

## INTERNATIONAL LEAGUE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

### BELARUS UPDATE

Edited by Victor Cole

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#### --HUMAN RIGHTS AND OPPOSITION NEWS --

#### 15 DAYS IN JAIL FOR DISTRIBUTING LEAFLETS

On November 12, police in Minsk arrested Artur Finkevich, Eduard Zelenkov, Olga Vorob’eva, Boris Garetski and Alyona Skrabunova, activists of the opposition Malady (Youth) Front, for distributing leaflets urging people to attend a rally to protest Lukashenko’s possible third term in office, Belapan reported. The rally titled “No To Third Referendum!” will take place on November 24 in Minsk to mark the anniversary of the controversial 1996 referendum, which extended and expanded Lukashenko’s authority. Charged with the violation of the Art. 167 of the Administrative Code [participating in a non-sanctioned street actions], the detainees (except for Garetski, a minor) spent a night at a police station.

On November 13, Artur Finkevich, 18, who was also briefly detained on November 11 for distributing similar leaflets (see Belarus Update Vol.6, No.4), was charged with violation of Art. 167, para 2, of the Administrative Offences Code and sentenced to 15 days in jail. [According to the Public Actions Law, an organizer of a mass action may

inform the public about its date and place only after securing all the necessary permits from the authorities. – Ed.] Other activists received heavy fines of BYR 330,000 (about \$155) each. Pavel Severinets, leader of the Malady Front, told Belapan, that the arrests and fines prove that the authorities are “very much afraid of the rally.” Valentin Stefanovich and Vladimir Labkovich, attorneys with Viasna Human Rights Center represented the Malady Front activists in court; Judges Alyona Tereshkova and Alexander Shylko presided. (Belapan, Viasna, November 13)

#### PICKETERS HEAVILY FINED OVER POLL ON PRESIDENT

A Gomel district court fined Ales Karniyenka and Vasil Palyakou, United Civic Party activists, BYR1.65 million (about \$785) each for conducting a poll on a possible third term for Lukashenko during an authorized picket, RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported. Karniyenka and Palyakou told the court that they had notified authorities that they planned to conduct a poll. They also argued unsuccessfully that the Public Actions Law does not ban polls at pickets. Viasna Human Rights Center reported that Judge Anna Novik, who presided over the hearing, recently ordered the confiscation of computer equipment belonging to two local NGOs. (RFL/RE, Viasna, November 12-13)

#### BNF ACTIVISTS RECEIVE COURT WARNINGS

As we reported in the previous issue, on November 2, police in Vitebsk arrested seven activists of the Belarusian Popular Front Conservative Christian Party (KKhP BNF) (see Belarus Update Vol.6, No.4) while they were installing wooden crosses on Uspenskaya Hill to commemorate Stalin's victims who were shot there in the 30s. Last week, Judge Galina Zubrytskaya gave the activists official warnings for participation in an unauthorized public action. (Viasna, November 12)

#### U.S.: ASSAULT ON CIVIL SOCIETY AND MEDIA CONTINUES IN BELARUS

Addressing the Permanent Council of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Amb. Stephan Minikes, U.S. OSCE Representative, supported Amb. Eberhard Heyken, head of the OSCE Office in Minsk (OOM), who described the Lukashenko's assault on civil society and the independent media in Belarus as “systematic.” Citing recent cases of liquidated NGOs and media outlets, Amb. Minikes pointed out that there have been a “serious deterioration in respect for OSCE commitments in Belarus in the course of the year.” The Ambassador urged the OOM to work with ODIHR and the Office of the Freedom of the Media to review Belarusian legislation concerning elections, NGOs, media freedom, and religious freedom. In addition, Amb. Minikes expressed disappointment that the Working Group on Civil Society has not made significant progress and called upon the Belarusian government to “cooperate with these efforts and do so now.” (U.S. State Department, November 13)

## U.S.: BELARUS AUTHORITIES NEED TO ADDRESS DISAPPEARANCES “SERIOUSLY”

Commenting on the November 5-8 visit by Christos Pourgourides, a member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) legal committee (see Belarus Update Vol.6, No.3, 4), Amb. George Krol, the recently appointed U.S. Ambassador to Belarus, said that it was a “good sign” that Pourgourides has been received by the Belarusian authorities. [The main purpose of Pourgourides’s visit was to gather information on the disappearances of Yuri Zakharenko, Victor Gonchar, Anatoly Krasovsky, and Dmitry Zavadsky. – Ed.] In an extensive interview given to the RFE/RL’s Belarusian Service, which is reviewed elsewhere in this issue, the Ambassador noted that “it remains to be seen what are the results of this visit.” He called on the Belarusian authorities to address the situation “seriously” and provide “explanations to the world community as to what happened and where is this investigation going.” (RFE/RL, November 17)

