

Lukashenka's Regime
Feels Reluctant to Integrate
Belarus into the EU

Ministry of Information Will
Not Register On-line Resources
as Mass Media

Zmitsier Khvedaruk to Be
Operated in the Army

Sidorski Urged the
Government to Stir up the
Privatization Process

Key Issues of Journalists
Activities in Belarus Remain
Unsolved, BAJ Leader States

The Year of Russian Culture in
Belarus to Be Started in the
Opera and Ballet Theatre on
April 15, 2009



photo.bymedia.net

The first meeting of the Public Advisory Council at the Belarus' Presidential Office was held in Miensk on February 6, 2009. Uladzimir Makey, the Presidential Office Head presided at the session. According to the top official, the Belarus' authorities are interested in learning different, even completely opposite opinions, on a variety of urgent issues.

A number of independent experts and public figures, including some democratic opposition activists were included into the Council, apart from the official side representatives.

In particular, an economist Leanid Zaika, the Honorary Chairman of Belarusian Union of Entrepreneurs Alaksandar Patupa, the Honorary Head of the United Civil Party of Belarus Stanislau Bahdankievich, the Belarusian Language Society Chairman Aleh Trusau, the Belarusian Helsinki Committee Head Aleh Hulak, the leader of Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions Alaksandar Yarashuk, and a political analyst and a media expert Piotra Martsau took part in the first meeting of the Council.

The leadership of the United Democratic Forces (UDF) hasn't reached a common opinion as for the new advisory body so far. On the one hand, the BPF Party leadership objects to participation in the Council on principle, regarding it as a game by the rules of the regime in power. On the other hand, the Head of the United Civil Party of Belarus Anatol Lyabedzka doesn't exclude that the Public Advisory Council may be used for promoting the UDF ideas and principles.

Visiting the town of Lida (Hrodna region) on February 10, 2009, Alaksandar Lukashenka commented quite neglectfully upon participation

of opposition activists in the Council. Among other, he stated that the democrats hadn't expressed any new ideas during the first meeting. Also, Lukashenka warned the opposition activists against "screaming and promoting dirty ideas" in the Council.

An independent political analyst Alaksandar Klaskouski noted that "it was pretty clear from the very beginning that the quasi-body wouldn't have any real authority. The President's words can be treated as a signal to the "executive vertical" representatives. Lukashenka remembers the perestroika experience during Gorbachev's presidency, when the state officials were thrown into disarray that facilitated the process going further than the perestroika initiators had planned. Therefore, he is warning the state officers now that nothing is changing. He is hinting that the façade is being painted for the EU. However, no real political alternatives are being created in the country."

Surprisingly, even such artificial efforts on the part of Belarusian governmental authorities are highly welcomed in the EU. Reportedly, *Benita Ferrero-Waldner*, the EU Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighbourhood Policy is going to pay a visit to Belarus in March 2009. Also, the Belarus' Minister of Foreign Affairs *Siarhei Martynau* visited Berlin on February 10-12, 2009.

He held negotiations with the Vice-Chancellor and the Foreign Minister of Germany *Frank-Walter Steinmeier*. It should be mentioned it was the first bilateral contact at such a high governmental level for 14 years.

The visit was dedicated to the development of bilateral relations as well as the relations between Belarus and the European Union.

Mr. *Steinmeier* underscored that "implementation of further democratic reforms remained to be a prerequisite for starting a new process in relations between Belarus and the European Union as well as for lifting the sanctions."

At the same time, a part of Belarusian opposition believes that any dialogue with the regime that carries on repressions is immoral. Thus, former political prisoners *Alaksandar Kazulin*, *Andrei Kim* and *Siarhei Parsiukievich* in connection with detention of private entrepreneurs and former political prisoners from *Vaukavysk* *Mikalay Autukhovich*, *Yury Lavonau* as well as *Uladzimier Asipienka* by the "Almaz" riot police group on February 10, 2009.

The statement authors have expressed a warning that the state authorities decided to make the opposition responsible without any good reason for the blast with numerous wounded people in *Miensk* on July 4, 2008.

"The arrest is ribaldry in relation to the EU official structures and a bright manifestation of the so-called "liberalization", the statement authors emphasized.

The former political prisoners emphasized that 14 young democratic activists, who had taken part in the private entrepreneurs' protest actions in the winter of 2008, were still under criminal prosecution. Also, the former political prisoners underscored that their civil rights were still restricted.

The Belarusian Association of Journalists drew the public attention to a number of rigid articles in the newly-adopted Belarus' Law "On Mass Media" that contradict the existing international standards in the field. (The legal act came into force on February 8, 2009.)

Although the state authorities returned two disgraced periodical editions to the state monopolist press distribution system and promised to avoid registration of on-line media, a range of newspapers still appears to be outside the "Belposhta" subscription and "Belsayuzdruk" retail sales systems. Also, the non-state press is still suffering from the economic discrimination and the highly complicated access to information.

Independent experts note that although certain shifts towards liberalization are taking place in the economy under the impact of the present-day crisis, the political and media fields remain to be highly pressurized by the regime in power as before.

As far as the economy is concerned, the results of January 2009 appeared to be quite deplorable. The monthly inflation rate of 4.1% appeared to be the largest for 6 recent years.

Although Lukashenka promised during his visit to *Lida* on January 10, 2009 that the Belarusian ruble wouldn't be dropped down again, the people feel afraid of a new abrupt devaluation to crown the crawling devaluation, taking place nowadays. Consequently, USD appears to be in high demand.

The gold and monetary reserves of Belarus have reduced to USD 2.9 billion, the National Bank reports.



