions of USD, the "Interfax" News Agency informs. Siarhei Niahrey, the Head of Foreign Economic Activity Department at the Ministry of Transport of Belarus has stressed that no less than 3,000 cars are waiting for a possibility to cross the border on the Polish side. The standstill of one truck at the border costs USD 300 to the cargo carrier.

No less than 300 Belarusian cargo transporting companies are suffering from the Polish customs officers' strike.

SOCIETY

The Institute of National Memory to Be Founded in Belarus

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The organizational committee on founding the Institute of National Memory Non-governmental Association has been created in Miensk. Such Belarusian intellectuals as a People's writer of Belarus Ryhor Baradulin, an academician Radzim Haretski, a historian Ihar Kuzniatsou, an academician Hienadz Lych have entered the organizational committee, the "Belarusian News" Web-portal (www.naviny.by) reports. The Institute will aim at composing a list of damages, caused to the Belarusian people, its culture and language by different occupational regimes.

Only One in Four Pregnancies without Complications

103 425 Belarusians were Born in 2007.

However, according to the Ministry of Health, only one in four pregnancies (26%, to be exact) runs without complications. The main

reason for the unfavourable situation is women's neglect for their health in the course of pregnancy. The doctors underscore that the culture of pregnancy remains low in our country as women are often unaware of what is not allowed to eat and how to behave during the pregnancy. As a result, premature births are frequent as well as foetal malformations and infections.

In 2007 six women died when giving birth, while in 2006 the number was as high as eleven. However, according to the doctors, this figure is the lowest among CIS states. Infant mortality in Belarus is 5,2 per 1000 newborns. It has gone down from 6,2 in the previous year.

CULTURE

Ministry of Information: "Rodny Kraj" Calendar in Belarusian to Be Revived in 2009

The Ministry of Information of the Republic of Belarus resumes publishing the only Belarusian-language calendar ("Native Land"), the BelaPAN news agency reports.

The letter addressed to the Belarusian Language Association from Vice-Minister of Information Ihar Laptionak reads that the calendar was included into the list of socially significant literature and will be published by the state-owned "Belarus" publishing house.

In October 2007 the Belarusian Language Association announced that the Ministry of Information intended to terminate publishing the "Rodny Kraj" calendar. Consequently, the organisation appealed to the authorities requesting to clarify the situation.

It should be mentioned that the only calendar in the Belarusian language "Rodny Kraj" which used to be published since 1990 did not appear at the beginning of this year.



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.

