

Edited by Nate Young
www.belarusupdate.org

BU Interview with Boris Nemtsov (Union of Right Forces Party)

On Thursday, April 15, Boris Nemtsov, former chairman of the SPS Party (Union of Right Forces) and former Deputy Prime Minister under Yeltsin, gave a speech at Columbia University, sponsored by the Center for Transitional Economies. Dozens of students, academics, and local Russian-language media attended the event, including representatives from *Belarus Update*, who had the opportunity to talk briefly with Nemtsov afterwards.

In his speech, Nemstov covered a wide array of issues including Russian politics, continuing struggles with economic reforms, NATO expansion, Putin's consolidation of power, and Russia's relations with the U.S., Europe, and former CIS countries, especially Belarus.

As a leading figure in the Russian opposition movement, Nemstov is an obvious source of support for pro-democracy opposition forces in Belarus. In October 2002, Nemtosv was detained at the Minsk airport after he and fellow SPS leader Irina Khakamada tried to attend a conference on Belarusian-Russian integration. They were stopped by Belarusian KGB authorities and "exiled" back to Russia, according to Nemtsov.

During the question and answer portion of the talk, Nemtosv was asked by an audience member to describe his experience in Minsk and, specifically, his attitude towards the Russia-Belarus Union. He described Lukashenko as the last dictator in Europe and said that "unification will never happen while Lukashenko is in power... [he] wants to get cheap resources and doesn't want to give up any power." He believes the Belarusian opposition will look towards Europe for support. Being an economic reformist, Nemstov also found troubling Russia's excessive subsidization of the Belarusian economy and the fact that Russia is only 7th in terms of trade with Belarus.

Belarus Update asked Nemstov about the fall parliamentary elections in Belarus and whether the Russian and Belarusian opposition can find common grounds to work and collaborate. "I am against any constitutional changes that would allows Lukashenko to run again. I am fully supportive of the UCP [United Civil Party] and the coalition Five Plus... The Russian political and business communities have to back the Belarusian opposition," Nemstov stated. He also felt that both Putin and Lukashenko are mutually distrustful of one another. And for good reason. "He [Putin] hates Lukashenko. Why should Russia support a dictatorship? Lukashenko calls Putin a terrorist." Nemstov noted his concerns about the recent crackdown against independent media outlets in Belarus, including the popular independent papers *Belaruskaya Delovaya Gazeta* [Belarusian Business News] and *Narodnaya Volya*.

On his website (<http://www.nemtsov.ru>), Nemstov gives his stance on foreign policy. Regarding Belarus, he says that "if they murdered the Belarusian Supreme Soviet chairman [Viktor] Gonchar, if they killed Zakharenko, if Dima [Dmitry] Zavadsky was killed, then we first need to talk about what Belarus must do to defend human rights."

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DOMESTIC

1. Lukashenko to Run for Third Term as President

Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko says he will run for his third presidency if the population supports him.

"If I make up my mind to run for president and the population supports me I will certainly do it," Aleksandr Lukashenko told deputies of the Belarusian Parliament.

Presidential elections in Belarus are slated for 2006. For the incumbent president to be able to run for presidency the country must hold a referendum on whether it is possible for the Belarusian President to run for his third presidential term.

Aleksandr Lukashenko promised the referendum would be "open, fair and in strict accordance with the Constitution." He also assured that nobody would play any political games during the election campaign.

"The main thing for Lukashenko is not to take the power again but not to be reproached for abandoning the power," he said.

The Belarusian President said a decision on whether to run for president or not might depend upon attacks of the opposition on the supporters of the present-day power. "Such people are many [Lukashenko's supporters] and I must defend them," he added.

Aleksandr Lukashenko said he would announce his final decision either in public, in the Belarusian Parliament or in his address to the nation. [text revised by the Editor]

Source: *RIA Novosti*; April 14, 2004; www.rian.ru

2. List of Belarusian State Secrets Adopted

Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko has signed a decree adopting a list of data which represents the country's state secrets.

