

April 21-28, 2004

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**Edited by Nate Young**  
**International League for Human Rights**

## **“We have a Criminal Regime in Belarus”: Council of Europe Adopts Resolutions on Belarus**

**Strasbourg, France** The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe adopted two resolutions today condemning the disappearances of four people in Belarus and the persecution of independent press. The resolutions followed a day of hearings on these issues during the Assembly’s spring session in Strasbourg.

The Assembly urged the Belarusian government to launch immediately an independent investigation and called for the resignation of then presidential security chief Viktor Sheyman, who has been accused of organizing the disappearances and the subsequent cover-up. The resolution also urged member states of the Council to apply pressure on the Belarusian leadership to cooperate, including the use of sanctions. The second resolution encouraged the production and dissemination of impartial, independent media to the Belarusian public which it lacks under the current authoritarian regime ruled by Aleksandr Lukashenko.

A press conference followed the hearings, moderated by Christos Pourgourides, a parliamentarian from Cyprus who conducted the missing persons investigation, and featuring two wives of the disappeared.

“I have no doubt in my mind at all that these disappearances were ordered by the highest possible level in the establishment in Belarus,” Pourgourides said in his highly critical opening remarks. “I cannot be certain that [the disappearances] were conducted by the president himself, but by people very close to the president... I have no doubt that the president gave orders personally for the cover-up.”

“I would like sanctions to be as tough as possible. We have a criminal regime in Belarus,” Pourgourides bluntly added later at the press briefing. “But we must not forget that sanctions which punish people would not be appropriate.”

Irina Krasovskaya, who last month gave testimony before the U.S. Congress on the disappearance of her husband, seemed confident that continued pressure by the international community on Belarus is working. “Today is a day of victory, a small one, but a victory nonetheless, a victory for democracy in Belarus.”

Her husband, Anatoly Krasovsky, a prominent businessman and critic of Lukashenko, disappeared on September 16, 1999, along with Viktor Gonchar, former Vice-President of the Belarusian Parliament.

Pourgourides’s statements also addressed the resolution condemning attacks against free press in Belarus and the need for continued support for independent journalists in Belarus who are regularly harassed and censored by the government. “Those journalists deserve full support from the Council of Europe and other international organizations, and I believe they deserve full support from the West, including all the countries that have democratic regimes.”

For complete texts of these resolutions and recommendations, please go to the Council of Europe, Parliamentary Assembly website: <http://assembly.coe.int/default.asp>

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## **DOMESTIC**

### **1. Chernobyl: Is Living There Possible?**

On April 26, to mark the 18<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Chernobyl catastrophe, the Belarusian opposition will organize a traditional street demonstration through Minsk, known as the "Chernobyl Shliakh." Since April 21, in his own march, the president has been paying a visit to the region which suffered the most from the radiation. In unison, Aleksandr Lukashenko and his political opponents talk about the tragedy of this date in Belarusian history and about the consequences the Chernobyl explosion had on our country. However, they differ in the way they accentuate the problems and the solutions to them. Both the government and opposition are blaming each other for using Chernobyl as PR.

The march's opposition organizers didn't get the go-ahead from Minsk to announce the format of the event: gather at the capital square of Yakob Kolas at 6:30 and march to the Peoples' Friendship park to the Chernobyl chapel, where a meeting had been planned. Minsk officials only cancelled the meeting. But despite this, the march organizers and the participants left the plan to meet at the Jakob Kolas square intact. That is, there are no guarantees that the "Chernobyl Shliakh" will proceed peacefully and befit a somber commemorative ceremony.

The opposition called the march the main event of the season of street democracy, having opted out having a demonstration in other traditionally "hot spring" dates, or even one more-or-less mass action since over the past few years the opposition demonstrations haven't generated a lot of people. It's unlikely that it will happen this time. Two things could possibly help the Belarusian opposition: the police, by not allowing it to gather en masse in the first place, or the rainy weather which has come down on Belarus the past few days.

