

INTERNATIONAL LEAGUE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

BELARUS UPDATE Edited by Victor Cole

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NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

As the editor of *The Belarus Update*, I am happy to report that after a brief hiatus, we are back on-line with more in-depth coverage of the human rights situation in Belarus.

The Bulletin owes its success first and foremost to its readers. I would like to thank all of you for your loyalty and contributions. Please share your opinions and thoughts with us; write to me at vcole@ilhr.org

Certainly no achievements are possible without a dedicated team. Let me introduce two new members of the League: Dr. Louise Kantrow and Olga Tarasov.

Dr. Kantrow, whose welcome message to our readers appears in this issue, joined the League as its new Executive Director. Her distinguished career includes service at the United Nations, the United States Agency for International Development, the Population Council and the United Nations Association of the USA (UNA-USA). She brings a wealth of experience and a vision to the League and has generously agreed to contribute a great deal of energy to ensure the success of the Belarus Human Rights Support Project.

Before joining the League in August 2003 as its CIS program officer, Olga Tarasov worked as a Europe and Central Asia research associate at the Committee to Protect Journalists. She holds a B.A. in international affairs from the George Washington University and Russian studies as well as an M.A. from Georgetown University's Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service. Olga was born in Belarus and is fluent in Russian and proficient in Polish.

At last, but not at all least, I would like to thank the Open Society Institute, a charitable foundation founded by the American philanthropist and financier George Soros, whose financial assistance has made *The Belarus Update* possible.

I look forward to hearing from you and hope that you and I will work together for the benefit of our beloved Belarus. Zhyve Belarus!

SOME USEFUL INFO

The Belarus Update is a weekly news bulletin of the Belarus Human Rights Support Project of the International League for Human Rights. 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.

Since its launch in 1998, the Update has aimed to provide a “one-stop” summary of events and trends relating to civil and political rights in Belarus. It has also highlighted the activities of NGOs and touches on socio-economic issues as they relate to the development of the Belarusian civil society.

The Belarus Human Rights Support Project is a part of Human Rights Defenders’ Lifeline Project, which was originally launched by the League in 1982 to defend individuals and groups who suffer reprisals for promoting human rights in their societies. Among those the League defended were Andrei Sakharov, Kim Dae Jung and Jaime Castillo Velasco.

Established in 1997, the Belarus Project supports judges, lawyers, human rights advocates, and journalists in making their case before the U.S. government, as well as the public and international fora regarding President Alexander Lukashenko’s wholesale assault on human rights and the rule of law in Belarus.

For more information on the Belarus Human Rights Support Project or to learn more about the League, please visit our website at www.ilhr.org

For back issues of the bulletin, analysis, and links to news sites and NGOs in Belarus, go to www.belarusupdate.org

For queries on how to subscribe or unsubscribe and other information, contact belarus@ilhr.org

WELCOME MESSAGE FROM OUR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Dear Readers,

As the new Executive Director of the International League for Human Rights, I am pleased to announce the resumption of weekly editions of the League’s *Belarus Update*, after a hiatus of almost ten months. As most of you know the *Update* is the weekly bulletin of the Belarus Human Rights Support Project which was established to help Belarusian citizens make their case for the protection of human rights and the promotion of civil society before the international community.

Since 1998, the weekly *Belarus Update* has chronicled events and issues, and transmitted the information internationally to individuals and policy makers. Taken together these volumes provide an invaluable picture of a critical period in the history of Belarus.

Since 1994, when Alexander Lukashenko came to power, the world has seen the growth of an increasingly repressive regime that regularly violates the most fundamental human rights, and harasses the country's political opposition, independent media and NGO community. The situation in the past few months has only escalated which makes publication of *Belarus Update* even more critical.

Belarus Update gives a voice to the disenfranchised elements of Belarusian society and is indispensable in informing the outside world of developments within Belarus, as well as Belarus related news in general. Our very able Victor Cole will resume his role of Editor. We hope you will continue to read and use this material and we will look forward to your feedback.