The presidential decree was published in Belarus' state-owned newspapers on Wednesday. The state secrets list includes information on the country's relations with foreign nations; the strategy and tactics of its foreign policy; talks between Belarusian and foreign officials aimed at formulating a common position on international relations; the drafting, signing, contents, suspension or annulment of the country's international treaties; the strategy and tactics of the country's foreign business contacts and outstanding settlements with foreign countries.

The country's budget spending on defense, law enforcement agencies and other national security bodies are considered state secrets as well.

Source: Interfax-Minsk; April 14, 2004; www.interfax.ru

3. ILO Commission Probes Alleged Abuses of Trade Union Rights in Belarus

The UN's International Labor Organization (ILO) commission investigating alleged violations of trade-union rights in Belarus met with the leaders of the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions (BKDP) on 16 April, Belapan reported on 19 April. BKDP President Alyksandr Yarashuk reportedly informed the commission about authorities' interference in the affairs of the Belarusian Union of Agro-Industrial Complex Workers, which he headed for many years, and about violations of trade unions' rights by the government after his election as president of the BKDP in November 2002. The commission will stay in Belarus until 24 April. It is scheduled to meet with representatives of other trade unions, employers, and the government. The ILO set up its "commission of inquiry" into allegations of serious workers' rights abuses in Belarus in November 2003.

Source: Jan Maksymiuk; RFE-RL; April 20, 2004; www.rferl.org/newsline/3-cee.asp

4. Neither Lukashenko Nor Opposition

If the question were raised in a referendum about limiting presidential terms to two, almost half of the Belarusians, 47.5% would answer "against", and only 25.4% would vote for it. More than half of Minsk dwellers, 51.9%, are not going to vote for the third term of the present president. Almost 50% of Belarusians believe that the referendum on the third term is not needed at all, and only 23.5% think that it is necessary to hold this referendum. These figures were presented by the laboratory of sociological research Novak headed by Andrei Vardamatsky. They are especially topical in the light of yesterday's statement of Lukashenko in the "parliament" that "if people would ask him", he is sure to stay in power for the third term. The research shows that while people are unwilling to see Lukashenko in power, the rating of opposition is not growing.

Almost 13% of Belarusians and 12.5% Minsk residents know about the European coalition "Free Belarus". Among those who know about the coalition, 9.1% of Minsk residents trust it completely, and 39.9% "almost trust" it. In the whole country 7% of people completely trust it and "almost trust" it almost 30%.

12.5% citizens of the country and 9% of Minsk residents know about the foundation of the People's coalition Five Plus. Among those who know about it, 5.6% of Minsk dwellers completely trust it and 38% almost trust it, in the whole country these figures are equal to 2.1% and 35% respectively. Ratings of recognition and confidence of the group "Respublika" are comparable with the ratings of other coalitions. Also, Five Plus takes the second position among the three coalitions in Belarus according to the poll, and even the third in Minsk. The conclusion suggests

that without the joining together of all opposition coalitions the rating of the Belarusian opposition would not grow significantly. [text omitted and revised by the Editor]

Source: Charter97; www.charter97.org

5. Disappeared 5 Years Ago Viktor Gonchar Summoned to Court

The court of the Soviet district of Minsk summoned Viktor Gonchar by a notice of appointment for the hearings as a defendant in connection with communal services non payment. Such writs have been received also by a wife of another abducted politician, Zinaida Gonchar, and her son Andrei. It is worth mentioning that the same district court acknowledged that Gonchar disappeared without a trace. The disappeared politician and his family are ordered to come to the court on April 19, when according to the decision of the Council of Ministers a day off is declared.

As Gonchar told at the press conference organized on April 14 in the human rights center Viasna, for the last month she really had not paid for communal services. On September 7, 2003, on the birthday of Victor Gonchar, a conflagration in the attic above her flat occurred. Fire fighters had extinguished the fire, but the flat interior was ruined by water, and the family had to make quick repair works. The district administration decided to allocate money of the state for repair works in the flat of Mrs. Gonchar from the sum intended for maintenance works and repairs. The sum agreed was equal to 1 million 320 thousand Belarusian rubles (about \$600). But even after some month the money were not transferred. Mrs. Gonchar decided not to pay for communal services to compensate for the payment not received. When she collected pay-sheets for the sum of 414 thousand rubles, she and her son were summoned to the court.

