

Head of Presidential Administration Promises to Take “Positive Steps” in the Media Market

A Judge Asked for Asylum in Poland

Alaksiej Karol Has Got a “Journalist Oscar”

The National Bank Has Forbidden to Buy Currency

Alaksandar Milinkevich: “The Search in Our Office Is a Grave Political Provocation”

About Half a Thousand Commercial Stalls Will Be Taken off the Streets in Miensk before December 10

The 11th Miensk Forum which was held on November 13 to 15, 2008, acknowledged some shifts in the relations between Belarus and the European Union. For the first time ever a Head of Presidential Administration took part in this event, and for the first time ever representatives of authorities promised to make efforts to bring the internal political situation in Belarus nearer to European standards. A

short “historic” conversation between Uladzimir Makiej, Head of Presidential Administration, and Alaksandar Milinkievich, a former presidential candidate from opposition happened at the Forum in an informal setting. To this day there was no communication at this level between authorities and opposition.

All-round ambiance of the Forum and its accompanying events create certain prerequisites for developing a

limited cooperation between Belarus and the European Union.

“The 11th Miensk Forum differs from the preceding ones, among other things, by the composition and the level of participants, and it displays new, first steps of Belarus and the European Union in the direction of normalizing their relations”, told Reiner Lindner, a German political analyst, the Chairman of Miensk Forum. He also believes that Belarus became a subject matter in an integration competition between the European Union and Belarus. That is why the situation which is being formed around it, and also Miensk Forum which was just held, provoke a genuine interest.

Frank-Walter Steinmeier, German Foreign Minister, says in his welcoming address to the Forum’s participants: “Germany, along with the European Union, figures out how to include Belarus, in a pragmatic and speedy fashion, in some areas of the European Neighbourhood Policy, namely energy, transport, and transport.” It is telling that nobody ever spoke at the Forum about Siarhiej Martynau, Belarusian Foreign



photo.bymedia.net

Minister, who was at that time in Geneva with a purpose that remains unknown for many Belarusians. Not a single mass medium ever reported the fact of such a strange absence of the Foreign Minister from the country. It is as likely as not that a rotation of the current head of the Belarusian foreign service is being prepared. There is a rumour that Mr Martynau will be appointed to Brussels as the Ambassador of Belarus.

All observers and experts note an overall softening of mutual rhetoric and a determination to cooperate in a pragmatic fashion. However experts differ in their assessment of willingness of the official Miensk to move in the tideway of the five priority directions specified by Brussels as necessary for development of the dialogue. It is question of absence of political prisoners, guarantees of the freedom of expression and the freedom of mass media, reform of the Belarusian election legislation, non-regression of conditions of functioning of NGOs, and guarantees of the freedom of assembly.

In its turn, the Belarusian party is more disposed to renounce the practice of criminal punishment for expressing political opinions, to remove from the decision-taking process those persons who were accessorial to political persecutions, to implement

some economic liberalization, to soften anti-Western rhetoric in propaganda, to make very cautious steps in respect of the freedom of speech and assembly. Also, Belarus counts on some support by the European Union in what regards a certain independence from Russia in making foreign policy decisions.

Belarus calls the European Union to decide on the status of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement which was signed by the parties in 1995 but never came into force.

Representatives of the authorities insist that the parties have a mutual interest in cooperation, and that it precludes putting forward any preconditions towards Belarus to continue the dialogue.

It is worth noting that Russia is also ready to make certain steps to normalize relations between Belarus and the European Union so that the support of its foreign policy initiatives by Belarus becomes more ponderable. Notably, a meeting between Terry Davis, Secretary General of the Council of Europe, and Sergei Lavrov, Russian Foreign Minister was held in Moscow on November 12, 2008, at which prospects of restoring Belarus' status in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe were discussed.

Representatives of the official Miensk stress that Belarus is not ready

to renounce its strategic partnership with Russia for the sake of improving its relations with the European Union. It was said, in particular, by Andrej Jaroshkin, Deputy Head of the Directorate of Foreign Policy Analysis of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, who participated in the Forum.

An important event was the signing on November 14 of an agreement between Russia and Belarus on extending a State credit to Belarus. Alongside with that the parties agreed that Belarus will start paying in Russian roubles for Russian oil and gas. On behalf of Russia the agreement was signed by Alexei Kudrin, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, on behalf of Belarus - Andrej Kharkaviec, Minister of Finance.

The credit in the amount of USD 2 billion will be extended at the interest rate of LIBOR+3. The first trench of USD 1 billion was already received, and the second trench of USD 1 billion will be wired before February 28, 2009. Belarus will have a grace period of five years on repayment of the principle balance of debt.

We should note that the credit agreement is signed, for the moment, for USD 1 billion only. The second billion is supposed to be extended after signing in next February a plan

of joint actions in coordinating measures to increase competitive ability of national economies. Probably, the payment in Russian roubles is not the only condition of the Russian party. The other such condition – though put forward a long time ago – is the removal of trade barriers for Russian goods in the Belarusian market.

Along with the settlement of one of the most important issues in the relations between Belarus and Russia two other events should also be mentioned.

Firstly, it regards “revealing of secret” by Alaksandar Lukashenka in his interview to The Wall Street Journal, namely that Belarus is negotiating a purchase of Russian Iskander missile systems. According to official statements of representatives of the Russian military and to other sources Russia does not intend to consider these demands of Belarus before 2011 – 2015, i.e. before Iskanders are not supplied to the Russian Army in a sufficient quantity. Even the consent of Belarus to have a joint air defence system with Russia will not help Belarus to realize its plans. So Lukashenka's “secret” is a way to tickle nerves of the West.

