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Table of Contents

I. Domestic

1. Parliamentary Elections to be Tentatively Held October 17 (*Itar-Tass*)
2. Criminal Actions Brought Against Young Protesters (*Charter 97*)

II. Regional

3. Implementation of About 50 Belarus-Russia Union State Programs Underway (*RIA Novosti*)
4. Democratic Forces of Belarus and Ukraine to Sign Cooperation Agreement (*Interfax-Ukraine*)

III. International

5. Belarusian and US Relations Impeded by "Democratic Situation" (*Prima News*)
6. EU Promises to Support Belarusian Opposition (*BBC*)
7. Belarusian Elite Would Like to See Belarus in EU (*Charter 97*)
8. Belarusian Opposition Visits Berlin (*RFE/RL*)
9. Europe Will Not Solve the Belarusian Problem (*BelaPan*)

IV. Human Rights & Independent Media

10. Supreme Court Ruling Threatens Survival of Newspaper (*Reporters Without Borders*)
11. Editor of Confiscated Independent Newspaper Fined \$10 (*Belarusian Association of Journalists*)
12. Belarusian Court Upholds Libel Ruling Against Private Newspaper (*RFE/RL*)

V. Business

13. Minsk Ratifies Oil Pipeline Integration Agreement (*Itar-Tass*)
14. Lukashenko Concerned About Prospects of Eurasian Economic Community (*Interfax-Minsk*)

DOMESTIC

1. Parliamentary Elections to Be Tentatively Held October 17

It has been preliminarily decided that the next elections of deputies to the House of Representatives (lower chamber) of Belarus' parliament will be held on October 17, 2004, Chairwoman of the Belarusian Central Election Commission (CEC) Lidiya Yermoshina said after her meeting with President Aleksandr Lukashenko on Friday.

She said in an interview with journalists that campaigning for elections to the upper house of parliament will begin on August 18. She said the elections should be held by November 18. Yermoshina also said that Lukashenko has instructed the CEC to prepare a draft presidential decree on CEC members with advisory vote.

This decision, according to her, will "certainly make the election process more transparent and will make it possible for those parties that will nominate their candidatures for parliament to have their representatives in the CEC."

Source: *Itar-Tass*; May 31, 2004; www.tass.ru

2. Criminal Actions Brought Against Young Protesters

17-year-old Ekaterina Klimko and Maksim Gromov were detained late at night on May 25 for distribution of leaflets with a slogan "Free Marynich!". During detention Maksim Gromov was

beaten. Reports have been drawn against the two young people for violation of Article 143 of the Administrative Code of Belarus. Next morning they were detained again on their way to school and were taken to the Soviet District Police Department of Minsk.

At the moment a criminal case has been brought against them, supposedly on charges relating articles 341 or 218 of the Criminal Code (Deliberate damage of property and Defilement of property). At about 6 p.m. the first interrogation of the accused in presence of the lawyer is to start.

There are precedents in the history of democratic opposition being pressurized and charged with these articles. In 1997 Vadim Lobkovich and Aleksei Shidlovky have spent in prison six months and a year and a half respectively. In 2001 Anatoly Alizar, Sergei Koltush, Aleksandr Yarmakov and Zubr coordinator Aleksei Shudlovsky were sentenced to large fines and corrective labor. [text revised by the Editor]

Source: Charter 97; May 27, 2004; www.charter97.org

REGIONAL

3. Implementation of About 50 Belarus-Russia Union State Programs Underway

Most budget funds of the Union State, 93%, are spent on implementation of joint programs of the Belarus-Russia Union State, Deputy Secretary of the Union State Ivan Matskevich told journalists Thursday.

According to him, "the basis of economic integration is scientific and technical programs," Mr. Matskevich stressed.

"We implement the programs and give a new lease of life to a number of industries, create workplaces," he added.

He says implementation of about 45 joint programs is underway at the moment.

The "Diesel Car Engineering" program has not only saved "enterprises of this industry but made it possible to manufacture competitive goods, which meet the Euro-2 standards," the deputy of the secretary emphasized.

"The Union TV-Set" program was successful as well. "It allowed to take the right place on the Russia-Belarus market and now we account for 30 percent of it," Mr. Matskevich underlined. "We expect it will be 60 percent in the future." Implementation of the program made it possible to manufacture up-to-date TV appliances and upgrade "Kvant" factories and the "Gorizont" works in Voronezh, Mr. Matskevich pointed out.