## U.S. WILL CONTINUE TO SUPPORT BELARUS CIVIL SOCIETY

In an interview with the RFE/RL’s Belarusian Service, U.S. Ambassador George Krol noted that “the commitment of the United States, the people and government to the processes, and supporting the processes of democratization and the development of civil society in Belarus, remains unchanged.” He added that the amounts of resources that have been available to Belarusian NGOs and independent mass media have been “more or less consistent over the years.” The Ambassador stressed that the U.S. government wants to “maintain this engagement with Belarusian society in full respect of Belarus’ sovereignty and independence as a sovereign and independent state.” (RFE/RL, November 17)

## -- MEDIA FREEDOM IN BELARUS --

### INDEPENDENT MAGAZINE CAN’T FIND HOME

Due to the refusal of the Minsk city officials to issue an office location permit, Tok, an independent magazine founded in 2002 to promote Belarusian literature, has been having difficulties to secure an office space, RFE/RL’s Belarusian Service reported. According to the magazine founders, they have been waiting for almost a year for the Minsk executive committee to give an approval for the office location. Henadz Dzmitryeu, assistant to the Tok editor-in-chief, told RFE/RL that he believes that the main reason for the delay was the authorities’ concerns that the new periodical is somehow associated with the opposition. (RFL/RE, Charter 97, November 13)

-- RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN BELARUS --

#### STATE SUBSIDIZES "TRADITIONAL" CONFESSIONS?

Nikolai Stepanenko, Belarusian religious affairs official, told Forum 18 News Service, a religious freedom watchdog based in Oslo, Norway, that "Russian Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Lutheranism, Islam and Judaism, are "clearly defined as traditional religions" by the 2002 Law on Religion and therefore "eligible for state support." The official added that if the Belarusian government ever introduces some elements of religious education in public schools, "only representatives of the above-mentioned religious traditions will be given access to kids, while New Apostolic, Krishna or Baha'i will not." The news service noted that Catholic representatives had criticized the new law for failing to contain provisions for religious education in state schools. According to Forum 18, while the Orthodox Church's access to state educational institutions appears to vary from region to region, it does receive state financial aid, unlike other confessions. Defending the practice, spokesman for the Belarusian Orthodox Patriarchate retorted that this was justified since Protestants build churches with the money from the West." (Forum 18, November 11)

--TRADE UNION NEWS--

#### ICFTU CONDEMNS HALT OF ILO PROJECTS

On November 14, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, a Brussels-based trade union association representing 158 million workers worldwide, strongly criticized the Belarusian authorities' November 12 decision to "de-register" International Labor Organization (ILO) technical assistance projects concerning the protection of workers' rights, the ICFTU website reported. According to the ICFTU, the ILO projects that provided emergency assistance to the Belarusian trade unions have also been suspended. Noting that these projects are critically important, especially in light of the increasing harassment of independent trade unions in Belarus, Guy Ryder, ICFTU General Secretary, urged the Belarusian authorities to "recognize its general obligations of cooperation as a member of the ILO" and to "respect the ILO's autonomy and independence in its work with its social partners." He stressed that the ILO possesses a specific mandate to work directly with employers' and workers' organizations. [The reaction by the Belarusian authorities might have been prompted by the 288th Session of ILO Governing Body, which is currently taking place in Geneva, which is to consider violations of Belarusian trade unions' rights (see Belarus Update, Vol. 6, No. 3). - Ed.] (ICFTU, November 14)

