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## DOMESTIC

### 1. Opposition Party Sues Belarusian TV for Libel

The BPF-Revival Party [formerly Belarusian People's Front] has filed a law suit with the Minsk Economic Court, in order to "protect its business reputation", the party's deputy chairman, Viktor Ivashkevich, told Belapan. He said the lawsuit was prompted by "slandorous allegations" made in the "In Focus" program aired by Belarusian television on April 25. The program anchor, Yuri Prakopov, claimed that "BPF-Revival Party chairman Vintsuk Vyachorka promised to stop supporting Chernobyl-affected regions if the party came to power".

The BPF-Revival Party demands that the television station broadcast a retraction of the allegations, recognizing them as false.

In addition, Ivashkevich said, Vintsuk Vyachorka intends to file an individual legal suit and demand damages from Belarusian television.

The party today filed a similar lawsuit with a court in Brest Region's Malaryta District against the head of the information directorate of the Malaryta District executive committee, who had stated that during World War II the BPF-Revival Party collaborated with Nazis.

Source: *Charter 97*; May 20, 2004; [www.charter97.org](http://www.charter97.org)

### 2. President Devises Way to Preserve Power

Aleksandr Lukashenko has devised a new way to stay in the presidential chair for a third term, says Sergei Skrebets, a Belarusian parliamentarian and member of the opposition fraction "Respublika." According to him, the plan Lukashenko has come up with is reminiscent of one of the Ukrainian versions of political reforms, where the president is chosen not by the people, but by parliament. Deputy Skrebets confirms that about a week ago the Belarusian President conducted a secret meeting with his most devoted parliamentarians. Already a group has been created which will make changes in the Constitution, expanding parliament's authority and limiting the president's. These amendments will be carried into the referendum, leaving the parliament, which has the right to choose the head of state, to elevate Lukashenko to the "throne," having announced the new term as the first one, rather than the third.

Skrebets himself didn't participate in the meeting and did not divulge the sources of his information, confirming only that they are "trustful." Nor did he say who out of the deputies was entangled in the "plot." According to him, Lukashenko's protégés were interested in the intrigue, since the president will give them guarantee of passage in the parliament for the next term. Skrebets said the new composition in parliament will be the most severe selection and will be completely answerable to the president. Also, parliamentary elections take place in October this year, and presidential elections are in 2006.

The parliamentary press service refused to comment on deputy Skrebets's statements, as the speech covers certain unofficial agreements. Senator Nikolai Cherginets, who managed Lukashenko's election headquarters during the last elections, called Skrebets's information completely absurd and stated there is no conspiracy.

Earlier, according to information from the opposition, the Belarusian President prepared to take on the issue of prolonging his authority in the referendum, having connected it to the issue of the Belarus-Russia Union. Now in Minsk, it looks like rumors will more frequently appear about the development of Lukashenko's hold on power. [translated from the Russian text by the Editor]

*Source: Olga Mazaeva, Nezavisimaya Gazeta; May 21, 2004; www.ng.ru*

### **3. Belarusian President Makes Cabinet Appointments**

President Alyaksandr Lukashenka appointed Ivan Bambiza, former head of the Belarusian State Petrochemical Concern (Belnaftakhim), as a deputy prime minister on 25 May, Belapan reported. "The government needs brainstorming and this man is able to reinforce the leadership of the Council of Ministers with his competence, attitude to duties, self-control, and ability to express a viewpoint," the presidential press service quoted Lukashenka as saying. Bambiza will replace Raman Unuchka, whom Lukashenka appointed a member of the Council of the Republic, Belarus's upper house. Lukashenka also named Leanid Rusak agriculture minister and Hanna Dzeyka tax minister.

*Source: Jan Maksymiuk, RFE-RL; May 26, 2004; www.rfe-rl.org/newsline*

### **4. Representatives of National Coalition "Five Plus" Meet**

Last week representatives of the National Coalition Five Plus visited Gorodok in the Vitebsk region. Local activists of political parties at the meeting included deputy chairman of UCP Sergey Alfer, deputy chairman of BSDG Alexey Korol and a member of bureau of PCB Central Committee, editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Comrade* Sergey Voznyak.