Moreover, the Union State is implementing the "Union Combine" program, which would upgrade the outdated agriculture equipment.

The budget of the Union State makes up 2.7 billion Russian rubles. The revenues amount to 1.6 billion Russian rubles, while Belarus' revenues make up \$8.6 million (\$1 equals about 29 RUR). [text revised by the Editor]

Source: RIA Novosti; May 27, 2004; www.rian.ru

4. Democratic Forces of Belarus and Ukraine to Sign Cooperation Agreement

Representatives of opposition forces of Ukraine and Belarus are negotiating on cooperation and may sign a corresponding agreement. Ukraine may face the same political situation as Belarus if

democratic forces lose the presidential elections, MP Olexandr Turchynov (Yulia Tymoshenko's bloc) said in an interview with Interfax-Ukraine on Wednesday. He described the situation of the Belarusian opposition as tough, and said the situation could not be solved within the Constitution of Belarus. The opposition force in that country need moral and political help, he said. He said the wording of the agreement had not been drawn up, however, it might be signed next week. He did not specify which country, Ukraine or Belarus, would host the signing ceremony. Irina Heraschenko, press secretary of Our Ukraine bloc leader Viktor Yuschenko, said the bloc had signed such a cooperation agreement with political forces in Poland, Lithuania, Georgia, and Russia. She confirmed that political consultations with the Belarusian opposition were taking place.

Source: Interfax-Ukraine; May 28, 2004; www.interfax-news.com

INTERNATIONAL

5. Belarusian and US Relations Impeded by “Democratic Situation”

The “democratic situation is one of the most serious obstacles to improving relations between the US and Belarus,” said George Krol, US ambassador to Belarus, while visiting Mogilev on 27 May.

The ambassador recalled that the US government and the embassy had on more than one occasion expressed their concern over the human rights situation in Belarus. “One of the aims of the American diplomatic mission in Minsk is to monitor what is going on in the country. We also advance to the Belarusian government our opinion regarding those events where it seems to us that Belarus is not fulfilling its obligations as a member country of the OSCE,” said Krol.

Meeting with officials, the ambassador repeatedly stressed that “if the Belarusian government were to seriously apply itself to resolving these problems, bilateral relations between the US and Belarus would not be as limited as they are at the present moment.”

Source: Prima News; May 28, 2004; www.prima-news.ru/eng

6. EU Promises to Support Belarusian Opposition

In Brussels leaders of Belarusian opposition are received better than government representatives. On Friday, the delegation of the opposition leaders, who met with European Union leaders in Brussels over the course of three days, returns to Minsk. The EU believes that the self-imposed isolation of the Belarusian authorities does not have to hinder the cooperation with civil society and the Belarusian people.

It is not common for the EU to meet with the opposition, but the invitation to 10 leaders of the Belarusian non-governmental organization, movements and political parties were sent in the name of the leadership of the Council of Ministers of the EU.

During the three days in Brussels, Lukashenko's opponents met with EU's High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, Javier Solana, the EU Enlargement Commissioner, Gunter Verheugen and other high-ranking EU officials.

The Belarusian opposition delegation requested the international community to coordinate actions directed to protecting democracy and human rights in Belarus, proposed the creation of an EU representation in Minsk or the creation of a special mission, and also to simplify the procedure of issuing visas, especially for young Belarusians.

-Step-by-Step Strategy

Brussels has already dedicated a lot of effort to spur Minsk to follow accepted European democratic standards and assumed international obligations.

President Lukashenko has repeatedly accused the EU of interfering in internal affairs. The step-by-step strategy for developing good neighbor relations, offered to the Belarusian leadership, is still in force.

However, the program, known as “Five steps towards the democratization of Belarus” was brought to the EU headquarters not by government officials, but by politicians persecuted by the official Belarusian authorities.

In Brussels the leader of the parliamentary group Respublika, Valery Frolov reminded others that it has already been a month since the Belarusian KGB imprisoned former Minister of External Economic Relations, Mikhail Marinich, and a week ago Valery Levonevsky, the Chairman of Nationwide Strike Committee, was put behind bars in a temporary detention center. He is accused of libeling President Lukashenko.

-Strong Resolution of the European Parliament

EU leadership is fairly knowledgeable about the situation in Belarus.

