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Edited by Nate Young  
www.belarusupdate.org

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## DOMESTIC

### 1. The Opposition Challenges Lukashenko to a Duel...By Television

On April 6, members of the Belarusian opposition coalition Five Plus invited Aleksandr Lukashenko to conduct a meeting and discussion on live television. Such was the response to the remarks Lukashenko made about his opponents in the western city of Brest on March 31.

Then Lukashenko, speaking about the opposition's role and place in our country's political system, stated that "we have mainly an opposition which is visible and which we're talking about; it has a radical anti-governmental nature. Therein lies the problem. But does any government need such an opposition? We need a normal opposition, which could have seen society's deficiencies and could talk about them even right to the president's face. Don't all yell at once that you're such and such... you personally insult not only me but also those whom I have been called upon to defend."

The opposition was offended by charges with anti-governmental activities and worthlessness. In the announcement, leaders of the national coalition Five Plus stated that "it's become a tradition" that the official leader "is not liable for his words and does not trouble himself with finding any evidence. We have the impression that he constantly lives in some kind of distorted, unrealistic world created by him among imagined enemies."

In turn, the opposition members cast a few stones. “Instead of consolidating society, trying to unite all the healthy forces of the country or find a compromise and agreement among the various political currents, Mr. Lukashenko for ten years already has carried on an ongoing, weary battle with the Supreme Council, political parties, NGOs, entrepreneurs, with the economy, Belarusian culture and language, with newspapers and educational institutes, with Europe, Russia, and America.”

The opposition is inviting the president to a public discussion on television in which he should explain “who out of us is carrying on destructive activities, who is lying, who is harming his country. We’re counting on your valor and courage, without which no citizen has the right to call himself the president of the Republic of Belarus, “ the statement taunting Lukashenko so that he accepts the challenge.

However, it’s unlikely that the head of state will seriously respond to this “are you chicken?” Even if it’s only because his advisors don’t recommend it. What reason does Lukashenko have to debate with his opponents in front of millions of people? Only the opposition could really profit from such a meeting, in order to simply break through the information blockade. This alone could surely provide opposition leaders with growth of electoral sympathy.

Today, the ratings of politicians who have announced their intentions to run for president, against the backdrop of Lukashenko’s popularity, don’t look great and fall in the margins of statistical error. The rating gap between the opposition leaders and the current leader is very big. And it is to Lukashenko’s benefit to maintain such an apportionment of strength.

It’s possible that during the electoral campaign of 2006, if of course Lukashenko will be on the ballot once again, he will follow the example of Russian President Vladimir Putin and reject any televised campaign slots for candidates.

Thus one can only guess who will look a winner in this verbal duel: the president, who has a lot of experience appearing before the people, or the opposition. Among the latter, there are of course politicians who aren’t camera shy. But alas they will sharpen their skills only through infrequent appearances on Russian television. [translated from the Russian by the Editor]

Source: Kirill Poznyak, BelaPan; April 7, 2004; [www.naviny.by](http://www.naviny.by)

## **2. Hearing Takes Place on the Liquidation of “Novaya Gruppa”**

A hearing on the case of the liquidation of the young society Novaya Gruppa was postponed until April 8. It was originally planned to take place on April 6. According to the executive director Ellada Gusakova, the official reason for postponing was the absence of sufficient arguments from the Ministry of Justice representative. The representative couldn’t prove the grounds for the group’s liquidation. However, before April 8, the ministry official is obligated to present evidence for the charge. This is why representatives from Novaya Gruppa intend to wait for the official verdict.

Novaya Gruppa conducted legal, ecological, and self-governance training programs for young people. The reasons for the liquidation were contradictions in the registration documents and the group’s seal. According to the directors of the young group, the Justice Ministry made a mistake during the registration: the organization’s name differs from the certificate of registration (it is written “Novaya Gruppa”, and in the certificate, “Novaya gruppa”). As a result, the name on the seal only matches the name on the one on the registration documents. Novaya Gruppa is accused of a violation when it officially filed its legal address. [translated from the Russian by the Editor]

Source: *Charter97*; April 8, 2004; [www.charter97.org](http://www.charter97.org)

#### **4. Dozens Rally in Minsk in Memory of Karpenko**

About 50 people rallied late Tuesday near Belarus' presidential administration office in Minsk in memory of the dead and vanished opposition activists.

