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--HUMAN RIGHTS AND OPPOSITION NEWS --

ZUBR ACTIVIST SENTENCED TO FIVE DAYS IN JAIL

On December 22, the Gomel Tsentralny District Court sentenced Syarhei Syamyenou, Zubr activist, to five days in jail for taking part in the December 20 action commemorating the second anniversary of the death of another Zubr activist Andrei Zaitsau, the movement's website reported.

[Andrei Zaitsau, a 24-year-old member of Zubr, a youth opposition movement, committed suicide on December 20, 2001, in Gomel (see Belarus Update, Vol. 4, No. 52). After his death, Zaitsau's friends found an audio cassette of a phone conversation between Andrei and Senior Lt. Aleksander Yevstigneyev, an employee of the Gomel Region KGB Department, as well as Andrei's letter to the Belarusian Helsinki Committee detailing KGB's recruitment effort. Subsequently, KGB officials denied any involvement, maintaining that the Gomel Department never even employed anyone named Yevstigneyev. – Ed.]

Syamyenou was charged with violation of Art. 156 (petty hooliganism) and Art. 166 (disorderly conduct and disobeying the police) of the Administrative Offences Code. Four more local Zubr activists were arrested but released shortly.

Similar protests took place in Minsk. Holding candles and Andrei's pictures, about 20 activists lined up in front of the KGB Headquarters. The action lasted for about 40 minutes, no arrests were reported. (Zubr, December 22-23)

BNF MEMBERS COLLECT SIGNATURES IN VITEBSK, RECEIVE HEAVY FINES

On December 22, police in Vitebsk arrested Uladzimir Pleshchanka and Alyaksandar Salauyan, members of the Belarusian Popular Front Conservative Christian Party (KKhP BNF), conservative wing of the Belarusian Popular Front (BNF), headed by Zyanon Pazniak, Belapan reported. Although the two activists were charged with organizing an unauthorized picket, they maintain they were simply collecting signatures under an appeal demanding the repeal of the Russia-Belarus Union Treaty, not conducting a picket. The Vitebsk Chyhunachny District Court fined Pleschanka 2,475,000 Belarusian rubles (US\$1,125) and Salaujan 2,475,000 Belarusian rubles (US\$1,200). (Belapan, December 23)

ORSHA COURT FINES BNF ACTIVIST FOR PICKETING

Judge Ihar Kalesnik of the Orsha City Court found Yuras Konyshka, a KKhP BNF activist, guilty of staging an unauthorized picket and fined him 330,000 Belarusian rubles (\$150), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Belarusian Service reported. Konyshka was one of the organizers of the picket, which took place in Orsha on January 11, 2003. A police report claimed that the posters carried by the protesters insulted honor and dignity of Lukashenko. Two other organizers of the picket were tried and fined six months ago. The authorities could not charge Konyshka earlier because he worked as a court clerk and was not subject to administrative charges without a proper sanction of the Regional Council. On September 5 the Orsha Regional Council voted to deprive the activist of immunity, enabling the court to proceed with the trial. (RFE/RL, December 23)

ANOTHER NGO FACES LIQUIDATION

On December 22, the Belarusian Supreme Court upheld two warnings issued by the Minsk City Executive Committee Justice Department to the Independent Association on Legal Research, Charter 97 reported. This decision gives the Committee the necessary legal grounds to petition the court to liquidate the NGO under the pretext that the organization received two warnings within one year. [On November 5, the Minsk City Court declined the appeal filed by the Association (see Belarus Update, Vol. 6, No. 4). – Ed.] In the last five years, the Association has provided legal support to about 40 Belarusian NGOs.

The Supreme Court also heard an appeal by the Assembly of Pro-democratic NGOs against the Justice Ministry's decision to deny its registration request. No decision has been reported. (Charter 97, December 23)

LOCAL BNF LEADER CHARGED WITH TAX EVASION

Alyaksei Lapitski, leader of the Zhodino BNF branch in the Minsk Region, has been charged with tax evasion, RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported. In 2001, Lapitski bought a one-bedroom apartment for his family. The local Department of Taxation has insisted that the activist could only afford it by hiding most of his real income from the authorities and has levied a 2 million Belarusian rubles (US\$900) fine. Lapitski believes that charges were brought in retaliation for his political activities. The hearing will be held in January 2004. (RFE/RL, December 22)

LYCEUM STUDENTS TO STUDY IN VILNIUS

Uladzimir Kolas, headmaster of the National Humanities Lyceum, an independent Belarusian academy, which was closed by authorities before the start of the school year, announced that 106 lyceum students were invited to the Vilnius Lyceum, which is based in the capital of Lithuania, from December 22 to January 3 to continue their studies, Charter 97 reported. Kolas called the invitation a true Christmas present for Lyceum's staff and pupils, who have not been able to attend the classes since September (see Belarus Update, Vol. 6, No. 8). (Charter, RFE/RL, December 22)

