

## INTERNATIONAL LEAGUE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

### BELARUS UPDATE

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--HUMAN RIGHTS AND OPPOSITION NEWS --

#### BNF ACTIVISTS ARRESTED IN VITEBSK

On November 2, police in Vitebsk arrested seven activists of the Belarusian Popular Front Conservative Christian Party (KKhP BNF), conservative wing of the Belarusian Popular Front (BNF), headed by Zyanon Pazniak, BNF reported. Uladzimir Pleschanka, Alyaksandar Salaujan, Ales Pazniak, Jan Dzerzhavets, Aleh Jamialianau, Ihar Matsveeu and Tamara Momchyts were installing wooden crosses on Uspenskaya Hill to commemorate Stalin's victims, who were shot there in the 30s. The police broke the two already installed crosses, stomped on the flowers and the candles. The activists are to stand trial on charges of violating the Public Actions Law. (BNF, November 4)

## MALADY FRONT ACTIVISTS DETAINED

On November 11, police detained Zmitser Dashkevich, 22, Artur Finkevich, 18, and Aleh Hnechyk, 17, activists of Malady (Youth) Front, for distributing leaflets urging people to attend a march against a possible constitutional referendum aimed at allowing Lukashenko to run for the third presidential term. After police reports were filed at the Sovetsky Precinct, the activists were released. (Charter 97, November 11)

## RAPPORTEUR ON DISAPPEARED VISITS BELARUS

Christos Pourgourides (Cyprus, EPP/CD), a member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) legal committee, visited Belarus on November 5-8, at the invitation of Vladimir Konoplev, vice-chair of the Belarusian Parliament's House of Representatives. The main purpose of the visit was to gather information on the disappearances of Yuri Zakharenko, Victor Gonchar, Anatoly Krasovsky, and Dmitry Zavadsky (See Belarus Update Vol. 6, No. 3). The PACE investigator met with Sergei Martynov, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Vladimir Naumov, Minister of Interior, and his predecessor Yuri Sivakov, as well as Victor Sheiman, Prosecutor General, and Vladimir Konoplyov. Pourgourides also met with the families of the disappeared and human rights non-governmental organizations (NGOs). According to Pourgourides, he intends to return to Minsk in December 2003, to finish his mission.

PACE created a special committee to investigate the cases of the missing Belarusian opposition figures. The Committee is headed by Sergei Kovalev, a deputy of the Russian Duma and a prominent human rights defender. Persisting in its efforts to thwart any international investigation into the disappearances, the Lukashenko administration denied Kovalev's request to visit Belarus. (PACE, November 5-12)

## BELARUSIANS ABROAD PROTEST AGAINST LUKASHENKO REGIME

On November 4, the Belarusian political refugees' organizations in France, Belgium, Holland, and the Czech Republic held protests against Lukashenko's regime, Charter 97 reported. In Paris, representatives of the Belarusian European Union held a picket at the building where the Special PACE Committee on Disappeared held its session. Another picket took place at the Belarusian Embassy in Brussels. On the same day, the Belarusian Union of Holland picketed the Belarusian Embassy in the Hague. Yet another protest was held in Prague by the Union of Belarusians Abroad. (Charter 97, November 5)

## BELARUSIAN COURTS CONTINUE NGO LIQUIDATION SPREE

On November 5, the Minsk City Court declined the appeal filed by the Independent Association of Legal Research in connection with two warnings the Association received from the Minsk

Executive Council, Charter 97 reported. Alyona Tanakachova, the Association chair, said that the decision means a de facto liquidation of the NGO. [Under the Belarusian law, an NGO can be liquidated after receiving two “official warnings.” – Ed.] In the last five years, the Association has provided legal support to about 40 Belarusian NGOs.

On November 11, the Belarusian Supreme Court ordered the liquidation of the Association of Young Entrepreneurs, RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported. The Association, which provided legal counsel and business-related education to young people involved in small business, was accused of registration improprieties during the infamous 1999 re-registration drive.