The Belarusian opposition states that Lukashenko doesn't worry about the nation's health and physical well being in general. The head of state has been subjected to criticism for initiating cultivation of produce on contaminated land, an attempt to rebuild the destroyed economy. The opposition supports further resettlement of those living in an area where radiation is over 50 curie per square kilometer, as well as keeping the benefits (which have decreased recently) to the victims and those who were sent to clean up after the accident. Leader of the Belarusian Popular Front Vinchuk Vyachork considers the footage of Lukashenko visiting the Chernobyl areas as mere PR. In his opinion, "it's necessary to change all that was done in the policy towards Chernobyl over the last ten years."

Lukashenko himself states that he's not in Chernobyl to do PR. In his continuing trip through the region most affected by radiation, he said to the residents: "We will do everything for you. I say this without populism, because there's no pre-election campaign. I'm not going anywhere and not slipping away, there's still a lot of work for me. I say this from my bottom of my heart that I will do everything I possibly can."

In one of his talks with a Chernobyl resident, the president was being frank: "I live right next to you, behind the river, on the shore. I live and watch how people live in your very zone. They say: yikes, there's Chernobyl, there's infection. I'll tell you, I come out there, the security service makes analyses of soil samples, the air, and so on. This is what they reported to me: they made an analysis of the soil, air, and made a thorough analysis. They don't take the president just anywhere." You can grow a sea of onions here and easily become a major importer."  
[Lukashenko probably meant to say "exporter"—Ed]

In general, Chernobyl is not as scary as some describe it. According to Lukashenko, "before it was unpopular to talk, but now it's likely you've been convinced that we really scared people back then. They vacated, and now they returned, few homes were abandoned. They made their whole policy around this: aye, aye, aye... Instead of helping people, they began to scare them. Displaced them. Where did it all lead to? They ruined your region, Gomel and half of Mogilev. I'm not saying that this shouldn't be done for health and whatever. But simply to sit with arms folded and yell that tomorrow I'm going to die. You understand, this isn't helpful."

Can there be any cultivation in the Chernobyl zone, was it worth it to displace people in the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, were the benefits to Chernobyl residents adequate for the conditions of their lives?—scientists should answer these questions. It seems that among them there is no common opinion. The opposition and government have various ways to solve the Chernobyl problem.

Lukashenko is trying to use it for PR purposes, as are his political opponents. How can there be politics without it? Lukashenko appears to be more of a winner. And it's not because the television only shows his point of view. And it's not only because he's there, in the "zone," and the opposition is in Minsk.

It's just that the president has a more optimistic, life-affirming position: "you can live there!" And for the opposition, it's the opposite. But people are really tired of Chernobyl. They need social post-Chernobyl rehabilitation. In addition, many do not appreciate the danger of radiation: ("can't see it... everyone eats and lives... it's not completely radiation"). They don't imagine this is so, no matter how much you tell them about the dangers of small doses and however much you show them the dose meter.

The opposition understands this very well, which is why this spring they are gathering to take the Chernobyl Shliak beyond the Minsk borders. *Belaruskaya Novosty* [Belarusian News] reported that the national coalition "Five Plus" plans to head out to the "zone," in order to show residents its own Chernobyl truth. [text translated from the Russian by the Editor]

Source: *BelaPan*; April 26; [www.naviny.ru](http://www.naviny.ru)

## 2. Briefly Democratic, Belarus today is Like a Living Cold War Museum

The flight from Moscow to Minsk is numbered 1983, which seems entirely fitting. The Tupolev-134 that flies the route every day may as well be a time machine taking travellers back to that year, when both cities were still part of a Soviet Union that experienced neither glasnost nor perestroika.

The flag that flies over the parliament building in Minsk, the capital of the former Soviet republic of Belarus, is the same red-and-green banner as in the days of the USSR, minus only a hammer and sickle. In front stands a statue of Lenin.

