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## Week in Review- Commentary

Belarus first gained independence on March 25, 1918, only to lose it a year later when it was absorbed by the Soviet Union. It was fitting, then, that following independence day in Minsk two weeks ago, Belarus marked a different, if somewhat contradictory, occasion: the eight year anniversary of the ambitious but fraying Russia-Belarus Union. When the treaty was first initiated by former Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Belarusian leader Aleksandr Lukashenko on April 2, 1996, the idea was not reunification but integration, a plan to weave the political, economic, and cultural ties of the former Soviet allies into an effective partnership. But so far, implementation of the treaty has been going at a snail's pace. Doubts about the effectiveness and even relevance of the Union state are still felt on both sides.

At a press conference last Wednesday, Pavel Borodin, state secretary of the Union, highlighted some of the achievements and progress made over the past eight years. Trade is growing and joint programs are increasing, he assured reporters. But later, Russian Finance Minister Aleksei Kudrin announced that the introduction of a single currency of the Union state, a move envisaged in the treaty, will be postponed until 2006. The Belarusian ruble can still celebrate independence day in the meantime.

But recent developments in Russia and Belarus, both regional and domestic, show that the delay in a common currency is just small change. First, there's the heated dispute over gas supplies to Belarus, which Russian gas giant Gazprom halted due to disagreements over prices and transit fees. An amiable agreement is forthcoming, Mr. Borodin claims. However, Moscow will surely not forget Lukashenko's disobedient lashing out against Gazprom last February, in which he vaguely threatened retaliation. Second, on the geopolitical level, the expansions of the EU and NATO will put more pressures on Belarus and Russia to work together and formulate joint strategies for their region which is quickly being pushed aside by a more integrated Europe. Russian political analysts argue that the expansion of NATO will not affect Belarusian interests or security at all. But whether Belarus will take a stance independent from Russia, or just sit encircled and embittered, is still uncertain. Third, the anti-democratic polices of Lukashenko—condemned recently by international NGOs during the Human Rights Commission meeting in Geneva—might be increasingly unfavorable for the popular, democratic dictator Vladimir Putin, who has taken a more accommodating stance towards western Europe and American foreign policy in particular.

Belarusian pro-democracy opposition forces could capitalize on the failings of the Union and seek support from Russians tired of Lukashenko's self-isolating actions. Importing ideas on democracy from Russia may not be the most fruitful undertaking. Then again, it looks easier than importing its gas.

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## DOMESTIC

### 1. Belarus Has Civil Society, Lukashenko Claims

On March 31, at a meeting on the economic assets of the Brest oblast, Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko stated that the government and civil society organizations have a great potential for joint work which should strengthen cooperation and mobilize efforts. First and foremost, government structures should rely on the deputies, trade unions, youth, veterans, and women's organizations.

The Belarusian leader emphasized that "we should teach our foreign partners that Belarus has civil society, but not like the kind in America or Europe where at its foundations are political parties. We will not form parties or artificially support them. At the same time, we won't impede their activities."

Speaking about mutual cooperation with civil society, the president said, "We will fight for such organizations, we will support them. Serious steps will be taken to implement this plan."  
[translated from the Russian by the Editor]

Source: *BelaPan*; March 30, 2004; [www.naviny.by](http://www.naviny.by)

### 2. Belarusian NGO Faces Closure Because of Typo

The Belarusian Justice Ministry is seeking to ban the nongovernmental organization Novaya Gruppa, which conducts educational activities focused on legal, environmental, and self-governmental issues, Belapan and the Charter-97 website (<http://www.charter97.org>) reported on 1 April. The Belarusian Supreme Court is scheduled to hear the ministry's suit against Novaya Gruppa next week. The charter, which the ministry registered six years ago, identifies the organization as "Novaya Gruppa," whereas its registration certificate printed by the ministry bears the name "Novaya gruppa." The ministry reportedly considers the discrepancy sufficient reason to liquidate the group. The ministry has also found irregularities in the NGO's legal address.