Best regards,

Louise Kantrow

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--HUMAN RIGHTS AND OPPOSITION NEWS --

BELARUSIAN COURT CLOSES NGO

On October 16, the Belarusian Supreme Court ordered liquidation of the Lutskevich Brothers Foundation, an NGO focused on historical research and cultural and social projects, Belapan reported. The court found the foundation guilty of infractions during

the 1999 re-registration campaign, using an incorrect seal, having an office in a private apartment in violation of housing regulations, and a failure to register regional branches. Speaking to journalists after the decision was announced, Victor Galavanov, Minister of Justice, denied that the ongoing campaign to shut down as many Belarusian NGOs as possible was initiated by the Ministry in preparation to next year's parliamentary election and a possible referendum on extending President Lukashenko's term in office. (Belapan, October 17)

...AND GOES AFTER ANOTHER

On October 22, the Belarusian Supreme Court began hearing the liquidation case against Viasna, Human Rights Center. During the morning hearing, Neanila Fishkina, a person responsible for registration of public organizations at the Ministry of Justice, testified as to the infractions allegedly committed by Viasna. According to Fishkina, Viasna leadership forged several signatures on Viasna's registration documents. After the testimony, she was cross-examined by Judge Valentina Kulik, Ales Belyatski, Valentin Stefanovich and Vladimir Labkovich, Viasna representatives, Alesia Vydruk, Independent Association of Legal Research, and Gary Pogonyalo, Belarusian Helsinki Committee. (Viasna, October 22)

BELARUSIAN TRADE-UNION LAWYER JAILED FOR CONTEMPT OF COURT

Judge Natalia Revutskaya of Moskovsky District Court in Minsk held Vladimir Adynets, an attorney representing the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions (BCDTU), in contempt and ordered him jailed for five days, Belapan reported. He was accused of violation of Art. 166, para 1, of the Code of Administrative Violations ("disrespect to court"). Adynets has allegedly failed to appear at a hearing held last September. According to Adynets, he did not show up because his client Alexander Yarashuk, a BCDTU leader, got sick and informed both the judge and his lawyer that he would not be present. Adynets said he had no right to represent the client in his absence. (Belapan, October 17)

LEAGUE BRINGS BELARUSIAN ACTIVISTS TO OSCE FORUM

On October 6-19, the League participated in the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, organized by the OSCE's Office for Democratic Initiatives and Human Rights in Warsaw, Poland. The annual conference of the 55-nation Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Europe's biggest security organization, was discussing ways to prevent human-rights violations like human trafficking and to promote freedom of expression. Among other human rights experts and opposition leaders, the League invited Zhanna Litvina, founder and president of the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ). On October 7, Litvina made oral interventions during the OSCE working session on the topics of press freedom and freedom on assembly.

On October 7, Olga Tarasov, the League's CIS Program Officer, Zhanna Litvina and other conference attendees, including Alexander Milinkevich, President of the Belarusian Association of Resource Centers, Tatyana Protko, Chair of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, Lyudmila Gryaznova, human rights defender, and Ales Belyatsky, Chair of Viasna, Human Rights Center, met with members of the U.S. Mission to the OSCE. The U.S. side was represented by Amb. Stephan Minikes, Amb. Pamela Hyde Smith, and Robert McNamara, Deputy Chief of Staff of the U.S. Congressional Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe. The meeting participants discussed the worsening human rights climate in the Belarus, as well as a possible future strategy toward Belarus. Olga Tarasov provided translation and advocacy assistance. (ILHR, October 22)

-- MEDIA FREEDOM IN BELARUS --

U.S.: LUKASHENKO REGIME STRANGLES MEDIA

Criticizing the treatment of independent press by the government in Belarus, Robert McNamara, Deputy Chief of Staff of the U.S. Congressional Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, made the following statement at the OSCE conference in Warsaw:

"The United States is dismayed that the Lukashenko regime in Belarus continues to strangle media freedoms. In the latest example of Belarus's assault on media freedoms, the Belarusian authorities denied an entry visa to Freimut Duve, OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media. This builds on a pattern of growing harassment of and hostility toward the media by the Lukashenko regime. In July 2003, IREX, a U.S.-based NGO, closed its Belarusian operations when the authorities refused to renew its accreditation on the grounds that IREX was funding opposition media. I would also note that, over the course of the last four months, there have been further restrictions imposed on the independent media, with the suspensions of independent newspapers Beloruskaya Delovaya Gazeta, Navinki, Ekho and Predprinimatelskaya Gazeta. The offices of the trade union paper Solidarnost were also sealed by the authorities." (United States Mission to the OSCE, October 7)

OSCE: INTERNET WILL HELP TO COMBAT STATE CENSORSHIP

The Internet is a key tool to dismantle oppressive state censorship in some former communist countries, an expert told a session of OSCE conference in Warsaw on October 7. Freimut Duve, the OSCE Media Freedom representative, said press coverage of scandals and problems was drying up in countries such as Belarus and Central Asian nations because people were afraid to talk to journalists. Power-brokers in such countries have "multifold ways to organize censorship, keep the journalists silent and kill their curiosity and courage" - a development that the Internet could help to combat. "We have to develop new opportunities like the freedom of the Internet - which these countries try to cut - and an open, multi-language society with access to multi-lingual media and to foreign media," he said during a debate at the conference. Duve

also identified Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan as black spots for media freedom. (OSCE, October 7)