The restoration of such symbols, and the banishing of the white-red-white flag associated with Belarussian independence since medieval times, were just the first steps taken toward recreating the old USSR by Belarus's President, Alexander Lukashenko. A decade after he came to power, the country seems like a living museum, a place where the Cold War never ended and the Soviet Union never fell.

Belarussian culture has been all but quashed under Mr. Lukashenko's rule, with Russian once more promoted as the country's first language and the country engaged in a slow reunification process with its huge neighbour to the east. Belarus may even adopt the Russian ruble as its official currency next year.

And as if signalling an end to Belarus's brief democratic era, Mr. Lukashenko changed the name of Independence Square in central Minsk, the site of enormous rallies calling for his resignation in 1996, back to what it was called in Soviet times: Lenin Square.

But it's the latest step back into the past many see as the most chilling. Mr. Lukashenko has decreed that a new state ideology is essential to preserve stability and called for the reintroduction of ideology courses at schools and workplaces.

"We should reach every individual citizen. We should communicate to the people what we want and the people should think this over," he told parliament last year. "The current stage of development of our society and the events in the near and far abroad force us to step up ideological work in our country."

Though he did not explicitly say what that ideology should be, everyone knew what he meant. Textbooks used in schools are now based on the speeches and writings of the President.

The media have been swept up in the ideology push as well. All television and radio stations are back under state control, and the few independent newspapers that dare criticize the regime are, one by one, being forced underground.

The popular *Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta* was shut for three months last year after running articles deemed offensive to the President; it is now denied access to both printing houses and state-run newspaper kiosks. It is now printed in Smolensk, Russia, and the print run is smuggled back into Belarus. When Mr. Lukashenko gave a Castroesque, hours-long monologue in parliament this week (during which he effectively announced his intention to try to change the constitution so he can remain in office past the two-term limit) it was repeated, in its entirety, on state-controlled TV and radio throughout the night and the next day.

"They are simply restoring what existed in the Soviet Union, making people into zombies," said Svetlana Kalinkina, editor-in-chief of *Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta*.

"They're telling people that everything is good in Belarus, and that everything is going bad in Poland, bad in the Baltics, and that it's only good in Belarus because we have Lukashenko. It's

becoming the same as in Soviet times, when people honestly believed there was no better country than the Soviet Union."

Mr. Lukashenko could argue that he has delivered what the population wanted. A former collective-farm boss and an admirer of Joseph Stalin, he was elected in 1994 by citizens fed up with the chaos that followed the breakup of the Soviet Union three years earlier.

He has since built a miniature replica of the old Soviet economic system, with a slight nod here and there to the passage of time. Some former state companies have been privatized, but most of the agricultural production still comes from old-style collective farms, phased out long ago in other former Soviet republics. While there are several McDonald's restaurants in Minsk, the wide boulevards are otherwise dominated by Communist iconography, with only a smattering of Western-style advertising.

All this has come in alongside a rekindling of the more sinister side of the Soviet Union. Like the media, independent trade unions and civil rights groups have come under severe state pressure. Few now dare to protest against a government that keeps tight control on all spheres of life.

"We've got a guy with the mentality of a collective farmer running the country. He takes advice from nobody because he thinks the country is his property," said Yaroslav Romanchuk, deputy director of the United Civil Party, one of the main opposition groups in the country.

"The result is that we're a country frozen in the past."

*Source: Mark MacKinnon, Globe and Mail; April 20, 2004; www.globeandmail.com*

### **3. Belarusian Popular Front to Sue State TV Channel**

Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) and its leader Vincuk Viachorka intend to bring action against the First National TV Channel and the journalist Yuri Prakopov, states the BPF news release of April 25. The claim concerns TV show *V Centre Vnimania* (In the Center of Attention) broadcasted by the First Channel yesterday. Mr. Viachorka claims that by stating on the air that "the chairman of BPF Party promised to stop the support of Chernobyl districts in the case of BPF coming to power" Yuri Prakopov distributed incorrect and offensive information.

