

Belarusian Authorities Agreed to Extension of OSCE Mission



The OSCE Office in Minsk made Lukashenka's "nice list" last Christmas. As a result, it was given permission to extend its mandate for one more year, until Dec. 31, 2010. However, the mission's work has to abide by strict conditions. Were the Office to overstep the mandate and engage in "activities that go beyond the agreed parameters, the Belarusian side reserves the right to terminate the activities of the OSCE Office in Minsk" any time, as the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs warned.

The meaning of this decision – or rather its meaninglessness – is somewhat similar to that of the EU decision in December 2009 to extend sanctions while suspending their application. The OSCE mission is extended, but its actions are so restricted that its presence in Minsk makes little difference. The only difference is that – with or without the sanctions – the EU hardly has a say in Belarusian politics while the Belarusian authorities will continue to effectively dictate the OSCE what to do for years to come.

The decision to extend the mission was made at the session of the OSCE Permanent Council in Vienna on Dec. 30, 2009. The Belarusian Foreign Ministry applauded the Office for cooperating with the Belarusian side in 2009. This is not surprising for there must be reasons why the Belarusian opposition and several OSCE member states complained over the actions and statements of the former head of the OSCE office, Hans Jochen Schmidt. Their complains led to Schmidt's early termination (his term was supposed to expire in February 2010) and appointment of German diplomat Benedikt Haller as his successor.

The OSCE Office in Minsk was established on 30 December 2002 following OSCE Permanent Council Decision No 526. Its objectives have been to work with the Belarusian government on the issues of institution building, consolidating the rule of law, developing relations with civil society, fostering economic and environmental activities. The Foreign Ministry said there were “no objective reasons today for the presence of the OSCE Office in Belarus.” Either the office has been so successful in achieving its objectives that there is nothing else to contribute, or the Belarusian government prefers that these objectives never be achieved.

Belarusian Visa Price Has Risen to EUR 180 if Issued at the Airport



The main aim of a visa regime is to regulate migration flow and to prevent eventual illegal immigrants from entering the country. What kind of illegal immigrants could come to Belarus from the EU or the USA?

How is Belarus going to become one of the world's top 30 economies by easiness of doing business, which the government has declared as its goal, if it has one of the most expensive visas in the world? The solution should definitely be to ease the visa regime or even its de-facto cancellation, as it has been done in Ukraine and Georgia.

The explanation for this Soviet-styled decision, however,

seems simple: the West is still seen by the Belarusian government as a potential threat and a potential source of danger for the regime. In the past, visa issues have been used as a tool to [force several Polish Catholic priests from Belarus](#). Along with Polish priests, who have presumably been promoting Polish nationalism instead of doing their primary spiritual work, foreign journalists, human rights activists and observers can easily be forced away from the isolated country in the middle of Europe.

However, if investment attraction is priority for Belarus, the visa regime for the EU and the US should definitely be liberalized. Besides, the EU itself could initiate this by lowering the Schengen visa price for Belarusians from the current EUR 60.

Starting 2010 the price for a Belarusian visa has risen to 180 euros for the citizens of the EU. First of all this concerns those who receive visas at the airport upon arrival to Belarus, the consular department of Belarusian Foreign Ministry told. The cost increase for Belarusian visas is due to new amendments to the Tax Code of the Republic of Belarus.

As explained in the Consular Section of the Minsk National Airport, potential tourists from the European Union, who wanted to come to Belarus, could previously have received a single journey short-term visa for USD 60. The new visa price is EUR 180. Long-term visas for citizens of the EU and the United States cost more than EUR 200.

Since the New Year the Belarus authorities charge for visas in Euros, not US dollars. Another change was introduction of three types of visas: transit, short-term and long-term. There is no separation between tourist and business visas, the Belarusian edition of RFE/RL reported.

“They have a choice, either to get the visa at an embassy of Belarus in their country for EUR 60 or at the airport for EUR

180,” – representatives of the consular department of Belarusian Foreign Ministry said.

In the consular at the airport “Minsk-2” noticed that foreign nationals are paid and the new tariffs. “Nobody yet refused”, – reported at the airport.

Tourism agencies say that foreigners are beginning to refuse to travel to Belarus because Belarusian visas are among the most expensive visas in the world.

[Read the original story at Telegraf.by](http://Telegraf.by)

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Belarus Officials Fly to Russia for Oil Talks



The Belarusian-Russian oil conflict once again demonstrates the fact that relations between both countries are far from what could have been called friendly. All the declarations of “eternal Slavic brotherhood” vanish once real money gets involved. The fight about eventual Russian oil duties has burst out just several days after the pompous establishing of the Customs union of Belarus, Russia and Kazakhstan. This may only be a signal that this post-Soviet integration initiative is the same farce as its uncountable predecessors.