According to Mrs. Gonchar, she is going to register a counter-claim to the housing and communal services department. But she is deeply amazed that a disappeared man is summoned to court as a defendant, the BelaPAN informs. [text revised by the Editor]

Source: Charter 97; April 15, 2004; www.charter97.org

REGIONAL

6. Lukashenko Doesn't Want to Turn Union with Russia Into Another CIS

Belarus will adhere to all agreements reached with Russia, Belarusian president Aleksandr Lukashenko stated in his address to the parliament and the nation on Wednesday.

"Belarus will follow the letter and spirit of treaties signed with Russia. We are against amendments which emasculate the contents of existing agreements and turn the Union government into the likeness of the CIS," Lukashenko said. He stated that "the Russian ruble will become the single method of payment for carrying out publicly all promulgated measures that will benefit equally both Russia and Belarus."

"And if our ally stops to look at us exclusively through the "prism" of gas pipe, we will find a solution to all of our present predicaments," Lukashenko emphasized. [translated from the Russian by the Editor]

Source: strana.ru; April 14, 2004; www.strana.ru

7. Lukashenko Elegantly Buries the Union Pact

On April 14, the Belarusian President made his annual address to the parliament and to the nation. Aleksandr Lukashenko began his speech by describing the principles and priorities of the state's foreign policy.

Lukashenko emphasized the increase of aggressiveness in international terrorism and that this global evil has not yet grazed our country. And this, of course, is an accomplishment of the Belarusian government, and their carefully thought out policy.

Lukashenko used the recent train bombings in Spain as a contrasting example, which had resulted in many casualties and was the consequence of Spanish troops stationed in Iraq. And thus everything is OK for us, because thanks to the wisdom of the country's leadership we did not poke our noses there. Then again, no one invited us to join the anti-Saddam coalition. But that moment remains unmentioned. And this is how to build good PR.

Regarding NATO's expansion, the president didn't say anything new. He was quite restrained and NATO wasn't called a monster.

Minsk's position is the following: we're against the expansion of this military-political bloc; we don't like it that our territory is being swept through with NATO's surveillance systems. We cannot compare our military potential to theirs, of course, but thanks to military reform Belarus created a modern army which is capable of striking a considerable blow against any potential aggressor.

Although, according to the president, for now there are no real outside threats. The "professional opposition" tries to make enemies with Belarus (and this is already, in passing, negative PR for political rivals).

Lukashenko called the CIS a sluggish structure, which over the past year hasn't resolved a single issue, and places integration into the European Union a model for post-Soviet leaders. Regarding the Single Economic Zone [Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan], the realization of this project is beneficial for Belarus. However, participation makes sense in the event that integration will proceed at different speeds.

The stronger, although tearless, moment came when Lukashenko described the perspectives on the Russia-Belarus Union. The president clearly and distinctly explained that the integration project in its previous format is dead. Moreover, the blame lies on the other side because they began to look at us through the "prism" of the gas pipe.

Common currency? We're not against it in principle, but a single ruble should become the "crown of the common home."

However, the building of this home itself, at the very least, is preserved.

The head of state reminded Putin of his suggestion about the entry of our country into Russia, and again called it offensive. Lukashenko stated that the referendum on the Constitutional act has a reason to be undertaken only under the condition that this document outlines integration on equal grounds and that it will be much stronger than the Union pact signed in 1999. As you know, Putin, on the other hand, more than once and under different guises has offered to revise the five-year-old conditions of the integration. The Kremlin believes that Yeltsin, during the twilight of his rule, gave Minsk too many rights in the Union government. [translated from the Russian by the Editor]