HAVEL EXTENDS SUPPORT TO BELARUSIAN EDITOR

On October 17, Vaclav Havel, former Czech dissident and ex-President, donated the cash portion of Hanno R. Ellenbogen Citizenship Award presented to him by the Prague Society for International Cooperation to Andrei Dynko, 29, the editor-in-chief of Nasha Niva, Belarusian independent weekly, the Associate Press reported. The award is given each year to an individual who has dedicated his or her life to public service with the stipulation that the financial portion of the award (\$5,500) be passed to a gifted young person. At the ceremony, Havel praised Dynko's publication, calling it "a symbol of independence and an island of freedom." Dynko called the gesture a "much needed boost to the democracy movement in Belarus," adding that the money will be used to shore up the weekly's finances. Former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who received the award last year and who also took part in the ceremony, said in a speech that it is important to recognize pro-democracy activists. "Mr. Havel used to tell me (that he and other dissidents) could not have existed without the interest of those who care about human rights," Albright said. The Prague society, whose honorary chairman is former South African President F.W. de Klerk, was established in 1999 to promote international cooperation in Central Europe. (AP, October 20)

AMNESTY: THREATS AGAINST JOURNALISTS ARE RISING WORLDWIDE

Independent media face threats and new restrictions in many countries, including the harassment and prosecution of journalists and the closure of newspapers and TV stations, Amnesty International said in a report released on October 16. Media control, "and hence influence over the mind of people, often is sought by those seeking to maintain power," the report said, citing alleged abuses in Algeria, Belarus, Colombia, Cuba, Eritrea, Guatemala, Indonesia, Iran, Rwanda, Syria, Venezuela and Zimbabwe.

Separately, Reporters without Borders, an international press-freedom watchdog, has published its annual report assessing the "freedom of speech index" throughout the world. Belarus occupies dishonorable 151st position, behind Ukraine (132nd) and Russia (148th), and followed by Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. (AI, RWF, October 9-16)

-- RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN BELARUS --

NEW RELIGION LAW SUPPRESSES CHURCH GROWTH

As last year's religion law confines the activity of a religious organization to a defined geographical area -- often a single village, town or region of the country, Baptist, Pentecostal and Catholic spiritual leaders begin to express their concern. The law's provisions "make it really difficult to establish new churches," Baptist pastor Victor Zdanevich complained to Forum 18 News Service. As an autonomously registered

congregation, his church is banned from creating a mission. Mikola Sharakh, chair of a Greek Catholic parish council in Polotsk, noted that the law effectively limits growth, creating a "reservation" for the church. One Roman Catholic agreed, telling Forum 18: "Authorities might argue that churches are open, but what freedom is that?" (Forum 18, October 13)

U.S.: NEW LAW ON RELIGION IMPEDES FREEDOM

In a statement on freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief or freedom of expression, free media and information made at the OSCE conference in Warsaw, Ms. Janet Mayland, member of the U.S. Mission, noted that "the passing of a restrictive new religion law, the enactment of an accord between the government and the Russian Orthodox Church, and the new law on rallies and demonstrations have led to a serious deterioration in religious freedom." She expressed concern that "the new law on religion raises nearly insurmountable barriers to the entry of new faiths and the right of adherents to such faiths to express their religious beliefs. Since the new law came into force, police have reportedly raided religious meetings and issued warnings and fines. Some groups have experienced violence from the authorities. It is feared the accord with the Orthodox Church will result in greater discrimination and harassment of other religions, as it increases the Orthodox Church's influence over numerous areas of public life." (United States Mission to the OSCE, October 7)

VANDALS DEFILE HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL IN BELARUS

Vandals smashed cans of paint against and daubed anti-Jewish slogans on a recently installed Holocaust memorial in the town of Lida, Grodno Region, Reuters reported, quoting Yakov Basin, head of a group that defends Jewish rights in Belarus. "This monument, at a site where several dozen Jews were shot during the war, was built only a month and a half ago," Basin told Reuters. Last month, Jewish leaders accused the Belarusian Ministry of Education of pursuing anti-Semitic policies after the officials shut down the Belarusian State University's International Humanities Institute, which offered a course in Jewish studies. (Reuters, October 14)

NEVER AGAIN!