Russia wants to reshape its relations with Belarus and make them more market-based. The Belarusian officials are trying to retain Russian financial preferences that create a huge annual

flow of cash into the pockets of the Belarusian government. In any case, in the mid-term Belarus will inevitably have to accept that expensive oil and gas is the price it has to pay for a real and sound independence from Russia.

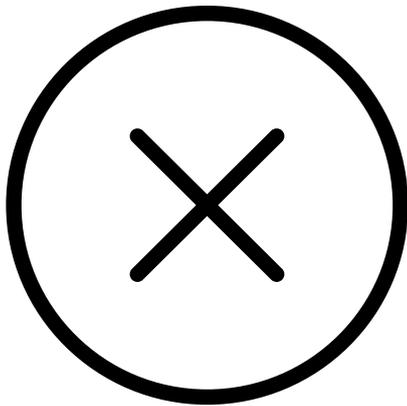
MINSK, Jan 5 (Reuters) – Belarus sent a delegation to Moscow on Tuesday for talks to resolve an oil dispute that has disrupted crude shipments to Belarussian refineries and raised the spectre of winter supply problems for the European Union.

“The delegation will fly today,” Belarussian government spokesman Alexander Timoshenko said by telephone, adding that the delegation included the head of Belarus’s Belneftekhim state oil company, Valery Kazakevich.

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Naša Niva: Belarusian Economists from Western Universities Plan to Launch a Masters Programme in Belarus



An interview with Michail Holasaŭ (Mikhail Golosov), a Belarus-born economics professor at Yale University. The initiative of these people is really worth admiration. It is very important for the Belarusian government to really seize this opportunity and to help economists from the Belarusian diaspora to realize their project.

Having Europe's probably most backward and least reformed economy, where real market reforms might only have started a year ago or so, Belarus desperately needs the experience and knowledge of people like [Michail Holasaŭ](#) or [Aleh Cyvinski](#) (Tsyvinski). One should consider the example of Mikheil Saakashvili, the Georgian president and successful reformer, who invited young Georgian-born economists from the West to advise on economic reforms and even take key positions in the country's government.

Economists with a global reputation have come to a [conference in Minsk on December 28-29](#). They are united by Belarusian origin. And the desire to do something for Belarus. Naša Niva has talked to Mikhail Golosov, a professor of economics at Yale University (USA).

NN: Please tell us a little about yourself.

Mikhail Golosov: I was born in Viciebsk and have studied at the Economic University in Minsk. After that I took postgraduate and doctoral studies in the United States. At first it was hard, because I didn't have a good initial base. I had to learn economics and mathematics virtually from scratch.

NN: Is our education so weak?

MG: No, I wouldn't say so. It's just that the BSEU is more like a business school. It prepares professionals in a very

narrow field, for example, the banking business. So, a graduate of the Belarusian Economic University is ready to go and to work at a bank. However, having graduated from there, I was not prepared to deal with economy on a scientific level. I stayed in the U.S. because I wanted to do serious economic research. Even European universities are far behind the U.S. in terms of science and research. I began to teach in Massachusetts then in Harvard. Now I'm at Yale.

NN: Have you met Belarusians among professors there?

MG: Not too many. We have gathered a significant part of them at a conference we hold in Minsk on Monday. Today we have a base of 29 Belarusian economy professors from western universities. However, we currently do not yet have information on the U.K. But overall, the figure is, I think, about 40 people. Some of them I know personally, with some I have been exchanging e-mails, some others I will only meet in Minsk for the first time. This is a lot compared to our previous expectations. However, there are many more professors from, for example, the Czech Republic. I am only talking about economic research. Perhaps, in mathematics there are more Belarusian professors.

NN: Have you ever been invited to work at the Belarusian government? Would you be interested in that?

MG: No, they haven't invited me. Although in principle it would be interesting for me. In addition to teaching, I have also worked at the Fed, so I have experience.

NN: What will there be at the conference on December 28?

MG: We want to organize a proto-university, or rather courses that teach economics at a serious global level. The conference to take place on 28-29 December is the first step to achieving this goal. We want to declare our initiative. Maybe there will be more interested people. This idea arose during a meeting in Rome between me, Aleh Tsyvinski (another

Yale University professor of Belarusian descent – NN) and Pavel Daneyko (a Belarusian economist, rector of the Moscow Business School – NN). The already existing BEROCC (Belarusian Economic Research and Outreach Center – NN) is the first step toward creating such a program, to create a scientific research center. The programme will be created if we see a list of Belarusian professors who would work there. Not just good teachers, but those who are concerned with the country's future. We plan to launch this programme in 2011 or 2012. Everything will depend on funding and legal status. The National Bank offers the University of Polesia in Pinsk as the platform for the programme.

NN: Will it be a Masters programme? Or will it also give Bachelor degrees?