Source: Jan Maksymiuk, *RFE-RL*; April 2, 2004; <http://www.rferl.org/newsline/3-cee.asp>

### **3. Opposition Ask for Lukashenko's Resignation**

A decision was made on March 31 by the National Strike Committee of Belarus to ask for President Lukashenko's resignation. The Strike Committee announced their preparation in carrying out mass protests. On May 1 participants will include entrepreneurs, workers, students, teachers, doctors, veterans and pensioners. Their main demand: the retirement of Aleksand Lukashenko and his government, said chairman of the National Strike Committee, member of the European Coalition "Free Belarus" Valery Levanevsky.

[text omitted]

The economic demands of the protesters are to be divided into two parts:

1. National: to reduce public utilities costs and rent by a third, to raise real average salary to 200 Euro, to increase pensions by 50%. To increase scholarships, unemployment benefits and child support up to the subsistence wage. Minimal wage received should be no less than 100 Euro per month.
2. Demands of businessmen: to cancel introduction of licenses from May 1, 2004, to cancel obligatory social insurance for small entrepreneurs; to reduce to a third the flat tax rate and rent for places in the markets; to cancel limitations for selling goods in the markets introduced by new regulations of trade in the markets; to revoke obligatory certification of goods and hygienic registration of the goods that are not dangerous people's health; to decrease certification costs and so on.

The participants of the protest plan to gather on May 1, at 10 a.m. in the traditional meeting places permitted by authorities in different cities. [text revised by Editor]

*Source: Charter 97; April 4, 2004; www.charter97.org*

### **4. Public Prosecutor's Office Suspended Investigation of Dmitry Zavadsky Case Again**

The Public Prosecutor's office of the Republic of Belarus has suspended the investigation into the criminal case on missing Belarusian journalist Dmitry Zavadsky, who had disappeared without a trace in Minsk on July 7, 2000, Gary Pogonyailo, lawyer for Mr. Zavadsky's wife, told Charter'97. In the notification about suspension of the criminal case signed by the deputy head of the organized crime and corruption investigation department of the Prosecutor's office Ivan Branchel, is said that the criminal case was suspended on March 31 "in connection with failing to detect a person who disappeared without traces".

Representative of Svetlana Zavadskaya, lawyer Gary Pogonyailo believes that investigation of the criminal case on Zavadsky full-scale abduction was not carried out:

"The Prosecutor's office is satisfied with the fact that a sentence was passed to the group of Ihnatovich, and decided that the case can be buried now. Detection of the crimes of the kind must be very high. The image of the state depends on this. The examples of the Western secret services that reveal crimes related terrorism are unique. And in our country none of these crimes have been revealed," said Pogonyailo.

At present Svetlana Zavadskaya and Gary Pogonyailo are set to press for a possibility to familiarize themselves with the notification on the suspension of the criminal case on Zavadsky's abduction.

"There are people accused of Zavadsky's abduction, and they are in the hands of investigators. How the investigation could have been suspended, if the fate of Dmitry had not been

established? Probably, the investigation shows in this way that wrong people have been convicted for the journalists' kidnapping. And if they agree that the verdict to the Ignatovich gang is legitimate, they should work with those people," believes Pogonyailo.

On March 14, 2002 Minsk district court found guilty a former officer of elite special squad Almaz Valery Ignatovich and his band in a number of crimes, including the abduction of journalist Dmitry Zavadsky. Valery Ignatovich and Maksim Malik were sentenced to life imprisonment, Alyaxei Huz – to 25 years of imprisonment, Sergei Saushkin– to 12 years of imprisonment in a colony of high security. [text revised by Editor]

*Source: Charter97; April 6, 2004; www.charter97.org*

## **REGIONAL**

### **4. Borodin Says It's High Time for Referendum on Union**

In Moscow and Minsk April 2 will mark the eighth anniversary of the Belarus-Russia Union, noted the secretary of the Union state Pavel Borodin at a press conference on Wednesday. According to him, eight years ago the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation came to an agreement about the formation of the association. A year later on this day the two sides signed a pact on creating the Belarus-Russia Union.