The recent reports of the Cypriot parliamentarian Christos Pourgourides on the disappearance of Lukashenko’s political opponents and the unprecedented pressure of Belarusian government on independent media are the basis for the European Parliament’s new strong resolution

Anatoly Lebedko, the leader of the United Civil Party, believes that the meetings in Brussels are a sign of support for Belarusian democracy.

“It is a great achievement that we have stopped the conveyor of death squadrons in Belarus. Opposition politicians no longer disappear without a trace, and more people within the country are finding out about crimes committed by the government,” he said.

-Minsk is Unhappy With Europe

Meanwhile, these days Minsk has especially chastised Europe for being unscrupulous in choosing its contacts.

The state media once again called opposition leaders petty political peddlers and the vast number of reports on this week’s possible and actual visits to Europe by Belarusian officials is impressive.

But the fact remains that during the last 10 years of Lukashenko’s rule, neither the Belarusian president himself, nor chief officials of his administration were awarded such a high reception as given to the opposition leaders visiting Brussels.

Source: BBC; May 28, 2004; bbcussian.com

7. Belarusian Elite Would Like to See Belarus in EU

More than a half of experts and leaders of public opinion in Belarus (56 per cent) think that the EU enlargement would influence the development of the country favorably. These figures were gathered by the Independent Institute of Social, Economic and Political Research (IISEPR) during a survey in May. More than 60 policymakers, mass media figures, scientists and businessmen were interviewed. The proportion of respondents from state and independent sectors was approximately equal.

Almost a third of respondents (36%) expressed an opinion that the EU expansion would not

influence the situation in Belarus in any way. 8% of the interviewed told that the EU enlargement would influence the life of the Belarusians negatively.

As the IISEPR underlines, the majority of the last group is representatives of state sector and, accordingly, they “understand the possible problems of relationships of Belarusian state monopoly with market economy of the European countries”.

The overwhelming majority of Belarusian establishment told that they would like to see Belarus in the EU, and not in the union with Russia. The opposite view was expressed only by 13%. [text revised by the Editor]

Source: Charter 97; June 2, 2004; www.charter97.org

8. Belarusian Opposition Visits Berlin

After visiting Brussels, where 10 leaders of the Belarusian opposition held discussions with EU leadership, a large delegation of representatives of the democratic movement of Belarus arrived in Berlin, where meetings were held on May 27th in the German parliament. Invited to the meeting in Berlin were representatives of the People’s coalition, Five Plus and members of the European coalition Free Belarus and the group Respublika.

They met on Wednesday evening in the Bundestag on the issue of foreign politics with the leader of the KDC-KSS fraction, the leader of the German- Belarusian parliamentary group, “Uttoi Tsalph” other parliamentarian, representatives of German political parties, human rights workers and journalists.

In the morning on the 27th of May, the Belarusian delegation met State-secretary of the German Foreign Ministry, Klaus Scharioth. In the words of participants in the meeting, the discussions were remarkable for their high degree of specificity.

To sum up the results of the almost week-long visit of the Belarusian opposition to Europe, during which important trips to Brussels and Berlin coincided, the leader of the United Civil Party, Anatoly Lebedko told RFE/RL:

“Of course it is not by chance. In big politics these kind of coincidences do not happen. Clearly this is to a certain degree an official visit to Minsk, because the level of meetings is very high. Belarusian authorities have not been able to overcome this kind of a visit in the last ten years, despite all their efforts. This is a demonstration of attention to a country, to Belarus. It is a definitive indication for the European prospects of Belarus, and it is a chance for us, that both Europe and Germany are ready to work with the opponents of the Belarusian regime.” [Russian text translated by the Editor]

Source: RFE-RL; May 28, 2004; www.rferl.org

9. Europe Will Not Solve the Belarusian Problem

The wide-scale visit of the large group of Belarusian opposition representatives to Brussels and Berlin has come to an end. The level and depth of these meetings conducted by the opponents of the current Belarusian government in the European and German capitals allows us to give it such a definition.

The leaders of the People’s Coalition Five Plus, the European Coalition Free Belarus and the group Respublika conducted discussions with the European Union High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, Javier Solana, the European Commission Director, Eneko Landaburu, Commissioner for the EU’s Neighbor Policy, Gunter Verheugen, Irish Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs, Tom Kitt, and high-ranking individuals from

the German government and parliament.

