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To our readers: Belarus Update Expanded Coverage of 2004 Parliamentary Elections

July 21

2004 is going to be a big year for elections, both parliamentary and presidential, in several countries of the former Soviet Union. Election season is always a good litmus test for nations in transition to show their true commitments to democratic reforms and human rights. Nowhere will this be truer than in Belarus, where parliamentary elections are slated to take place on October 17.

The make-up of the Belarus' Chamber of Representatives, and the level of its political diversity, will have a marked impact on the country's domestic political agenda, especially as it relates to President Aleksandr Lukashenko's desire to push for a constitutional amendment allowing him to run for a third term in office. This long expected move comes after Lukashenko extended his power in a referendum back in 1996 and again in 2001, when he won another term in office through elections which numerous international observers considered fraudulent.

Boycotting the elections, which was carried out by many disgruntled candidates back in the 2000 parliamentary ballot, is not an attractive option, however. There is still hope. According to RFE/RL, opposition parties plan to nominate up to 220 people, two for each of Belarus' 110 districts in case the main candidate is denied registration. Anatoly Lebedko, leader of one of the contending opposition parties United Civic Party, told *Belarus Update* in a telephone interview recently that free and fair elections are nearly impossible to expect this time around. He is optimistic, however, in mobilizing the 25% or so of the population who are dissatisfied with the current Lukashenko regime but who have yet to support, or even hear about, any viable alternative opposition players. Of course, the difficulty of the opposition in getting heard is compounded by the notable lack of unity among the several factions vying to compete with Lukashenko's deferential legislature. Yet even if the opposition does not get a sizable number of candidates into office, their ability to even register and compete freely will itself be a big victory, Lebedko confirmed.

Starting today, *Belarus Update* will devote an entire section that gathers week to week election news, including regular updates on nomination and registration of candidates, opposition blocs and party activities, independent and foreign media access to the elections, and editorials by local journalists, translated from Russian into English when necessary.

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ELECTION NEWS

1. Parliamentary Elections in Belarus Set for Oct 17

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko has set October 17 as the date for elections to the House of Representatives of the National Assembly of Belarus.

The presidential press service reports that Alexander Lukashenko has ordered to take organizational steps to prepare and hold elections within a deadline set by election laws.

Lidiya Yermoshina, the head of the Belarusian Central Electoral Commission, approved an election budget worth nearly seven million dollars that was proposed by the Electoral Commission. The budget had been calculated on the basis of one dollar per one voter.

Most deputies of the parliament of the current convocation are expected to take part in the upcoming elections to the House of Representatives. The United Belarusian Opposition nominates 220 candidates for the parliamentary elections. Each election constituency will nominate the main opposition candidate and 110 backup candidates in case the main candidate is denied registration.

The nominations will start in August.

Source: Itar-tass; July 14, 2004; www.tass.ru

2. Belarusian Opposition Prepares Candidates for Parliamentary Election

The opposition United Civic Party (AHP) intends to field 55 candidates in the 17 October parliamentary election, Belapan reported on 14 July, quoting AHP leader Anatol Lyabedzka. The Belarusian Popular Front plans to propose 60 candidates, while the Belarusian Party of Communists will reportedly nominate 39 hopefuls. The three parties are in an election coalition called Popular Coalition Five Plus. Meanwhile, another opposition group, the Conservative Christian Party (KKhP), is calling on Belarusians to boycott the 17 October ballot (see "RFE/RL Newslines," 13 July 2004). "The 17 October election is a show organized by Belarus's enemies," KKhP spokesman Valery Buyval told Belapan. "In our country, it matters not how people vote, but who counts the votes," Buyval said.

Source: Jan Maksymiuk, RFE/RL; July 15, 2004; www.rferl.org/newslines

3. Membership in Election Commission to be Granted to Parties with Running Candidates

Only representatives of those parties that manage to register their members as candidates in the parliamentary elections will be granted associate membership in the central election commission, Mikalay Lazavik, the commission's secretary, told BelaPAN.

He recalled that Lidziya Yarmoshyna, the commission's head, had proposed issuing a presidential decree that would allow political parties to join the commission without voting right "for the purpose of making the election process more transparent and open to public." According to Mr. Lazavik, Aleksandr Lukashenko accepted the proposal and tasked the commission with drawing up such a decree.