Today, around fifty industrial, social, military, technical, cultural, and educational programs and events exist under the guise of the Union. Borodin highlighted that over the last eight years, more than twenty-five bilateral agreements have been signed which strengthen legislatively the principles of the Union and give them legal credence. Borodin emphasized that trade between Belarus and Russia grows every year and in 2003 consisted of US \$12 billion. "I believe that 2004 will be key to solving the political issues between Russia and Belarus. A series of industrial programs will be adopted, and concrete parameters by which we can build the Union state will be defined," he said.

Borodin also noted that it is high time to hold a referendum on the issue of the functionality of the Union. [translated from the Russian by the Editor]

*Source: BelaPan; March 30, 2004; www.naviny.by*

### **5. CIS Anti-Terrorism Protocol Signed**

The Belarus parliament has ratified the protocol confirming regulations on conducting joint anti-terrorist activities in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

The ratification of the document is designed to show that Belarus shares responsibility for the preservation of peace and international security, noted Leonid Yerin, chairman of the Belarus state security committee, when he submitted the document to the legislative assembly.

"Analysis of the current international situation shows that international terrorism is characterized by a large scale, an unprecedented cruelty and sophistication in staging terrorist acts," said Mr. Yerin.

The protocol defines, in particular, the legal status of the participating states in joint operations. The protocol confirming these regulations was signed in Chisinau, the capital of Moldova, in 2002.

According to Mr. Yerin, the documents submitted by him to the parliament do not contain points that contradict the Belarus constitution. On Friday, the Belarus parliamentarians also ratified the

International Convention on the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism, signed by Belarus in 2001 in New York. [text revised by Editor]

Source: RIA Novosti; April 2, 2004; <http://www.rian.ru>

## **INTERNATIONAL**

### **6. U.S. Embassy in Minsk Concerned About Crackdown Against Civil Society (full text)**

The Embassy of the United States of America expresses alarm and deep concern about recent actions taken by some Belarusian authorities against members of Belarusian civil and political society.

In recent weeks, Belarusian authorities have imposed onerous fines and pursued criminal proceedings against officials of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee. Separately, authorities are also pursuing charges against the chairman of the United Civic Party and have detained other political party leaders. Belarusian authorities continue to repress independent media by arbitrarily refusing printing and distribution services and threatening closure of independent newspapers, including the well-known and internationally respected *Beloruskaya Delovaya Gazeta*. Such actions would appear to violate Belarus' international commitments to protect and respect human rights. Furthermore, these actions raise serious questions about the commitment of Belarusian authorities to ensuring that upcoming parliamentary elections will be conducted freely and fairly according to OSCE norms of conduct. The Embassy encourages the Belarusian leadership to ensure that Belarusian authorities respect the rights of Belarusian citizens as guaranteed under Belarusian and international laws and reverse these actions against civil society.

In an unprecedented act of unity, the United States of America and the European Union recently jointly approached the Belarusian Government to reaffirm the importance both the United States and the European Union attach to relations with Belarus. Both the United States and the European Union warmly encourage Belarus to join the trans-Atlantic community of democratic nations in upholding common values of democracy, respect for human rights, and freedom of speech. To prevent Belarus isolating itself further from this community of friends and neighbors, the Embassy of the United States of America calls upon the Belarusian leadership to halt the repressive actions against Belarusian civil and political society.

Source: U.S. Embassy in Minsk; April 1, 2004; <http://minsk.usembassy.gov/>

### **7. Belarus to Build Relations with NATO While Looking Back at Russia**

Yesterday, on April 2, in a festive occasion in front of the Brussels based NATO headquarters, seven flags were raised representing the new countries which were inducted into NATO. This was the largest expansion in the military-political block's history: more than a third: from 19 to 26 members.