MG: So far we are planning to launch a Masters programme. In fact, I do not think that we would train bachelors. To make a short and qualitative Masters programme is not so difficult. For that you don't need many teachers, as well as not so many students (a group of 20-30 people).

NN: Do you plan to make financial profit from this idea?

MG: (laughing)

NN: Will the programme prepare professionals for Belarus or for the West?

MG: For Belarus. It is interesting to us as Belarusians.

NN: Do you have any arrangements made?

MG: We are just beginning to talk with various government organizations. So far everybody is expressing interest.

NN: What will be the working language there?

MG: English. Now, English has become the language of economy in the world. Leading Masters programmes in Italy and Spain

are in English. Virtually all academic literature is in English.

NN: Why is the programme so important for you personally?

MG: I guess because I'm from here.

NN: Let me also ask some questions on current issues. How, in your opinion, will the crisis change global economy?

MG: I think that in western countries, where there has been a wave of economic liberalization on deregulation, the trend will now go in the opposite direction. The state will play a big role in the economy. Now the national debt has risen in the United States and European countries, so they should either raise taxes or expect inflation. This will lead to a rather slow growth of the economy. This forecast is for the short or medium term. The slow growth in Western countries will also slow down the rise of prices for oil and other raw materials.

NN: And will China be growing as previously?

MG: It is difficult to predict something certain for China. I think that for some time it will be growing in its current volumes. China has enough of their own problems to be solved. China started with from a very low point and grew very quickly. In principle, it is easier to grow from a low starting point than from a higher one. The more China develops, the more it will have problems rich countries are now facing: problems of inequality, social problems.

Read the original story in Belarusian at nn.by

Belarusian Nuclear Power Project: Dangerous and Expensive



On September 2nd, Belarus moved one step closer to building its first nuclear reactor by signing an agreement with Russia's AtomStroyExport for constructing a nuclear power plant in Astravets, Hrodna region. The launch of the first nuclear plant unit is scheduled for 2016 and the second – for 2018.

For Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka – who announced building the power plant during his annual visit to the contaminated Chernobyl zone – a domestic nuclear energy source is a “national security” guarantee. Today Belarus uses minimal domestic electric production capacity and is able to provide for only 10 percent of its energy needs.

Approximately 75 percent of its electricity is imported from Russia, a supplier not shy about exploiting the energy dependence of its neighbors turning energy “from a purely economic issue into a political one,” as Lukashenka himself acknowledged.

Diversifying energy supplies to Belarus is indeed an exigent matter. But a nuclear plant built by Russia on a Russian loan, serviced by Russian technicians and fed with Russian fuel might be a very good deal for Russia, but will hardly make Belarus more independent. Moreover, the new nuclear plant

would supply only 25 percent of Belarus energy needs and would begin operation in 2016 or later, even according to the most optimistic prognoses. What will happen to the high-level radioactive waste from the power plant is still unclear, but in solving this problem, Belarus would most likely also have to rely on Russia (although currently neither Russia nor Ukraine permit the import of radioactive waste).

Belarusian Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection has reassured the population that the nuclear power plant would meet international standards on nuclear and radiation safety. However, the track record of Russian power stations is far from comforting. No further proof is needed when one remembers the Chernobyl catastrophe on 1986 – the worst nuclear power plant disaster in history and the only level 7 instance on the International Nuclear Event Scale. An estimated 260 million curies of radiation were released – about 200 times more radiation than was released by the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. Belarus faced 70 percent of the fallout, and twenty-three years later, one fifth of its territory is still radioactively contaminated. Already in 1992, Belarus was spending 20 percent of its budget on Chernobyl-related problems.

Another disturbing example is Mayak, a nuclear fuel reprocessing plant in Chelyabinsk oblast in Russia. Working conditions at Mayak resulted in severe health hazards; by the beginning of the twenty-first century about half a million people in the region have been irradiated in one or more of the incidents.

One need not look far back, however. Just this August, about seventy people were killed in an accident at the Sayano-Shushenskaya hydroelectric station. The consequences would have been much more serious, had the station been a nuclear power plant. Despite significant technological advances, nuclear power remains a dangerous energy source.

In the midst of financial crisis and borrowing left and right, Belarusian government seems oblivious to the costs of the nuclear power plant – up to \$12 billion not counting the expenses on a spent fuel storage facility. For comparison, Belarus' annual budget in 2008 was about \$25 billion. The loan to finance the project will probably come from Russia since Belarusian financial system is just as poorly diversified as its energy. Being slow to send the last \$500 million installment of its \$2 billion loan to Belarus this summer, Moscow is hardly a reliable creditor, and it has never been never squeamish to use the dependency of its smaller neighbors to its own advantage.

