

INTERNATIONAL LEAGUE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

BELARUS UPDATE

Edited by Victor Cole

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EDITOR NOTE

For everything there is a season....In May 1998, I e-mailed you the first issue of *The Belarus Update*, then the only regular publication providing in-depth coverage of the human rights situation in Belarus. Six years and 250 issues later – as I have finally realized that the law is indeed a “jealous mistress” and that the practice of law can be so time consuming it allows for little else – the time has come to pass the baton to a new team.

In my final issue, a few thanks are in order. To my wife and daughter, for their wholehearted support and encouragement. To the League, for this unique opportunity to work for the benefit of my beloved Belarus. To the Open Society Institute, a charitable foundation founded by the American philanthropist and financier George Soros, whose financial assistance has made *The Belarus Update* possible. And last but not least, to all our readers, for your loyalty and contributions. Zhyve Belarus!

Victor Cole, Esq.

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--HUMAN RIGHTS AND OPPOSITION NEWS --

1. CHRONICLE OF ZUBR RESISTANCE

Confrontation between local authorities and Zubr activists intensified after about 120 Belarusian students from a technical college in Baranovichy, Brest Region, decided to terminate their membership in the pro-Lukashenko Belarus Republican Youth Union and join Zubr, an unregistered opposition youth movement (see Belarus Update Vol. 7, No. 10). On March 5-8, the Baranovichy police arrested 15 activists, reported the movement's website.

On March 10, about 50 people took part in an opposition rally titled "Stop the Belarusian Republican Youth League (Lukomol)!", which took place in Borisov, Minsk Region. Aleksandr Monich, leader of the Zubr Borisov branch, has appealed to authorities to allow the country's youth decide which voluntary organization to join. Monich, Dmitry Barodka, and Ihar Lednik were taken to a local police station and charged with "organizing and participating in mass action violating public order." Monich and Barodka spent the night in custody. The same day, Mikita Sasim and Andrei Chyzh were sentenced to ten and seven days of administrative detention, respectively, for "petty hooliganism."

On March 9, three Zubr activists were detained near the Belarusian State University in Minsk for distributing a new issue of newspaper *Supratsiu (Resistance)*, an opposition newspaper, reported Belapan.

On March 11, Zubr activist Ivan Vasikau was detained by riot squad policemen near Kastychnitskaya metro station in Minsk, while distributing *Supratsiu (Resistance)*. The activist was taken to a nearest police station, where a report was filed on him.

On March 12, Aleksandr Manich lost his job at one of the local plants for his opposition activities. (Belapan, March 10 - Zubr, March 9-12)

-- MEDIA FREEDOM IN BELARUS --

2. 2003: BLOODY YEAR FOR JOURNALISTS

On March 10, the International Press Institute (IPI) released its annual World Press Freedom Review 2003, which highlights the extreme sacrifices made by journalists reporting from "hot spots." With 19 journalists killed in Iraq, 2003 was one of the bloodiest years in recent times for war reporters, the review says. Aside from Iraq, 45 journalists in 19 countries lost their lives in 2003. The most dangerous region was Asia, where 19 journalists were murdered: seven of them in the Philippines and three each in Nepal and India. In the Americas, where 17 journalists were killed, Colombia, with nine deaths, remains the most consistently dangerous country in the world to practice journalism. There were four journalist deaths in Europe, three of them in Russia, with the other found dead under suspicious circumstances in the Ukraine. In Belarus, the Review says, there are continuing battles between the media and government. The country's independent media suffer violence and harassment. See the full text of the report at www.freemedia.at

3. SUSPENDED WEEKLY RESUMES PUBLICATION

The editorial board of *Zgoda* [*The Concord*] resumed publication of this Minsk-based independent weekly, reported the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ). On February 5, the Ministry warned *Zgoda* for “multiple Press Law violations” and suspended the publication for one month (see Belarus Update Vol. 7, Nos. 6, 7). The newspaper was accused of changing its legal address without notifying the Ministry and being published only in Russian and Belarusian, while its license mentions more languages. (BAJ, March 9)

-- RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN BELARUS --

4. BAPTIST COMMUNITY URGES RELIGION LAW AMENDMENTS

On March 9, in an open letter to Aleksandr Lukashenko, his chief of staff and the parliamentary speaker, the Union of Christian Baptists urged them to amend religion law provisions that forbid religious services in private homes, Mikalai Sinkavets, union head, told reporters in Minsk. The law, passed in 2002, forbids religious groups to conduct religious ceremonies outside of churches, and envisages censorship of religious literature and quotas for registering religious communities. It should be noted that although Lukashenko calls himself “an Orthodox atheist,” he openly favors the Orthodox Church in the overwhelmingly Orthodox Belarus. (Belapan, March 9)

5. BELARUSIAN NEO-NAZIS CALL FOR POGROMS

Trying to restrain the proliferation of fascism in Belarus, the Union of Councils of Soviet Jews, reported that Belarusian neo-fascists, particularly Russian National Unity (RNU) sympathizers, recently distributed leaflets in Gomel calling for violence against Jews. The leaflets reprinted articles from *Rus Pravoslavnaya* (*Orthodox Russia*), a Moscow-based right-wing newspaper, which accused Jews of attempting “to eradicate Christianity.” “Jews are the force of evil,” wrote the newspaper. The leaflets called for “the annihilation of the dishonest.” The RNU members were so sure of their impunity they even provided the address of their Gomel headquarters.

[The Belarusian branch of the Russian National Unity party has grown more active in Belarus in recent years. The self-proclaimed fascist movement has found a warm reception in Belarus, where such extremist manifestations have been tolerated under Lukashenko, known for publicly expressing his admiration of Hitler. Gleb Samoilov, RNU regional leader, boasted that the organization has excellent relations with the authorities, some government employees are among their members, and that they even patrol the streets in Minsk together with the police.- Ed.] (The Union of Councils of Soviet Jews, March 11)

6. ORTHODOX CHURCH SIGNS AGREEMENT WITH MILITARY

On March 12, the Belarusian Defense Ministry and the Belarusian Orthodox Church agreed to

provide some religious services for the military, reported Belapan. Churches will be built at military bases and soldiers will swear their oaths of service to priests. Religious instruction will also be included at military academies. (Belapan, March 12)

--TRADE UNION NEWS--

7. LOCAL TRADE UNION ACTIVIST SEVERELY BEATEN

On March 8, Ivan Roman, a prominent trade union activist from Grodno, was beaten up by unknown assailants, suffering a concussion, dislocated shoulder and knee injury, reported Charter 97. Roman was on his way home, when unidentified individuals forced him into a car. After a heavy blow in the head, the activist lost consciousness. He came to his senses half an hour later on a wasteland on the city outskirts. Roman filed a police report. In April 2004, Roman is scheduled to testify before the International Labor Organization's special commission about trade union rights violations in Belarus. Last November he lost his job due to his active involvement in the trade union movement. (Charter 97, March 10)

-- AT HOME IN BELARUS --

8. LUKASHENKO LAUNCHES SOVIET-STYLE DISCIPLINE CAMPAIGN

On March 11, Aleksandr Lukashenko announced in a national TV address that he would start a "war on negligence, sloppiness, lack of discipline and alcoholism," and signed a directive titled "On Some Measures to Strengthen Public Safety and Discipline," reported his website. "We won't live better without strong discipline," the Belarusian strongman told his compatriots. Earlier this month, Lukashenko also announced a campaign against corruption. In February, he reconstituted ideological departments that had existed in Soviet times. Opposition leader Anatoly Lebedka dismissed the campaign as an attempt to maintain control of the country amid an economic collapse. (www.president.gov.by, March 11)