Following are remarks delivered by Amb. George Krol at the Ceremonial Meeting dedicated to the 60th anniversary of the destruction of the Minsk Ghetto:

"We are gathered here today to commemorate a great tragedy, a tragedy that occurred here in Minsk but was repeated throughout Belarus and much of Europe. It is a searing memory we recall – of the brutal deaths of innocent men, women and children, who died simply because of their ethnic background and religion. We must never forget them. Furthermore, we must never forget the lesson their deaths taught the world. Such is the tragedy that can emerge from unchecked hatred, intolerance, persecution, fear and ill will."

“Unfortunately the lessons learned from the destruction of the Minsk Ghetto have yet to be learned among some in Belarus. Vandalism of Jewish memorials and cemeteries and the circulation of anti-Semitic literature and comments dishonor not only the memory of those who perished here, but disgrace the efforts of those who have fought and currently strive to ensure that the events that took place 60 years ago never happen again.”

“We must remain vigilant and firm in rejecting all forms of extremism and ethnic and religious hatred. Governments and societies have a special obligation to act promptly to protect their citizens from acts of hatred, to teach and practice tolerance but deal firmly with those who preach ethnic and religious hatred.” (U.S. Embassy in Minsk, October 21)

-- BROTHER SLAVS --

BELARUS PRES UPBEAT ON UNION WITH RUSSIA

Visiting Moscow, President Alexander Lukashenko said on September 30 that he was hopeful about a planned union between the two former Soviet republics, despite economic disagreements that have stalled the project, ITAR-Tass and Interfax, Russian news agencies, reported. Opening a meeting of the union's State Council in Moscow with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Lukashenko said there were “serious and objective” obstacles to building the union. “At times, it is difficult to find a solution, but we will find one,” he added.

Lukashenko and then-Russian President Boris Yeltsin signed a union treaty in 1996, but the plans have failed to progress, in part because of rocky relations between Putin and Lukashenko.

In January 2003, the two leaders vowed to push ahead with plans to introduce the Russian ruble as the single currency by January 1, 2005, but the agreement on implementation has been stalled amid concerns among Belarusian officials that it could give Russia too much control over their much smaller country. Next day, Mikhail Kasyanov, Russian Prime Minister, confirmed that the two sides failed to agree on the terms of a deal during meetings and that there may not be enough time to introduce the single currency as planned, the Interfax news agency reported. (ITAR-Tass, Interfax, October 1)

-- AT HOME IN BELARUS --

LUKASHENKO'S POPULARITY DWINDLES

According to a poll conducted by the Independent Institute of Socioeconomic and Political Studies (NISEPI) among 1,519 Belarusians last September, 49 percent of the population disapprove of the government's policies, while 30 percent said they agreed with the country's path of development, Belapan reported on October 13. Of those

polled, 28 percent said they would re-elect President Alexander Lukashenko, while 61 percent said "someone else" should be elected president. JM

-- ELECTION 2004 --

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION URGED TO FORM PRO-EUROPEAN ALLIANCE

Representatives of 10 democratic organizations meeting in Borisov, Minsk Region, on October 20 have appealed to Belarusian opposition parties to form a pro-European alliance, Belapan reported, quoting Igor Lednik, a local activist of the United Civic Party. Lednik suggested that local authorities set up an association of Belarusian cities that should in turn seek membership of the Council of Europe's Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe. Lednik said the Belarusian Parliament should also seek a greater role in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe after next year's parliamentary election. Last November, Belarusian opposition politicians as well as cultural and public figures formed the European Movement in order to promote European values and integration with the European Union. The movement, established on the initiative of Belarusian Social Democratic Party (National Assembly) leader Mikalay Statkevich, is headed by Mikhail Marynich. (Belapan, October 20)

-- INTERNATIONAL NEWS --

BELARUS EXPELS JORDANIAN FOR SUSPECTED TERRORIST ACTIVITIES

On October 16 the Belarusian authorities decided to deport Jordanian national Walid Husayn al-Muhammad Muzay'in because of his suspected involvement with the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, a terrorist organization, Belarusian Television reported. According to the Belarusian KGB, Muzay'in, who has been working toward a postgraduate degree at the Belarusian Medical Academy for two years, was said to have been preaching radical Islam among students of Arabic origin and recruiting supporters. He was ordered to leave Belarus by October 18. (BT, October 16)

-- CALENDAR OF EVENTS --

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