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Last week two events happened on the same day that attracted attention of Belarusians to the maximum extent: inauguration of Barack Obama, 44th president of the United States, and a meeting of presidents of Belarus and Ukraine in Charnihau after the gas war between Moscow and Kyiv.

Belarusian – American relations which were destroyed in many fields in recent years should have

certainly provoked interest to the new US president and his foreign policy. And if the governing class in Belarus remains in cautious expectation of the future foreign policy of Washington, hoping that the notorious pragmatism will prevail, opponents of Lukashenka's regime hope that Belarus, with its problems in the fields of democracy and human rights, will not be forgotten. The so-called dialogue between the regime and the West is conducted mostly in German, the language which Uladzimir Makiej, Head of the Presidential Administration and a career diplomat, has a perfect command of. The Belarusian party managed, after all, to persuade many of its interlocutors into pragmatism, which, in their opinion, means the priority of development of trade and economic relations and a de facto oblivion of freedom of speech and human rights' issues. Today there is a bias to such pragmatism, realpolitik, in the dialogue in progress. The Belarusian ruler uses bargaining in prisoners of the regime as one of the elements in his open and secret contacts with Western politicians and diplomats. There is an opinion that he made quite a good exchange for himself: liberation (not an act of pardon or acquittal) of Alaksandar Kazulin and other political prisoners in exchange of suspension of sanctions and his legitimization while maintaining the very institute of political prisoners. The Criminal Code of Belarus has clauses that provide for punishment for dissidence. This experiment was seen as a success, and Minsk wants to do it once again, this time not with Brussels, but with Washington.

According to some reports, Emanuel Zeltser, an American citizen, arrested by KGB, convicted at a closed court session and serving time in one of Belarusian camps, may become a bargaining item in Belarusian-American relations. The American party seeks to obtain his liberation because of his serious illness. There are reasons to believe that Lukashenka may release him. However, the true price of the US citizen's possible liberation remains unknown.

It is widely believed that the Democratic administration is always paying more attention to human rights in its international policy. Notwithstanding the diplomatic war in spring 2008 (ambassador and almost all officials of the American diplomatic mission became persona non grata), Washington abstained from closing down its embassy in Miensk. It indicated by this that Belarus is not indifferent for it. This is why one should expect an appointment of a new US ambassador to Miensk and an increase of the embassy's staff. It is obvious that it will not be a priority issue for Barack Obama's administration. But it seems quite real that the State Department headed by Hillary Clinton will strive to balance the today's prevalence of realpolitik in respect of Belarus by its moralpolitik. A "moment of truth" is expected to come in April in relations between the West and Lukashenka's regime. The six-month moratorium on sanctions against several Belarusian officials and enterprises will expire. Assessment of the conduct of Lukashenka's regime will determine Belarus' position on the West in many respects. Lukashenka himself is prone to see his political future with optimism, especially after the gas war between Moscow and Kyiv. The significance of Belarus as a transit country for Russian gas to Europe has noticeably increased. It

remains unclear at what extent Washington will take it into account in its policy with Miensk.

The meeting of the presidents of Belarus and Ukraine in Charnihau on January 20 has attracted a special attention after the gas war between Moscow and Kyiv. It took place on the following day after signing of a peace

gas agreement for a term of ten years in Moscow by Prime Minister of Ukraine Julia Timoshenko and Prime Minister of Russia Vladimir



Putin. As well as prime ministers, the two presidents in Charnihau also talked face-to-face for some time, thus intriguing all observers, especially those in Moscow. Judging by official statements, the discussion was limited solely to economic questions. So, according to reports of Ukrainian mass media, President Lukashenka pointed out that by now both parties are able to resolve many issues that they were unable to do before. In particular, he reminded about the proposal of the president of Ukraine to make a Black Sea – Baltic Sea corridor and about his willingness to work with Ukraine and Baltic countries "on this issue".