The privatization of state enterprises can be a significant source of income for the state budget, the government neglected before. The Prime-Minister of Belarus Siarhey Sidorski urged the government to hold system work on turning the state enterprises into joint-stock companies and sell the shares, owned by the Belarusian state.

However, independent experts believe that the government is late with privatization, as the assets should have been sold before the crises, when they cost most of all. Moreover, even the governmental officials admit that the existing Belarus' Law "On Privatization" is anachronistic.

POLITICS

Lukashenka's Regime Feels Reluctant to Integrate Belarus into the EU

Belarus is not planning to enter the European Union in the foreseeable future, the Belarus' Minister of Foreign Affairs Siarhey Martynau noted during his recent talks with three EU top officials, the BelTA News Agency reports.



However, the Minister confirmed that the Belarus' government treated positively the Eastern Partnership strategy, promoted by the EU. However, he emphasized that all components of multilateral cooperation in the region have to be elaborated and implemented on the basis of equality.

OFFICIALLY

Ministry of Information Will Not Register On-line Resources as Mass Media

Ministry of Information of Belarus does not intend to register Internet resources as mass media, Deputy Minister Lilija Ananich told on February 6.

According to her, such registration is not legally regulated, and there is no definition for Internet resources. The law on mass media which comes into effect on February 8 does not regulate conditions of registration and distribution of such mass media.

In Deputy Minister's subjective opinion, on-line media already exist in Belarus, but, as she said, there haven't been adopted legislative acts which regulate their activities yet, the [BelaPAN News Agency](#) reports.

OPPOSITION

Zmitsier Khvedaruk to Be Operated in the Army

Youth activist Zmitser Khvedaruk, forcefully drafted into army, will be operated on veins.



On February 11, the "Young Front" activists visited Zmitser Khvedaruk in a military detachment in Zhodzina, Miensk region. The young people were given 20 minutes to talk with Khvedaruk and to pass personal things and newspapers to him.

The oppositionist was told he had varicose veins, so he would likely be operated.

It should be noticed that varicose veins exempt a draftee from military service.

It should be reminded that in late February Zmitser Khvedaruk was detained and conveyed to a military enlistment office, though he was a student of Theological College and had a deterrent. Three days after he took an oath in the military unit in Zhodzina, he was taken to hospital in Barysau.

Zmitser Khvedaruk was beaten up at opposition protest rallies by riot policemen several times. He even got a brain concussion last time.

ECONOMY

Sidorski Urged the Government to Stir up the Privatization Process

The Prime-Minister of Belarus Siarhey Sidorski urged the government to stir up the processes of privatization and turning the state-owned enterprises and organizations of Belarus into joint-stock companies during the recent Council's of Ministers meeting.

Moreover, the head of government requested to introduce system work with the shares of public corporations.

Also, he asked the State Committee on Propriety officers to propose potential investors, including



the residents of Belarus, to the state enterprises, the BelTA News Agency reports.

SOCIETY

Key Issues of Journalists Activities in Belarus Remain Unsolved, BAJ Leader States

The new media law that came into force in Belarus on February 8, 2009 restricts the freedom of media even more than the previous law did. This is the opinion of the Belarusian Association of Journalists expressed by Deputy Chairperson of BAJ Andrei Bastunets at the press conference on February 9, 2009..

There are several provisions of the law that worsen the situation of media outlets in Belarus. For instance, two official warnings about violation of any article of the law can become the grounds for closing down of a media outlet. Besides, an editorial board is responsible even for articles that are reprinted from other media.



“Some interesting and symbolic events are taking place. Returning of Narodnaya Volia and Nasha Niva to state press distribution systems, holding of round table sessions on the topics of Internet and media law, decision not to introduce official regulations for online media and introducing re-registration of media

outlets upon request – all these steps can be regarded as demonstration of movement towards meeting the recommendations of the European Union, the demonstration of the change of the policy of total control over the information field,” the Chairperson of BAJ Zhanna Litvina said.



Still, the key issues of journalistic activities in Belarus remain unsolved, the BAJ leader stated.

“The authorities preserve the monopoly on printed and electronic media, distribution systems and printing facilities. They regard media as a part of administrative mechanism that has to perform propaganda functions,” Zhanna Litvina admitted.

According to Ms.Litvina, BAJ will keep standing up for the key priorities that would indicate real changes of the situation. These priorities include:

- equal economic conditions of activities of media outlets of different types of property;
- access to information and accreditation of foreign correspondents upon request;
- adjusting of Belarusian media laws in accordance with international norms.

Besides, Zhanna Litvina appealed for journalistic solidarity.

“We all need corporate solidarity and mutual understanding ever more now. I ask you to cover the

topics of the freedom of expression in our country as much as it is possible,” the BAJ leader appealed to journalists present at the press conference.

CULTURE

The Year of Russian Culture in Belarus to Be Started in the Opera and Ballet Theatre on April 15, 2009

The Year of Russia in Belarus will be opened on the stage of the reconstructed Opera and Ballet theatre in Miensk on April 15, 2009, the First Deputy Minister of Culture of Belarus Uladzimir Rylatka informed the BelTA News Agency.

The ballet dancers from the State Academic Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow will present “Swan Lake” by Peter Chaykouski on the renewed stage in Miensk.

The year of Russia in Belarus will be continues with numerous concerts of Russian actors and singers. The culmination will take place during “The Slavic Bazaar in Vitsiebsk” in July 2009.

The Year of Russia in Belarus will be followed with the Year of Belarus in Russia in 2010.



EUROPEAN RADIO FOR BELARUS



Polish aid

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.