Despite all this, in the eighteen years of its independent history marred by the Chernobyl disaster, Belarus has been edging closer to acquiring a nuclear power plant. Belarus announced started a program to examine 15 possible sites for constructing a nuclear power plant. In 1996, Belarusian Energy Minister, Valentin Gerasimovm announced that Belarus was seeking \$3.5 to \$4 billion in aid to build a nuclear power plant. In 1997, the Dubrowna region in northeast Belarus volunteered to host a nuclear power plant. In 2002, Lukashenka named Russia as main partner in the area of energy and nuclear research.

The nuclear power station will be built in Astravets, the most beautiful part of the country full of Belarus historical landmarks. The proposed site is just 20 kilometers from the Lithuanian border and 50 kilometers from Vilnius. International law does not allow building nuclear power plants so close to the border without informing and receiving approvals from neighboring countries. However, Lithuania has not been officially notified about the project yet and is concerned about the plans of the Belarusian government no less than the Belarusian citizens.

Opponents of the project point out that Astravets is far from being an ideal location for a nuclear power plant due to its

wind rose and seismic instabilities in the area. In 1909, the region experienced an earthquake measuring 7 on the Richter scale. The most recent earthquake occurred in 1999.

Before deciding to spend an exorbitant amount on the nuclear project, the Belarusian government should read the numerous studies that explain why nuclear power is neither environment-friendly nor cost-effective when compared to other carbon-free or low-carbon options, which include wind power, combined-cycle gas power plants, and energy efficiency measures.

In the end, building a nuclear plant will only deepen Belarus' economic dependence on Russia and will not contribute to the country's wasteful level of energy consumption. Most importantly, in the absence of independent environmental expertise and very limited access of media and public to the project, the Russian-built station might be very dangerous to Belarus and its EU neighbors.

What Washington and Minsk Have to Talk About



On Friday, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Phillip Gordon listened more than he talked. Perhaps because he was not graced with the presence of the chief Belarusian orator, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka. Most

likely, however, because Washington doesn't have much to talk about until Minsk lifts restrictions on the political opposition, allows independent media and NGOs to develop and takes other measures to improve its human rights record.

Gordon first talked with the representatives of the Belarusian opposition. Alyaksandr Kazulin, Siargei Kaliakin, Anatol Liaukovich, Anatol Liabedzka, Vincuk Viachorka, Viktor Karniaenka, Vital Rymasheuski, Valiancin Stefanovich, and Mihail Pashkevich briefed Gordon on the political situation in the country prior to his meeting with the presidential chief of staff and foreign minister.

According to the Foreign Ministry's terse account, "The sides discussed the development of Belarus-US relations, in particular taking advantage of the existing opportunities to expand the trade and economic cooperation and interaction in international security sphere."

According to the US Embassy, "During discussions with Belarusian government officials, he (Gordon) stressed the U.S. desire to continue to engage Belarus in a mutual effort to improve bilateral relations."

Gordon emphasized that the United States will not lift its sanctions on Belarus in exchange for the enlargement of its staff at the US embassy in Minsk. Sanctions will be lifted if there are actual improvements in political situation in the country, he said.

Gordon remarked that his visit to Belarus was made possible by the improvements like the release of the political prisoners. The Belarusian government needs to put a little more effort to have the sanctions lifted, however. Washington is ready to send an ambassador to Minsk, but it is up to Belarus to make it happen, stressed Gordon.

Read more about Gordon's visit in [*The Washington Post*](#).

Phillip Gordon to visit Belarus on Friday



As the proverb goes, guests bring joy twice: when they come and when they go. The increasing frequency of Western visitors to the Belarusian capital is a positive sign that its isolation is coming to an end, but Alyaksandr Lukashenka surely sighs with relief when the outsiders leave. Luckily, Western officials never stay for long; they drop by Minsk on their way to states with larger arsenals and oil resources. Of course, some were forced to prolong their visit – like Emanuel Zeltser, a US lawyer charged with industrial espionage. Those are important because their fellow countrymen usually come to the rescue. Others were impelled to depart sooner than they expected, like the staff of the US embassy in Minsk.

This Friday, the Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Phillip Gordon plans to meet top government officials as well as the opposition leaders during his one-day trip to the Belarusian capital. He will be the highest US official to visit Minsk since US Ambassador Karen Stewart's forced departure in March 2008. The way for Gordon was paved by the earlier visits of EU Foreign Policy chief Javier Solana (February 2009) and a US congressional delegation (June 2009). A Senior Fellow for US Foreign Policy at the Brookings Institution, in Washington, DC, Gordon was appointed to

replace Assistant Secretary Daniel Fried.

The first move of the Obama administration toward Belarus was a one-year extension of the US national emergency act on June 12, 2009, which blocks the property of certain “persons undermining democratic processes.” This time, however, the Belarusian government didn’t do anything drastic to protest. Perhaps Minsk realized that another hostile act would effectively end the relationship between the two countries, or maybe the need for loans during the global economic crisis taught it a lesson in diplomacy.

