

### EU takes a compromise decision on Belarus

European Union Foreign Ministers agreed a compromise deal on the EU relations with Belarus. Their decision, adopted on March 16, has renewed for a year the travel ban and asset freeze on 41 top Belarusian officials including President Alyaksandr Lukashenka. At the same time, the decision extends for nine months the suspension of the same travel ban for 36 officials, including the Belarusian head of state, which is already in force.

In a statement the Foreign Ministers state that Belarus had made "certain positive steps" to improve ties with the EU and "the European Union remains ready to deepen its relations with Belarus". Spokesman of Belarusian Foreign Ministry Andrei Papau stated that "this decision will allow pragmatic dialogue between Belarus and the EU to continue".

In its decision, the EU did not set concrete conditions, based on which the decision will be revised in December. EU External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner said "it would be wrong now to impose new conditions. We wish to seize the opportunity to construct a relationship beneficial to both sides". But she stressed that on the whole, "Belarus' human rights situation remains dire". A dozen newspapers remain banned by the authoritarian government, which also harasses human rights activists, she said.

Although the EU is keen on a rapprochement with Belarus, especially within a framework of its new initiative, the Eastern Partnership, the latest EU decision on Belarus did not mention country's perspective participation in this program. Czech Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg who presided over the meeting of EU foreign ministers noted that it has not yet been decided whether Lukashenka would be invited to the summit on the Eastern Partnership which is to take place in May in Prague. The Netherlands, which also opposed that recent changes in Belarus are mere 'window dressing', expects 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.

According to the Associated Press, the EU's desire to accommodate Belarus reflects the growing importance the EU gives to stability on its eastern doorstep. The region is crucial to the flow of energy to the EU. But it is also vulnerable to Russia, a point underscored by last summer's war in Georgia, Associated Press concludes.

*Sources: AP, Reuters, European Voice, České noviny*

### Belarus offers to double gas transit

Belarus is offering to double the capacity of its natural-gas pipeline network to lure transit fees away from Ukraine, through which Russia supplies a fifth of Europe's gas, Belarusian Energy Minister Alyaksandr Ozerets said.

The minister stated that Gazprom could pump additional 34 billion cubic meters of the fuel a year via the Yamal-Europe pipeline that runs through Belarus by building a parallel line. This would, according to him, bring harmony to European deliveries and enhance diversity of Russian transit routes.

As the perspective completion of the Nord Stream pipeline which will bring Russian gas directly to Germany in 2011, Belarus' offer to construct Yamal-Europe-2 would depend mostly on Polish demand. Poland's government supports the Belarus proposal and considers Yamal-Europe-2 an alternative to the 1,200-kilometer Nord Stream, Polish Economy Minister Waldemar Pawlak said. Though, according to Gazprom spokesman Sergei Kupriyanov, Yamal-Europe-2 "will be considered in time, but after the building of Nord Stream".

Gazprom owns 25 per cent of Beltransgas, the state-run Belarusian company that operates Yamal-Europe, and its share will be increased to 50 per cent by 2011. Gazprom shipped 33 billion cubic meters of gas to Europe via Yamal-Europe last year, compared to 120 bcm through Ukraine.

*Source: Bloomberg*