

European Parliament passes resolution on Belarus

On January 15 the European Parliament adopted a non-binding resolution on Belarus in which it spells out five conditions which the EU should consider when making a decision whether to extend its suspension of the travel restrictions on 35 Belarusian officials. The EU member states will take the decision in April this year.

Albeit welcoming registration of "For Freedom" movement, return of two independent newspapers to the official distribution network and release of political prisoners, the Members of the European Parliament call on Belarus to guarantee freedom of media and continue cooperation with the OSCE on reform of the electoral law.

The EP also stresses the need for Belarus to remain a country without political prisoners, improve environment for the work of non-governmental organizations, and ensure freedom of assembly and political association.

The Parliament also calls on authorities to allow return of the European Humanities University back to Minsk. The EHU was closed down by the authorities in 2003 and thanks to the international assistance it was re-established in Vilnius, Lithuania.

At the same time, the resolution also recommends the fees for Schengen visa for Belarusian citizens be lowered and the application procedure for visas simplified.

In his reaction, the Press Secretary of Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Andrei Papou stated that Belarus took "positive note of the constructive elements of the European Parliament's new resolution". Though, according to him "the MEPs failed to proceed, in full measure, without obsolete stereotypes and bias towards our nation".

Sources: European Parliament, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus

Belarus raises gas price for consumers

On January 20, ahead of talks in Moscow aimed at setting a price for gas to be imported from Russia, Belarus raised prices of gas for domestic consumers by 9.8 percent to USD 174.18 from the previous rate of USD 158.67 per 1,000 cubic meters. Until the end of 2008 the country was paying USD 128 per tcm for the commodity from Russia.

Belarusian officials were expecting to pay up to USD 160 this year, while Russian representatives suggested the price could be more than USD 200. Neither Belarus nor Russia indicated what price will be set for 2009. At the end of last year, both sides said agreement had been reached on conditions of supply and pricing, with details to be announced subsequently.

According to a resolution issued by the Ministry of Economy "the gas price for domestic producers was subject to review in connection with a rise in prices from January 1 of gas from the Russian Federation and also in connection with overall changes in economic operations".

Back in November last year Belarus agreed to switch to rubles when trading in oil and gas from Moscow.

Source: Reuters