The Real Shooting Distance of Belarusian Guns

The Belarusian government not only violates human rights at home, but also hand over fist contributes to their violations abroad, going just as unpunished.

Last week Graduate Institute of International Studies issued a report titled “Small Arms Survey 2009: Shadows of War”, which named Belarus – along with principled regimes like Iran and North Korea – a “significant exporter” of small arms that provides little or no information on its exports. Produced annually by a team of researchers based in Geneva, Switzerland, the report estimates the undocumented trade of firearms to be at least US\$ 100 million.

Little Belarus has been culpable of keeping the illegal arms trade up from its very birth as an independent state. In the new millennium it has only become better at it. In 2002, Mark Lenzi wrote in the Wall Street Journal Europe, that Belarus

secretly delivered over \$500 million worth of weapons to Palestinian militants. In 2003, Lebanon seized Belarusian weapons waiting to be smuggled into Iraq in defiance of a United Nations ban. In 2004, a report produced by Amnesty International accused Minsk of selling weapons and equipment "complicit in torture, rape and murder" in the western Darfur region.

The Belarusian leadership did not even flinch at being caught red-handed by the world's leading human rights watchdog and in 2006 concluded a military cooperation protocol with Sudan, selling even more armored personnel carriers. Incidentally, the same carriers were seen in Darfur in March 2007. In January 2007, a Memorandum of Understanding on defense cooperation was signed with Iran. And in March of 2007, Minsk publicly offered to sell Venezuela the SA-3 Goa and SA-8 Gecko surface-to-air missile systems. Another good Belarusian friend, authoritarian Turkmenistan, did not mind acting as a conduit for delivering Belarusian weapons to the opposition in Tajikistan and to the Taliban in Afghanistan.

According to information available on the Web site of Belarusian embassy in the United States, Belarusian export control system "meets high international criteria" and the country "acts in strict correspondence with the United Nations embargo that prohibits exports of arms and equipment to the countries of unfavorable military and political situation or states participating in any regional conflicts." In reality, however, export control regulations in Belarus remain porous allowing the Minsk to continuously rank among the world's leading arms exporters earning millions in lucrative deals with developing countries.

Belarus' dangerous exports end up in places just as "roguish" as where they come from. Many are sent to conflict-ridden and armed-to-teeth hotspots, to which the West knows better than to sell more weaponry. According to the U.S. Congressional

Research Service, from 1998 through 2005 the country ranked 11th in the world in deliveries of arms to developing nations with \$1.1 billion in deliveries to Saddam Hussein's Iraq, conflict areas in the Balkans, the Adjara region of Georgia, and the Palestinian territories among other glorious places. Such markets are most profitable because Belarus faces no competition there as few other nations have as little to lose in their international image as Minsk does.

Belarusian heavy industry constituted 25 percent of Soviet machine production. After the USSR collapsed, the country's defense sector started exporting left and right to survive, just as all other former Soviet Union states. In 1997, profits from selling the warehouses of the former Soviet Army reached \$500 million, securing Belarus ninth place among the world's ten largest arms exporters.

For a desperate satellite reeling off its Soviet orbit, the country was doing surprisingly well. At the end of the 1990s Belarus started manufacturing parts to repair the old technical equipment purchased earlier by the Soviet clients – Cuba, China, Ethiopia, Libya, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and others. Ten years after the Soviet implosion, Belarusian defense industry switched to modernizing old Soviet equipment and developing new technologies. At the same time, the secrecy of Belarusian arms exports increased. In January 2004, presidential decree established Goskomvoenprom, the state military-industrial committee. Besides planning, coordination, and control of production, the committee's tasks include dabbling into arms export, which was previously reserved exclusively for the Foreign and Defense ministries.

Belarusian swagger on the arms market perplexes those who know the limitations of the country's weapons industrial base. All of the Soviet heritage must have been sold out or become obsolete by now. So where do the guns for sale come from? While damaging the country's relations with the West, the arms exports are suspected to be oiling the wheels in the country's

relations with Russia. With no weapons development base of its own, it is Russian weapons Belarus may be selling. The symbiosis of the two "brotherly" nations results in a political cover for Moscow and financial backing for Minsk. This way Russia is able to reach the markets frowned upon by the West without risking international denunciation, and the Belarusian government can tap into considerable profits, cementing its authoritarian power at home.

More than 100 Belarus enterprises cooperate with Russian partners. According to the official data, their teamwork goes no farther than making spare parts and accessories for military equipment. In May 2007, Russian arms officials publicly denied any allegation that Moscow violated international embargos by selling arms through Minsk. However, even Russian analysts from Moscow Defense Brief admitted that "[i]t would have been quite difficult for Belarus to take this position [on the world's arms market] without cooperating with Russian agencies."

