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DOMESTIC

1. Opposition Activist to be Tried for Defaming Belarusian President

Opposition activist Aksana Novikava on 10 May received a notification from the Minsk Transport Prosecutor's Office that she is to stand trial on a charge of libeling Belarusian President Alyksandr Lukashenka, Belapan reported. Prosecutors claim that Novikava on 5 April handed out leaflets that "contained knowingly libelous, i.e. false, information that defamed the president of the Republic of Belarus and accused him of serious crimes." Novikava, an unemployed single mother of a three-year-old daughter, could face up to five years in prison, considering that she was convicted of the same offense and received a two-year suspended prison sentence in April 2003. Moreover, Novikava was fined 3.5 million rubles (\$1,620) in January for staging an unauthorized demonstration in front of the Supreme Court's building in December. She has also previously received three fines totaling thousands of U.S. dollars for similar offenses.

Source: Jan Maksymiuk, *RFE-RL*; May 11, 2004; www.rferl.org/newsline

2. Riot Police Dispersed Businessmen Meeting In Grodno

The official May Day meeting in Grodno concluded with police truncheons. A detachment of riot police with truncheons, in helmets and with shields, forced out from the traffic lane people who blocked the passage of public transport on Socialist Street. An elderly woman-pensioner was left lying on the asphalt because one of the riot policemen pushed her in the chest violently. The woman was taken to a hospital by an ambulance. It happened five hours after the meeting on Labor Day in Grodno started.

The meeting started on 10 a.m. in Minsk, with brass band music and optimistic speeches by the leadership of the city and region in the Lenin Square.

In the middle of the crowd four white-red-white flags, registered flags of independent trade unions were waving. They were brought by more than a hundred workers from the largest plant of the city, Grodno Azot. After them went about two thousand small traders from Grodno markets, who carried posters with slogans: "Everybody is equal before the law", "Long live Labor", "Lukashenka Must Resign". They were whistling loudly, so the optimistic speeches were hardly heard. They were shouting, "We need work!", "We need salary!", and were making noise with covers of empty metal pans.

The official celebration was terminated quickly. The officials left, but about 3,000 people remained standing in the square, shouting and demanding to cancel licenses for retail trade and to stop confiscations in the markets. About 150 riot police officers lined up and were not allowing the crowd to the city executive committee. Only four women, representatives of the traders, were given permission to negotiate with the city authorities. In an hour they came out of the building and said that Aleksandr Antonenko, chairman of the city executive committee, promised not to implement sanctions against those who would not be able to receive a license in May.

The protesters moved to the building of Lenin District police department on the Telman Street, where a detained leader of the All-Nation Businessmen Strike Committee Valery Levanevsky was kept. Police lined up and did not let people into the building of the department. The crowd, shouting "Freedom!", turned to Socialist Street and blocked the traffic. At that moment an armed riot police detachment appeared and started to force people out of the street. [text revised by the Editor]

Source: Charter 97; May 5, 2004; www.charter97.org

4. We Remember Rally in Minsk

A rally by *We Remember*, dedicated to the cases of disappeared politicians was held today in Minsk. It was carried out on the 5th anniversary of disappearance ex-Minister of Internal affairs Yuri Zakharenko.

About 250 people were standing along Skaryna Avenue with portraits of disappeared Yuri Zakharenko, Viktor Gonchar, Anatoly Krasovsky and Dmitry Zavadsky. Some of the participants were holding portraits of ex-Ambassador of Belarus in Lithuania Mikhail Marinich who had been arrested by KGB ten days ago. The action was carried out under initiative of relatives of those people who disappeared in Belarus. And it was supported by the *European Coalition Free Belarus*, *Peoples Coalition Five Plus* and *Young Front*. The *Zubr* movement took the most active part in the rally. There were about 50 young people with *Zubr* buttons holding portraits of vanished politicians. Many well-known politicians and human right activists also took part in the action.

Policemen were trying to detain UCP leader Anatoly Lebedko, but the politician managed to jump into his car and drive away. Lebedko thinks it was attempt to arrest him for taking part in the demonstration "Chernobylsky Shlyah". "It is obvious that they got an order to arrest me for 10 or 15 days", says Anatoly Lebedko.