As was expected, our Baltic neighbors are rejoicing; their lifelong dream has come true. However, from the other side, showing clear but restrained discontent, was Russia. In truth, we are witnessing an incredibly important event, the consequences of which will remain unclear, not only for our country, but also for the region, and even for Europe.

Of course, only the entry of Latvia and Lithuania, and to a lesser extent, Estonia, really affects Belarusian interests. The same step taken by Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia will only have some kind of psychological impact for our country. Meaning, "why is everyone so eager to join the alliance?" Perhaps it's not so bad. Without a doubt, this perception is the result of NATO's five-year-long presence on our western borders. Despite the warnings from the Belarusian

government, the majority of the working class didn't feel any growing external threats, and this reasonably has a serious influence on our worldview.

One must say that even the Belarusian leadership on this occasion seemed much more restrained in its reactions with regards to this event: no mention of "monsters that have crept up to innocent borders." Aleksandr Lukashenko only reminded that for nearly ten years he held on to the belief that the expansion of NATO to the East is unacceptable. He also stated that Belarus is preparing to ward off any hypothetical aggression, strengthening its military forces. Maybe you can disagree with this position, but you must admit that this position has been expressed calmly, without growing tension. Accordingly, similarly other commentary from officials was restrained.

Moreover, at the celebration in Brussels, as Russian television network NTV reported, Belarusian military servicemen were present (probably, representatives of our mission to NATO) while not a single Russian participated.

The reasons for such behavior are as follows. First, Minsk could have remembered that its immediate neighbor, Poland, is a NATO member, and that this fact did not evoke any negative feelings among the vast majority of Belarusian citizens. This logic can be applied to the Latvia and Lithuania. Second, the long standing resistance to NATO's expansion, which produced no results, also served a lesson. At a minimum, opposition had no effect but to undermine the image of the opponent.

Our current situation with Russia, towards which it seems the Belarusian government's previous anti-NATO rhetoric was directed, leaves much to be desired. which in a big way was oriented towards the Belarusian government's previous anti-NATO rhetoric, leaves much to be desired. Why would we sacrifice ourselves for them?

[text omitted]

Thus, even if this expansion (by all accounts, not the last one, for there are still some more candidates) could present any danger to Belarus, it would be in the Kremlin's absolutely inadequate reaction to the expansion. [translated from the Russian by the Editor]

*Source: Andrei Fyodorov; BelaPan; April 3, 2004; www.naviny.by*

## **HUMAN RIGHTS & INDEPENDENT MEDIA**

### **8. UN Commission On Human Rights to Consider Resolution On Belarus**

Ambassador Richard S. Williamson, U.S. representative to the Commission on Human Rights, says the United Nations' most important human rights body has an obligation to speak out on violations wherever they occur in the world.

Williamson added that the United States intends to sponsor a resolution on the situation of human rights in Belarus and to co-sponsor a resolution on Turkmenistan with the European Union. The United States also has "grave concerns" about the situation in Chechnya and hopes to support a resolution on it, but is waiting to see the language of the final draft of the resolution.

Williamson spoke at a March 26 press briefing, as the commission concluded the second week of its six-week session. Voting on resolutions will take place during the last two weeks of the session, which ends on April 23.

The United States is convinced that the "naming and shaming" aspect of the commission's work can lead to reform and, at the same time, show the victims that there are "those in the international community that stand with them," Williamson said.

"We have seen instances, time and time again, where there has been grudging and slow progress by those countries who have been subjected to the light of the commission," he noted."

*Source: Wendy Lubetkin, Washington File Special Correspondent; Charter97; March 31, 2004; www.charter97.org*

## **9. Representative of Belarusian Mission to UN Defends Legal System in Belarus**

*Note: The following is an excerpt from a statement by Vladimir Malevich, representative of the Belarus Mission to the U.N., which was made during the annual meeting of the UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva.*

One of the inalienable elements of a truly democratic society was the effective enjoyment of independence by the judiciary. All other rights depended on the right to a free and fair trial by a competent and independent court functioning under the law, and this was established by the Constitution of Belarus, where every individual had the right to judicial redress.

