

INTERNATIONAL LEAGUE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

BELARUS UPDATE
Edited by Victor Cole

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EDITOR'S NOTE

As an NGO in consultative status with the International Labor Organization, the League has always paid special attention to the labor relations in Belarus. Today, the Belarus Update launches a new column titled Trade Union News that will focus on the plight of Belarusian labor organizations.

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--HUMAN RIGHTS AND OPPOSITION NEWS --

COURT SHUTS DOWN VIASNA

On October 28, the Belarusian Supreme Court ordered liquidation of Viasna, Human Rights Center, Interfax reported. Following its October 16 decision to shut down the Lutskevich

Brothers Foundation, an NGO focused on historical research and cultural and social projects, the Court accepted the Justice Ministry's allegations of "numerous infractions committed by Viasna." According to the Ministry, the Viasna leadership forged several signatures on the group's registration documents and violated electoral regulations during the September 2001 presidential elections. Immediately after the court's decision was announced, eight Viasna activists refused to leave the courtroom and staged a sit-in protest, chanting "Shame! Shame!" Shortly, they were arrested, dragged out of the room, jammed into a police bus and taken to the Leninsky police precinct. On October 29, the Leninsky District Court fined the activists for the incident. (Interfax, Viasna, October 28-29)

U.S. SHARES EU CONCERNS OVER NGO CLOSURES IN BELARUS

The United States shares the "concerns expressed by the EU regarding the assault on the NGO community in Belarus," Amb. Stephan Minikes, U.S. OSCE Representative, told the OSCE Permanent Council on October 23. According to Minikes, in the past few months, Belarusian courts have closed or dissolved two NGOs, Legal Assistance to the Populations and Youth Christian Social Union, four NGO resource centers in Grodno, Gomel, Baranovichi, and Vitebsk, one trade union - the Belarusian Trade Union of Air Traffic Controllers - and several independent media entities such as the Novaya Gazeta Smorgoni. Calling the recent developments "an alarming record," the Ambassador noted that the assault on the NGO community in Belarus "flies in the face" of Belarus's OSCE commitments requiring respect for NGOs, the country voluntarily entered at the 1999 OSCE Istanbul Summit. He urged Belarus to "cease its attacks" on NGOs, "reverse" the closures, and "uphold media freedoms." Warning that such a policy will lead to further international isolation of Belarus and urging better cooperation between the Belarusian government and the OSCE's Office in Minsk, Amb. Minikes pointed out that "only Belarus can overcome this plight by manifesting, in action, its respect for the principles of democracy and human rights enshrined in OSCE commitments." (U.S. State Department, October 24)

LUKASHENKO DUCKS QUESTIONS ABOUT DISAPPEARED POLITICIANS

On October 24, Alexander Lukashenko held a three hour on-line press conference with Belarusian and Russian journalists, during which he asked about the destiny of the missing opposition politicians. While asking the question, Marina Koktysh, a journalist from Narodnaya Volya, opposition newspaper, noted that the four-year investigation failed to uncover anything about Yuri Zakharenko, Victor Gonchar, Anatoly Krasovsky and Dmitry Zavadsky, and the Belarusian president seems not care about the missing people. [Yuri Zakharenko, former Belarusian Minister of Internal Affairs, was last seen in May 1999. After Lukashenko fired him in 1996, Zakharenko became a prominent member of the opposition. Victor Gonchar, Deputy Chair of 13th Supreme Soviet, and a staunch critic of Lukashenko's policies, and Anatoly Krasovsky, a prominent Belarusian businessman and Gonchar's close friend, disappeared in September 1999. Dmitry Zavadsky, a Belarusian cameraman for the Russian television network ORT, disappeared in July 2000. – Ed.] Disagreeing with the journalist, Lukashenko replied that he was concerned but since there are about 800-900 people who go missing in the country each year, it would be "unfair to only focus on missing politicians or opposition journalists." Commenting on the Lukashenko's reply, Irina Krasovskaya, whose husband Anatoly has been

missing since 1999, noted that when prominent businessmen and politicians start disappearing in any country “the suspicion first and foremost falls on the government,” reported to the Charter 97 press center. (Charter 97, October 24)