A strange incident happened during the rally. About 20 activists of fascist organization *Russian National Unity* came up to the chain of participants of the action. First people with swastiks were trying to join the action, then they started to tear portraits. But participants of the rally banished them away and asked police to arrest them. Nevertheless, police did not do anything and the young fascists left.

Almost all chiefs of Minsk police forces were watching the action, but they did not interfere into it.

The rally was carried out without detentions. Actions of solidarity have been held in other regions of Belarus, press-center of Charter 97 informs. According to the latest information, 8 participants of the event were detained in Novapolatsk. [text revised by the Editor]

Source: Zubr (Bison); May 7, 2004; www.zubr-belarus.com

5. Lukashenko Welcomes 60th Anniversary of Belarus' Liberation from Nazis

Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko believes the upcoming July celebrations in honor of the 60th anniversary of Belarus' liberation from the Nazi occupation is an epoch-making event.

"The 60th anniversary of a country's liberation is not just a holiday, but an epochal event in the history of our state, which places special responsibility on the country's leadership to the nation, and first and foremost to the veterans," Lukashenko said on Wednesday while conducting a meeting of the republican organizational committee on preparing and carrying out events connected with the 60th anniversary of Belarus' liberation and victory during the Second World War.

"No one can be left without the attention and support of the state," the head of state underscored.

According to him, "respect for veterans is respect for those who are with us no longer: those who perished in the war, those who died after the war and in our days."

"We do not have the right to forget about those who always remained on the battlefield and who were tortured in Fascist camps," Lukashenko said, reminding the audience that more than 3 million people perished in Belarus during the war.

The president reported that a portion of the money earned on April 24 during the "subbotnik" [a day dedicated to voluntary work for the benefit of the state – Ed.] will be donated to the restoration and renovation of the "Belarusian sacred places," key memorials honoring the heroic feats of the people during WWII.

Lukashenko noted there are more than 8,000 war memorials which, according to him, should be preserved in a proper condition. [text translated from the Russian by the Editor]

Source: Interfax; May 5, 2004; <http://interfax.minsk.by>

REGIONAL

6. Little Cheer on EU's Eastern Border

While many Eastern Europeans celebrate their countries' accession to the EU, the mood beyond the union's new eastern border is more subdued.

In Belarus, Ukraine and Russia there is a mixture of unease about the impact of the expanded EU and disappointment at missing out on the benefits of membership. In the Belarusian capital Minsk, riot police on Saturday tried to prevent an opposition demonstration in favour of EU enlargement, confiscating EU flags and arresting protesters. The country's president, Aleksandr Lukashenko, has had less than cordial relations with Brussels, which has frequently criticised his human rights record.

In Russia, reaction to EU expansion reflects both concern over its new powerful neighbour and a desire to remain aloof.

The daily *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* believes staying out of the European Union may be the best thing for Russia, which it thinks has chances of becoming a new "European tiger" on its own.

The paper adds that an improving economy could give Russia bargaining power in relation to the EU, but warns that it should avoid frightening "old lady Europe" again in future. It also urges Moscow to put pressure on the EU to prevent what it calls "discrimination" against the Russian-speaking minority in Latvia.

Many of the country's ethnic Russians do not have Latvian citizenship, and there have been complaints that the EU has done too little to encourage its new member to improve the minority's position. In Latvia itself, Russian speakers on Saturday staged a protest against plans to end the teaching of Russian in schools across the street from a ceremony in Riga to mark the country's accession to the EU.

Between 20,000 and 30,000 protesters carried EU flags tied with black ribbons as a sign of mourning, according to agency reports.

Moscow's *Vremya Novostei* is dismissive of the benefits of EU membership, wondering whether the new members really know what they have let themselves in for.

"There is a strange European standard concerning the 'curvature' of bananas permitted for sale in the EU," it says, adding helpfully: "This is not a joke."

Another Russian paper, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* points out that Russia's "long-suffering" enclave of Kaliningrad is now cut off from the mother country by the European Union.

"Hurrah, Russia will finally have a border with Europe! But what sort of hurrah is it if it wasn't us that came to Europe, but Europe that came to us," it says.