Source: Kirill Poznyak; BelaPan; April 14, 2004; www.naviny.by

8. Lukashenko on Russian Relations (excerpt)

Unfortunately, the West understands the situation in Belarus better than the Russians do. When the West stopped financing our opposition, certain circles in Russia began to finance it. As soon as the current government, God forbid, will be replaced no one here will talk any more about any pro-Russian government. There couldn't be a more pro-Russian government than we have now. All that's left is to give up sovereignty and independence. We won't go for that. When they talked

about this to me—I won't name names, you know where this conversation could have taken place—they said "we'll hold a referendum on whether Belarus wants to become part of Russia." They tell me: if you want to, then do it. Of course. For now I am in the position to hold a referendum... But, firstly, this will be the beginning of Lukashenko's end and all who are with him. This is the beginning of the end of this government. Secondly, Russia gets a second Chechnya. And it will be Chechnya squared. [translated from the Russian by the Editor]

Source: *Izvestia*; April 15, 2004; www.izvestia.ru

INTERNATIONAL

9. Belarus' Position on NATO Enlargement Unchanged

Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko said his country's position regarding NATO enlargement has not changed, and that therefore the Belarusian army will undergo reform to properly confront this situation.

In an annual address to the parliament and the nation on Wednesday, Lukashenko said, "Belarus' border with NATO is 1,213-kilometer long. We have said honestly and openly that NATO enlargement is unacceptable for Belarus. We have stuck to this viewpoint for ten years." Lukashenko criticized NATO plans to deploy a military infrastructure on the territories of its new members.

"Our territory can be completely covered by their technical reconnaissance fire, and not only ours but also the Russian territory can be covered by their technical reconnaissance fire," he said.

"Belarus does not possess a military potential compatible with NATO's military power," the Belarussian leader noted. However, "in carrying out reforms in the armed forces, we are consistently advancing in building an army that would be capable of waging a modern war," he said.

At the same time, "Belarus intends to further ensure its security using political tools," the president said.

Source: *Interfax*; April 14, 2004; www.interfax.ru

HUMAN RIGHTS & INDEPENDENT MEDIA

10. UN Human Rights Commission Passes Resolution on Belarus (press release)

Note: The following is from a press release published after the UN Commission on Human Rights adopted a resolution on Belarus and appointed a special rapporteur to investigate human rights abuses in the country. For complete text of the resolution please visit: www.belarusupdate.org.

The Commission on Human Rights acted on a series of draft resolutions on country-specific situations this afternoon, approving by roll-call vote measures criticizing human rights matters in Cuba, Turkmenistan, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, and Belarus.

Through the resolutions on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and Belarus, it decided to appoint Special Rapporteurs to investigate human rights issues in those countries.

[text omitted]

In a resolution on the situation of human rights in Belarus, adopted by a roll-call vote of 23 in favour and 13 opposed, with 17 abstentions, the Commission expressed deep concern at reports from credible sources implicating senior officials of the Government of Belarus in the forced

disappearance and/or summary execution of three political opponents of the incumbent authorities and of a journalist; about the electoral process and legislative framework in Belarus, which remained fundamentally flawed; about continued reports of arbitrary arrests and detentions; about persistent reports of harassment and closure of non-governmental organizations, national minority organizations, independent media outlets, opposition political parties, and independent trade unions; and about increased restrictions on the activities of religious organizations. The Commission decided to appoint a Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus.

A Representative of Belarus said the attempt to appoint a Special Rapporteur was a mere attempt to divert the Commission from the consideration of true mass violations of human rights such as were occurring in Iraq; and that the Commission once again found itself being used as the tool of the political interests of certain Member States.

[text omitted]

In a resolution on the situation of human rights in Belarus (E/CN.4/2004/L.22), adopted by a roll-call vote of 23 in favour and 13 opposed, with 17 abstentions, the Commission expressed deep concern at reports from credible sources implicating senior officials of the Government of Belarus in the forced disappearance and/or summary execution of three political opponents of the incumbent authorities and of a journalist; about the electoral process and legislative framework in Belarus, which remained fundamentally flawed; about continued reports of arbitrary arrests and detentions; about persistent reports of harassment and closure of non-governmental organizations, national minority organizations, independent media outlets, opposition political parties, and independent trade unions; about increased restrictions on the activities of religious organizations; about reports of harassment of independent and internationally oriented educational establishments; about the failure of the Government to cooperate fully with all the mechanisms of the Commission on Human Rights, as requested in its resolution 2003/14; and about the criminal prosecution of a leading opposition figure.