"On the eve of Chernobyl tragedy, Lukashenka's propaganda machine didn't scruple to profiteer on Belarusian misfortune and use a direct lie," states the BPF news release.

*Source: Belarusian Association of Journalists; April 26, 2004; www.baj.ru*

### **4. Two More Belarusian NGOs Dissolved**

The Supreme Court on 22 April liquidated two more nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), the Belarusian Center of Constitutionalism and Comparative Legal Studies and the International Institute of Political Studies (IIPS), RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported. The Belarusian Center had cooperated with the Council of Europe, held several conferences on human rights, and published some 30 books during its seven-year existence. The IIPS studied security issues, international relations, and the political situation in Belarus; its experts often provided commentaries for independent media. Both NGOs were banned following a move from the Justice Ministry, which said it had found "irregularities" in their registration documents. Alyaksandr Fyodarau of the IIPS told RFE/RL that the authorities' campaign to liquidate NGOs is because of the October parliamentary election and what could turn out to be a referendum on President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's possible third term in power. "The authorities would not like any independent organizations to watch over [these political events]," Fyodarau said. "Because this could affect the results and provide people with information not desired by the authorities."

Source: Jan Maksymiuk, RFE-RL; April 23, 2004; [www.rferl.org/newsline](http://www.rferl.org/newsline)

## **5. Supreme Court Liquidates *Novaya Gruppya* Youth Association**

On April 16, by a ruling by the Supreme Court the Republican youth public association *Novaya Gruppya* was liquidated. The pretext for the liquidation was that the legal address did not correspond to the real one.

As the executive director of the association Elada Gusakova told the BelaPAN, the *Novaya Gruppya* was involved in volunteer work and was a full member of the international organization *International Civil Service*, having more than 80-year history.

[text omitted]

At the same time, as the executive director noted, the organization, which has 320 members, would not stop its activities in Belarus, and would continue to work unofficially. In the future the leaders of the *NG* are going to register a branch with the *International Civil Service*, which would have a different legal status. [text revised by the Editor]

Source: Charter 97; April 21, 2004; [www.charter97.org](http://www.charter97.org)

## **Regional**

### **6. Russia and Belarus to Solve Problems within the Union State**

Russia and Belarus need to urgently resume the implementing of the Union State Treaty, said the chairman of the National Assembly Council of Belarus, Gennady Novitsky. While speaking to journalists during a break in the international information forum in Kaliningrad, Mr. Novitsky said that Russia and Belarus' need to return to the framework of the treaty was connected with deliveries of Russian natural gas to Belarus.

"Today, this is not a conflict but a real market situation under which the buyer wants to buy cheaper and the seller to sell for more," he said.

At the same time, he recalled that nobody cancelled the agreement under which the natural gas is delivered to Belarus at Russian internal prices. "And this is a problem now since the agreement is not being implemented," he emphasized.

Mr. Novitsky said he was confident that this situation was temporary and that the difficulties will be solved through negotiations.

Source: RIA Novosti; April 21, 2004; [www.rian.ru](http://www.rian.ru)

### **7. Belarusians Stopped Loving Russia and Do Not Want to Unite**

According to the last opinion poll carried out by the Independent Institute of Social, Economical and Political Research (IISEPR) among the Belarusian people, the idea of integration with Russia is steadily losing supporters in the country. The results of the survey were published yesterday in Minsk. If a year ago in the framework of the same poll more than a quarter of the respondents were for Belarus and Russia becoming one state with one president, government, flag, army and currency, now this idea is supported only by 13.8% of the questioned. But more than a quarter of the questioned want the relations between Belarus and Russia be the same as with other CIS countries (their number a year ago was amounting to 19%). Half of respondents are for the union of the two independent states, connected by close political and economical relations (a year ago this answer was given by 48% of respondents, in last September - 56%, and in March-2004 -

50%).

