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**F**inancial and economic situation in Belarus keeps on worsening. At that, independent experts believe that the official statistics colors the truth. An independent economic analyst Alaksandar Chubryk believes that the gross domestic product in Belarus reduced approximately by 5% in January 2009, whereas the National Statistic Committee (BelStat) declares it increased by 4.2% within the same period of time. The expert grounded

the calculations in his article, published in the "Nasha Niva" weekly. A. Chubryk noted that the abrupt fall of gross domestic product "put Belarus in one range with troublesome counties of Europe." According to him, the crisis "caused more harm to Belarus than to Russia, Poland or Lithuania." The expert concludes that the national economy is falling down rapidly. Consequently, he forecasts the appearance of further needs of cutting down the budget expenses and devaluing the Belarusian ruble. It should be noted that a crawling devaluation is taking place this way or another at present. After the shocking 20.5% collapse at the very beginning of 2009, the Belarusian ruble has lost more around 8% more in relation to USD.

The President Lukashenka had to admit in public not long ago that the industrial lobby was insisting on additional devaluation of Belarusian ruble by 20% more. The First Vice-Premier of Belarus Uladzimir Siamashka stated on February 20, 2009 that "moderate and well-considered devaluation of the national currency" would be helpful for the national market defense as well as for stirring up the export." Firstly, he meant the necessity of improving the competitiveness of Belarusian production in the Russian market, as the Russian ruble kept on falling quicker than Br. The crisis led to the shrinkage of trade turnover between Belarus and Russia by 40-50% in January 2009 in comparison with the same period of time in the year of 2008, the First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus Ihar Pietryshenka stated



on February 25, 2009. The stocks of finished products are increasing at the storehouses of industrial enterprises. Some of them have to introduce shorter working weeks. Others send workers to leaves without payments. The danger of unemployment is increasing as well.

The growth of crisis phenomena can cause the rise of social tension in the country. The common living standards are noticeably falling down. The growth of consumer prices in Belarus totaled 4.1% in January 2009. (It was the worst indicator among all post-Soviet states then.) At the same time, the payroll dropped down. According to the BelStat, the average wages shrank from 1,000.2 thousand Br in December 2008 to 919.6 thousand Belarusian rubles in January 2009, i.e. by 8.1%. However, the fall of salaries in the USD equivalent by 26.7% from USD 450 to USD 330 appeared to be absolutely stunning indeed.

Independent observers note that Lukashenka's promises to increase salaries to USD 700 in equivalent till 2010 have turned into a fiasco. According to a well-known Belarusian economist Leanid Zaika, just on the contrary, the Belarusians will face further reduction of living standards by around 30% in the near future. It is expected that the economic recession will last till 2012.

The rigid economic realities are compelling the Belarusian political leadership to normalize relations with the West. In particular, the Belarusian

governmental officials treat positively a new EU program of Eastern Partnership. However, the Belarusian officials underscore that they would like to integrate with the united Europe on its own conditions, i.e. disregarding the problems of democracy and human rights.

At that, situation with human rights in Belarus was very poor in 2008. This conclusion could be found in the annual report on human rights, prepared by the US Department of State and presented a couple of days ago. It is noted in the document that the Belarusian state authorities "continued to abuse seriously their power every now and then." In particular, they restricted civil rights and liberties, including the freedom of press, the freedom of speech, the freedom of meetings, the freedom of associations, and the freedom of religion. It was stressed that "the citizens' right to change the government was considerably limited" as well. Also, it was noted that the state authorities continued persecuting the citizens, who dared criticize the regime in power and its vicious policies.

The opposition activists state that the situation in the political field has hardly improved. Just on the contrary, a new wave of repressive actions against



political opponents could be seen during the recent weeks. The Belarusian democratic opposition representatives consider the recently arrested private entrepreneurs Yury Lavonau, Mikalay Autukhovich and Uladzimir Asipienka from Vaukavysk (Hrodna region), officially charged with a far-fetched criminal offense, as well as a youth activist Artsiom Dubski to be new political prisoners in the country.

Consequently, a significant part of opposition in Belarus criticized the EU Council's Secretary General Javier Solana for his visit to Belarus on February 19, 2009. The present-day EU policies on Belarus are often regarded by democratic activists in the country as non-transparent, short-sighted and even immoral.

