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Three themes were among the most discussed in the Belarusian media and political circles last week: the 91st anniversary of declaration of Belarusian People’s Republic (BPR), Lukashenka’s meeting with Medvedev, Putin, and the leader of Abkhazia S. Bagapsh in Sochi, as well as a foreign exchange deal with China in the amount of USD 2.8 billion.

The declaration of Belarusian People’s Republic, roundly known as the Freedom Day is annually celebrated by the Belarusian democratic forces on March 25th in the independent Belarus. The Belarusian

Popular Front and other opposition parties, NGOs and civil initiatives arrange rallies and other actions and events on this day. The attitude of official authorities towards the opposition actions, dedicated to the Freedom Day always depend on the number of their participants and the dictator’s mood.

Several thousand people gathered near the National Academy of Sciences this time. The mass action in the city center of Minsk was held in quite a peculiar period of time, as the incumbent regime continued its dialogue with the European Union and Belarus was invited to take part in the “Eastern Partnership” program, initiated by the EU. Moreover, there were carried on talks and expectations, regarding Lukashenka’s eventual visit to Prague, where the EU countries’ summit with the participation of top officials from six countries included in the “Eastern Partnership” program would be held. These pre-requisites made it possible to surmise that the regime would abstain from dissolving the mass public action participants and mass arrests on the Freedom Day. There were observed several preventive detentions of democratic activists in the regions only.

A truly mass celebration didn’t take place on the Freedom Day this year, as the opposition forces appeared to be quite disunited and suffering from irreconcilable disagreements among their leaders.

It should be emphasized that Alaksandar Milinkievich, an ex-candidate to presidency and the leader of

“Za Svabodu” civil movement didn't enter the organizing committee on arranging the Freedom Day celebration on March 25, 2009. He attended the meeting though. However, the celebration participants didn't pay special attention to his presence during the event.

As for the other ex-candidate to presidency and a former political prisoner Alaksandar Kazulin, he had a meeting with the Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs Karel Schwarzenberg in Prague on March 25, 2009. The politicians were discussing the “Eastern Partnership” program and Lukashenka's eventual visit to the summit in the Czech capital on May 7, 2009. Kazulin believes the Belarusian dictator shouldn't be invited to the summit anyway.

In the presence of numerous observers from diplomatic representations and international institutions, the Freedom Day celebrations in Minsk ended without any special incidents.

The head of state returned to the Belarusian capital from Sochi after a five-day visit to Russia. Among other, Lukashenka had a chance to communicate with Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Cyril in Sochi. According to official reports, Lukashenka was on holidays in the south of Russia, holding important negotiations on the Belarus-Russian bilateral relations all the time. Among other, there was discussed a delay with admitting independence of two Russian protectorates – Abkhazia and South Ossetia by the Belarusian government. The Kremlin has started expressing its nervousness on the matter more openly. Lukashenka is hastened to take the step. This very topic was domineering during Lukashenka's talks with the political leader of Abkhazia S. Bagapsh. There exist

some grounds to surmise Belarus will acknowledge legally the independence of Abkhazia, following the Russian Federation, in the near future. It should be emphasized that Lukashenka's regime has been developing the trade and economic relations with Abkhazia since long ago.

The Russian governmental officials do not hide their deep concern with the invitation of Belarus to the “Eastern Partnership” program, despite a number of statements, delivered by Western politicians about the existence of a mere proposal for cooperation within the program at the present moment.

In case Lukashenka admits the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, he will restrict himself considerably in the “Eastern Partnership” program, as all the other program participants will continue treating these territories as integral parts of Georgia. By the way, Georgia has been invited to take part in the program as well and it should be stressed that the territorial integrity of Georgia is decisively supported by the EU and the United States. Therefore, most probably, the EU will maintain relations with Belarus within the program on the technical level only. Independent experts believe that the time for Lukashenka's successful maneuvering between the EU and Russia can't be everlasting and must come to an end soon. Perhaps, it will take place as soon as full-scale consequences of the global financial and economic crisis appear in Belarus. There exist good reasons to believe that a feeling of anxiety for the consequences of the growing severe crisis in the economy of Belarus that will undoubtedly lead to considerable social and political tension in the country, have made the Belarusian president spend five highly complicated days in Russia.

Hopefully, Lukashenka will reveal the real contents of his talks with Medvedev and Putin in Sochi in his highly expressive public speeches. Quite a few politicians in Europe may treat these eye-openers as pure sensations.

The news about a swap agreement between the National Bank of Belarus and the National Bank of China became a real sensation last week. Belarus will receive 20 billion CNY in return to 8 trillion Br. (The sums equal approximately USD 2.8 billion.) The official sides promise to use the resources in the mutual trade. Commenting upon the deal, Piotra Prakapovich, the Head of the National Bank of Belarus underlined that thus both countries were avoiding the use of USD in mutual accounts. However, it should be noted that the mentioned swap agreement with China is scheduled for three years with a possibility of extension. In other words, it will be legitimate for the partners to “close the account” and demand the unspent surplus back in 2012. It is impossible to forecast the remaining sum nowadays. However, as a positive moment, it should be noted the Belarusian exporters won't be obliged to sell the proceeds from sales in the foreign currency, received from China. Commenting upon the swap agreement some experts drew their attention to its even more sensational contents. It appeared that no swap agreements had been signed. The Belarusian and Chinese governmental officials signed some memorandum about the political readiness of sides to make the treaty. The National Bank of Belarus will have to elaborate and sign a credit agreement, stipulating all the details of this deal, including the rates, the dates of mutual transfers, the purpose of use etc. in order to get 20 billion CNY. Apparently, the financial agreement will be precisely reconciled by the parties during several months in a row.