If in March and September of the last year 50% of people were ready to vote for the Constitution of the union state, now less than 38% are ready to do so. Almost a quarter of the interviewed said that they would vote against – it is the lowest figure since 2001.

Another interesting detail: though in fact all Belarusian TV channels are now switched to Russian language, more than 7% of the interviewed said that the main language of their daily communication is in Belarusian (in September less than 3% of people called themselves purely Belarussian-speaking).

The understanding of the Belarusians of the history of their statehood has changed as well. For the first time to the question what was the first Belarusian state half of the respondents answered that it was the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (about 35%) or the Belarusian Democratic (People's) Republic, created earlier than the Soviet Union (15%). The official version that the first Belarusian state emerged as a union republic and part of the Soviet Union and was called the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic, is supported only by 17% of the interrogated.

*Source: Yuri Svirko, Kommersant; April 23, 2004; www.kommersant.ru*

## **International**

### **8. Call for 'Maximum Pressure' on Belarus over Disappearances**

The Assembly today called for "a maximum of political pressure" on the current leadership of Belarus until high-ranking state officials, including current Prosecutor General Victor Sheyman, were fully investigated for their role in the disappearances of four men in 1999 and 2000 and any subsequent cover-up.

Sanctions should include the possible suspension of Belarus's participation in Council of Europe agreements and activities as well as contacts on a political level, while co-operation with civil society should be stepped up, the parliamentarians said. They also encouraged those countries whose courts have international jurisdiction to open murder proceedings.

The Assembly was debating a report prepared by Christos Pourgourides (Cyprus, EPP/CD) on behalf of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights which looked into the disappearances of opposition figureheads Yuri Zakharenko and Victor Gonchar, as well as businessman Anatoly Krasovski and reporter Dmitri Zavadski, formerly the personal cameraman of President Lukashenko.

Speaking in the presence of the wives of two of the missing men, Mr Pourgourides said Belarus law-enforcers who originally investigated the cases "had obviously come to the conclusion that then presidential security chief Sheyman had instructed Interior Minister Sivakov to set up a 'death squad' under the command of Colonel Pavlichenko, which killed, inter alia, the four men covered by my mandate." He added: "At a crucial turning point, President Lukashenko has clearly sided with those who wanted to cover up the truth".

The Assembly said it wanted "to send a strong signal that impunity for forced disappearances is not tolerated by the international community".

The parliamentarians also debated a report on the persecution of the press in Belarus.

Belarus applied to join the Council of Europe in March 1993 and was granted Special Guest status – allowing it to take part in some of the Assembly's activities – but this status was suspended in January 1997.

Source: Council of Europe; April 28, 2004; <http://assembly.coe.int/>

## **9. Belarusian Delegation Participates in Interparliamentary Union Assembly in Mexico**

A delegation of Belarusian parliamentarians headed by Chamber of Deputies chairman Vadim Popov is participating in the 110 member Interparliamentary Union Assembly meeting in Mexico, April 18-23.

According to Interfax, the head of the Belarusian delegation will appear at the assembly's plenary sessions in which general debates will take place on the political, economic, and social situation in the world. The main themes will be reconciliation and partnership.

In addition, Popov will appear at a committee session on stable development, finance and trade, in which representatives will discuss activities to attain equal conditions on trade of agricultural products and public access to basic medicines.

The speaker of the lower chamber of the Belarusian parliament will meet with parliamentary leaders from Russia, Poland, Mexico, China, Syria, Belgium, and Austria. [translated from the Russian by the Editor]

Source: *BelaPan*; April 23, 2004; [www.naviny.by](http://www.naviny.by)

## **Human Rights & Independent Media**

### **10. Belarusian Government Accused**

Today, in Geneva, a hearing took place on the case against the Belarusian government. The case was undertaken based on the decision of the Administrative Council of the International Labor Organization in response to violations against trade union rights in our country. The representatives of the plaintiff, defendants, as well as witnesses arrived in Switzerland.