Belarus is careful not to give away too much about its arms exports. Four years ago the National Report on arms exports published by the Foreign Ministry stopped disclosing information about Belarus' customers, volumes of trade, and types of the equipment sold. The document has been reduced to a list of normative acts in the field of licensing and export control.

President Alyaksandr Lukashenka claims that Belarusian weapons sales are insignificant and that the revenues are used to prop up the Belarusian ruble. The leader denies Belarus' involvement in the illegal arms trade, dismissing allegations as disinformation fed to the Western media by the opposition. In an interview with AFP news agency in November 2008 Lukashenka accused NATO of provoking a 'mini arms race' by flying planes near Belarusian borders and said he was considering buying short-range Russian Iskander missiles to step up air defenses.

The regime's dependence on arms exports to unsavory regimes is an indication that since the collapse of the Soviet Union the nation's economy has evolved as little as its political system. This year, the country's relationship with the West has improved. If Belarus still plans on joining the rest of Europe, it must act like a civilized nation: end oppression at home and stop profiting on oppression abroad.

Will Belarus follow the US 'road map'? US Congressmen visit Minsk to find out

✘ Detaining American citizens to hand them over months or even years later turning offenses into favors is becoming a tradition in dictatorial countries like North Korea. Last year – strangely or not – Belarus has followed the suit by detaining an American lawyer.

Pardoning the ailing prisoner after the meeting with seven representatives of the US Congress who visited Minsk on Tuesday, June 30, Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka undoubtedly scored points with the United States.

Emanuel Zeltser has been in a Belarusian prison since last March after being convicted for industrial espionage in a closed trial. The commission asked for Mr. Zeltser's release on humanitarian grounds as continued incarceration would endanger his life.

Of course, Zeltser is not the only 'guest' treated to a Belarusian prison on political grounds. Three more have being

held in custody since February. Unfortunately, Belarusian entrepreneurs Mikalai Aytuhovich, Yuri Liavonay, and Uladzimir Asipenka will hardly succeed in bringing a foreign delegation to their rescue.

It will take more effort on Lukashenka's behalf to have the three-year-old economic sanctions against Belarus lifted, however. After securing the release of his countryman, the head of the delegation Senator Benjamin L. Cardin (D-MD) reminded the Belarusian leader that removing the blemishes from his human rights record is crucial to reestablishing the country's discourse with the West. Reforming electoral legislation and granting freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and freedom of association to Belarusian citizens were also discussed.

The delegation also met with opposition activists— several of whom once suffered the fate akin to Mr. Zeltser's. Congressman Christopher Smith, one of the authors of the Belarus Democracy Act, stressed the need for a sincere and open dialogue with the opposition.

"You have a road map. Everything is written down in the Belarus Democracy Act. It mentions the rights that must be observed," said Smith, expressing hopes the economic crisis will make Lukashenka think. Adopted by U.S. Congress in 2004 and extended by President Barack Obama, the Belarus Democracy Act allocates U.S. funds to Belarusian opposition parties, NGOs and independent media and makes humanitarian donations to the Belarusian government contingent on liberal reforms.

The U.S. delegation also included Senator Durbin, Commissioner Senator Roger Wicker (R-MS), Commissioner Congressman Mike McIntyre (D-NC), Commissioner Congressman Robert Aderholt (R-AL), and Congressman Lloyd Doggett (D-TX).

This is the first visit of a delegation of such level to Belarus for last ten years. A week earlier, Commissioner for

External Relations and European Neighborhood Policy Benita Ferrero-Waldner also paid a visit to Minsk announcing the allocation of an assistance package for the improvement of food safety in Belarus. Western visits increased after Lukashenka had adopted some limited liberal reforms and granted amnesty to a series of political prisoners. His nominal bow to the West resulted in lifting of the EU travel ban for Belarusian officials and an invitation to join the Eastern Partnership. This spring Belarus received an International Monetary Fund loan of \$1 billion, raising its total pledge to \$3.4 billion. Of course, you can't eat your cake and have it, too. Lukashenka's courting the West resulted in Russian criticism of his economic policies and a ban on Belarusian dairy imports.

A release of one troubled American will hardly open a new page in Belarusian relationship with the West. A good start could be made by apologizing to 30 US diplomats expelled last year after the expansion of US sanctions. The surest way to find a common language with the USA and the EU, however, lies in improving Belarus' human rights record.

The West has a lot more to offer to Belarus than Belarus to the West. There is no time for bargaining or testing the limits of the Western goodwill, especially because the freedoms time and again asked from Belarus are what every developed country is proud to offer to its citizens.

Read more about Zeltser's misfortune: "[US lawyer imprisoned in Belarus freed after pardon](#)," *The Washington Post*, June 30, 2009.

No Agreement between EU Countries on Belarus



An interesting overview of divergences within the European Union on the Belarusian issue appeared in an article published by Radio Liberty Free Europe.