Protesters brandished portraits of Gennady Karpenko, who died in 1999 under unclear circumstances, and Viktor Gonchar, Anatoly Krasovsky, Yuri Zakharenko and Dmitry Zavadsky who disappeared without a trace.

"This act is in remembrance of those who died for Belarus' freedom and democracy. And we will continue to move Belarus toward a civilized, democratic society," protester Lyudmila Gryaznova said.

Belarusian authorities have repeatedly been criticized by international organizations for strong-arm tactics in dealing with dissent.

Opposition leaders and human rights groups have repeatedly charged Belarus' Soviet-style President Aleksandr Lukashenko with rights violations and electoral fraud. [text revised by Editor]

*Source: United Civil Party; April 6, 2004; [www.ucpb.org/eng/index.shtml](http://www.ucpb.org/eng/index.shtml)*

#### **5. 50% of Belarusians Don't Believe in the Fairness of Belarusian Elections**

Nearly fifty percent of Belarusians (43.9%) do not believe that fall parliamentary elections will be free and fair, according to a sociological survey conducted in March by the Minsk based Independent Institute of Socioeconomic and Political Studies (NISEPI).

1,480 people were surveyed. 64.2% responded saying they would participate in the elections for the deputies in the Chamber of Representatives, which are expected to take place on October 17. For the last four months, the number of people interested in voting has decreased by 10.1%.

21.4% do not plan to participate, while 14.4% are unsure whether they will vote at all. The vast majority (77.1%) who consider themselves opponents of President Aleksandr Lukashenko are convinced that the elections will be neither free nor fair. 16.1% on the other hand are convinced of the fairness of the campaign. Practically half of the respondents who do not side with the opposition also do not believe in the fairness of the parliamentary elections. [translated from the Russian by the Editor]

*Source: PRIMA news agency; April 12, 2004; [www.prima-news.ru](http://www.prima-news.ru)*

### **REGIONAL**

#### **6. The Parliaments of CIS to Make Contacts Through the Internet**

Representatives of the parliamentary apparatus of the CIS member states swapped work experience and agreed to continue the development of business deals.

At a press conference on Wednesday, Aleksandr Lotorev, chief of state of the Russian State Duma, said the Duma conducted a seminar for leaders of information and analytical services of the parliaments of Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan and Ukraine.

According to Lotorev, the seminar's participants exchanged experience in using modern technology to create an informational and analytical system which would cover the activities in the legislative bodies in the nine CIS countries' governments.

"Our main goal is to facilitate the effectiveness of legislative work and to this end, it is necessary to more effectively use the global Internet to furnish closer contacts among the CIS countries' parliaments," said Lotorev. [translated from the Russian by the Editor]

Source: Belapan; April 8, 2004; [www.naviny.by](http://www.naviny.by)

## **7. Poll Suggests Belarusians Losing Interest in Union with Russia**

The Minsk-based Independent Institute of Socioeconomic and Political Studies (NISEPI) concluded from a March poll conducted among 1,480 adult respondents that Belarusians are losing interest in unification with Russia, Belapan reported on 6 April. Nearly 14 percent of Belarusians believe Belarus and Russia should merge into a single state, according to the pollster, down by 5 percent from a similar poll six months ago. NISEPI blamed the drop on a protracted row over Russian gas supplies to Belarus (see "RFE/RL Newslines," 31 March 2004). The poll also found that 50 percent of respondents approve of an economic and political alliance with Russia, down nearly six percentage points from six months ago. According to the poll, if a referendum were held on a joint constitution for the Russia-Belarus Union, nearly 38 percent would vote to approve the document (down from 50 percent six months ago), 24 percent would vote against it, and 15 percent would not take part in the referendum.

Source: Jan Maksymiuk, RFE-RL; April 7, 2004; <http://www.rferl.org/newslines>

## **INTERNATIONAL**

### **8. Belarusian President to strengthen ties with EU**

President Aleksandr Lukashenko has expressed intentions to develop ties with European countries and to strengthen the European direction in Belarus' foreign policy.

At a ceremony for appointing Vladimir Senko Belarusian ambassador to Belgium and permanent representative to the European communities and NATO, Lukashenko expressed hope that Senko "will channel cooperation between Belarus and European organizations and Europe as a whole to the right vein over the next several years."

"Our foreign policy course must be pursued and there is no need to change it cardinally because it has proven correct," he said. Furthermore, "the position Belarus stated eight years ago with regard to NATO enlargement has been reiterated by many countries. We were aware of the consequences of NATO enlargement long ago and spoke about it. We were ignored. However, we reformed our Armed Forces without preparing for war," he said.