Generally, to write about this issue in our country is very unpleasant. But it's not surprising this case have been brought to the court. The Council of Europe, European Parliament, and the OSCE has already reprimanded the Belarusian government (and without a doubt, the presidential administration). High level officials from our country have been refused entry into the U.S. and countries of the European Union. Finally, the United Nations took on the case. First, the UN Human Rights Commission adopted a harsh resolution on the human rights situation in Belarus, and then one more agency of the UN—the ILO—has begun an investigation into violations of unions' rights in Belarus. We note that in the 85 years of the ILO's existence, the decision to create a similar commission was undertaken ten times, and as a rule, made in response to military dictatorships in "third world" countries.

Saturday, April 24, 10 a.m. In the UN office building the ILO Commission Chairman investigating violations of trade union rights in Belarus, Professor Budislav Vukas, officially declared the conclusion of the investigation into Belarus. The main purpose of the visit to Minsk-- to collect information—has been completed. For a week of findings in our country, members of the commission Budislav Vukas, Niklaus Brun, Mary Gaidron, as well as the ILO Executive Director Kari Tapiola, the Justice representative, International Confederation of Free Trade Unions Vadim Borisov met with more than 100 witnesses from both countries, including with Belarusian officials. They also met with the General Prosecutor Deputy Nikolai Kupriaynov, Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration Oleg Proleskovsky, ministers from the departments of Justice, Labor and Social Protection, Industry, and Foreign Affairs, and the chairman of the State Aviation Committee. They flew to Geneva, full of impressions and the burdening weight of witness testimonies of trade union rights violations, 500 of which were obtained.

Minister of Labor and Social Protection Antonina Morova had to endure the most during these days. She went to meet with members of the commission four times. Furthermore, government representatives hosted the commission in its own building, and meetings with opponents were conducted in the UN office building in Belarus.

Thus, today and tomorrow, the trial against the Belarusian government will happen on a new stage: the hearing stage. Today, the sides opened with statements (plaintiff—the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions; defendant—the Belarusian government). By regulation, they are limited to thirty minutes each to present their side. After this, the evidence of violations were examined. The representatives from the ICFTU will attack. On the defense side: First Deputy of the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection Elena Kolas, as well as the Director of Labor Ministry affairs and the Deputy Justice Minister. The judges: the ILO Commission of Inquiry. In addition, representatives from Belarusian trade unions have arrived in Geneva: Aleksandr Yaroshuk, Aleksandr Bukvostov, Gennady Fedinichin, Yuri Migutsky, and journalist Aleksandr Stankevich. On the defense side is the General Director of NGO *Integral*, Victor Yemelyanov.

*Source: Dmitry Drugailo, Belaruskaya Delovaya Gazeta; April 27, 2004; www.bdg.ru*

## **11. Politically-Motivated Criminal Charges Against the Belarus Helsinki Committee**

*Note: The following is an open letter sent by the International Helsinki Federation to the heads of delegations at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) on April 21, 2004.*

Excellencies,

On behalf of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights (IHF), I am writing to draw your attention to the grave situation of independent human rights monitoring organizations in Belarus, and in particular to the apparently politically-motivated criminal charges against the Belarus Helsinki Committee.

Charged with tax evasion relating to funds received to undertake human rights projects funded by the TACIS programme of the European Union, the Committee faces not only financial ruin but the possibility of jail terms for its members.

The Commission on Human Rights of the United Nations has passed a Resolution on the "Situation of human rights in Belarus," a copy of which I am attaching for your convenience.

Among the problems cited was "persistent...harassment and closure of non-governmental organizations..."

The government was urged to "cease harassment of non-governmental organizations, political parties, trade unions, independent media and democracy and human rights activists" and "to undertake a review of domestic laws and practices regarding the compulsory registration of non-governmental organizations..."

The Commission on Human Rights decided to "appoint a Special Rapporteur...to examine the situation of human rights in Belarus..." and to review the reports of said Rapporteur at the session of the Commission next year.