OFFICIALLY

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus Stands against Prohibition of Importation of Commodities



Belarus shouldn't struggle purposefully with import of commodities. It has to make more active use of the permitted measures of domestic market defense, roundly accepted in the international trading relations. This statement has been delivered by Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus Andrey Yeudachenka..

The governmental official emphasized that it is necessary to struggle against the unfair import, implemented under wrong economic terms and according to the deviated schemes that undermine competition in the country though.

The governmental official stressed that it was necessary to avoid taking the system of measures, which

contradict the generally accepted rules of international trade. A. Yeudachenka is convinced that Belarusian enterprises are not using sufficiently the anti-dumping, compensatory and special defending measures, applied in the international trading relations.

Interfax

POLITICS

"Gasprom" May Reduce the Gas Price for Belarus

Belarus continues negotiations with "Gasprom" corporation and the Russian government as for the return to the rate of USD 148 per 1,000 of cubic meters of gas, imported to Belarus till September 2009 and to hold re-pricing at the end of the year.

The Belarusian side forecasts the gas price in the amount of USD 90 per 1,000 of cubic meters in the fourth quarter of 2009. Belarus motivates its proposal with the harsh consequences of the financial crisis. Independent experts surmise that the Russian side will have to support the ally in the present critical realities in order to be on a safe side with the gas supply to Europe.

"Kommersant"

SOCIETY

Public Council on Morality to Be Founded in Belarus



An idea on establishing the Public Council on Morality was articulated at the Synod meeting of the Belarusian Orthodox Church..

Reportedly, the candidates for membership in the Council are selected nowadays. They will include public figures, cultural workers, people of Art and scholars.

The Belarusian Orthodox priests believe it is high time to monitor and get rid of manifestations of cruelty, violence and vulgarity in the media. It is expected the Public Council will take advisory decisions only.

Charter'97

OPPOSITION

Milinkievich Considers the Opposition to Be Marginal

The leader of "Za Svabodu" civil movement has delivered a number of arguable statements.

Alaksandar Milinkievich noted during his press conference in Miensk on March 25, 2009 that the Belarusian opposition didn't participate in the negotiations between the Belarusian official authorities and the EU structures' representatives, because of its marginality.

"We've become less influential in the society," Milinkievich emphasized. He addressed to the democratic opposition leaders with a request to start solving the problem of their weak influence on the



Belarusian society instead of expressing indignance at the lack of invitation to participate in a kind of a dialogue between the EU structures and the Belarusian government.

Also, Alaksandar Milinkievich believes

that there are no political prisoners in Belarus at the present moment. "In my opinion, it is possible to name a person a political prisoner if a court verdict is taken and if human rights activists and international advocacy organizations state it is a political prisoner," A. Milinkievich stated.

"Interfax"

ECONOMY

Banks Give Credits for Building Real Estates at 26% of Interest per Annum as Before



The building (construction) of real estate in Belarus is credited by five out of 31 banks, existing in Belarus. At that, on the one hand, three banks – "Belarusbank", "BPS-bank", and "Belinvestbank" give credits in Belarusian rubles only and on the other

hand, two other banks – "Belrosbank" and "Priorbank" give credits in EUR and USD only.

Interest rates on credits for building real estates have stabilized recently, *Infobank.by* informs. It is possible to get such credits at 25-26% of interest per annum in Belarusian rubles and at 17% of interest per annum in EUR and USD.

Practically all experts note that the terms for getting credits are getting much tougher. "It is necessary to earn much more today in order to get a credit for building real estate nowadays," *Infobank.by* authors emphasize.

CULTURE

Tsesler's Painting "Generation P" Removed by Censors from Exhibition in Miensk

After a denunciatory article in an official newspaper, a painting of the famous artist was removed from an exhibition.

Vladimir Tsesler, Syarhei Kirushchanka, Ruslan Vashkevich agreed to offer their paintings for "Grapheme" exhibition. There is no need to present them to public either in Belarus or in Europe. A young curator Krystsina Stashkevich collected 10 projects. Almost each of them was a diptych or a triptych, *"Komsomolskaya Pravda in Belarus"* informs.

"The idea of "Grapheme" was to show in one exposition different works devoted to a text," Krystsina

Stashkevich explains. “In every of the works a text is present to some extent, as an idea or as a graphic treatment, or as a part of the concept. In fact all works had been displayed earlier in the framework of different projects”.

The exhibition opened in Yanka Kupala Literary Museum, which is recently rather successful in finding its way to the hearts and minds of young people. Besides, a high-ranking official from the Culture Ministry was present at the opening of the exhibition.

In a week an article was published in one of the national state newspapers. The artists were called scandalous art-hooligans and provocateurs, and even a question was risen whether conceptual art is permissible inside the Literary Museum with half a century long traditions, *Charter'97* reports.

As a result, the museum had to hide all the works mentioned in the article: the painting of nude fire fighter by Mikhail Hulin from his large project “Children’s demonology” about childhood fears of his generation; two works by Ruslan Vashkevich and one work by Uladimir Tsesler. It was the work where the artist interpreted the “Generation P” novel by Pelevin.



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://www.belarus-live.eu) fills this gap. The site allows to order weekly reception of news in English, Polish, Belarusian, Russian.