AMNESTY: WE WANT TRUTH ABOUT DISAPPEARED

Reacting to Lukashenko’s comments on the missing politicians, businessmen, and journalists made at his on-line press-conference on October 24, the Netherlands chapter of Amnesty International, a human-rights watchdog, sent an open letter to Lukashenko. In the letter, J.D.B. v.d. Meulen, AI activist, said that Lukashenko must accept responsibility for the disappearances and tell the whole truth about Victor Gonchar and the others. (AI, October 24)

-- ELECTION 2004 --

BELARUSIAN YOUTH PLANS STRATEGY OF RESISTANCE

Zubr, the Belarusian youth opposition movement, recently organized an outdoor outing of regional leaders, its press-service reported. It was held in an undisclosed location in one of the vast Belarusian forests. Coordinators of Zubr movement from all six Belarusian regions gathered there to discuss political situation in Belarus and to work out Zubr’s strategy for the parliament elections. The attendees agreed that only a creation of a single democratic political block will ensure that opposition will be represented in the Belarusian parliament. A nation-wide election campaign was discussed. Finally, Zubr coordinators decided to continue non-violent resistance to the regime. (Zubr, October 24)

EUROPEAN MOVEMENT GATHERS STEAM

Following a meeting of 10 democratic organizations held in Borisov, Minsk Region, on October 20, another session of the group working to unite the Belarusian opposition and to promote European values and integration with the European Union took place in Minsk on October 24. Headed by Mikhail Marynich, the European Movement was established on the initiative of Narodnaya Hramada, Belarusian Social Democratic Party, in November 2002. The October 24 session was attended by Nikolai Statkevich, chair of Narodnaya Hramada, Andrei Sannikov, a Council member of Free Belarus, political association, Valentina Matusevich, chair of Nadzeja, a women’s party, Leonid Molokhov, chair of Private Property, Nina Stuzhynskaya, leader of the Women’s League, Anatoly Fedorov, a regional activist, Dmitry Borodko, chair of the Minsk region branch of Free Belarus. The attendees announced plans to hold a presentation in Minsk on November 1, the tenth anniversary of the European Union. (Charter 97, October 24)

-- MEDIA FREEDOM IN BELARUS --

FREEDOM OF SPEECH: BELARUSIAN VERSION

The Presidential Administration assumed a complete “editorial” control over the filming of “The Freedom of Speech,” a popular talk show on a Russian nationwide network NTV, Charter 97 reported. After reviewing the proposed list of show participants, the administration delivered an ultimatum to the show producer: either the administration will exercise full discretion on the list of attendees or President Lukashenko will not attend. As the show organizers backed down, not a single opposition politician was allowed to participate in the show, which will focus on the Russia-Belarus Union. Among the participants who were axed by Lukashenko’s lieutenants were Andrei Sannikov, international coordinator of Charter 97 civic movement and opposition politician, Tatiana Protko, chair of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, Oleg Volchek, leader of a liquidated NGO, Ales Belyatski, chair of Viasna Human Rights Center, which was shut down by the authorities on October 28, Andrei Klimov, a former Supreme Soviet deputy and political prisoner, Nikolai Statkevich, chair of Narodnaya Hramada, Myachislau Hryb, a former Chair of the Supreme Soviet, Mikhail Chigir, a former Prime Minister, Vasily Leonov, a former Minister of Agriculture. Only four Belarusian independent journalists are going to take part in the show. (Charter 97, October 28)

BIG BROTHER WATCHING YOU

The previous issue of the Belarus Update quoted Freimut Duve, the OSCE Media Freedom representative, who, while speaking at a session of OSCE conference in Warsaw on October 7, expressed the belief that the Internet was a “key tool to dismantle oppressive state censorship in some former communist countries.” (See Belarus Update, Vol. 6, No. 1) While human rights activists enthusiastically accepted the obvious benefits and power tools of the Internet, they watch warily steps by world’s oppressive governments to utilize the Internet for monitoring and ultimately controlling the human rights movement. In another troubling development, Beltelecom, a Belarusian telecommunication company which controls the vast majority of the Internet traffic in the country, announced the launch of a central traffic control system. Local human rights observers believe that the updated equipment will be capable of tracking the content of transmitted information, possibly leading to the creation of a nationwide database containing a personal dossier on every Internet user in the country. (Charter 97, ILHR, October 22-28)

-- RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN BELARUS --

BELARUS SHUTS DOWN ONLY JEWISH SCHOOL IN MINSK



On October 27, the Belarusian authorities shut down the only school in Minsk offering a course in Jewish studies, in what Jewish leaders said was the third such move against their community in the last two months, Reuters reported. Lyudmila Chertova, the school director, told Reuters that Minsk city authorities unexpectedly decided not to extend a lease agreement with the Jewish Sunday School, which offers courses in Jewish history, culture and Hebrew to about 75 children.

Jewish leaders said it was the latest attempt to drive Jews out of Belarus. They criticized

authorities for failing to clamp down on what Jewish leaders say are attacks on Jews and cemeteries and memorials for Holocaust victims. "I think it is a political decision. A raid against Jewish education and Jewish organizations has started," said Yakov Basin, head of a group which defends Jewish rights in Belarus. A representative of the city council said the decision to close down the school was caused by new rules on how to use educational buildings and did not elaborate further. The school closure fits into the Alexander Lukashenko's pledge to provide full state support for the Russian Orthodox Church in Belarus. In September 2003, Jewish leaders accused the Belarusian Ministry of Education of pursuing anti-Semitic policies after officials shut down an institute that offered a course in Jewish studies. Earlier this month vandals attacked a recently installed Holocaust memorial in the town of Lida, Grodno Region. (See Belarus Update, Vol. 6, No.1) [Before the World War Two, there were more than 400,000 Jews in Belarus, but tens of thousands were killed by the Nazis and many more left to escape Soviet anti-Semitism. Now about 100,000 remain. – Ed.] (Reuters, October 28)

LUKASHENKO DECORATES HEAD OF RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

In yet another sign of an increasing close relationship between the Lukashenko administration and the Russian Orthodox Church, on October 23, President Lukashenko bestowed the Order of Frantsishak Skaryna, the country's top state award, to the Metropolitan of Minsk and Slutsk Filaret, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church in Belarus and Patriarchal Exarch, Belapan reported, quoting the presidential press service. The decoration was reportedly made in acknowledgment of Filaret's "great contribution to spiritual revival and the strengthening of friendship among nations." (Belapan, October 24)

--TRADE UNION NEWS--

MAZ VIOLATES WORKERS RIGHTS

The Minsk Automotive Plant continues to violate workers rights, reported www.praca.by, an independent trade union website, quoting Solidarnost, a trade union newspaper. The plant administration requires that all job applicants sign a resignation request with the date field remaining blank. This way, the plant management can always claim that a laid off or fired worker resigned voluntarily and therefore is not eligible for unemployment benefits. In addition, all applicants are "strongly advised" by the management to join a state-controlled trade union, set up recently by the Ministry of Industry. According to Vladimir Volkov, the plant's chapter leader of the Union of Automotive and Agricultural Machinery Workers, an independent trade union, the government sent out directives to all state employers in an effort to boost membership of a recently created pro-government union. The move obviously aimed at weakening independent trade unions before the next year parliamentary election. (www.praca.by, October 27)

TRADE UNIONS FEDERATION LOSES INDEPENDENT LEADER

Alexander Bukhvostov, chair of the Union of Automotive and Agricultural Machinery Workers, an independent trade union, was forced out of the Presidium [Governing Council] of the

Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus (FTU). He was replaced with Alexander Kartsev, chair of the Minsk Tractor Plant Union, who is believed to be a government supporter. "There remain no supporters of the independent trade unions in the Presidium," believes Alexander Starikevich, editor-in-chief of Solidarnost, a trade union newspaper. According to Starikevich, the Bukhvostov's removal is yet another sign of the relentless efforts of the Lukashenko government to decimate independent trade unions. Leonid Kozik, the Federation chair, is either "not interested or unable" to safe-guard the unions independence, Starikevich concluded. [In December 2001, Vladimir Goncharik, who challenged Lukashenko in that year's presidential election, had to leave his chairmanship position at FTU after receiving credible reports that Lukashenko would sign a decree nationalizing the FTU's property unless Goncharik steps down. – Ed.] (Solidarnost, October 24)