Lukashenka specified that "this issue" means adhesion of Belarus to the project of Odessa – Brody – Plock pipeline, and not only creation of an energy bridge to supply Ukrainian electric energy and a transport corridor to Baltic States. It is known that Odessa – Brody project is regarded in Moscow as anti-Russian – as other project of countries of "Krakow Initiative" are though. According to Belarusian television, Lukashenka thanked Yushchenko for his

support in the dialogue not only with the European Union but with the United States as well. It is interesting that the Ukrainian president will come to Brussels after Charnihau. It would be intriguing to learn what he will say there in support of Lukashenka.

"We are always ready to cooperate in oil, energy, and transport spheres", the Ukrainian president pointed out in Charnihau.

And in the meantime, clearly competing with the Ukrainians, a Russian company Inter RAO UES began supplying electric energy to Belarus in the framework of long-term commercial contracts signed before with Belenergo GPO.

According to Inter RAO UES contracts are signed for five years and make provision for annual supply of up to five billion kWh of electric energy to Belarus. Three billion kWh out of this volume are guaranteed and are supplied according to a schedule and price agreed upon annually, and up to two billion kWh are supplied based on economic expediency of parties and in the regime of daily planning and mutual approval of the schedule of supply.

OFFICIALLY

Authorities Introduce Sanctions against High Prices

Entrepreneurs who exceeded prices may be fined in the amount of up to 80 base rates, up to 30% of their sales revenue may be confiscated, and they may be stripped of their licenses.



Fourteen records of administrative violations were drafted in Miensk during spot inspections of shopping centres and markets in view of groundless rise of products' prices, Mikalaj Kryzhevich, Deputy Head of the Price Policy Department of Miensk City Executive Committee – Head of the State Inspection for Price Control told to a BelTA's correspondent.

All in all, Miensk City Executive Committee's representatives checked more than twenty business entities of the capital during the monitoring which started on January 15. The highest price rise (above the acceptable level) was recorded on fruit and vegetables, mostly by importing companies. For example, oranges have risen by 18.8%. From the beginning of the year a kilo of oats has rose by 11%, frozen fish (not cleaned) by 18%, a pack of black tea by 15%, and instant coffee by 20.6%.

POLITICS

Police Have Not Let Activists of the Union of Poles in Belarus into Their Organization's Premises

Persecution of activists of the Union of Poles in Belarus continues in Belarus.



About 150 to 200 people – supporters of Andzelika Borys, leader of the Union of Poles unrecognized by the Belarusian authorities, - assembled near the premises of the Union of Poles in Horadnia on January, 17. People expressed their resentment of the fact that they are not allowed to the House of Poles built for Polish government's money. The event lasted about one hour and a half, Radio Liberty reports.

Andzelika Borys' supporters assembled near the premises of the Union of Poles in Belarus because she had been invited (for the first time ever, in fact) at a meeting of the official Union of Poles headed by Josef Lucznik, but not in her capacity of a leader of an organization, but as a common citizen. Andzelika Borys refused to take part in a meeting of a pro-authority organization.

SOCIETY

Dwellers of Astraviec District Are Promised a "Different Planet" Together with Nuclear Power Plant

"The power plant is built not to explode, but to work normally", Andrej Rykau, Director of the Republican Unitary Design Enterprise for Scientific Research "BelNIPI Enerhapram" (member of the site-selection committee) told in his interview to Narodnaja Hazeta while commenting on the decision to build the Belarusian nuclear power plant in Astraviec district.



He insists that the power plant will not endanger the region's ecology, and it is not afraid of any earthquakes (a hundred years ago a powerful earthquake was recorded in Astraviec region).