The Commission urged the Government to dismiss or suspend from their duties law enforcement officers and public officials implicated in forced disappearances and/or summary executions, pending an impartial, credible and full investigation of those cases; to ensure that all necessary measures were taken to investigate fully and impartially all cases of forced disappearance, summary execution and torture and that perpetrators were brought to justice; to bring the electoral process and legislative framework into line with international standards; to bring the actions of its police and security forces into conformity with its obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; to establish independence of the judiciary and end impunity for persons responsible for killing or injuring individuals; and to release scientists and other individuals detained for politically motivated reasons.

It urged the Government to cooperate fully with all the mechanisms of the Commission, including by extending invitations to the Special Rapporteur on the question of torture, the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, the Special Rapporteur on the right to freedom of opinion and expression, and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on the situation of human rights defenders; as well as the Working Group on Enforced or Arbitrary Disappearances; and decided to appoint a Special Rapporteur to establish direct contacts with the Government and people of Belarus with a view to examining the situation of human rights in the country.

The vote was as follows:

In favour (23): Australia, Austria, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Croatia, Dominican Republic, France, Germany, Guatemala, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Netherlands, Paraguay, Peru, Republic of Korea, Sri Lanka, Sweden, United Kingdom and United States.

Against (13): Armenia, China, Cuba, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, Russian Federation, Sierra

Leone, South Africa, Sudan, Ukraine and Zimbabwe.

Abstentions (17): Argentina, Bahrain, Bhutan, Burkina Faso, Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gabon, Honduras, Mauritania, Nepal, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Swaziland, Togo and Uganda.

Source: UN; April 16, 2004; www.un.org

11. The Belarusian Representative Responds...

SERGEI ALEINIK (Belarus), speaking as a concerned country, said no one present was likely to be surprised that the United States had tabled a draft resolution based upon totally misleading and groundless accusations against another State. This was nothing but an attempt to punish a State that had chose to follow another path. It was obvious to all that the accusations against Belarus had been designed in the same manner as the weapons of mass destruction allegations against Iraq and that country's alleged ability to deploy them in 45 minutes. However, the European Union's position was more surprising. Was it perhaps a simple attempt to divert attention from those countries' own human rights situations? The Union had rejected all constructive proposals for negotiation and had attempted to create new dividing lines in Europe, which ran counter to all policies of good neighbourliness and partnership.

Unlike the United States, Belarus was a party to all basic international human rights treaties and cooperated fully with international human rights treaty bodies. Among the problematic aspects of the draft, one must ask why Belarus had been singled out as a problematic country in terms of enforced disappearances when such disappearances had been recorded in more than 79 countries. Moreover, Belarus' electoral legislation conformed entirely with international standards and its electoral practices were entirely democratic and transparent. Belarus had been recognized by the World Bank as a model for regional countries in the fight against poverty. There were 18 political parties in Belarus today, and opposition parties could not only criticize the current Government but also benefited from generous political and financial support from the West. Nor had any party been dissolved. Belorussian citizens had established 2,214 public associations and 52 all-nation trade unions, which also maintained active international contacts. The press had grown by 20 per cent in recent years and non-governmental organizations by 70 per cent. The suggestion to have a Special Rapporteur for Belarus did not stand up to criticism or logic. Special Rapporteurs should only be appointed as a last resort for those countries in which mass, gross and continuing violations of human rights were taking place. The attempt to appoint a Special Rapporteur for Belarus was a mere attempt to divert the Commission from the consideration of true mass violations of human rights such as were occurring in Iraq. The Commission again found itself being used as the tool of the political interests of certain Member States.