"We have few diplomats of the caliber of Vladimir Senko. He is firm, balanced and loyal to the country," he said.

Lukashenko tasked Senko with clarifying Belarus' position on cooperation with Russia in the West. "No matter what happens in our relations, it has historically been our strategic partner in the union state. However, Belarus is also part of Europe, its center in a way, and we cannot be outside it," he said.

Lukashenko told Senko "to pursue this line politically and diplomatically in an honest and sincere fashion in relation to the European countries and the United States, which largely influences the atmosphere in Europe," the presidential press service reported.

Previously, Senko served as the ambassador to France, Spain and Portugal simultaneously.  
[translated from the Russian by BelaPan]

*Source: Interfax; April 8, 2004; www.interfax.ru*

## **HUMAN RIGHTS & INDEPENDENT MEDIA**

### **9. Belarus Face U.N. Rights Breach Charges**

The ex-Soviet states Belarus and Turkmenistan were warned on Thursday that they may face new condemnation by the U.N.'s human rights body for a range of violations, including murder and repression of dissent.

The charges came in separate resolutions, to be voted on at the end of next week, presented to the United Nations Human Rights Commission by all west and central European countries and the United States.

[text omitted]

The resolution on Belarus, often condemned by the U.N.'s International Labour Organization for suppressing workers' rights, expresses deep concern at reports implicating government officials in the disappearance "and/or summary execution" of three political dissidents and a journalist. It says the electoral process in the country, under the tough control of Soviet-period collective farm chief President Alexander Lukashenko, remains "fundamentally flawed" and that religious groups are facing increased restrictions.

The 53-nation Commission criticized both countries last year for the first time and called on them to improve their record.

But the two resolutions -- backed by three other former Soviet states and formerly Communist-ruled countries in Europe -- assert that neither country had done anything substantial to come into line with U.N. rights agreements.

Russia, which faces a possible resolution from the EU's 25 current and incoming members criticizing its war in Chechnya, has declined to support the criticism of Turkmenistan and Belarus.

*Source: Reuters; April 9, 2004; www.reuters.com; original title: Ex-Soviet States Face U.N. rights Breach Charges*

### **10. Circulation of *Den* Confiscated**

On April 7 at 9.30 p.m. police confiscated print run of independent newspaper *Den* - 4,800 copies. It occurred at Iwyeva traffic police post, in the middle of the road from Minsk to Hrodna. Policemen made claims on documents for delivery of the newspaper, Radio Svaboda informed. The newspaper is printed in Smolensk (Russia) because all Belarusian printing houses refused to print it. On March 31, a car with the print run of the newspaper was detained in the same traffic police post, but later released. This time the newspaper was confiscated.

"I am almost sure that the action is planned," said Mikhail Belakoz, who was delivering the newspaper in his private car. "The traffic police officer, who detained me, has not asked for the documents for the newspaper, but he reported to somebody on the phone: 'Well, they are detained.'"

According to Belakoz, the officers drew up a report of the make of the car and stated a reason for the newspapers' seizure there. A member of the police group, a department on economical

crimes staffer, refused to give his name. In an hour Belakoz was released. He was not given any document on the seizure of the newspaper.

The print run of the newspaper is currently stored in the Iweva police department, and according to an orderly, on April 8 an examination into the case will take place. The usual length of the examination is 10 days. [text revised by the Editor]

Source: *Charter 97; April 8, 2004; www.charter97.org*

## **11. Press Advocacy Groups Condemn Closure of Investigation into Journalist's Disappearance**

Reporters Without Borders and the Belarus Association of Journalists (BAJ) voiced shock today at the decision to close the investigation into the disappearance of journalist Dmitri Zavadski although the Council of Europe's special rapporteur recently spoke of serious suspicions about official involvement in the disappearance and an attempt to cover this up.

Zavadski's wife, Svetlana Zavadskaya, was told of the decision in a letter at the beginning of April which said the investigation had been closed because "the disappeared individual has not been found."

Reporters Without Borders and the BAJ have asked prosecutor-general Viktor Sheyman to write to the Zavadski family giving the reason why the official in charge of the case, Ivan Branshel, decided it should be closed.

The two organisations also asked the prosecutor's office to detail not only what actions were taken to find Zavadski but also what initially-envisioned investigative measures were not carried out and why.