Excellencies, the IHF hopes and expects, especially in view of the Resolution, the strong support of the participating States on this issue.

The mandate of the Belarus Helsinki Committee is to promote and monitor the OSCE Human Dimension commitments in Belarus. The charges against it have no legal basis. The Committee and the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights appeal for your support, to urge that

these charges be withdrawn so that the Committee can continue to assist the government to fulfill its obligations.

We appreciate your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

Aaron Rhodes  
Executive Director

*Source: International Helsinki Federation; April 21, 2004; www.ihf-hr.org*

## **12. IHF Publishes 2004 Human Rights Report on Belarus (excerpts)**

*The International Helsinki Federation published its 2004 Human Rights report on the OSCE region: Europe, Central Asia, and North America. The following is from its introduction on Belarus. For complete text of the report go to: [www.ihf-hr.org](http://www.ihf-hr.org).*

The human rights record in Belarus remained one of the worst in Europe in 2003, with an almost complete absence of democracy and the rule of law. The country suffered not only from economic backwardness and the long-term consequences of the Chernobyl catastrophe but also under the authoritarian regime of President Alexandr Lukashenka in whose hands most power was concentrated. There were almost no state institutions in where officials were elected or appointed in accordance with democratic procedures: most of them were appointed directly by the president or his administration. As a result of the non-observance of the rule of law, the power of officials increased.

The Criminal Code and economic legislation allowed for arbitrary accusations to be made against any person. As a result, intimidation and manipulation of critically minded officials was possible. High officials who had come to power by undemocratic means showed little respect for the law, and retained the conditions, under which the lives of people in Belarus were insecure and unstable. The government appeared to disregard its commitments under the international human rights treaties ratified by the country.

Continued violations of political, social and economic rights created an atmosphere of fear. According to data from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, in the first nine months of 2003, 2,560 Belarusian citizens (out of the total population of less than ten million people) had asked for political asylum abroad.

The accumulation of economic and political repression added to social problems, which included widespread alcoholism. Contributing to economic, ecological, demographic and moral losses, alcoholism constituted a serious threat to the stability and development of the society.

Among the most serious violations of civil and political rights were assaults on the right to association. Other common human rights abuses were violations of the standards for democratic elections and freedom of expression, restrictions on peaceful assembly and religious freedom, and violations of the right to fair trial. Further, police misconduct, including arbitrary arrest, ill-treatment and torture, continued, and unsolved disappearances in the past remained uninvestigated.

*Source: IHF; April 15, 2004; www.ihf-hr.org*

## **13. Belarus Censors Russian State TV**

The broadcast of Russian TV channel Rossiya was interrupted April 17, 18/ 5PM - 8:30PM. The cut-off clashed with broadcast of the shows *Zerkalo* and *Vesti Nedeli*. Belarusian TV Center explained the cut-off with "unplanned repair work" at Rossiya channel.

However, Rossiya denies technical reasons for the incident. The presenter of *Zerkalo* Nikolai Svanidze told Radio Liberty Belarusian Service that the channel directors are indignant about the action Belarusian side undertook. Mr. Svanidze thinks that the broadcast was interrupted since the above shows were announced to contain Belarusian-related stories: *Zerkalo* discussed the address of Alexander Lukashenko to the National Assembly and the Belarusian nation; *Vesti nedeli* talked about the Saturday cut-off.

*Source: Belarusian Association of Journalists; April 21, 2004; www.baj.ru*

## **Business**

### **14. Belarusian Parliament Ratifies CES Agreement**

The lower house of the Belarussian parliament ratified, on Friday, an agreement on the Formation of a Common Economic Space (CES), signed by the presidents of Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine in Yalta in September 2003.

RIA Novosti correspondent reports that when presenting the agreement for ratification Belarussian deputy foreign minister Vasily Pugachev reported that 94% of CIS GDP and 87% of trade turnover fall on the "Four" and that 80% of CIS population live in Belarus, Russia, Kazakhstan and Ukraine.