The document is expected to be signed by the Belarusian leader only after September 16, the deadline for the candidate registration stage.

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

4. Analysis: Belarusian Opposition Prepares for Parliamentary Election

The opposition parties constituting the Popular Coalition Five Plus -- the Belarusian Popular Front, the Belarusian Party of Labor, the United Civic Party, the Belarusian Social Democratic Assembly, and the Belarusian Party of Communists (PKB) -- are going to ensure that their common candidate is on the ballot in each of the country's 110 districts for the 17 October legislative elections. PKB leader Syarhey Kalyakin told journalists on 15 July that Five Plus will field two candidates in each district so that the first-choice nominee can be replaced by the back-up one if needed. According to Kalyakin, the coalition's parties will not have any candidate quotas, and nominees will be selected solely on the basis of their popularity in each particular district.

The Popular Coalition Five Plus seems to be the strongest opposition force in the country now, if the word "strong" may be applied to the Belarusian opposition under President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's autocratic rule. After the controversial constitutional referendum in November 1996, the opposition has been driven out by Lukashenka from "systemic politics" -- that is, primarily from the country's legislature and elective self-government bodies -- and marginalized in the domestic political arena. Major opposition parties boycotted the 1999 local polls and the 2000 parliamentary ballot, in protest against the country's antidemocratic election legislation. The return of the opposition into "systemic politics" took place in the 2001 presidential election and the 2003 local polls, but in both cases with frustratingly poor results (see "RFE/RL Belarus and Ukraine Report," 14 July 2004).

As in several previous election campaigns, there is no unity in the ranks of the Belarusian opposition. Apart from the Popular Coalition Five Plus, two other opposition groups have declared their intention to take part in the election: the European Coalition Free Belarus based on the Charter-97 human rights organization and the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Popular Assembly); and the Young Belarus bloc based on the opposition Youth Front (a youth arm of the Belarusian Popular Front). It is still possible that other groups claiming opposition to the government will emerge closer to the election date and field their candidates.

Meanwhile, the Conservative Christian Party (KKhP), led by exiled Zyanon Paznyak from Poland, is calling on Belarusians to boycott the 17 October elections. "Only a boycott gives the people a chance for victory, a possibility to renounce the election farce," Paznyak said in a message to a KKhP conference in Minsk earlier this month. "There are no elections whatsoever, [election] protocols record only those results that are conveyed from the top," KKhP acting Chairman Yuras Belenki told RFE/RL last week. "In such a situation there is only one way of counteraction for society -- to show its attitude to the farce by refusing to go to the polls."

However, boycotting may be an unfeasible option on 17 October. According to a recent survey by the Minsk-based Independent Institute of Socioeconomic and Political Studies (NISEPI), some 63 percent of voters said they will take part in the October elections. The boycott proposed by the KKhP was supported by only 10 percent of respondents. Commenting on the survey last week, NISEPI Director Aleh Manayeu said that "pro-democracy forces" stand a "realistic chance" of winning seats in the Chamber of Representatives on 17 October. According to him, the survey

established that the Belarusians are increasingly looking forward to changes. However, he added, opposition forces may count on success in the election only if they manage to establish a single pro-democracy alliance and advertise their nominees as independent candidates. Belarusian TV viewers are regularly offered prime-time antiopposition propaganda features and documentaries with such telling titles as "The Road to Nowhere" or "Political Pedophilia."

Belarus's Election Code has long been criticized by both the domestic opposition and European experts for undemocratic provisions regarding the formation of election commissions (political parties may not be represented on them), powers of election observers during the voting and vote count, and early voting (which is effectively outside any control). Three deputies of the Chamber of Representatives -- Valery Fralou, Uladzimir Parfyanovich, and Syarhey Skrabets -- staged an 18-day hunger strike last month demanding liberalizing changes to the Election Code, but their relevant bill was overwhelmingly voted down on 22 June. Thus, the current election campaign will be conducted under the old rules.