An interesting overview of divergences within the European Union on the Belarusian issue appeared in an article published by Radio Liberty Free Europe. The Dutch seem to be the most consistent in their demands of specific improvements from the Belarusian government, Poland and the Baltic states are concerned about Russia's influence on Belarus, while Germany and France are driven by Realpolitik considerations:

Dutch Foreign Minister Maxime Verhaegen, argued that the reforms undertaken by Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka are no more than window dressing.

The Netherlands wants the upcoming EU summit on March 19-20 to set out a list of clear conditions Belarus must meet before it can join the Eastern Partnership initiative, which will be unveiled at the same meeting.

One group of countries, led by Britain, Sweden and Poland, and the Baltic states, is naturally sympathetic to the Dutch concerns. But these countries also believe that the Russian factor means the stakes are high enough for the EU to justify a continued partial suspension of its standards in a bid to engage the Belarusian leadership.

Another camp of mostly Western European countries led by Germany and France is keen to establish the EU as an autonomous regional and global player. These countries have

somewhat contradictory motives. Russia is certainly seen as a competitor, but the driving force for most in seeking dialogue with regimes like Minsk is a pragmatic preference for interests over values and a deep-seated skepticism for the utility of sanctions in this context.

Read full text at rferl.org

Eurasia Daily Monitor on Economic Crises in Belarus



WASHINGTON – Eurasia Daily Monitor has published an article about the impact of economic crises on Belarus and whom Belarusians tend to blame for the crises:

Economic Problems Beset Belarus

March 13, 2009 To date, there has been little other than optimistic prognoses from Belarusian government circles about the state of the economy. Unlike the situation in neighboring states, Belarus is not facing recession, and economic growth continues. Moreover, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka has assured citizens of government protection, should the situation become difficult.

The Belarusian economy has a unique structure, in which state intervention has been common until recently; and the official media has proclaimed a specific Belarusian path to prosperity. Is it possible that the country has been

unaffected by the international recession that is affecting its neighbors such as Poland, Ukraine, and Russia so strongly?

The answer is that the Belarusian government is treading a fine line between myth and reality. Nothing is quite as it seems. While its leader Lukashenka, aided by the head of the presidential administration Uladzimir Makey and Prime Minister Syarhey Sidorski, make overtures to the European Union and fulfill the requirements for the next tranche of an IMF loan, they also seem to be drawn irrevocably further into the Russian orbit, not only politically—as a base for Russian anti-missile defense—but in particular economically.

And its population is increasingly anxious about the economic situation the country finds itself. In late February the Belarusian authorities reported an anticipated growth in GDP of 2 percent in 2009, though the rise for the manufacturing industries will be only 1 percent (Belarusian Telegraph Agency, February 24). That figure stands in contrast to the fall of GDP in neighboring states, even though the GDP growth overall is significantly less than in previous years.

The country also announced that in 2009 it would have a balanced budget without deficits. As a result, the IMF was happy to disburse the first tranche (\$800 million) of the \$2.46 billion "standby arrangement" agreed to last January (Belapan, March 10). In April an IMF team will visit Belarus to ensure that it is adhering to the stringent conditions. In addition to its negotiations with the IMF, Belarus has begun to open up to its European neighbors as well. Yet in other respects, the state seems to be drawn back to Russia.

First of all, Russia has become a virtual banker to Belarus. In 2008 it loaned Belarus \$2 billion, and it received a request from its smaller neighbor for a further \$3 billion for 2009 before the midway point of the first quarter of the year had even been reached (www.bloomberg.com, March 2). The government has requested loans from other sources, including the United States; but the fact remains that it is indebted most of all to Russia.

In the winter of 2008-2009 Belarus avoided the sort of unseemly row that occurred over gas prices between Russia and Ukraine. Belarus currently pays \$140 per thousand cubic meters for Russian gas and is confident that the price could fall to \$100 by the end of the year. In the long term it has resolved to circumvent its dependence on Russia for energy imports by building its own nuclear power plant, the construction of which will begin in 2010.

Russia, however, is set to provide the funding, materials, and even fuel for this station; and the Russian firm Atomstroyexport has been accepted as the "prime contractor," according to Russian Ambassador to Belarus Aleksandr Surikov. There is some logic to using Russian technology, given Russia's proximity and experience in nuclear energy; but this choice draws Belarus further into the Russian economic orbit.

The Russians have offered a \$5 billion loan for the completion of the station, which, in contrast to earlier reports, will now be built in Astravets, in Hrodna region, close to the border with Poland and Lithuania (www.naviny.by, February 6). In a recent survey conducted by the Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Research (IISEPS) in December 2008, 1,500 respondents from different regions of the country were asked what the most serious problem "facing our country and

its citizens" was.