Separately, on October 17, the Justice Ministry denied a registration request submitted by the Assembly of Pro-democratic NGOs, the largest association of NGO in Belarus, the Assembly reported on its website. The request was originally submitted in October 2002. (Charter 97, RFE/RL, [www.belngo.info](http://www.belngo.info), November 6-11)

## BALTIC YOUTH LEADERS SUPPORT DEMOCRATIC BELARUS

On November 1-2, Vladimir Kobets, coordinator of Zubr Youth Movement, attended a conference of Baltic youth organizations held in Piarnu, Estonia, Zubr reported. Referring to the 2004 Belarusian parliamentary election, the meeting attendees expressed their support for the Belarusian opposition's efforts to return Belarus to the way of democracy. “The conference showed that there is a great interest of the neighboring countries to the democratization of Belarus and its further integration into Europe. The leaders of the youth organizations promised to raise the issue of Belarus through their representatives in the national parliaments,” said Kobets. The delegates also signed an Agreement on Cooperation to Achieve Democracy in Belarus. See the full text of the Agreement at [www.zubr-belarus.com/index.php?id=712&lang=2](http://www.zubr-belarus.com/index.php?id=712&lang=2) (Zubr, November 5)

## HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS: BELARUSIAN CIVIL SOCIETY FACES EXTINCTION

Drawing attention to the recent closures of Belarusian NGOs and crackdown on independent media, delegates to the Human Rights House Network's Annual Meeting, representing human rights NGOs in Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kenya, Norway, Poland, Russia, Turkey and Uganda, expressed “deep concern about the Belarusian authorities' campaign to destroy civil society in Belarus,” Charter 97 reported. Attendees, who gathered in Bergen, Norway, on October 31, believe that such a campaign represents a “systematic attempt to silence human rights defenders and prevent the development of a pluralist democratic society.” Human rights defenders believe that the “all-encompassing attack on Belarusian civil society” is undertaken by the authority in preparation to the 2004 parliamentary election. Citing Art. 21 and 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights as well as Art. 19 of the UN's Declaration for Human Rights, the Human Rights House Network urged the Belarusian authorities to bring its conduct in compliance with these international commitments, which are also guaranteed by the Belarusian Constitution. (Charter 97, November 3)

## EU AND OSCE SUPPORT BELARUSIAN CIVIL SOCIETY

On November 5, participants of the 13th meeting of the EU and OSCE representatives held in Kishinev, Moldova, on November 5, expressed concern about the “continuing steps of the authorities restricting the civil society and mass media in Belarus and the inadequacy of the electoral legal system,” OSCE reported on. They appealed to the Belarusian government to fulfill its international obligations and to “let civil society, including mass media, play their important role in the development of democracy.” (OSCE, November 6)

## BELARUS CRITICIZES U.S. HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

The Belarusian Foreign Ministry delivered its official comment on the 2002 State Department Report on Human Rights Practices in Belarus to the U.S. Embassy in Minsk, reported Belapan. According to Sergei Skvortsov, Ministry spokesman, the Belarusian government considers the U.S. report to be “biased,” noting that a number of statements “contradict reality” and are “simply false.” In its report, released on March 31, 2003, the State Department concluded that in 2002, the Belarusian regime's human rights record “remained poor and worsened in several areas.” The Ministry also criticized the report for paying “more attention to information coming from the opposition and NGOs rather than from official sources.” (Belapan, November 6)

## ...WHILE ATTEMPTING TO MEND FENCES WITH WASHINGTON

Belarus is interested in restoring full-scale cooperation with the United States, provided the U.S. leadership “recognizes Belarus' right to conduct independent domestic and foreign policies,” said Alexander Gerasimenko, Belarusian Deputy Foreign Minister, Belapan reported on November 4. On October 30, Mikhail Khvostov, the newly appointed Belarusian ambassador to Washington, urged the Bush administration to replace its current policy of “selective engagement” with that of “constructive engagement,” which would entail more contacts (See Belarus Update, Vol. 6, No. 3). (Belapan, November 4)

## -- MEDIA FREEDOM IN BELARUS --

## INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER BANNED IN SVETLOGORSK

Caving to the pressure from the authorities, the Svetlogorsk Consumer Society has cancelled a distribution contract to sell in its stores *Regionalnye Novosti*, an independent newspaper, Charter 97 reported. The decision was prompted by the complaints of Balislav Pirshtuk, head of the Regional Executive Committee, who saw the newspaper in a provincial store. According to Raisa Matychka, the society's vice-chair, the authorities advised the group that *Regionalnye Novosti* “does not fit the profile of the local population,” urging it to focus on distribution of

government sponsored publications. In addition, according to *Regionalnye Novosti's* editor, the state owned regional publishing houses have consistently refused to print the newspaper. (Charter 97, November 5)

-- RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN BELARUS --

#### BELARUS BANS AHMADIYYA MUSLIMS

The Belarusian government's lists of 16 prohibited religious organizations includes Ahmadiyya, a British based Islamic sect, Forum 18 News Service reported. According to Forum 18, the Belarusian officials do not register sects of Christianity or Islam, claiming "there will be conflicts between them."