In neighbouring Ukraine, the mood is different, with many papers feeling left out of the European party.

"Our homeland has found itself on the sidelines of Europe, or to be more exact, in some other kind of Europe - an unpredictable and obscure one, one with a dubious future," the opposition daily *Ukrayina Moloda* notes ruefully.

The Ukrainian parliament's newspaper, *Holos Ukrayiny*, talks of an "enlargement of the EU which we no longer seek to enter", and says the government appears to have dropped ambitions to join the union.

"It has become obvious that, through no fault of ours, the prospect of seeing that strategy fulfilled appears doubtful," it says.

Fears of the economic repercussions of EU enlargement also exercise some papers, with tabloid *Segodnya* worried that Ukraine's vital industrial sector will lose access to previously open markets.

"Losses may amount to an average of 250m euros a year," it says.

Zerkalo Nedeli urges the EU not to "erect a high wall" on the Ukrainian border, but "help its neighbour become richer" instead.

In Lviv, close to the Polish border, the daily *Vysokyy Zamok* bemoans the fact that Ukraine has lagged behind its western neighbour, which has now become an EU member.

"Fifteen years ago the level of prosperity or, to be more precise, poverty in both Poland and Ukraine was identical, but now the gap is obvious," it says, and warns that the gap will widen unless Ukraine tries to benefit from EU expansion

"Ukraine should welcome the process of EU enlargement as a positive one and one which is beneficial for its future."

Source: BBC News; May 1, 2004; www.bbc.co.uk

INTERNATIONAL

7. Belarus President for Broader Cooperation with Arab World

There are no closed matters in terms of cooperation between Belarus and the Sultanate of Oman and other countries of the Arab world, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko said at a meeting on Tuesday with Ahmad bin Abd al-Nabi al-Makki, national economic minister and deputy chairman of the Council for Finance and Energy Resources of Oman.

"We are ready to cooperate in all directions of interest and will be upright in such cooperation with you and all your neighbors", Lukashenko assured him.

The Sultanate of Oman has a lucrative geopolitical and strategic location in the Middle East, Lukashenko said. "We very much hope for the further development of economic cooperation with the entire region", the Belarusian president said. He stressed that the present level of trade-relations with Oman and other countries of the Arab world is not in correspondence with the present potential of the sides.

Very soon top-level visits will be exchanged and "we will confirm the course towards the expansion and deepening of cooperation", Lukashenko said.

He noted that the visa liberalizations made by the Belarusian side regarding nationals of the countries making up the Cooperation Council of the Arab States of the Persian Gulf will be conducive to the development of economic contacts. The Belarusian Foreign Ministry has taken a decision to somewhat simplify the issue of visas for nationals of the Persian Gulf countries beginning in May 1. Now, one-time and guest visas for a term of up to 30 days will be issued without invitations.

During the Belarusian visit by the Oman national economic minister, the agreements on trade cooperation and the encouragement of investments have been signed. According to the Oman minister, they will promote the further development of the contractual law base of relations between the two states. [text revised by the Editor]

Source: RIA Novosti; May 11, 2004; www.rian.ru

8. United States of America Expresses Concern Over Arrest of Mikhail Marinich [Statement]

The Embassy of the United States of America expresses its concern over the recent arrest of former Belarusian government minister and ambassador Mikhail Marinich. As Belarus develops its democracy, including the holding of important parliamentary elections this year, the arrest of Mr. Marinich, who has been an active and open participant in Belarus' political scene, creates an atmosphere that could call into question the intention of the Belarusian leadership and Belarusian authorities to conduct political discourse and elections freely, fairly and without use of threat or intimidation of those political figures who may express different views. History has shown that stability depends on government's ability to protect and respect the rights and freedoms of its citizens. We call upon Belarus' authorities, especially its legal and judicial organs, to respect and

uphold the legal rights and freedoms of Mr. Marinich and all Belarusians.

The United States Embassy would also like to take this opportunity to remind the Belarusian authorities that reducing fear in society remains one of the principal actions the OSCE Parliamentary Troika has called on Belarus to take to comply with its obligations as an OSCE member. A fair disposition of Mr. Marinich's case, and an end to harassment of non-governmental organizations, including the Belarusian Helsinki Committee and independent media, would reduce such fear and would clearly signal the intent of Belarusian authorities to improve relations with the United States. We would welcome and would seek to respond positively to such a clear signal.