There was an effective system of protection of the judiciary in the country. Criminal legislation provided for the fullest possible protection of the rights of both those suspected of crimes and those convicted of crimes. No one could be found guilty of a crime without due legal process and proof. There was also a process of judicial review that ensured that none could be found guilty unfairly. A significant role in ensuring respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms belonged to the Constitutional Court, which had created the legal basis for further discussion of the issue of the death penalty, with the possibility of a moratorium on it, leading to a potential repeal of the penalty.

*Source: U.N. Commission on Human Rights; April 1, 2004; <http://www.unhchr.ch/>*

## **10. Banned Belarusian Newspaper Ready to Relaunch**

The banned independent weekly *Svaboda* has reemerged in Minsk as an underground newspaper, editor-in-chief Sergei Dubavets was reported saying. The renewed, 24-page *Svaboda* will appear as a monthly and will be distributed among pro-democracy organizations, especially during opposition demonstrations. He added that the newspaper will not seek state registration. "Under the current circumstances, it is impossible to register a pro-democracy publication. I have vainly attempted to do this in the past two years," Mr Dubavets said. *Svaboda* was launched in 1990 and forced to shut down in 1997 following two official warnings for alleged violations of the country's media law. [text revised by the Editor]

*Source: Belarusian Association of Journalists; March 31, 2004; [www.baj.ru](http://www.baj.ru)*

## **BUSINESS**

### **13. Bush Imposes Sanctions on Companies Aiding Iran with Arms, Including One from Belarus**

The Bush administration is imposing sanctions on 13 foreign companies and individuals in seven countries that it says have sold equipment or expertise that Iran could use in nuclear, chemical and biological weapons programs, according to administration and congressional officials. The sanctions would prohibit the companies and individuals from exporting goods to the United States, or receiving contracts or assistance from the United States, and will prevent U.S. companies from trading with them for two years. Officials said the sanctions were being imposed

under the Iran Nonproliferation Act of 2000, which prevents sales of goods and technology that Iran could use to acquire long-range missiles and unconventional weapons.

The 13 entities cited include five Chinese companies as well companies in Russia, Macedonia, Belarus, Taiwan, North Korea and the United Arab Emirates. At least five had already had sanctions imposed at least once by the administration.

They said the list also included Baranov Engine and Professor V. Vorobei in Russia; Mikrosam and its president, Blagoja Samakoski, in Macedonia; Changgwang Finyong Corp. in North Korea; Belvneshprom Service in Belarus; Elmstone Trading in the United Arab Emirates; and Goodly Industrial in Taiwan.

The companies could not immediately be reached for comment. [text omitted]

Source: *New York Times*, April 2, 2004; [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)

#### **14. Borodin Says Russian-Belarusian Natural Gas Agreement Imminent**

Pavel Borodin, the state secretary of the Union state of Russia and Belarus, said that an agreement on deliveries of Russian natural gas to Belarus will be reached soon.

"Regarding gas and oil, we will come to an agreement soon," he said at the news conference on Friday.

Mr. Borodin also said that he hopes the introduction of a single currency in Russia and Belarus will happen before 2006. According to him, five of the six agreements in the package on the introduction of a single currency have already been coordinated.

"The sides have not reached an agreement only on the value added tax. It is a purely economic aspect, because this is connected with the advance of the Russian and Belarus products to the markets," he said.

"The Union State does exist. It has a common border, a common customs space and will soon have a common currency," Mr. Borodin pointed out.

However on Wednesday, Russian Finance Minister Aleksei Kudrin told reporters that the introduction of the ruble as the single currency of the Union State had been postponed until 2006. It had been planned to be introduced on January 1, 2005. [text omitted and revised by Editor]

Source: *RIA Novosti*; April 2, 2004; <http://www.rian.ru>

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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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