INTERNATIONAL LABOR FEDERATION SUPPORTS COLLEAGUES

At its 20th European Region conference held in Porto, Portugal, on October 17 – 19, the International Federation of Air Traffic Controllers Associations (IFATCA) condemned the "serious infringements of the principle of freedom of association, and violations of trade union rights" in the case involving the Belarusian Trade Union of Air Traffic Controllers (BTUATC). Despite local and international protests that culminated in the resolution adopted by the ILO Committee on Freedom of Association on November 21, 2002 (ILO/02/51), the Belarusian Supreme Court ordered liquidation of the BTUATC on August 7, 2003. The Court agreed with the Belarusian government that the profession is "too sensitive" to the national security to be allowed to unionize.

"Our Federation believes it is the right of air traffic controllers in Belarus to establish or join an organization of their choosing without interference from governments, and it must be stressed that Belarus remains a signatory to the International Labor Organization's Conventions concerning the freedoms of workers' associations," says Mr. Marc Baumgartner, President and CEO of IFATCA. "We call on the International Labor Organization, the International Transport Workers Federation and others to denounce the actions of the Belarusian authorities in denying basic human rights to air traffic controllers."

IFATCA is the worldwide professional organization of air traffic controllers with more than forty thousand members representing 128 countries. Among its goals are the promotion of safety, efficiency and regularity in international air navigation, and the protection and safeguarding of the interests of the air traffic control profession. (IFATCA, October 19)

-- BROTHER SLAVS --

BELARUS DENIES RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA ARE DETERIORATING

On October 27, the Belarusian Foreign Ministry denied that relations with Russia had deteriorated after the two former Soviet republics traded accusations last week amid signs their long-planned political and economic union was foundering. Andrei Savinykh, spokesman at the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, sought to calm fears in both capitals that ties were worsening after Moscow sent an official complaint to Minsk over the weekend citing the "unfriendly character of relations" after President Lukashenko openly accused top Kremlin

advisers of orchestrating a stalemate in negotiations to create a political and economic union between the ex-Soviet states. [At his well-publicized on-line press conference held on October 24, Lukashenko conceded that the union talks with Russia have reached a deadlock. – Ed.]

Savinykh claimed that Russia's note "in no way" signaled deteriorating relations, adding that Minsk "is strictly adhering" to the union treaty signed in 1996 by Lukashenko and then-Russian President Boris Yeltsin. Russian sources have blamed Lukashenko himself for the deadlock, accusing him of using the union to boost his power. Two weeks ago, in meetings in Moscow, Lukashenko expressed hope about a planned union between the two former Soviet republics, despite economic disagreements that have stalled the project. (Associated Press, October 27)

CLEANING UP WALL STREET: SOVIET STYLE

In a massive regulatory cleanup that swept from New York to Minsk to Siberia, on October 25, the Russian authorities arrested Mikhail Khodorkovsky, chair of the Russian oil company Yukos and the richest man in Russia. Separately, on October 23, the Moskovsky District Court in Minsk started hearing in the case of Evgeny Kravtsov, an ex-banker who ran the Minsk branch of Grodno's "Kompleksbank," Belapan reported. If convicted, the former banker can be jailed for 8 to 15 years. The Belarusian KGB arrested Kravtsov in August 2002 on the economic crimes charges. Oleg Dubovets, Kravtsov's attorney, says that his client believes he is innocent and eager to fight the indictment. Also in Minsk, the Belarusian KGB arrested several officials of Velcom, a provider of wireless telecommunications, including its deputy general director, Interfax reported. Commenting on the arrests of Velcom officials, Alexander Lukashenko stressed that the charges are brought against specific individuals and not the company. "I am certain that [Velcom] will continue operating on Belarusian market," the Belarusian leader said.