-- BROTHER SLAVS --

#### U.S. AMBASSADOR: WE SUPPORT BELARUSIAN INDEPENDENCE

In an extensive interview given to the RFE/RL's Belarusian Service, Amb. George Krol, the recently appointed U.S. Ambassador to Belarus, stated that the United States "supports as a fundamental element of its policy" the sovereignty and independence of Belarus. Commenting on the Russia-Belarus relations, the Ambassador noted that the U.S. discusses Belarus with Russia only "in the context of integration of the region as a part of the trans-Atlantic community of nations," which includes Russia and Belarus together as a "part of an undivided and free Europe." The Ambassador denied that U.S.-Russian relations are more important to Washington than Belarusian independence. He also expressed hope that "Moscow's intentions in its influencing Minsk would be for encouraging Belarus too, as Russia itself will be trying to meet standards of European behavior and economic and political integration." (RFE/RL, November 17)

-- AT HOME IN BELARUS --

#### WHO NEEDS PACE?!

Vladimir Konoplev, vice-chair of the Belarusian Parliament's House of Representatives, told Narodnaya Gazeta, a Belarusian daily, that he was "not sure" whether the Belarusian Parliament's participation in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) would be worthwhile. "Does the Belarusian Parliament need the special invitee status to the current assembly?" Konoplev asked rhetorically during the interview. The deputy based his position on the alleged "unwillingness" by the European parliament to consider "objectively" the Belarus's request to reinstate its special invitee status, which was revoked in 1997 after Lukashenko had disbanded the 13th Supreme Soviet. (Narodnaya Gazeta, November 14)

-- ELECTION 2004 --

#### BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION FORMS ELECTION COALITION

An opposition alliance formed by the United Civic Party, the Belarusian Popular Front, the Belarusian Labor Party, the Belarusian Social Democratic Assembly, and the Belarusian Party of Communists will hold a 2004 parliamentary election campaign under the name of the Popular Coalition Five Plus, United Civic Party press-center reported. Anatoly Lebedka, UCP leader, said that the Popular Coalition Five Plus is seeking to enlist cooperation from democratically-minded individuals and NGOs in the election campaign. Meanwhile, Narodnaya Hramada, Belarusian Social Democratic Party, led by Nikolai Statkevich, called on pro-democracy activists and organizations to join the recently created European Coalition "Free Belarus" (See Belarus Update, Vol. 6, No. 3) in order to lead a coordinated election campaign in 2004. (UCP press-room, November 11)

-- INTERNATIONAL NEWS --

## U.S.-BELARUS RELATIONS: IMPROVEMENT IS POSSIBLE

According to Amb. Krol, “the basis for improving relations with the United States are on the conditions and principals that are found in the OSCE recommendations for changes in Belarus on election laws and the treatment of civil society, non-governmental organizations, the press and a serious investigation of [political] disappearances.” The Ambassador stressed that those four conditions are “fundamental for [U.S.] policy of seeking to improve relations with Belarus.” As for Washington, it “is prepared to take actions to work more closely and engage with Belarus on a wide sphere of activities.”

Commenting on a possible accession of Belarus to NATO, Amb. Krol said that “if Belarus has a desire to achieve membership in NATO, that is its own sovereign right to go for it.” At the same time, he added “that’s not the matter of, say, that Belarus must become a member of NATO in order to become a part of trans-Atlantic community,” noting that there are many countries in Europe that are not members of NATO but are members of the trans-Atlantic community of nations.” “The future of Belarus is not lying in the hands of Washington or Moscow or Brussels. But it lies here in Minsk, in Belarus. And the Belarusian people should have the opportunity to decide for themselves freely as a sovereign independent nation the course of their future,” the Ambassador concluded.

## EDRB SEES DANGER IN EU'S EASTERN ENLARGEMENT

“There is a danger that EU expansion may reinforce the marginalization of some of the countries [of the former Soviet Union] so that they remain on the fringes of the international economy with relatively little foreign direct investment and little opportunity for legal migration,” warned the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) in its annual economic review of the former Communist states, published on November 17. While noting that the biggest progress in economic reforms over the past year has been made in the former Soviet Union and south-east Europe, the report stressed that some countries have almost halted reforms altogether, including Belarus, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. “The acceleration of reforms, as well as deeper integration and regional co-operation, is central to the growth prospects of all those countries that will not accede to the EU in 2004,” the EBRD concluded. (EBRD, November 17)

## -- NOTABLE QUOTES --

“My heart still cannot fully accept the idea of State-Church separation. Church plays such a pivotal role in our country, it glues our society together,” Alexander Lukashenko. (www.president.gov.by, visited November 17)

## -- CALENDAR OF EVENTS --

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

November 24 - Youth march titled “‘NO’ To Third Referendum!” in Minsk

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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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