

Lithuania hopes for quick return to EU-Russia talks, wants resumption of oil deliveries to Mazeikiu

VIENNA. APRIL 23. INTERFAX CENTRAL EUROPE – Lithuania hopes for a quick resolution of the conflict that is blocking negotiations on the new European Union–Russia partnership and cooperation agreement (PCA), and resumption of crude oil deliveries is an essential part of the solution, Lithuanian Prime Minister Gediminas Kirkilas told Interfax Central Europe on the sidelines of the Europe-Russia Forum in Vienna Monday.

"We believe the obstacles to EU-Russian negotiations will soon be removed and negotiations will begin," Kirkilas said. "We also believe oil transport by pipeline to the Mazeikiu refinery will be resumed before negotiations begin. We strongly believe in solidarity and cooperation of all European Union partners."

Since late 2006, Poland has been blocking the EU's negotiations mandate for the new PCA agreement because of Russia's ban on agricultural imports from the country. Poland continues to demand the lifting of the food trade embargo before it allows the EU-Russia PCA negotiations to resume.

Kirkilas' statement Monday suggests Lithuania conditions the start of the PCA talks on Russia repairing the Druzhba oil pipeline to Mazeikiu Nafta, the only oil refinery in the Baltic States.

On July 29, 2006, two months after Poland's top oil refiner PKN Orlen agreed to buy the Lithuanian company, there was an accident at the 57-km point on the Unecha-Polotsk (total length - 70 km) pipeline involving an oil spill of 20 tonnes. Shortly after the accident, Russian pipeline operator Transneft's management said that the repairs might take a long time and that it is possible that reparation of the ageing pipeline might be impossible.

Kirkilas said a new EU-Russia agreement, as well as the ratification of the EU Energy Charter by Russia would improve relations between EU members and their eastern neighbor.

"A new partnership and cooperation agreement is a strategic opportunity to strike balance in mutual relations between the EU and Russia," Kirkilas said during a panel of the Europe-Russia Forum on Monday. "Lithuania also maintains that this [Energy Charter] treaty is essential if we are to enjoy reliable long-term energy contacts."

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