In an article titled *The Failure of Putin's Russia*, Bruce P. Jackson, a Washington Post correspondent, maintains that the arrest of Mikhail Khodorkovsky by Russian secret services in Siberia involves "more than the charges he may face and his fate before the court." Jackson believes that the legal proceedings instituted against Khodorkovsky are a "distraction from the larger moral and strategic implications." Failing to see any parallels between these arrests and the clean ups currently carried out in the U.S. by the likes of Eliot Spitzer, New York Attorney General, SEC and other regulatory agencies, Mr. Jackson attempts to conjure up the antiquated Cold War spirits. Picturing Russia on the brink of returning to the Halloweenish days of the communist rule, Mr. Jackson attempts to spook the reader with "chauvinists" in the Russian Defense Ministry and the FSB whose main goal is to reestablish "a neo-imperial sphere of influence in the new democracies to Russia's south and west." If Washington fails to take a hard line in response to the latest "crackdown" on apparently honest businessmen, the journalist warns, the world should expect "Cold War thuggery and opportunistic financial seizures." Completely ignoring the ways the so-called New Russians elite built their financial empires, Mr. Jackson is apparently more concerned about the "grand scheme of things." It would be interesting to see Mr. Jackson's reaction if his mutual fund manager tried to justify some internal dealing by the need to keep the capitalist system rolling. Just as the Bush administration has tacitly encouraged the current Wall Street cleanup, it should allow its Russian and Belarusian counterparts to do the same, as long as the law is enforced fairly and evenhandedly. (Washington Post, Interfax, ILHR, October 28)

-- AT HOME IN BELARUS --

BELARUS WILL REMAIN NUKE-FREE

“Any union of Russia and Belarus won’t change Belarus’s nuclear-free status,” President Lukashenko said during his well-publicized on-line press conference held in Minsk on October 24. “To me whether Belarus should be a nuclear power or not is not a question,” Lukashenko told journalists, “only fools go around clinking nuclear weapons,” he said. (Interfax, October 27)

U.S. AMBASSADOR PRESENTS CREDENTIALS IN MINSK

On October 22, Ambassador George Krol, the new U.S. Ambassador to Belarus who arrived in Minsk on September 3, 2003, presented his credentials to President Lukashenko, Belarusian Television reported. “[Belarus] is a country of talented and hardworking people, which is known for its religious and ethnic tolerance [and its] love for beauty and orderliness.... My government is steadily following its consistent policy of respect for and support to the sovereignty and independence of the Republic of Belarus,” Krol said in Belarusian. Lukashenko responded in Russian: “Our country will always be an [independent] state. No matter what unions we will enter,... the sovereignty and independence of our state will be [preserved].” (BT, October 22)

CAN’T LET GO OF KOMSOMOL

On October 29, Alexander Lukashenko will take part in a reception dedicated to the 85th anniversary of Komsomol, the Communist Union of Youth organized by V.I. Lenin, BelTA, Belarusian news agency reported, quoting the president press-service. (BelTA, October 28)

-- INTERNATIONAL NEWS --

VIETNAM MILITARY DELEGATION VISITS BELARUS

A delegation of the Air Forces of the People’s Army of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam arrived in Belarus on October 28, BelTA news agency reported. The delegation is headed by Major-General Buj Dang Phiet, deputy commander of the Air Forces, and will stay in Belarus until November 7, [anniversary of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution – Ed.]. The press-service of the Belarusian Ministry of Defense reported that the delegation will meet Col. Anatoly Vankovich, acting commander of the air forces and air defense forces of Belarus, to discuss the issues of military cooperation. The Vietnamese military delegation will also visit several military units of the air forces and air defense forces of Belarus. (BelTA, October 28)

-- CALENDAR OF EVENTS --

October 31 – Picket organized by the Union of Automobile and Agricultural Machinery Workers in Minsk’s Bangalor Square.

November 1 – Presentation of Belarusian European Movement in Minsk

The Belarus Update is a weekly news bulletin of the Belarus Human Rights Support Project of the International League for Human Rights, www.ilhr.org. The League, now in its 62nd year, is a New York-based human rights NGO in consultative status with the United Nations, the Council of Europe, and the International Labor Organization. Visit www.belarusupdate.org for back issues, analysis, and links to news sites and NGOs in Belarus. Letters to the Editor: vcole@ilhr.org, subscription services: otarasov@ilhr.org

The Belarus project was established to support Belarusian citizens in making their case for the protection of civil society before the international community regarding Alexander Lukashenko's wholesale assault on human rights and the rule of law in Belarus.