Source: UN; April 16, 2004; www.un.org

12. Prosecution Warns Editor of *Birzha Informatsii*

On April 8, Grodno prosecutors passed a warning notice to the editor of an independent newspaper *Birzha Informatsii* Yelena Ravbetskaya for violating the Article 5 of the Law on Press. The Prosecution considered that Mrs. Ravbetskaya distributed the information on behalf of an unregistered political party.

The warning is based on two articles by the head of Grodno office of Union Civil Party (UCP) in *Birzha Informatsii* of January 29 and March 18. The first article was dedicated to the creation of party coalition Five Plus; in the second one the author expressed his viewpoint on the elections in Russia.

April 7 district Prosecution summoned Mrs. Ravbetskaya and informed her about the proceedings regarding the above articles. Talking to the editor, the investigator Aleksandr Abramovich

Abramovicz referred to a last year's refusal of Grodno Executive Committee to register UCP Grodno office.

UCP is registered by Ministry of Justice, while according to the Law on Parties local departments of the party are required only to register in local government bodies - stated in the explanatory note to the Prosecution April 8. However, it turned out that the Prosecution already passed the warning. The editor-in-chief of *Birza Informatsii* intends to appeal the warning in court.

This wasn't the first attempt to call independent journalists to account for distributing information on behalf of unregistered bodies.

Twice since the beginning of April, Baranovichi Prosecutor's office summoned the journalist of the newspaper *Intex-Press* Marina Kulikova. The journalist was questioned about the article she wrote on the incorporation of Baranovichi cell of official youth organization BRSM into an unregistered youth movement Zubr.

April 13 Minsk District Court fined Mikhail Marynich for calling himself a member of organization Za Hodnaje Zhyccio in the article he wrote for the newspaper *Narodnaya Volya*-- Ministry of Justice didn't register the organization yet. [text revised by the Editor]

Source: *Belarusian Association of Journalists*; April 9, 2004; www.baj.ru

13. Narodnaya Volya Threatened with Lawsuit Again

Narodnaya Volya is under threat of another law suit for not registering an agreement with state information agency BelTA for the dissemination of TV schedule of Belarusian channels. It was stated in a warning received by the editorial office of the newspaper. According to the Belarusian Association of Journalists, *Narodnaya Volya* stated that the TV schedule is not subject to copyright and can be freely printed in any newspaper. The BelTA makes reference to its exclusive right to disseminate TV schedules of Belarusian TV channels and affirms that publishing of a TV schedule by *Narodnaya Volya* without an agreement with the news agency is subject to legal compliance with the Belarusian Civil Code.

Besides, the director of the agency Dmitry Zhuk threatens to demand payment from the editorial office of the *NV* as a compensation of the agency's losses. On April 8 the editor-in-chief of the *NV* Iosef Syaredich sent a reply to the BelTA, saying that he is ready to consider the offers relying to the 9 channels, in which the newspaper is interested (while the BelTA proposes to buy a packet of several dozens of channels' schedules with announcements for 5, 025,000 rubles, or about 2,300 US dollars). [text revised by the Editor]

Source: *Charter97*; April 13, 2004; www.charter97.org

BUSINESS

14. Belarus May Impose Restrictions on EU Textile Imports

Belarus may impose restrictive measures against textile imports from Europe if the EU does not raise import quotas for Belarusian textiles after 10 new countries join it on May 1 2004, Deputy Foreign Minister Aleksandr Mikhnevich said.

The countries that are to join the EU on May 1 are major consumers of Belarusian textile products, with exports totaling around \$100 million a year, he said.

"We will hold new talks with the EU on Belarusian textile import quotas in mid-May and if we do not achieve an increased quota we will impose similar restrictive measures on European textiles.

We are not planning to launch a textiles war, but we will not be open if the EU maintains the current quotas," Mikhnevich said.

Source: *Interfax*; April 16, 2004; www.interfax.ru

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. To send letters to the Editor or to subscribe/unsubscribe please contact Nate Young at: 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.

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.