A number of oppositional politicians held a briefing in Miensk on February 24, 2009. They expressed their deep concern in connection with the possible inclusion of Belarus into the Eastern Partnership program, even if the EU demands on democratization are not satisfied by the regime in power. The concern was supported by the Political Board of the United Democratic Forces of Belarus on February 26, 2009. Among other, it was stated that the membership of Belarus in the Eastern Partnership program can be supported only in case the Belarusian state authorities meet the corresponding conditions.

Reportedly, J. Solana's spokeswoman Cristina Gallach stressed the same idea during a meeting with journalists in Brussels on February 24, 2009. In particular, she noted that the Belarusian government has to honor human rights, hold a constant dialogue with the opposition and guarantee the press freedom in the country.

The EU Commissioner for Foreign Relations and Neighborhood Policy Benita Ferrero-Waldner is going to pay an official visit to Belarus on March 12-13, 2009. She underscored the importance of this trip and noted that if the progress of Belarus in the field of democratization is confirmed during her visit, the country may be included in the Eastern Partnership program.

It means that hypothetically A. Lukashenka may be invited to participate in the constituent summit on the program to take place in Prague on May 7, 2009.

## POLITICS

### Lukashenka Ordered the Construction Business Structures to Sell All Ready-Built Apartments Immediately



*"If the businessmen fail to sell the ready-built apartments, we will seize them and sell to the people in need," stated A. Lukashenka during his visit to Miensk Motor Plant in Miensk on February 24, 2009.*

"I see that the finished blocks of flats are not commissioned," noted the President. The Head of State promised to confiscate the ready-built apartments, if they are not sold by developers within a months' term, the "BelaPAN" News Agency reports.

BelaPAN

## OFFICIALLY

### The Commodity Turnover between Belarus and Russia Shrunk by 50%



*At the beginning of 2009 the turnover between Belarus and Russia dropped by 40-50% as compared to the same period of 2008.*

The information was presented by the First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Ihar Petryshenka.

"Unfortunately, summing up the results of January, the turnover with Russia has dropped by 40-50% as compared to January-February last year, due to

objective causes and some internal reasons," Ihar Petryshenka noted.

Speaking about the state of trade and economic relations with the European Union, the First Deputy Minister noted that in the conditions of the economic crisis "everyone is trying to defend one's economy". "We are taking steps to minimize the consequences of the crisis," Petryshenka said. "There is no country in the world today which is not affected by the global economic and financial crises. It is particularly felt in our country with its export-oriented economy," he added.

## OPPOSITION

### Ivan Shyla Threatened with the Disciplinary Battalion in the Army



*Commanding officers of the military unit began putting pressure on Ivan Shyla, Youth Front's activist who had been drafted to the army by force, Uladzimir Shyla, father of the youth activist told to Radio Liberty.*

"Firstly, he is accused of being a faker, because he is frequently sick. Secondly, he is blamed for reading such "provocative" publications as Nasa Niva newspaper and Arche magazine. And private conversations that Ivan has with his comrades-in-arms they called "political activities" and have even started to threaten

him with the disciplinary battalion. Something like, he is engaged in political activities, and it is illegal, and we will do something about it”, he says.

Ivan Shyla was examined at a hospital in Lepel, because he complains of backache and throat diseases that he also had well before draft. This is why the most part of his military service Ivan spent in the medical unit.

Today, preliminary hearings in the case of appeal against the decision of the draft commission which had authorized Ivan Shyla's draft without a medical examination will be held in the court of Salihorsk. According to Uladzimir Shyla, commanding officers of the military unit keep this information in secret from Ivan.

*Radio Liberty*

## ECONOMY

### The Prices Hike in Belarus Appeared to Be the Highest among the Post-Soviet States



*The advance of consumer prices in Belarus appeared to be the highest among the former USSR states in January 2009.*

In particular, the prices for food and

commodities in our country increased by 4.1%, BelaPAN reports.

Ukraine holds the 2nd position on the list. The prices advanced by 2.9% there. Lithuania and Russia hold the 3rd and the 4th positions on the list correspondingly. However, the level of consumer prices in Azerbaijan, Estonia and Moldova has slightly decreased within the same period of time.