Candidates for the 17 October election may be proposed from 8 August to 6 September, while their registration with district election commissions will take place from 6-16 September. After the registration, candidates will be able to begin their campaigns, which must be financed exclusively from the state budget and a special election fund created by the Central Election Commission for voluntary donors. Each registered candidate may obtain up to 950,000 Belarusian rubles (\$440) from the state budget for covering his/her campaigning expenses. If a candidate exceeds the sum allocated to him/her from the state budget and the special election fund, his/her registration may be canceled.

Regretfully, it should be expected that, as in the legislative election campaign in 2000, opposition and/or independent candidates will face many difficulties during the registration process. In 2000, some 2,000 prospective independent candidates were refused registration on technicalities. Last week the Justice Ministry signaled a new problem for the opposition. Justice Minister Viktor Halavanau's threatened that he will use "penalties" against the Popular Coalition Five Plus if its leaders fail to register by mid-August. Halavanau said the coalition must be registered just like any other public association, otherwise the alliance will be illegal. To support this view, Belarusian Justice Ministry officials even quoted a Russian-language dictionary, which reportedly says that "coalition" means the same as "association."

In theory, all registered candidates will be allotted the same amount of air time for campaigning on state-run television and radio. But in practice, Belarusian Television has already been conducting an intense preelection campaign of vilifying the Belarusian opposition parties and activists for several months. Belarusian viewers are regularly offered prime-time antiopposition propaganda features and documentaries with such telling titles as "The Road to Nowhere" or "Political Pedophilia." It will be extremely hard to offset such propaganda for candidates disfavored by the government with their official campaign resources, which may not exceed \$440 per person.

In other words, as many times in the past 10 years of his rule, it is President Alyaksandr Lukashenka who shuffles and deals cards in the election game. His opponents will be lucky if they manage to join this game. Winning it seems to be beyond their current capabilities.

Source: Jan Maksymiuk, RFE/RL; July 19, 2004; www.rferl.org/newsline

5. Belarus Stats Agency Launches Online Elections Archive

The Belarusian Information Agency, BelaPAN, is to transform the country's elections website into a comprehensive online archive of Belarusian elections and referenda dating back to 1990.

The site, <http://elections.belapan.com>, was originally in June, 2001, in order to cover that year's presidential elections.

Currently, visitors to the site can find information about the upcoming parliamentary elections in October, last year's local councils elections, the presidential elections of 2001 and the National congress elections of 2000.

The new internet resource is to provide statistical data, sociological analysis and other information in three languages - Belarusian, Russian and English.

Source: *DMEurope*; July 16, 2004; www.dmerope.com

DOMESTIC & REGIONAL

6. Andrey Sanikov Summoned to Public Prosecutor

Coordinator of European Coalition "Free Belarus" and international coordinator of civil initiative Charter '97 Andrei Sanikov was summoned today to the public prosecutor of Belarus. Senior officer of Public prosecution Novikov ordered the politician to write explanations about the publication of the article "Belarus's Terrorist Ties" by Andrey Sanikov and Mark Lenzi in *The Washington Post*. Novikov said that the article contains "wittingly false inventions concerning Belarusian authorities." Andrey Sanikov refused to give explanations because he did not consider the writing of the article to be an illegal action.

"I refused to give explanations because Novikov was trying to get them according to the law on public prosecution. The article says that an officer of the public prosecution can accept explanations only in cases when the law was violated. I gave some explanations. I said that the information in the article is based on numerous publications in world media and on international documents that oblige the state to stick to definite rules in selling weapons. When I asked if he appealed to *The Washington Post* he said "Not yet." It is strange. We know that in Belarus editorial officers of independent newspapers are suppressed together with authors of articles. Novikov also hinted that any person who decides that I insulted Lukashenko in the article can demand compensation for his insulted feelings," said Andrey Sanikov to Charter press-center. [text revised by the Editor]

Source: *Charter 97*; July 19, 2004; www.charter97.org

7. Lukashenko Orders Athletes to Win

The leadership of the National Olympic Committee of Belarus (NOKB) demanded from the heads of sports federation promissory notes with the obligation to bring home medals from the Olympic Games in Athens.

Leader of the Belarusian Canoeing Federation Vladimir Pargenovich confirmed this fact. "In truth, the leadership of the NOKB is demanding written promissory notes to bring back medals from Greece. Financing this or that type of sport is directly linked to delivery of medals," he noted.