Representatives of the Coalition were asked various questions about the relation of Belarus with Russia and the European Union, about translation on the contract system, about local self-government, including the issue of the presidential elections of 2001. "People asked how to avoid recurrence of similar mistakes in a future," noted Sergey Alfer.

"Unfortunately inhabitants of Gorodok today almost have no information on activity of Five Plus. We still should work in this direction. And consequently I am sure, that the past meeting with local activists of political parties does not become last," - the deputy of City district council, member of BSDG Leonid Gorovoi said.

*Source: United Civil Party Press; May 19, 2004; www.ucpb.org*

## **REGIONAL**

### **5. Putin Meets CIS Leaders at Economic Summit**

President Vladimir Putin met with Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko Sunday in Yalta for talks on bilateral cooperation between the two countries, as part of a summit in the Crimea involving leaders of the Single Economic Space agreement, Russian media reported.

The summit, the first between member nations Belarus, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Russia, opened Sunday and marked a "symbolic event" in the first stage of the zone's development, Interfax quoted a source close to the talks as saying. Earlier President Putin called the summit a "period" in the first stage of forming a free-trade zone.

The agreement forming the alliance was signed last September between the four former Soviet republics to facilitate trade and, in part, as an answer to the European Union's free trade zone.

After his meeting with Lukashenko, Putin expressed satisfaction with the talks, noting that "despite a number of problems... Belarus is second in trade volume with Russia after Germany," RIA Novosti quoted the president as saying.

Putin also met Sunday with Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev for talks on the unification of tariff and customs policy.

*Source: Itar-Tass; May 24, 2004; www.itar-tass.com*

### **6. Putin Says Moscow and Minsk Have Some Elements of Single Economic Space**

Russia and Belarus already have some elements of the Single Economic Space (CES), President Putin said at a press conference in Yalta after the summit of the four countries' heads. Despite the fact that Ukraine is bigger than Belarus, trade turnover between Russia and Belarus is three times higher than that between Russia and Ukraine.

"Here is the result of these elements," said the president. "We are all very much interested in realizing these plans," he stressed, saying that they are realizable.

Mr. Putin paid attention to the necessity to render support to the idea of creating the Single Economic Space on the part of mass media. "We need your support," Vladimir Putin told journalists. He said that in his opinion, it depends on the media how to bring this idea home to citizens.

According to Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma, the summit in Yalta was really necessary. "We have held this meeting to orient ourselves as to where we are," he said. Leonid Kuchma said the SES is not created from scratch.

"Discussions are held, but we've already made the main conclusion," he said. "And this conclusion is that the heads of the four states have political will and the desire to establish the Single Economic Space, which will contribute to economic integration and boosting economic cooperation between them," Mr. Kuchma said.

At the opening ceremony Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko talked about specific decisions at the summit. "If today's meeting fails to bring specific results, I suppose it will then be the beginning of hopeless work," he said.

Mr. Lukashenko said the SES should be created taking into account the norms and regulations of the World Trade Organization.

He invited the Russian, Kazakh and Ukrainian presidents to Minsk to attend celebrations dedicated to the 60th anniversary of Belarus' liberation from fascists, which are to be held in June 2004.

"I want to invite you all to attend the celebrations. This is the Memory Day of all Soviet people, not only Belarusians," he added.

*Source: RIA Novosti; May 24, 2004; www.rian.ru*

## **7. Eastern Slav Nations Seek Reintegration**

The idea of reintegrating the three Eastern Slavic nations that gained independence after the breakup of the Soviet Union remains a divisive issue with experts and politicians. But in the end, any integration processes should rely on the will of the people and their striving to unite. As recent surveys indicate, most of the Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians believe that their nations have grounds for reintegration and a mere 6 percent in Russia and Ukraine and 10 percent in Belarus say they have too little in common to reunify.