"This shows that the 'Four' is an economically self-sufficient association," Pugachev said. He also stressed that the Agreement and the Concept, which is its inalienable part, are the framework documents which highlight the aims, tasks, basic principles and conditions for the CES functioning.

Pugachev pointed out that the ratification of the Agreement will lay a strong foundation for fruitful cooperation of the four countries and will contribute to further deepening multilateral economic cooperation and enhancing integration processes in the post-Soviet space.

Belarus is the last of the "Four" to ratify this Agreement. A representative of the Belarussian foreign ministry pointed out that in this case the Belarussian stance was substantiated since "there existed apprehensions that neither side will fully assume obligations on this Agreement."

President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko instructed the Belarussian Council of Ministers to submit the Agreement on the Formation of a Common Economic Space for ratification last February.

The discussion of the Agreement in the Belarussian parliament lasted more than an hour.

*Source: RIA Novosti; April 23, 2004; www.rian.ru*

### **15. Government Conducts Negotiations with Sibneft**

And also with Slavneft about the privatization of Mogilevkhimvolkno, Belarussian First Vice Premier Vladimir Semashko told journalists on Friday. According to him, Belarussian President Aleksandr Lukashenko and Slavneft President Yuri Sukhanov discussed this matter on Friday.

"I think we will soon reach a concrete solution on this issue," he said. According to him, "Today, Lukashenko confirmed intentions to privatize the Belarussian oil and chemical enterprises."

However, he reiterated that the privatization process “will not take place for the sake of the process alone... We do not have the right to give away our enterprises, and the partners who come to these enterprises should pay market prices for them.”

Semashko added, “By market prices, we mean not only buildings and equipment, but also professional experience and staff skills. In addition, the brand and image are worth a lot.”

Earlier, Interfax reported that Sibneft and Slavneft are jointly offering to invest in the Belarusian oil and chemical complex. Sibneft authorized the president of Slavneft Yuri Sukhanov to conduct negotiations with the concern on the question of creating a joint venture.

Russian investors offered Belarus to create the joint venture, which would have united three strategic aims: oil extraction, processing and refinement, and byproducts. Sibneft is prepared to contribute one or more deposits of hydrocarbon raw materials on Russian territory, in exchange for Belarusian shares of oil and chemical enterprises. Shareholders include Mozyrsky, Polimir, and Mogilevkhimvolkno. [translated from the Russian by the Editor]

Source: *Belaruskaya Delovaya Gazeta*; April 23, 2004; [www.bdg.ru](http://www.bdg.ru)

## 16. Belarus Expresses Desire to Continue Cooperating with EBRD

A senior Belarusian minister assured the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development board that Belarus was determined to continue to cooperate with the EBRD.

First Deputy Prime Minister Vladimir Semashko, at a meeting with the EBRD board of directors, put forward proposals for more intensive interaction between the EBRD and Belarus as part of a new EBRD strategy for Belarus, the Belarusian Foreign Ministry press service told *Interfax*.

He proposed that the strategy be based on "a new neighborhood" concept as a way to increase the number of projects between the EBRD and Belarus.

Semashko had meetings with EBRD President Jean Lemierre and EBRD Director for Financial Institutions Kurt Geiger to discuss the proposed strategy, a proposal for more extensive EBRD operations in Belarus, and a planned visit to Belarus by EBRD executive directors.

Source: *BelaPan*; April 22, 2004; [www.naviny.by](http://www.naviny.by)

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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. To send letters to the Editor or to subscribe/unsubscribe please contact Nate Young at: [cis@ilhr.org](mailto:cis@ilhr.org).

For current and back issues, list of events, and more information about the League’s advocacy activities in Belarus, please visit the Belarus Update website at: [www.belarusupdate.org](http://www.belarusupdate.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 Lukashenko's wholesale assault on human rights and the rule of law in Belarus.

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