President of Belarus and the National Olympic Committee Aleksandr Lukashenko obligated Belarusian Olympiads to bring home 25 medals from Greece; therefore, NOKB officials are taking promissory notes.

The Olympic team delegation will be headed by the former Interior Minister and current Minister of Sports and Tourism, Yuri Sivakov, who is one of the leaders suspected in the disappearances of Belarusian opposition leaders. Sivakov figures in a report entitled "Disappeared People in Belarus" by Christos Pourgourides, special rapporteur at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

"There is no doubt that if the Minister of Internal Affairs Naumov and the Minister of Sports and

Tourism Sivakov visit countries where there is a risk they will be detained, they will be arrested, Christos Porougourides declared in Kiev. [text translated from the Russian]

Source: Prima News; July 20, 2004; www.prima-news.ru

8. Russia, Belarus Put Off Introduction of Single Currency

Russia and Belarus have decided to postpone the introduction of a single currency, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko said at a news conference on Tuesday.

According to him, issues related to the Constitutional Act and the introduction of a single currency have been taken off the list of immediate priorities in Russia-Belarus reintegration.

Mr. Lukashenko pointed out that the introduction of a single currency was "the pinnacle" of the Russia-Belarus Union's edifice and the lower part of the building had to be constructed first, referring to agreements signed but not yet implemented.

Speaking of the Constitution of the Russia-Belarus Union, Alexander Lukashenko said that several versions of the draft had been prepared by now and that the architects' ambition was to make it as strong as the Union Treaty currently in effect.

The two nations have now paved the way for economic reintegration by making a decision on gas prices, the Belarusian leader said. "Belarus and Russia will be building a common state as Russia is a stable and traditional partner, and we will continue to maintain our cordial relationship," he emphasized.

Source: RIA Novosti; July 20, 2004; www.rian.ru

9. Belarus: CIS Can Become a Discussion Club Without Decision Making

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko thinks that the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) would never be disbanded.

He stressed at the press conference devoted to the results of his ten years at power, "We have come to the line at which it is necessary to make specific decisions in the Commonwealth of Independent States."

"We do not want this structure to fall apart and for this reason we must make specific decisions," the Belarusian president said. Otherwise, he said, the CIS can turn into "a political club, which makes no decisions."

According to Lukashenko, the CIS still has "salutary motifs" at present and therefore "we must do all for the CIS to be an influential entity and for its voice to be heard."

Source: Itar-Tass; July 20, 2004; www.tass.ru

10. Belarusian President Offers Referendum on Third Term

Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko said today he might run for a third term in 2006 if the country approves it in a referendum.

In a televised speech, Lukashenko said he would need to get "permission from the people" to make constitutional changes allowing him to run for a third term. Belarus' current constitution limits him to two terms.

Lukashenko also said that he would run as an equal to the other candidates in the next election.

"There will be third [presidential] term for Lukashenko only in accordance with the constitution. Only then, when the people decide," he said. "I am not going to extend any terms. If people allow me to participate in the 2006 presidential election, then I will participate, just like in the previous election, equally with the other candidates."

Lukashenko rose to power in 1994, and two years later oversaw a national referendum that stripped parliament of many powers and extended his term until 2001. He won another term in 2001 in an election that was not recognized as legitimate by European observers.

Source: BelaPan; July 21, 2004; www.naviny.by

INTERNATIONAL

11. Polish Sejm Committee Comes Out in Defense of Belarusian Opposition

The Foreign Affairs Committee in the Polish Sejm has issued a statement in defense of the Belarusian opposition, said the press office of the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF).

"We interpret threats [by the authorities] to outlaw opposition parties (including the liquidation proceedings against the Belarusian Party of Labor) as serious violations of generally binding rules of respect for human rights. Failure to abide by such international rules and commitments is also a serious violation against the principles of the modern way of life and cooperation among peoples in Europe," the press office quoted the statement as saying.

"Poland's moral support for democratic aspirations of the Belarusian people is a necessary expression of friendship that creates conditions for closer cooperation between our countries," says the appeal.