Speaking of commonalities between the three Eastern Slavic nations, 22 to 42 percent of the respondents mention historical heritage, kinship, and economic interest. Interestingly, common historical background is what comes first with the Russians whereas the Ukrainians and the Belarusians make a stronger emphasis on shared economic goals.

Between 8 and 19 percent of those surveyed justify the need for reintegration by similarities of the cultures and languages and by common political interests. The Russians tend to put cultural and linguistic aspects above politics while most of the Ukrainians and the Belarusians believe that political factors are more important.

For the Russians, the main argument in favor of reintegration is common cultural and historical heritage; the Ukrainians and the Belarusians are motivated by economic and political concerns. Only 4 to 9 percent of those polled mention exterior threats as a motive for Eastern Slav reunification.

Curiously, Russian respondents mention kinship bonds as a basis for reintegration just as frequently as Ukrainian and Belarusian counterparts (28%, 30%, and 25%, respectively), this notwithstanding the fact that half as many Russians have relatives and friends in Ukraine and Belarus (34% against 57% and 69%).

People in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus have different attitudes to the prospect of forming a union with other nations. Half of the Russian respondents (51 percent) say they don't want their country to join any bloc. Ukrainians and Belarusians, by contrast, are keen to become part of an interstate alliance. The former (23 percent) seek reintegration with their Slav neighbors while the latter (28 percent) show more interest in EU membership. Between 15 and 19 percent of the interviewees hail the idea of reviving the Soviet Union.

The statistics cited comes from surveys carried out by Russia's VTSIOM pollster in association with counterparts in Ukraine and Belarus. In each of the three countries, interviews have been conducted with a representative sample of 1,200 to 1,800 adults.

*Source: Interfax; May 25, 2004; www.interfax.ru*

## INTERNATIONAL

### 8. Belarusian Opposition Leaders Visit Brussels

Today at the headquarters of the European Union in Brussels a meeting between Belarusian opposition leaders and leaders of the European Union took place. Representatives of the Belarusian democratic forces met with European Commission Director General for Enlargement Mr. Eneko Landaburu and Mr. Tom Kitt, Minister of State for Development Cooperation and Human Rights of Ireland, which is presiding in the EU now. Representatives of the European coalition "Free Belarus", People's Coalition "Five Plus", the group "Respublika", representatives of civil society and youth organizations were invited to talks in Brussels.

During the meetings with Belarusian oppositionists EC Director General for Enlargement Mr. Eneko Landaburu expressed concern over the situation in Belarus.

"We are really concerned by the state of affairs in Belarus. We understand the importance of the imminent parliamentary elections in Belarus and are trying to influence the official authorities in order to enable Belarusian people make free choice. We cooperate with the OSCE in order to carry out control the voting and give them an appropriate evaluation".

Mr. Eneko Landaburu, Basque by origin, expressed personal support to the Belarusian opposition:

"I took part in struggle with Franco dictatorship, and I understand your situation very well, I understand how the support of international community is important. I express my sympathy and support to you".

Mr. Tom Kitt, Minister of State for Development Cooperation and Human Rights of Ireland, also expressed concern over the situation of human rights in Belarus. Minister of State stated that it is necessary to carry out independent investigation of the disappearances of a number politicians and public figures, and called upon the Belarusian opposition to unite. Besides, Mr. Tom Kitt observes that the EU would do everything possible in order not to isolate the Belarusian nation, despite of the actions of the official Minsk.

In their speeches leaders of the Belarusian opposition talked about violations of human rights in our country, about arrests of opposition figures, pressure on civil society and absence of freedom of speech. Belarusian politicians called upon the international community to exert pressure on Belarusian authorities, to increase attention to the country before and during parliamentary elections. In particular, coordinator of the European coalition "Free Belarus" Mikola Statkevich told that after the change of Lukashenka's regime "doors of the EU should be opened for Belarus".

Coordinator of the Zubr movement Uladzimir Kobets asked the EU leadership not to issue visas for highest officials of Belarus, and for people in charge of human rights violations in the country. At the same time, Mr. Kobets said that it is important to make visa-issuing process for common Belarusian citizens simpler, especially for the young, who should move around Europe easily.