9. CONSTITUTIONAL COURT RULES ON DEATH PENALTY

On March 11, the Belarusian Constitutional Court ruled that the death penalty violates the country's constitution, reported Belapan. The court's chair Gregory Vasilevich said that the verdict requires the Belarusian president and the parliament to "impose a moratorium on the death penalty or completely outlaw it." Andrei Nareiko, a lawmaker who had asked the Constitutional Court to rule on the matter, said that the parliament was likely to suspend or ban capital punishment as early as this spring. "Imposing a moratorium on the death penalty will help solve problems in Belarus' relations with the European Union and demonstrate our striving for international legal standards," Nareiko said after the court's decision. It should be noted that a 1996 referendum, which Lukashenko used to consolidate his authority and extend his tenure, had 80 percent of voters voicing support for capital punishment and only 17 percent speaking against it. In 2003, four Belarusian citizens were sentenced to death on murder charges. (Belapan, March

11)

10. BELARUS BEGINS DESTROYING MINE ARSENAL

On March 10, Belarus began destroying millions of anti-personnel mines, the most of any nation that has ratified an international convention banning such mines. Belarus has about 4.5 million mines, the seventh-largest such arsenal in the world, reported Belapan. The Ottawa Convention, which has been ratified by 141 countries, bans the use, production, stockpiling and transfer of anti-personnel mines. Among the countries that have refused to sign the treaty are the United States, China and Russia. Belarus has become a full participant in the treaty this month, but is still seeking funds to defray the costs. Canada has agreed to finance 25 percent of the costs, and negotiations are ongoing with NATO while other donors are also being sought, said Defense Ministry spokesman Leonid Zakharenko. (Belapan, March 10)

-- ELECTION 2004 --

11. CONSTITUTION MAY BE AMENDED TO SKIRT TERM LIMITS

Answering a reporter's question during a news conference marking the 10th anniversary of the adoption of the country's constitution on March 10, Gregory Vasilevich, Chief Justice of the Belarusian Constitutional Court, said that the country's constitution may be amended to allow Aleksandr Lukashenko to run again for the Belarusian presidency in the 2006 presidential election, reported Interfax. "It is for political figures to decide whether to hold a constitutional referendum on the extension of the incumbent's term in office," said Vasilevich. "While the constitution may be improved, I do not support rushing from one political system to another, like from a presidential to a parliamentary republic, because relations between the branches of power have already taken shape in Belarus," he concluded. (Interfax, March 10)

-- BROTHER SLAVS --

12. LUKASHENKO WISHES PUTIN "GOOD LUCK" AHEAD OF ELECTION

On March 11, Aleksandr Lukashenko and Russian President Vladimir Putin discussed over the phone the state of Belarusian-Russian relations, reported BelTA. The Slavic leaders reaffirmed mutual aspiration for further integration between the two countries. The Belarusian leader wished Putin victory in the forthcoming presidential election. (BBC, March 11)

-- INTERNATIONAL NEWS --

13. BELARUS APPROVES PLAN OF COOPERATION WITH NATO

On March 12, Andrei Savinykh, Belarusian Foreign Ministry spokesman, told journalists in

Minsk that the government has approved a plan of cooperation with NATO for the next two years, reported Interfax. He said the plan, which is part of the NATO Partnership for Peace program, consists of joint 171 actions which he declined to specify. "The emphasis is on practical cooperation with the alliance," Savinykh said.

Belarus joined Partnership for Peace in the early 1990s, but its contacts with NATO have been minimal. Lukashenko repeatedly has warned that NATO poses a threat to Belarus and said last December that the country had developed a "defense plan" to counter the United States. (Interfax, March 11)

-- NOTABLE QUOTES--

"If you see something, say something," Aleksandr Lukashenko, commenting on his signing a directive titled "On Some Measures to Strengthen Public Safety and Discipline" (www.president.gov.by)

-- UPCOMING EVENTS--

March 18 – RFE/RL Belarusian Journalists Briefing, Washington, D.C.

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. Letters to the Editor: vcole@ilhr.org, subscription services and back issues: otarasov@ilhr.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.