Source: Charter 97; July 20, 2004; www.charter97.org

HUMAN RIGHTS & INDEPENDENT MEDIA

12. Mozyr Residents Will Not Have to Watch Only Belarusian Channels

For residents in Mozyr, hope has arisen that they will not have to watch just Belarusian TV, "Lad," ONT, but also other TV channels. Minister of Communications and Information Vladimir Goncharenko, together with the Mozyr representative Valentin Borisenko discussed the issue of constructing a transmission tower today.

The minister told journalists after the meeting that the current problem is well known. He sees the possibility of permitting the construction of a modern transmission tower which allows Mozyr to receive signals on the level with other major cities in the republic.

The Minister of Communications and Information is prepared to finance half of the work in the event that city government officials take on the other half of expenses. In order to begin work next year, the Mozyr budget in 2005 should stipulate the allocation of funds for the construction of the transmission, confirmed Vladimir Goncharenko. [text translated from the Russian]

Source: Belta; July 17, 2004; <http://belta.press.net.by/>

13. Belarus: Demonstrators Must be Allowed Freedom of Expression

The Belarusian authorities must ensure the right to peaceful protest for political opponents and human rights activists, Amnesty international said today in the context of anti-government demonstrations planned for tomorrow, the 10th anniversary of Alyaksandr Lukashenko's presidency.

"There should be no repeat of the ugly scenes of police brutality and arbitrary arrests witnessed during past demonstrations," Amnesty International urged.

"International human rights standards must be fully observed during policing operations," the organization stressed.

In the past large scale protest actions have met with a repressive response from the Belarusian authorities and have resulted in waves of arrests. Amnesty International has repeatedly expressed its concern about the Belarusian authorities' disregard for human rights, including the harassment and intimidation of non-governmental organizations and trade unions, the stifling the freedom of expression and association, and "disappearances" of opposition politicians and a cameraman.

"The Belarusian authorities continually demonstrate their lack of tolerance for dissent."

"Anyone detained for their peaceful protests will be considered to be a prisoner of conscience", Amnesty International said as the organization prepares to monitor closely the demonstration on 21 July.

The Belarusian authorities are obliged under Articles 19 and 21 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to guarantee citizens the right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. This is particularly important in the run-up to the parliamentary elections on 17 October when those engaged in civil society, and in particular members of the opposition, should be allowed to express their views openly .

Background

In March 2004, Amnesty International called on the authorities to end the practice of detaining people solely for the peaceful exercise of their fundamental rights to freedom of expression and association.

In April 2002, 85 peaceful demonstrators were detained and more than 30 were sentenced to periods of imprisonment between three and 15 days. Opposition activists are continually harassed and according to Zubr, a non-registered youth organization for democracy and human rights, in the period between January 2001 and December 2003 more than a thousand incidents occurred during peaceful public actions. Amnesty International has already taken up two cases of activist arrested for the peaceful expression of their views so far this year.

In April 2004, the UN Commission on Human Rights criticized Belarus for continued reports of arbitrary arrest and detention and for harassment of non-governmental organizations and opposition political parties and those engaged in democratic activities. It has called on Belarus to bring the actions of its police and security forces into conformity with its obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

In May 2004, the Council of Europe rejected an application from Belarus to renew its special status with the organization which had been suspended when President Lukashenko dissolved the parliament in 1997.

Source: Amnesty International; July 20, 2004; www.amnesty.org

BUSINESS

14. Lukashenko Believes EU Expansion Greatly Affects Belarus Economy

Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko said one of new key factors affecting the Belarussian economy is the expansion of the European Union.

The Belarussian president made this statement at a press conference in Minsk on Tuesday, the economic news agency Prime-Tass reports.

“Problems emerge in the countries that have joined the EU. Enterprises of eastern countries of Western Europe go under to competition under new conditions and are ready to move their production facilities to Belarus,” the Belarussian head of state pointed out.

“We have already received many advantageous offers, which we are studying and we shall give attention to those that will help solve the problems of our economy and promote the development of small towns and small businesses,” Lukashenko said.

The president said another plus point is the low unemployment level in the country, just 1.2-1.5 percent.

“We have already achieved the level of unemployment that we are ready to tolerate,” Lukashenko said.

Source: Itar-Tass; July 20, 2004; www.tass.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 Belarussian 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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