We asked Irina Krasovskaya, leader of the civil initiative "We remember", member of the European coalition "Free Belarus" and wife of Belarusian businessman and public figure Anatol Krasouski, who disappeared in 1999, to comment on the results of today's meetings in the head office of the EU:

"I am impressed by the high level of the meetings. Serious interest and concern over the situation in Belarus is evident". [text revised by the Editor]

Source: Charter 97; May 25; [www.charter97.org](http://www.charter97.org)

## **HUMAN RIGHTS & INDEPENDENT MEDIA**

### **9. Newspaper *Den* Resumes Publishing**

The independent Grodno based newspaper *Den* resumed publishing, despite confiscation of office equipment and materials of the newspaper. This was made possible with the help of several NGOs. The latest issue had 24 pages and included materials of the previous issue, publication of which was disrupted by a May 11 search at *Den* journalists' workplaces by KGB officers.

Source: *Belarusian Association of Journalists*; May 21, 2004; [www.baj.ru](http://www.baj.ru)

### **10. Freedom House Publishes Nations in Transit 2004, Report on Belarus (Excerpt)**

Belarus saw its ratings worsen in two Nations in Transit categories: civil society and corruption. Local elections in March 2003 were conducted as a largely ceremonial event and predictably confirmed the political hegemony of the president. The government intensified its attacks on civil society and the independent press, and introduced a new "state ideology" that had a particularly negative impact on academic freedoms. The government has failed to address the spread of corruption in the public sector, and the public's perception of corruption has increased considerably.

[Note from the Editor: This year, Belarus scored a 6.54 (1 representing the highest level of democratic development, 7 being the lowest). In 2003, it scored a 6.63 in terms of democratization.]

Source: *Freedom House*; May 24, 2004; [www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org)

### **11. U.S. to Belarus: End Assault on Media, Opposition, Civil Society**

The United States repeated its call for the Belarusian government "to end its assault on civil society, the media, and the democratic opposition."

In a statement May 20 to the OSCE Permanent Council in Vienna, Austria, U.S. diplomat Douglas Davidson joined the EU in condemning Belarusian State Television's broadcast of a program that called into question the "sanity, competence, credibility and honor" of several members of the political opposition."

He also objected strenuously to footage in the film comparing U.S. training programs with training provided by Nazi Germany to Belarusian collaborationists.

"The United States government's assistance programs in Belarus, as elsewhere in the world, are designed to strengthen democratic institutions," said Davidson. "The Belarusian Government's efforts to misrepresent and suppress such programs speaks volumes about its own lack of commitment to democratic institutions and respect for the views of its own citizens."

Davidson urged the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media to monitor closely the situation in Belarus, where he said the regime is "redoubling efforts to muzzle the free press."

Source: *US Department of State's Bureau of International Information Programs*; May 25, 2004; <http://usinfo.state.gov/>

## **BUSINESS**

### **12. Russian Ruble's Introduction in Belarus Still Uncertain**

Russia intends to continue the process of monetary integration with Belarus, director of the inter-budget relations department of the Finance Ministry Anton Silvanov told Belarusian journalists on Wednesday.

"The issue of monetary integration still persists and is fully substantiated but practically it is already impossible to introduce the Russian ruble on the territory of Belarus from 2005," he said. According to Mr. Silvanov, it is necessary to agree upon and implement intra-state procedures and initial agreements to introduce the Russian ruble from 2005.

"We presumed that the Belarusian ruble would be tightly pegged to the Russian currency during six months. Apart from that, other organizational measures are required, for example, for the importation of the currency into the territory of Belarus. On the whole, we expected these measures to take from 8 to 12 months," the department director of the Russian Finance Ministry said. At the same time, he noted that in any case decisions would have to be taken by the leaders of both states.

"But technically, it is problematic to introduce the ruble from 2005 and I fear that with each month we are increasingly losing our chances," Silvanov stressed.