In another disturbing indication that the separation between the Church and the State continues to blur in Belarus, Forum 18 News Service reported that Orthodox Christian communities that do not belong to the Moscow Patriarchate can only gain state recognition if they manage to receive approval of a local Moscow Patriarchate bishop. The practice threatens the existence of the Russian True Orthodox Church, which is under the auspices of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, the Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox (People's) Church and Catacomb True Orthodox communities. (Forum 18, November 4-6)

-- BROTHER SLAVS --

#### BORODIN FLOATS IDEA OF PUTIN RULE PAST 2008

President Vladimir Putin could be in power for another two decades if his former boss's vision becomes reality, The Financial Times reported. Pavel Borodin, a Yeltsin-era Kremlin property chief and currently the secretary of the Russia-Belarus Union, said that Putin could become the head of a new confederation of the former Soviet republics. The confederation, according to Borodin, would start with a proposed union of Russia and Belarus, and would later include other Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries. Last month the presidents of Russia, Belarus, Ukraine and Kazakhstan signed a principle agreement to form an integrated free trade zone. The four nations set a December 1 deadline to outline the main steps need to create a common market, which ultimately will require harmonizing legislation. Borodin hired Putin to work as his deputy at the Kremlin property department in 1996. (FT, St. Petersburg Times, October 30-November 4)

-- AT HOME IN BELARUS --

#### BELARUS PRESIDENT SAYS HE MIGHT SEEK THIRD TERM

During a November 7, visit to the Homel region in southern Belarus, Lukashenko reiterated that

he might seek a third term as president, which is currently prohibited by the Belarusian constitution, AP reported. Hinting at a possibility that he could call a referendum to amend the constitution, which limits presidents to two terms, Lukashenko said that he may “ask people” whether they would be “opposed” to him participating in the next presidential election on “an equal basis” with “five or six other candidates.” After he first floated the idea of yet another constitutional referendum in August 2003 [Lukashenko extended his first term in a disputed referendum in 1996 and won his current term in a 2001 vote local and international observers said was neither free nor fair. – Ed.], Belarusian opposition leaders voiced concerns that Lukashenko, who was first elected in 1994, would seek to stay in power after his current term runs out in 2006.

Meanwhile, on November 9, police in Homel briefly detained two activists of the opposition United Civic Party after the activists staged a street poll on a possible third term for Lukashenko, Belapan, Belarusian news agency, reported. Reportedly, some 90 percent of the 2,172 respondents in that survey said they are opposed to Lukashenko or any other person remaining in the president's post for more than two terms, the agency added. The activists will be tried in court for staging an unauthorized demonstration. (AP, Belapan, November 7-9)

-- ELECTION 2004 --

#### OPPOSITION ORGANIZATIONS GET READY FOR ELECTION

As we reported in the last issue, on November 1, representatives of Belarusian NGOs and political parties, announced the creation of the European Coalition “Free Belarus” (See Belarus Update, Vol. 6, No. 3). The newly created organization seeks to accelerate the integration of Belarus into the European Union (EU) and to establish a common opposition election platform ahead of next year’s parliamentary poll. The Coalition is open to institutional and individual members. Apart from Valery Schukin, deputy of the 13th Supreme Soviet, and Galina Dryabizova, a civil rights lawyer, the following organizations signed the Coalition’s Declaration: Nadzeja Women’s Party; the Belarusian Women’s Forum; the Women’s Coordination Center; Revival of the Fatherland, Women’s Association; the Belarusian Association of Women Jurists; ‘We Remember!’, a civil initiative established by the wives of disappeared (Irina Krasovskaya and Svetlana Zavadskaya); the Belarusian Branch of the European Movement, a public association; the Belarusian Branch of the European Home, a public association; Private Property, a national NGO, Volat [Strongman] Youth Center (Borisov, Minsk Region); Maladzechna Talaka, civic initiative established in the City of Molodechno, Minsk Region; Terre Convention, ecological civic initiative; the Public Association of Young Social Democrats; the Republican Businessmen’s Strike Committee; the Belarusian Solidarity, civic initiative; the International Fund named after Yefrasinnia Polatskaya; Narodnaya Hramada, Belarusian Social Democratic Party; Free Belarus, democratic block, and Charter 97, civic initiative.