Reporters Without Borders and the BAJ believe that the family has a right to information about two members of the interior ministry special services who were convicted of kidnapping Zavadski, in particular, whether they admitted their guilt and whether they provided information about Zavadski's fate after he was abducted and where his body was buried.

The family also does not know whether the accomplices to the kidnapping – mentioned in the trial – have been identified and whether they have provided information.

Reporters Without Borders and the BAJ also deplore the KGB's failure to respond to the request made by Svetlana Zavadskaya and the wives of three other disappeared persons – two government opponents and a businessman – for proceedings to be initiated against senior officials suspected of being linked to their disappearance.

Zavadski disappeared on 7 July 2000 at Minsk airport. He was President Lukashenko's personal cameraman until he resigned from the government-run TV station in 1996 went to work for the Russian TV channel ORT. He was imprisoned with an ORT colleague for two months in 1997 after reporting the existence of gaps in Belarus' security along its border with Lithuania.

On 16 July 2002, the Belarus supreme court upheld a life sentence on the former head of the interior ministry's special units, Valery Ignatovich, and one of his subordinates, Maxim Malik, for the kidnapping of Zavadski and for the murder of five other people. According to the authorities, Ignatovich decided to kill Zavadski because he felt Zavadski was referring to him in an interview he gave in 2000 to the daily *Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta* in which he said he met Belarussian citizens in Chechnya fighting on the side of the Chechen separatists. The trial did not reveal the exact circumstances of Zavadski's kidnapping or who was behind it.

The office of the prosecutor-general had previously decided on 27 February 2003 to close the investigation in Zavadski's disappearance. But then it reopened it on 10 December 2003 without

any explanation other than "the need to pursue the enquiries."

Council of Europe special rapporteur Cristos Pourgourides referred in a preliminary report on 27 January 2004 to serious suspicions about the involvement of three officials in four disappearances, including Zavadski's. The officials named in this report are Viktor Sheyman, the prosecutor-general since November 2000 and head of the national security council at the time of Zavadski's disappearance; Yuri Sivakov, who was interior minister at the time; and Dmitri Pavlichenko, the commander of a police special unit. Pourgourides said: "steps were taken at the highest level of the state to actively cover up the truth about the circumstances of the disappearances."

*Source: Belarusian Association of Journalists/Reporters Without Borders; April 9, 2004; www.baj.ru and www.rsf.org.*

## **BUSINESS**

### **12. Belarus Gets Another Gas Respite**

Belarus has enough gas to last it until April 19, Beltransgaz head Pyotr Petukh said on the phone today. He did not say if his company would sign additional short-term contracts on gas deliveries with independent Russian suppliers.

Sibur is to deliver 366 million cubic metres of gas and TransNafta, 500 million cu m of gas in April. Gazprom stopped deliveries on January 1, 2004 and Itera, on February 12 but it is ready to deliver 520 million cu m at \$46.68 per 1,000 cubic metres.

*Source: RIA Novosti; April 7, 2004; www.rian.ru*

### **13. Moscow-Brest Cooperative Effort**

A delegation of the Moscow Government headed by Deputy Mayor Valery Shantsev is on a working visit to Brest (a Belarusian city on the border with Poland).

A spokesperson for the Brest Region Administration told RIA Novosti on Saturday that the two sides discussed prospects for construction of a shopping center in the west of Moscow as well as a land swap project for housing development.

The delegation from Moscow is expected to visit the Brest Dairy Plant and the Belarusian-German joint venture Santa Bremor producing the well-known Matias herring.

On Friday, the delegation of the Moscow Government arrived in Minsk where the two sides signed agreements on establishing the Moscow-Belarus Council for Business Cooperation, collaborating in the field of business support and in the sphere of mass media and information.

It was pointed out during the talks that the two parties viewed joint production of buses and trolley buses, food supplies to Moscow and development of retail trade networks as the most important areas of cooperation. In all, the parties identified as many as 15 vital areas for bilateral cooperation, a spokesperson for the Belarusian Foreign Ministry said. In addition, Belarus and Moscow intend to annually increase their trade turnover by 30-35 percent.

In 2003, the Belarus-Moscow trade turnover amounted to \$4.6 billion, with Moscow accounting for 41 percent of the republic's overall trade with Russia. [text revised by the Editor]

*Source: RIA Novosit; April 10, 2004; 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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