

EU opens arms toward Belarus

Even though both the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the European Union criticized September parliamentary elections in Belarus, recent developments indicate that Brussels has changed its strategy on Belarus. Decision of EU foreign ministers on October 13 confirms the EU has offered an embrace to its – until now isolated- neighbor.

In the beginning of October, the EU High Representative Javier Solana invited Belarusian Minister of Foreign Affairs Syarhei Martynov to a meeting at the margins of the meeting of EU foreign ministers on October 13. The EU invitation of Belarus' minister is a breakthrough after four years of not holding high-level talks with Belarusian officials.

A few days later, the OSCE chairman-in-office, Finnish Foreign Minister Alexander Stubb, told during his meeting with Belarusian President Aliaksander Lukashenka in Minsk that "it is time to turn the page in Belarusian-European relations." His words were also reflected and backed up by the European Parliament's non-binding resolution on October 9 calling for a six-month partial suspension of the visa ban against top-level Belarusian officials and for lowering the visa costs for Belarusian citizens.

EU foreign ministers supported this trend on their meeting last Monday, confirming the suspension of travel restrictions on majority of 41 Belarusian officials and to restore high-level contacts with Belarusian authorities. Those had been restricted since 2004.

President Lukashenka was allowed travelling to the European Union, too. After October 13, there are only four Belarusian officials allegedly involved in disappearances of four opposition representatives and journalists in 1999/2000 and Chair of the Central Electoral Commission Lidzya Yarmoshina who remain on the EU visa ban list.

The European Union also extended the asset freeze for all 41 persons for another year and agreed to reconsider the suspended sanctions in six months. According to the EU decision, review of the sanctions and Brussels' next steps will depend on "progress towards reforms of the Electoral Code [...] and other concrete actions to respect democratic values, the rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms."

Sources: TASR, Reuters, AP, Council of the European Union

Lukashenka meets Putin

On October 6 Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin arrived to Belarus to meet with the President Lukashenka. The discussion focused mainly on economic issues and further cooperation between the two states in this sphere.

Russian Prime Minister reaffirmed Russia's readiness to grant a new interstate stabilization credit to Belarus, and at the same time, proposed creation of a "currency pool" to tie Belarusian ruble closer to Russian ruble.

Putin also suggested that the Russian currency could be the main currency used in the energy trade between the two countries and a potential currency for the National Bank of Belarus to keep its currency reserves. Russian gas price for 2009 was a part of the discussion as well.

The meeting did not bring any specific agreement in any of mentioned areas.

Sources: Itar-Tass, Interfax, Kommersant, RIA Novosti