Source: U.S. Embassy, Minsk; May 7, 2004; <http://minsk.usembassy.gov/>

HUMAN RIGHTS & INDEPENDENT MEDIA

9. KGB Searches Editorial Office of the *Den* Newspaper

Representatives of the Grodno KGB forced its way into the Cultural and Educational Foundation *Batskaushchyna* (Fatherhood) on Karl Marx Street, 11, where the city subdivision of the newspaper *Den* is located, and where internet newspaper *Pagonya* is made. Now they are conducting a search.

The foundation is headed by the editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Den* Mikola Markevich. Reporter Pavel Mazheika is in the office as well, and the KGB officers have forbidden him to answer phone calls. The KGB men also entered a private apartment in the Urubevski Street, saying that they need the Grodno branch of Leu Sapeha Foundation, and started the search there, ordering Viktor Sazonov, Vladimir Khilmanovich, Sergei Luschuk, the Belarusian Popular Front members Mikola Lemyanovsky and Sergei Malchuk (head of the regional organization) not to leave the apartment.

KGB officers confiscated digital data carriers and documents in both apartments.

Source: Charter 97; May 5, 2004; www.charter97.org

10. Reports Without Borders Condemns KGB Search of Independent Newspaper

Reporters Without Borders has protested against a KGB search of the offices of the independent weekly *Den*, already subjected to months of official harassment, and seizure of several of its computers.

The three-hour raid on the newspaper's premises on 11 May 2004 was carried out on the orders of Vladimir Onisko, deputy prosecutor for the Grodno region, near the Polish border. The newspaper was suspected of involvement in the publication of tracts seen as "discrediting" President Aleksandr Lukashenko. The search ended with the state security committee (KGB) officers seizing four computers.

"We are extremely angry at the methods used by the authorities, particularly the KGB, to prevent journalists on *Den* from working normally. We urge you to put an end to this unacceptable harassment and to ensure the return of the computer equipment seized during this search," Reporters Without Borders wrote to interior minister Vladimir Naumov.

Mikolai Markevich, editor of *Den*, told Reporters Without Borders that the newspaper was not involved in the production of the tracts and that the search was just the latest move in a campaign by the authorities against independent media and NGOs in the run-up to legislative elections in autumn 2004.

The search came a few days before the time limit set by the authorities for the newspaper to quit its offices. The housing administrative office in Grodno ordered the organisation Batskaushchina that hosts the *Den* team, to vacate the premises before 15 May. It accused the organisation of illegally sub-letting its office to the newspaper. Markevich pointed out that the administration has more than ten times refused him the right to officially set up the newspaper in Grodno. The newspaper has been subjected to months of escalating obstruction to its publication : lightning seizures, repeated tax investigations and refusal of the country's printers to work with the newspaper.

Police seized 4,800 copies of *Den* at Iveye, 130 kms from Grodno, on their way to Belarus from the printers in Smolensk, Russia on 7 April. The seized issue carried an article complaining about police refusal to take action against two men who were arrested on 18 March attempting to break into the Batskaushchyna offices. Markevich recognised one of the men as a KGB officer.

The newspaper received a letter from the regional prosecutor's office on 17 April confirming that the two men were KGB officers. The Svetach print works in Minsk illegally broke its contract with the newspaper in November 2003 as did the distributors, Belsayuzdruk, on 29 January 2004, forcing the paper to print in Russia.

Markevich, then editor of the weekly *Pagonya* was sentenced on 15 August 2002, to 18 months corrective labour for allowing articles to be published in his paper accusing the president of being implicated in the disappearance of opponents of his regime. Pavel Mazheika, of the same paper, was sentenced to one-year hard labour for having "insulted" the president. On 13 November 2001, the newspaper was closed down.

Reporters Without Borders condemns the administrative harassment of the independent press in its 2004 annual report. These papers are seen as too critical of the Lukashenko regime, which the international press freedom organisation lists as one of the 37 "predators of press freedom" worldwide.