Over 82 percent stated price rises, well ahead of the next three categories, which predictably were impoverishment of the population, unemployment, and the collapse of production (37.8 percent, 35.7 percent, and 31.7 percent, respectively). Incidentally, the answer "fear of the loss of Belarusian independence" was the choice of only just over 5 percent. More than one-third of respondents maintained that their personal economic situation had worsened over the past three months, and almost half (46.4 percent) anticipated serious shocks for the Belarusian economy in the future.

As to who was responsible for the economic deterioration in the country, 52 percent declared it was the government, 42.5 percent the president, and only 27.4 percent blamed "the West" (www.iiseps.org/eopros53.html).

Thus, the Belarusian leaders, despite a more benign international political climate, are facing two growing problems: increasing indebtedness to and reliance on Russia, Lukashenka's rhetoric notwithstanding; and a loss of public faith in the government. The survey elicited the most negative reactions in many years, and it suggests that the public is no longer satisfied simply to accept official statements that there is no economic crisis in Belarus.

For many of them, the crisis is already manifest. The shock of the 20.5 percent currency devaluation in January has been followed by a further 10 percent drop in the value of the Belarusian ruble, which is now traded at 2,880 to the dollar (3,000 on the black market). Discontent with the Lukashenka regime is rising. –David Marples Source: [Eurasia Daily Monitor](#)

New York Times: U.S. and Belarus in Dispute Over Inmate

The New York Times

Ellen Barry of New York Times wrote this article on the fate of Emanuel Zeltser. The American lawyer has been jailed by Belarusian KGB for almost a year on charges of possessing forged documents and commercial espionage. The article suggests that Zeltser has become a victim of a battle for assets of a Georgian-born tycoon Badri Patarkatsishvili who died in London under mysterious circumstances in 2008.

It is estimated that Mr. Patarkatsishvili's assets are worth around \$15 billion. Mr. Zeltser's defence alleges that their client has become a victim of Boris Beresovsky, a former Russian tycoon now based in London. The U.S. Government and Amnesty International so far have been unsuccessful in pressing the Belarusian Government to release Mr. Zeltser.

"It's very exceptional," said Jonathan M. Moore, the United States chargé d'affaires in Belarus. "This is the only time in my knowledge that a citizen of any country was arrested immediately upon arrival, held by the KGB, sentenced in a closed trial and has been held for so long when the state of his health is such a concern."

Read the full text of the article in [New York Times](#).

Belarus state TV crew at the inauguration in Washington



Radio Liberty Free Europe commented on Belarus sending a state TV crew to broadcast Barack Obama's inauguration in Washington.

The world has followed avidly the historic events in Washington, where Barack Hussein Obama was yesterday sworn in as the 44th president of the United States. Discussion of the inauguration and the challenges facing Obama dominated headlines in many countries. In some places, however, the media largely ignored the topic.

The Belarusian government has never expressed a particular affection for the United States or its presidents. So it was an unprecedented move when Minsk sent a special TV crew to Washington to report as Barack Obama took his oath of office and became the first African-American president.

The state-funded television team offered surprisingly positive coverage of the historic event – signaling a possible desire on the part of Minsk for warmer relations with the West.

Read full text at rferl.org

The National Endowment for Democracy hosts an event on Belarus



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Please RSVP by email to <bobbiet@ned.org> or

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Despite the controversial September 2008 parliamentary elections in Belarus, which were widely denounced by western

observers as undemocratic, the European Union has followed through on pre-election pledges to loosen travel restrictions on Belarusian government officials, including President Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

Over the past year, Belarus has taken steps to release political prisoners and says it wants improved relations with the West. Is Belarus, which continues to actively repress domestic criticism and has reportedly offered to host Russian missiles on its territory, sincere in its stated wish to improve relations with Europe and America?

Olga Kazulina is the daughter of political prisoner and former presidential candidate

Alyaksandr Kazulin, who was arrested in March 2006 and sentenced to 5 1/2 years of imprisonment for his political actions against the Lukashenko regime. She is a member of the Social Democratic Party and the commission "Freedom for Kazulin and All Political Prisoners." Ms. Kazulina was the deputy director of the firm Alaktiv from 2005 until 2007, when she was fired after attending an opposition conference in Lithuania.

Alyaksandr Klaskouski is Director of Analytical Projects for the news agency BelaPAN and Editor-in-Chief of BelaPAN's Elections website. He also runs a popular political blog for the e-weekly *Nasha Niva* and writes a column for *Naviny.by*. Mr. Klaskouski is a regular contributor to RFE/RL's Belarus Service and BelSat, a Warsaw-based satellite television channel. Both speakers are in the U.S. at the invitation of the International Republican Institute to participate in events marking International Human Rights Day.

Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty 1201
Connecticut Ave NW, Washington, DC 20036 tel: 202-457-6900 *
<http://www.rferl.org> * fax: 202-457-6992