In their interviews, the chairman of the United Civil Party, Anatoly Lebedko and head of Narodnaya Gramada, Nikolai Statkevich assessed this trip as extremely important. It was highlighted that ordinarily the EU does not undertake these kinds of meetings with opposition parties, and that the current situation is an exception which shows that the EU views Belarus as a country with a good outlook for democracy. According to the participants, this event provided a great opportunity to bring their position to the European community and to the EU, additionally, it helped work out the final strategy and facts regarding actions towards Belarus. This position was presented in the Five Steps Towards Belarusian Democratization program.

According to independent mass media, delegation participants highly valued the content of the meetings. In particular, it was noted that their European counterparts agreed with the establishment by the EU of various approaches to the Belarusian leadership and civil society, which is the main point of the program mentioned above. In addition, Gunter Verheugen announced that Belarus has a right to raise the question of its membership in the EU. In that case, all discussions about Belarus' potential membership can be halted if what was said was not just an example of usual diplomatic niceties.

In their evaluation of the importance of the visit, EU representatives were more subdued. According to Solana, the invitation of opposition leaders should be seen as a sign of support, and the meetings enabled the placement of a greater emphasis on the situation in Belarus, especially on the upcoming parliamentary elections. At the same time, there was no information on any possible concrete actions towards providing the sought assistance. However, this is not the result of the secrecy of the talks because the European Union, in principle, as an organization cannot circumvent any government, in this case, the Belarusian government, in its actions. All means that flow from the EU are under the control of the latter. Thus we can only count on moral support and political pressure.

But, in fact, this means preservation of the present situation. For all the demonstrated sympathy for their guests, higher level EU officials can only call on Belarusian leadership to carry out internal political reforms to conduct free and fair elections. The use of economic sanctions appears to be essentially improbable for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the lack of a unified opinion on the their advisability and effectiveness, even among the Belarusian experts.

Similarly it is doubtful that the EU representatives' promise to raise the Belarusian question in discussions with the Russian Federation will bring about any positive changes. In the past, similar hopes have been placed a number of times on the United States. It is possible that some discussion on this issue will be held, but Russia does not currently have any reason to strive for radical change in Belarus.

Another important fact, prompting the EU to restraint, is the lack of unification within the opposition ranks. In spite of the fact that the delegation was formally representing all the basic political groups, who are in this case expressing the same point of view, undoubtedly the Western partners understand the actual situation very well. As one EU diplomat who participated in the discussions stated, Javier Solana drew his colleague's attention to this issue.

The opposition leaders' promise to work out a common platform inspires certain optimism, and if this really does happen, then we can consider this trip to be quite successful for that reason alone.

Overall, we must admit that with all the importance of the visit, it has not resulted in radical change in the internal political arrangement in Belarus. Frankly, it cannot cause such a change. Although the significance of international support should not be underestimated, the key to solving Belarus' internal problems lie in Belarus. [Russian text translated by the Editor]

Source: Andrei Fyodorov, Belapan; www.naviny.ru

HUMAN RIGHTS & INDEPENDENT MEDIA

10. Supreme Court Ruling Threatens Survival of Newspaper

Reporters Without Borders voiced concern today that the newspaper *Narodnaya Volya* might have to close after a Belarus supreme court panel confirmed a 50 million ruble (20,000 euros) damages award against it for libeling former state TV chief Yagor Rybakov.

It urged the court's presidium to review the May 31 decision to ensure the damages were proportional to the offence so the paper did not have to close, which it said would "greatly worsen the difficult press freedom situation" in the country.

Damages against journalists Marina Koktush, of *Narodnaya Volya*, and Eleonora Yazerskaya, a former state TV broadcaster, were reduced by the panel to 1 million rubles (400 euros) each, but the award against the paper itself was maintained. Editor Iosif Seredich said the amount would "inevitably" force the paper to close.

A Minsk court imposed the damages on 17 November last year for an October 2001 interview in the paper with Yazerskaya in which she said Rybakov was a bad manager.

Source: Reporters Without Borders; June 2, 2004; www.rsf.org

11. Editor of Confiscated Independent Newspaper Fined \$10

On May 26, Grodno Court approved the confiscation of *Den* newspaper and fined the newspaper's editor-in-chief Mikola Markevich 10 USD.

Militia seized the print-run of *Den* near the town of Iwje, April 7. However, the report was drawn only April 29. One of the articles in the confiscated number of *Den* contained the opinion of the head of entrepreneurs' strike committee Valery Levonevsky, who was reflecting upon the possibility of civil protest. Mikola Markevich was accused of illegal distribution of the printed edition.