During 2003, the authorities suspended and repeatedly sanctioned more than ten newspapers, prevented around 15 independent media from appearing and shut down several human rights organisations that were providing the media with a valuable service.

Source: Reporters Without Borders; May 12, 2004; www.rsf.org

11. One More Law Suit Against State TV

Pervomaisky District Court commenced the hearing of the suit of Tatiana Protsko and Dmitry Kozyr against the head of National State TV and Radio Company Yuri Prokopov. The plaintiffs claim 35,000,000 Belarusian rubles (USD 17.500) in moral damage.

The suit is based on the show "In the Center of Attention" broadcast by the First National TV Channel February 29. The author and presenter of the show Yuri Prokopov focused on income and property of some Belarusian public figures, including the one of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee chairman Tatiana Protsko and her husband, the owner of Zabolotye farm Dmitry Kozyr.

The plaintiffs state that by mentioning Mrs. Protsko's monthly salary and broadcasting shots of her family's private property Mr. Prokopov violated the Constitution and the norms of access to documents that contain private secrets.

The plaintiffs disproved most of the information disseminated by Yuri Prokopov. The defendant was unable to prove the veracity of the facts he mentioned and refused to name the source that provided him with information on Mrs. Protsko's income. In addition, it was found that the journalists of the First National Channel entered the territory of Zabolotie farm without the owner's

knowledge and permission. In order to illustrate the statements by Mr. Prokopov, the TV crew shot someone else's car.

After watching the tape and hearing both parties, the judge decided to postpone the hearing till June 5. Also, the judge proposed that the plaintiffs provide the court with actual information on their income and property/ [text revised by the Editor]

Source: Belarusian Association of Journalists; May 7, 2004; www.baj.ru

12. Lukashenko Says Mass Media in Belarus is Dynamically Developing

Mass media in Belarus is "developing dynamically in accordance with the requirements of the day, the oldest of publications have preserved their leading positions, many new ones are confidently gaining respect," Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko stated in an opening address to participants and guests at an international professional fair/convention titled "Mass Media in Belarus," which opened today in Minsk on the eve of World Press Freedom Day.

Over 70 Belarusian and foreign mass media outlets are participating in the event. According to the organizers, one of the main purposes of the fair is to "promote Belarusian mass media, expand the information field, and to aid in creation a unified information space for the Union state of Belarus and Russia."

According to the Belarusian Information Minister Vladimir Rusakevich, today 1,305 printed mass media outlets, four nationwide television channels, and 50 local and regional television companies are registered in Belarus. "Every month, the Ministry receives registration applications from approximately 10 mass media; around the same number of outlets is liquidated," the Minister said.

Also planned for the fair are days of Russian and Ukrainian press. [text translated from the Russian by the Editor]

Source: Itar-Tass; May 4, 2004; www.tass.ru

BUSINESS

13. Trans Nafta Ready to Continue Gas Supplies to Belarus

Trans Nafta, a Russian independent gas supplier, is ready to continue gas supplies to Belarus in May, a source in the oil and gas sphere told RIA Novosti. According to the source, the volumes of gas supplies have not been specified yet.

Gazprom's branch Sibur is supplying gas to Belarus now. In mid-April it signed an agreement with its Belarusian partner Beltransgaz. The agreement envisages supplies of 1 billion cubic meters of gas in April-May 2004 at the price of \$46.68 for 1,000 cubic meters. 700 million cubic meters were to be supplied in April and 300 million in May.

"This amount of gas is enough for Belarus until May 17," the source said.

Gazprom ceased gas supplies to Belarus since January 1, 2004. Another oil and gas company, ITERA, stopped supplying gas to the country on February 12. ITERA often claimed its readiness to supply 520 million cubic meters of gas to Belarus, however, Beltransgaz did not response to this proposal.

Contracts of other independent supplies, Trans Nafta, were fulfilled in mid-April. On March 10 Sibur and Beltransgaz signed an agreement implying supplies of 1 billion cubic meters of gas in 2004. In particular, 200 million cubic meters were to be supplied in March.

Source: RIA Novosti; May 11, 2004; www.rian.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.