Secondly, on November 14 Alaksandar Lukashenka approved a draft agreement between Belarus and Russia on the joint border control

and the creation of the joint regional air defence system as a background for negotiations. Leanid Malcau, Belarusian Minister of Defence, was empowered to conduct negotiations and sign the agreement.

Putin's threat to abandon the plans to construct "Nord Stream" gas pipeline was received with great hopes in Miensk. Experts call attention to the fact that BTS-2 project is still not approved by the Russian government and is most likely to be delayed for an uncertain period of time. Therefore, Belarus keeps its role in transit flows of Russian raw materials, and it strengthens its positions in negotiations with Russia on energy prices in particular and in the bilateral dialogue in general.



OFFICIALLY

Head of Presidential Administration Promises to Take "Positive Steps" in the Media Market

During the opening ceremony of the 11th Miensk Forum on November 13, 2008, Uladzimir Makiej, Head of Presidential Administration noted that certain "positive steps" would be taken

in the Belarusian media market, the Press Service of Belarusian Association of Journalists reports with references to Nasa Niva and naviny.by.

Uladzimir Makiej's welcome word was followed by a speech, delivered by the first Ambassador of Belarus in Germany Piatro Sadouski, Nasa Niva reports. "My question is as simple as ABC. When will we be able to buy Narodnaja Vola at news-stalls?" he asked Mr Makiej, getting a wave of applause from the public.

"Makiej became confused, paused and answered in Belarusian that "positive steps will obligatory come and that they will be related to the situation in the media market as well," Nasa Niva reported.

"Speaking at the opening ceremony of the 11th Miensk Forum on November 13, the Head of Presidential Administration stated that he considered the present opportunity to smooth the relations between Belarus and the European Union and to associate Belarus to pan-European



processes as a "unique moment", naviny.by reports. Answering the questions from participants he promised that the Belarusian authorities would make concrete steps, directed to meeting the EU expectations during the "trial period" till April 2009.

POLITICS

A Judge Asked for Asylum in Poland

Ihar Cishkin, a former chairman of Klimavichy District Court, asked for political asylum in Poland. He explained his decision by a pressure from Belarusian authorities.

According to him, he tried to combat local corrupt officials who were engaged in smuggling alcohol to Russia. Cishkin claims that some special agencies' officers were implicated in these machinations. Ihar Cishkin served as chairman of Klimavichy District Court from 2000 to 2007. He was removed from his office by Belarusian president Lukashenka in summer 2007 for infractions of the law. In fact, some opposition members from Mahilou affirm that Ihar Cishkin tried opponents of the authorities on several occasions.

SOCIETY

Alaksiej Karol Has Got a "Journalist Oscar"

Alaksiej Karol, a Belarusian journalist and editor-in-chief of an independent Novy Chas newspaper, was acknowledged with 2008 Knight International Journalism Award by the International Center for Journalists, according to the press service of the Belarusian Association of Journalists.

The award ceremony was held in Washington, DC on November 12, 2008. The other award recipients are John F. Burns of New York Times and Ugandan reporter Frank Nyakairu.

The Knight Award is a very prestigious one, and after its ten-year history has got the status of a "Journalist Oscar". Winners are nominated by an independent jury which includes journalists of reputable publications and agencies, such as New York



Times, Washington Post, ABC, CBS, Reuters, CNN, and other media.

ECONOMY

The National Bank Has Forbidden to Buy Currency

The National Bank has introduced a ban on the purchase of foreign currency at off-exchange currency market. The decision bears upon operations related to advance payments for import of goods and services.



From now on the banks are not allowed to satisfy residents' requests to purchase foreign currency at off-exchange market for making advance payments for imports. The purchase of currency may be permitted only in case the request is backed by the Council of Ministers of Belarus.

There are no changes in procedure of buying foreign currency at currency's exchange market.

OPPOSITION

Alaksandar Milinkevich: "The Search in Our Office Is a Grave Political Provocation"

Formally a distress, but in practice a search was conducted in the Miensk office of Alaksandar Milinkevich, leader of the organizing committee of the Movement for Freedom in the evening of November 18, 2008. The politician qualifies this action as a provocation of a "hawks" clan of the government, Euroradio reports.

According to Mr Milinkevich, officers of court entered the apartment and started to levy distress on all belongings which were in it. The reason given



for these actions was that a man against whom a criminal case was initiated had lived in this apartment ten years ago. In practice the distress was levied on the belongings of opposition members.

"I see these actions as a grave political provocation. It is coming primarily from those who do not want the amelioration of relations between Belarus and the European Union, the United States, and other democratic countries. These persons do not want to see steps in the direction of liberalizing life in Belarus".

TENDENCIES

About Half a Thousand Commercial Stalls Will Be Taken off the Streets in Miensk before December 10

The city authorities suggest that local dwellers buy cigarettes in "Belasajuzdruk" newsstands instead.

Miensk City Executive Committee plans to take off the streets all the stalls before the winter ends. Now they are actively removed in the Kastychnicki district of the capital. In their windows the stalls posted orders which they had received from the local administrations: to get away before December 10.



"The stalls will be replaced by sheds. There will be no commercial stalls in the city at all, apart from "Belasajuzdruk" newsstands", Euroradio was "reassured" in the Office of Commerce and Services of the Administration of the Kastychnicki district.



CENTRUM STOSUNKÓW MIĘDZYNARODOWYCH
CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS



EUROPEAN RADIO FOR BELARUS



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.