OSCE MINSK OFFICE MANDATE RENEWED FOR ANOTHER YEAR

Andrei Savinykh, the Belarusian Foreign Ministry spokesperson, announced that the OSCE Minsk Office (OOM) mandate has been renewed until January 1, 2005, Belapan reported. The renewal became effective as no OSCE member states filed any objections by December 24. The OSCE Permanent Council in Vienna, Austria, is to make the extension of the mandate official. (Belapan, December 24)

-- MEDIA FREEDOM IN BELARUS --

LOCAL AUTHORITIES BAR PUBLISHING OF INDEPENDENT PERIODICALS

The Belarusian government continues its crackdown on media freedom. On December 19, Judge Valyantsyna Staravoitava of the Mogilev Region Economic Court upheld the Krichev City Executive Committee's decision to prohibit Uladzimir Kudrautsau, founder of *Ulasny Kamentar* [*Private Observer*], an analytical weekly, from publishing another independent periodical, RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported. Kudrautsau cannot publish because the authorities refused to register the weekly's legal address. The publisher intends to appeal to the Belarusian Supreme Economic Court. As of today, there are no registered independent outlets in the city of

Krichev. Earlier, the authorities shut down *Volny Horad (Free City)*, and *Novaya Hazeta Krychava (Krychav's New Newspaper)*. The state-owned daily *Leninsky Klich (Lenin's Call)* remains the only printed source of local news in town. (RFE/RL, December 22)

UNIVERSITY STUDENTS GET ZUBR NEWSPAPER

On December 22, Zubr activists distributed the latest issue of *Supratsiu [Resistance]*, the movement's newspaper, to the students of the Belarusian State University and the Belarusian State Pedagogic University, the movement's website reported. The Belarusian State Pedagogic University security officers escorted the activists outside. No arrests were reported.

Local observers believe that such distribution of free issues of independent press is the most efficient way to educate the young generation of Belarusians about democracy and human rights, given the population's daily subjection to the state-owned electronic mass-media. The low income levels of Belarusian students enable them to buy very few independent printed media such as Russian newspapers. (Zubr, December 23)

OSCE: AUTHORITIES LAUNCH NEW ATTACK ON INDEPENDENT MEDIA

In an open letter to Sergei Martynov, the Belarusian Foreign Minister, Freimut Duve, OSCE Media Freedom Representative, expressed his grave concern about the Lukashenko government's continuous crackdown on the independent media, characterized by censorship, repression and intimidation, Charter 97 reported. Duve criticized the Minsk City Court decision to order *Narodnaya Volya*, the largest independent daily, to pay 50 million Belarusian rubles (US \$23,500) in libel damages to Yegor Rybakov, head of the Belarusian State Television and Radio Company (BRT) (see Belarus Update, Vol. 6, No. 6), calling it a "harassment campaign."

The OSCE official also slammed the decision of the Minsk Executive Committee to remove advertising posters of the *Narodnaya Volya* newspaper during the recent subscription campaign in Minsk metro. "The reason why the posters were removed," Duve wrote, "was allegedly the absence of the full legal name of the newspaper. I saw the posters myself and can testify that the newspaper title was there." "I consider such decisions by your government as another indication of what Colin Powell, the U.S. Secretary of State, called 'a systematic campaign against independent mass media in Belarus,'" Duve concluded. (Charter 97, December 24)

--TRADE UNION NEWS--

OPPOSITION LEADER OF BELARUSIAN TRADE UNION FORCED OUT

Alyaksandr Bukhvostau, chair of the Union of Automotive and Agricultural Machinery Workers (UAAMW), was forced out by a resolution of a Union's Special Convention held in Minsk on December 23, Charter 97 reported. The event gathered 407 delegates and representatives of international trade union associations. The convention was also attended by Leanid Kozik, chair

of the Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus (FTUB) and former deputy chief of the Lukashenko administration, and other officials.

Pyotr Akhramenka, UAAMW deputy chair, addressed the delegates, alleging that Bukhvostau “has been ignoring all decisions by the Union governing bodies, has become an authoritarian leader, and has focused too much on politics [referring to Bukhvostau involvement in the Belarusian Labor Party].” Replying to the accusations of politicizing the trade union movement, Bukhvostov argued that trade unions should respond to violations of workers’ rights.

Before leaving the gathering, Bukhvostau thanked the participants of the convention for their 12 years of work together and walked out together with about 70 sympathetic delegates and international representatives. Ten minutes later, they announced the establishment of the Independent Union of Automotive and Agricultural Machinery Workers, Radyjo Racyja reported. (Charter 97, Radyjo Racyja, December 24-25)

-- BROTHER SLAVS --

UKRAINIAN PRESIDENT SHOWS LUKASHENKO “THE WAY?”

Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma won parliamentary backing for having legislators pick the president starting in 2006, Reuters reported. Opponents call it an unlawful bid to skirt term limits. According to the proposal, starting next year, the president's powers would be reduced and his term cut to two years; the parliament would elect the president from 2006. Although Kuchma, first elected in 1994, says he has no intention of running again next year when his two legal terms are completed, the opposition suggests Kuchma could use backroom deals to ensure an ally or business associate runs next year. Even if a rival won, they say, his powers would be limited and a Kuchma ally, elected by a compliant assembly, could take over in 2006. (Reuters, December 25)

LUKASHENKO APPOINTS NEW PM, TOUGH ON RUSSIA

On December 19, Alexander Lukashenko appointed Sergei Sidorsky the Belarusian Prime Minister, Reuters reported. Sidorsky had been the acting Prime Minister since July 10, 2003, when the Belarusian strongman sacked Gennady Novitsky over wage arrears. Local analysts believe Sidorsky’s appointment would cause more problems in Belarus’ relations with Russia. In an interview to Reuters, Yaraslau Ramanchuk of Strategy, an independent Belarusian think tank, explained that the appointment of Sidorsky “indicates that Lukashenko will continue his confrontation with Russia.” (Belapan, Reuters, December 19)

-- AT HOME IN BELARUS --

LUKASHENKO: BELARUS SHOULD BE READY TO DEFEND ITSELF

At the December 26 meeting of the Belarusian Security Council, the Belarusian leader said that the country must be prepared to defend itself against an invasion, BelTA, a Belarusian news agency, reported. Since spring 2003, Lukashenko has been criticizing Washington's military campaign against Iraq, saying it had created a precedent whereby undesirable leaders could be unseated with military force. "Belarus has to be vigilant and pay particular attention to military readiness. Due to certain countries' ambitions, the world has returned to a state when military actions and brute force have become preferred instruments of foreign policy," Lukashenko said, using U.S. as an example. (BelTA, December 26)

PLANT DIRECTOR SENTENCED TO 10 YEARS IN MAXIMUM-SECURITY COLONY

On December 22, the Belarusian Supreme Court found Mikhail Leonov, former director general of the Minsk Tractor Factory (MTZ), guilty of large-scale embezzlement, money laundering, illegal opening of bank accounts in hard currency, and tax evasion. The court sentenced Leonov to 10 years in a maximum security colony with confiscation of property and banned him from holding managerial positions for another five years, Charter 97 reported. [Leonov was arrested on January 8, 2002, on corruption charges and has been in pretrial detention ever since (see Belarus Update, Vol. 5, Nos. 2-4, 9, 16; Vol. 6, No. 6). – Ed.] Prosecutor Oleg Shandarovich asked the court to sentence Leonov to 12 years in prison. Leonov was ordered to repay all damages to the state and MTZ by February 1, 2004. He considers himself innocent and is going to appeal the sentence. (Charter 97, December 23)

-- ELECTION 2004 --

REGIME GETS READY FOR PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

Lydia Yermoshina, chair of the Belarusian Central Commission on Elections and National Referenda, said the preparations for the next year parliamentary elections are already well under way, the Russian news agency Interfax reported. According to Yermoshina, the Commission had already worked up draft recommendations for electoral district commissions. Elections to the House of Representatives, lower chamber of the Belarusian Parliament will be held in October, 2004, and would cost approximately US\$7 million. (Interfax, December 22)

COMMUNISTS APPROVE 2004 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS PLATFORM

On December 21, the Central Committee of the Party of Communists of Belarus (PKB), an opposition Communist party, approved a draft platform for the next year parliamentary election campaign, Belapan reported. The Party defines its main goals as promoting real growth of the GDP, raising pensions and wages, reducing unemployment and inflation rates, reforming the housing sector, preserving and developing the education and health systems, ending what it describes as a demographic crisis, protecting the environment, fighting crime and corruption, and improving Belarus's international image. The document, titled "Do, Rather Than Promise," also states that the country's economic problems cannot be solved without political reform, in order

to ensure the unconditional rule of law, limits on presidential powers, legislative and judiciary independence, free and fair elections, and guaranteed rights and civil liberties. (Belapan, December 22)

-- NOTABLE QUOTES--

“We are not going to do any saber-rattling. We are not going to threaten anybody. We are talking about defending our Fatherland,” Alexander Lukashenko addressing the December 26 meeting of the Belarusian Security Council. (BelTA, December 26)

“Fairy tales about some financial flows from the West are a good reason to start crackdowns,” Vintsuk Vyachorka, BNF leader, commenting on Lukashenko’s last week criticism of the KGB’s alleged failure to track financial sources of the Belarusian opposition. (Belapan, December 23)

-- UPCOMING EVENTS --

Best Wishes for the Holidays and New Year to our readers! If you are missing any past issues of our publication or need further information, please contact otarasov@ilhr.org

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.