Speaking about the problems existing between the two states due to the introduction of the Russian ruble, Anton Silvanov noted that the most difficult issue in the negotiation process was the demand by the Belarusian side to be paid compensation for the losses of the Belarusian budget in the event of a reduced tax burden on the country's budget. "Today the negotiation process has not reached any results," he said.

According to Mr. Silvanov, today the general level of tax payments to the Russian budget amounts to 33.5% while the respective figure for the Belarusian budget is about 43%. In the event of the introduction of the Russian ruble, the Belarusian side will have to reduce this difference in the tax burden on its budget to make Belarusian goods competitive.

In this connection, the Belarusian side proposes that Russia should compensate it 7% of the gross domestic product or \$1.2 billion and pay this amount annually until the Belarusian economy is adapted to new economic realities. These new demands "were a serious stumbling block for us at the negotiation process," Anton Silvanov noted. [text revised by the Editor]

*Source: RIA Novosti; May 19, 2004; www.rian.ru*

### **13. Belarus May be Left Without Gas**

After a spectacular gas cutoff in February, a standoff between Gazprom and Belarusian authorities has been somewhat subdued. However, the Russian Courier newspaper reports, the parties, without coming into direct contact, exchanged threats at the beginning of this week. Since the start of this year, Belarus has purchased gas from so-called independent Russian producers, at a price of \$46.68 per 1,000 cubic meters. For its part, Gazprom offered its gas for \$50 per 1,000 cubic meters, while Belarus' government insisted on prices applied to the "fifth zone" of Russia. The parties did not make much efforts to bring their positions closer together.

According to Russian Courier, Gazprom's wait-and-see position seems to have been a purposeful tactic. After independent producers fully exhausted their quotas for gas sales to Belarus, Gazprom offered new terms: \$52 per 1,000 cubic meters of gas and a transit fee of \$0.67.

This was an unpleasant surprise for Belarusian authorities. They hoped to partly offset high gas prices by transit fees, which they estimate 1.5 times more expensive. And now the situation is becoming dangerous again. If Gazprom persists, Belarus may be left without gas as soon as next week, the newspaper reports.

At the same time, Gazprom, which suffered losses from the previous cutoff, would like to resolve the conflict peacefully, Russian Courier notes. And here is a coincidence: Vladimir Putin will meet Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko in the Black Sea resort of Sochi on Sunday. On the eve of this rendezvous, Gazprom officials told Belarusian reporters that February's cutoff had been blessed by the Kremlin, and made it clear that they would lend an ear to the Kremlin in the future, too.

The two leaders have discussed the gas issue on more than one occasion, but this has not led to significant progress, the newspaper concludes.

*Source: RosBusinessConsulting; May 20, 2004; www.rbcnews.com*

#### **14. IMF Recommends Structural Reforms to Belarus**

The International Monetary Fund acknowledges the stable economic growth in Belarus, but recommends to the government to reduce inflation and step up structural reforms, Thomas Richardson, head of an IMF mission to Belarus said during a Minsk-Washington live link-up on Wednesday.

The conference call was organized in connection with the IMF executive board's discussion of an annual report prepared as part of consultations with Belarus under article 4 of the Fund's charter.

Richardson said that the IMF executive board expects stable economic growth in Belarus in 2003 and in the first quarter of 2004.

Richardson noted differences in the Belarusian and international systems for calculating statistics, which may cause a difference in GDP figures of about one percentage point. Nevertheless, even taking this into consideration Belarus is demonstrating very stable economic indicators, he said.

Among positive trends the executive board noted high growth in exports and the ongoing liberalization of the currency system.

At the same time, the IMF considers that one of the main problems in Belarus is the high level of inflation. The Fund forecasts growth in consumer prices in 2004 of over 20%. Richardson noted the negative consequences for the economy of high inflation. He said that high inflation can be seen as an additional tax on the poorest section of the population.

The IMF also noted the relatively low level of international reserves in Belarus which, according to the Fund, amount to half a month's imports. [text revised by the Editor]

*Source: Interfax; May 20, 2004; www.interfax.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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