Mr. Markevich considered the claim groundless, since the print-run was confiscated before it was delivered to distributors. Besides, according to Mr. Markevich, the newspaper matched all the requirements of the Law on Press. Moreover, Mr. Levonevsky's opinion didn't contradict constitution and contained no call for unlawful actions.

According to the vice-chairman of the Belarusian Association of Journalists, law expert Andrei Bastunets, the charges against Mikola Markevich were based on the article irrelevant to mass media activity. "According to Article 25 of the Law on Press and Other Mass Media, full or partial confiscation of print-run can take place only on the basis of court decision. In the case of the newspaper *Den*, it turned out that by deciding to confiscate the print-run of edition administrative committee had practically cancelled the power of the Law on Press," – said Andrei Bastunets. [text revised by the Editor]

Source: Belarusian Association of Journalists; May 27, 2004; www.baj.ru

12. Belarusian Court Upholds Libel Ruling Against Private Newspaper

The Supreme Court upheld on 31 May a lower court's ruling ordering the private newspaper "Narodnaya volya" to pay 50 million rubles (\$23,000) in damages for libeling Yagor Rybakou, former chief of the Belarusian State Television and Radio Company (see "RFE/RL Newslines," 18 November 2003), Belapan reported. The court also reduced the compensation to be paid to

Rybakou by "Narodnaya volya" staff writer Maryna Koktysh and former television host Eleanora Yazerskaya to 1 million rubles each. Rybakou originally sued "Narodnaya volya" over an article written by Koktysh in which Yazerskaya was quoted as claiming that Rybakou contributed to Belarusian Television's "ruin" and cited rumors that he was to blame for the deaths of some of his employees. Rybakou was arrested earlier this year on charges of abuse of office, theft, and corruption.

Source: Jan Maksymiuk, RFE/RL; June 1, 2004; www.rferl.org/newsline

BUSINESS

13. Minsk Ratifies Oil Pipeline Integration Agreement

The Council of the Republic of Belarus National Assembly on Thursday unanimously ratified a cooperation agreement on the integration of the Druzhba and Adria oil pipelines. The governments of Russia, Belarus, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia and Ukraine signed the agreement in Zagreb, Croatia, on December 16, 2002.

The signatories to the agreement took a commitment to ensure free transit of extra oil volumes through the territories of their respective countries and to include those volumes in their transportation schedules.

Belarus is expected to earn six million dollars worth of profit a year if five million tons of oil is to be transported via its territory in the first stage of operation.

Source: Itar-Tass; May 28, 2004; www.tass.ru

14. Lukashenko Concerned About Prospects of Eurasian Economic Community

Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko is concerned about the state of affairs in the Eurasian Economic Community (EEC), which includes Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan.

"The most important concern for me today is the prospects of the EEC. The CIS has the EEC, the Single Economic Community, Belarus-Russia Union, and GUUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Moldova).

There are a lot of organizations, and the time has come to determine the direction in which we could work in this association (EEC), Lukashenko stated in a meeting on Wednesday with the General Secretary of the EEC Grigory Rapotoi in Minsk.

According to the Belarusian President, "we don't strive to finance this organization because for these years we, like other participants, didn't receive anything from the EEC... It's a mighty association, and we could have been able to come to an agreement," Lukashenko said.

According to him, "once again, questions remain about the induction into the WTO... Kyrgyzstan is in the WTO, Russia seemingly forged far ahead in this matter, but doesn't say how far. In this situation, Kazakhstan and Belarus are thinking whether this association (EEC) is effective and what will happen next," the head of state said.

Lukashenko said that the issues up for consideration at the upcoming June session of the heads of EEC states are "not completely relevant" for Belarus. He clarified that first and foremost is the issue of standardization of railway tariffs under the frameworks of the EEC and the construction of electric power stations in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

“As for the tariffs we principally work with Russia, and it’s roughly 96%, and these tariffs are standardized. Regarding the building of the power stations, we couldn’t find any interest in this matter and it is doubtful we should participate in the financing of these projects,” Lukashenko added.

According to him, as a member of the EEC, Belarus will participate in discussions on the issues scheduled to take place at the meeting of Intergovernmental Council of the Eurasian Economic Community. [Russian text translated by the Editor]

Source: *Interfax-Minsk*; June 2, 2004; <http://interfax.minsk.by/>

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.