*BelaPAN*

## SOCIETY

### “ARCHE” #7-8 (2008) Declared to Be “Extremist”

*The Maskouski City District Court of Brest declared “ARCHE. Pachatak” #7-8 (2008) contained a range of “extremist materials, liable to destruction”.*

Thus, the court satisfied a claim, submitted by the KGB Department for Brest region some time ago. The court hearings were closed to the public and last for one hour only (from 9.30 a.m. till 10.30 a.m.). The judge announced the verdict at 11.45 a.m., the Monitoring Service of Belarusian Association of Journalists reports. The judge Tatsiana Miraniuk (Deputy Chair of Maskouski City District of Brest) regarded the case. She announced before the beginning of the court session that the trial would be held in the private mode. Consequently, the KGB representative and an attorney Pavel Sapielka, who represented the defendant's interests were only permitted

to take part in the judicial sitting. It is worth mentioning that even the “ARCHE” founder Andrei Dynko was not permitted to enter the court room.

Pavel Sapielka is convinced the court verdict is “illegal, ungrounded and subject to cancellation.” As soon as the defendant gets the official motivation of the verdict, it will be contested in Brest Regional Court. “Everything remains intact until the verdict comes into legal force. As soon as it becomes effective, all copies from the print-run will be treated as extremist and liable to seizure if found, in accordance with the Belarus’ Law On Counteraction to Extremism,” Mr. Sapielka noted in his interview to the BAJ Press Service.

Valer Bulhakau, the “ARCHE” Editor-in-chief is also convinced that all the charges are absolutely ungrounded. “It is hard to find proper words in order to comment upon the decision. The magazine issue didn't contain any calls to commit violent actions or undermine the political system. The magazine issue was printed on 1,100 pages. It is around 3 million symbols. The claimants took four phrases that can be rather treated as philosophic arguments out of this immense amount of texts... The situation is absurd. Actually, it looks like the KGB is persecuting dissent in the same way it used to be during the Soviet times,” Valer Bulhakau said.

It should be reminded that an “ARCHE” author Ales Pashkievich was going by train to Poland via Brest on October 24, 2008. During a customs check 10 copies of “ARCHE” #7-8 magazine were seized from him. A customs officer Renata Niadbayeva considered the information, contained in the magazine, to be “dangerous for the national interests of Belarus.”

Then, the copies of “ARCHE” were seized from their owner for “legal examination”.

Consequently, the KGB Department for Brest region demanded to recognize the seized copies of “ARCHE” as “extremist materials, liable to destruction,” according to the Belarus’ legislation.

“The analysis results showed that the magazine contained information that defamed the activity, implemented by the Belarus’ governmental authorities and public administration bodies, reinforced social and political tension and confrontation in the society, encouraged carrying out the actions, directed to arrangement and putting into life mass riots and, consequently, jeopardized the national security of the Republic of Belarus,” colonel L. Dedkov, the Head of KGB Department for Brest region stated in the claim, submitted to court on December 30, 2008.

According to the claim, such information is contained in four articles, published in “ARCHE” No.7–8, including:

- “The Parliamentary Election: the Belarusian Depression, the European Intrigue” article by V. Silitski;
- “A Blast and a Round-up: Mini-Oswiecim in Belarus. A Round Table Discussion in the „ARCHE“ Editorial” publication;
- “Miensk Maneuvers. Lukashenka Makes Use of Elections to Get Levers in Negotiations with the EU” article by B. Jarabik and A. Rabalatti;
- “The Victims’ Memory and the Executioners’ Memory” publication by A. Rasinski (“Katyn” film review).

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## CULTURE

## A Young Belarusian to Represent Norway at “Eurovision”



*Alaksandr Rybak, a 22-year-old Belarusian by origin, permanently residing in Norway, will represent the country at the “Eurovision” contest this year.*

The young singer came to Norway together with his parents, when he was 4 years old. Majoring in musical studies, he cooperated with the “A-ha” musicians and took part in the “Kjempejansen” star factory program for young singers with the “Foolin” song, created by himself. A.Rybak was honored with a prestigious “Anders Jahres Culture Prize” in 2004. Presently, he is taking part in theatrical performances and starring in a film about the Gypsy to be released this summer.

More than 700,000 Norwegians supported A. Rybak with their SMS messages during the qualifying round. A Norwegian pop-star Tone Damli Aaberge held the second position with around 120,000 votes.

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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.