Representatives of the European Coalition “Free Belarus,” took part in a session of the Coordination Committee of the Hrodna Initiative, reported the Assembly of Pro-democratic NGOs. The session focused on developing a strategy that would ensure an nomination of a single

opposition candidate per electoral district in the 2004 parliamentary election. (Charter 97, [www.belngo.info](http://www.belngo.info), November 3-11)

## OPPOSITION UNITES

According to an article written for the International War and Peace Reporting by Yury Potemkin, reporter with the Belapan information agency, opposition parties in Belarus have formed a wide-ranging coalition designed to improve their chances in the 2004 parliamentary election. The group, titled Narodny Deputat [People's Deputy], brings together five opposition parties, the Respublika faction in the Belarusian parliament, and an association of local councils. Three major opposition parties, the United Civil Party, UCP, the Belarusian Popular Front and the Belarusian Party of Communists, along with the smaller Labor Party and the Social Democratic Society make up the coalition.

In recent elections, the opposition parties have failed to make many inroads on the regime of President Alexander Lukashenko. They have no seats in parliament because of a boycott of the last general election, and performed even worse in the 2003 local elections, widely seen as a first test of their grassroots campaigning skills for the future parliamentary vote.

There was no official reaction from the government. But a pro-presidential faction in the parliament, also called People's Deputy, was peeved that the new coalition was using its name. "I believe that the opposition is deliberately trying to mislead voters," said the group's deputy head Sergei Kostyan. "But I am sure that in the end, people will work out who the real People's Deputy group is." Read the full article at [www.iwpr.net](http://www.iwpr.net) (IWPR, November 5)

-- INTERNATIONAL NEWS --

## IRAN, BELARUS TO EXPAND BILATERAL RELATIONS

In a meeting with Leonid Rachkov, Belarusian Ambassador to Tehran, Hossein Hashemi, the head of the Iran-Belarus Parliamentary Friendship Group, stressed the importance of expanding bilateral relations with Belarus, IRNA reported. Hashemi expressed satisfaction with close and growing ties between the two countries and highlighted great bilateral potential and capabilities. He said current economic exchanges between Iran and Belarus are insufficient, adding the two sides have enormous capacities for expanding ties and their parliaments can play an important role in this regard. The official assessed the role of the Parliamentary Friendship Group as "very important" and said these groups can play a decisive role in implementation of previous agreements. Alluding to "several commonalties" that Iran and Belarus ostensibly "share," Rachkov called for further cooperation of Iran's Majlis in expanding economic, commercial, political and parliamentary ties between Tehran and Minsk. (Iran News, November 9)

## VIETNAM ON ARMS SHOPPING TRIP TO BELARUS

A top Vietnamese military official visited Belarus to continue his country's purchase program of Soviet designed weapons for its air missile defense program, Radio Free Asia's (RFA) Vietnamese service reported. General Bui Dang Phiet, deputy commander of Vietnam's air force, visited Belarus on October 28-November 7, according to the Belarusian Defense Ministry (see Belarus Update, Vol. 6, No. 2). During the visit, General Phiet, who is responsible for air defense and armaments procurement, met with his Belarus counterpart, Anatoly Vankovich, to discuss "military-technical cooperation," the ministry said. The visit comes soon after Vietnam signed a deal with Russia in August for the import of two Soviet-designed S300 PMU1 air defense batteries or 12 missile launchers for an estimated US\$300 million. According to RFA, the purchasing trip to Belarus is the latest in a series of attempts by Hanoi to boost its military capabilities with Russian weapons, owing to its familiarity with Soviet arms during the Vietnam War. (RFA, November 10)

-- CALENDAR OF EVENTS --

November 6-21 – ILO considers violations of Belarusian trade unions' rights

November 19 – DG Relex, EuropeAid and the Delegation of the European Commission to Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova will hold a conference in Brussels, titled “Belarus, Our Future Neighbor.”

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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](http://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](http://www.belarusupdate.org) for back issues, analysis, and links to news sites and NGOs in Belarus. Letters to the Editor: [vcole@ilhr.org](mailto:vcole@ilhr.org), subscription services: [otarasov@ilhr.org](mailto: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.

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