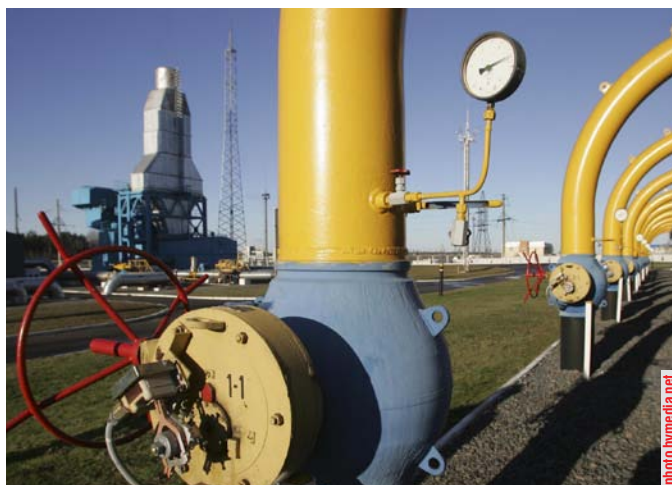
Andrej Rykau tries to make sceptics and opponents of the power plant change their mind, and make comparison with Russia. He says that this project will give a "powerful impetus to the development of the region". He holds up as a model Kalininskaja nuclear power plant which is located between Moscow and Saint

Petersburg. When you follow the road you see a lot of abandoned villages. But once you come to the settlement you feel like you land up on a different planet”.

ECONOMY

Russian Gas Got More Expensive

Price of natural gas for legal persons and individual entrepreneurs in Belarus was increased by 9.8% from January 1st.



The price will rise from USD 158.67 to USD 174.18 per one thousand cubic meters exclusive of VAT. This decision is contained in Resolution №7 of the Ministry of Economy of Belarus, BelTA news agency reports quoting the press-service of the Ministry.

“Need for reviewing the price of natural gas for customers in the Republic emerged in view of the increase in the buying price of gas from the Russian Federation from January 1st, 2009 as well as in view of change in overall economic conditions”, the Ministry of Economy explained.

Taking into account that the end customers will pay in February for gas used in January, the gas price regulated by this resolution is applied from January 1st, 2009.

OPPOSITION

Ivan Shyla and Franak Viachorka Released Statements Regarding Their Military Draft

Youth activists Ivan Shyla and Franak Viachorka released statements regarding their military draft. They are convinced that they faced a new form of a political persecution, Euroradio reports.

In particular, Shyla claims that he has accurate information on the pressure exerted by representatives of secret services on the medical commission. So, initially he was condemned as unserviceable in time of peace, but later the decision was changed. Shyla demands to be submitted to an independent medical examination, to bring to justice officers of KGB and the military commissar of Salihorsk district who “put pressure on members of the medical commission”, as well as to be provided with an opportunity to complete his secondary education and to pass an exam in May this year.

Franak Viachorka claims that the results of his medical examination might have been falsified, because earlier he was condemn as unserviceable, but now he must be drafted. He intends to contest in court the decision of the draft committee and actions of employees of the military hospital, and states his willingness to be submitted to an independent medical

expertise. Also Viachorka is going to demand that persons who strong-armed him in the hospital and took to the military commissariat by force be brought to justice, and to be reinstated in the Belarusian State University where he was expelled from.

CULTURE

Ministry of Culture: “Kurapaty Cannot Be Put on the UNESCO World Heritage List”

Officials from the Ministry of Culture called the Kurapaty stow, where tens of thousands people were gunned down during the Stalinist repressions, “a historical memorial site associated with historical events, and the development of the Belarusian society and State”, Euroradio reports.

Deputy Minister of Culture Uladzimier Hrydziushka says in his letter to Anton Astapovich, Chairman of the Belarusian Voluntary Society for Protection of Monuments of Culture and History, that Kurapaty cannot be nominated for inclusion in the UNESCO World Heritage List.

Allegedly, Kurapaty does not meet the requirements of the instruction on the application of the World Heritage Convention. However, as Astapovich pointed out in his interview to BelaPAN news agency, to the UNESCO World Heritage List may be included sites that have an exceptional universal historical value. He believes that Kurapaty is quite such a site because many important personalities from different countries were exterminated on its territory during several decades.



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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.