

June 2-9, 2004

Edited by Nate Young
International League for Human Rights

International League for Human Rights Condemns Latest Attacks on Civil Liberties

On June 8, the International League for Human Rights, an international non-governmental organization with special consultative status at UN ECOSOC, condemned the latest blow to Belarusian independent media and civil society, after Information Minister Vladimir Rusakevich suspended publication of *Rabochaya Solidarnost*, a popular Minsk-based independent newspaper.

The League also expressed deep concern about the unfortunate outcome of Oksana Novikova's trial, as well as the ongoing hunger strike by three parliamentarians and a number of political opposition activists.

The League called on Aleksandr Lukashenko and his officials to respect the Belarusian citizens' fundamental human rights, and to cease the assault on a democratic civil society in Belarus immediately.

Table of Contents

I. Domestic

1. Hunger Strike in the Parliament (*BDG*)
2. The Belarusian President Believes Science Should be Fully Devoted to Economic Development (*BeITA*)
3. In Belarus, Participants in Hunger Strike to be Tried (*Prima News*)

II. Regional

4. Russia to Grant \$200M Loan to Belarus (*MosNews*)
5. Sidorsky: Belarus is Fulfilling Union Obligations Towards Russia (*BDG*)
6. Putin Says Belarus Gas Row Resolved (*Moscow Times*)
7. Fradkov: Russia, Belarus Believe in Union Potential (*Itar-Tass*)
8. Latvia Finances Newspaper of Belarusian Opposition (*RosBalt*)

III. International

9. International Solidarity With Belarusian Strikers (*Charter 97*)
10. OSCE Chairman-in-Office Discusses Implementation of OSCE Standards and Commitments With Belarusian Leadership (*OSCE*)

IV. Human Rights & Independent Media

11. Belarusian Government Suspends Publication of Non-state Newspaper (*RFE/RL*)
12. Belarus Police Detain Hunger Strike Sympathizers (*Reuters*)
13. Oksana Novikova Sentenced to Corrective Labor Facility (*Charter 97*)

V. Business

14. Belarusian National Bank Will Lower Interest Rates (*BDG*)
15. Putin: No Common Currency for Russia, Belarus on January 1, 2005 (*Interfax*)

DOMESTIC

1. Hunger Strike in the Parliament

On June 3, Chamber of Representatives deputies Valery Frolov, Sergei Skrebets and Vladimir Parfenovich declared a hunger strike directly inside the parliament building. Neither the weak attempts of the president's security service to stop journalists from entering the parliament building nor the ineffective attempts of the Parliament's Speaker Vadim Popov to stop the deputies in vain by turning off their microphones prevented Frolov, Skrebets and Parfenovich's demands from being heard.

"People have been calling all day long: political leaders, residents of remote regions and Russian politicians. They expressed support and solidarity," said General Valery Frolov. "People are worried about our health. But so far everything is fine," he added.

Frolov and Skrebets spent last night inside their offices. The night passed quietly. The building's security did not have any complaints or demands. However, this morning once again the building was surrounded by minders, attentively watching persons walking by. It seems that the government fears displays of solidarity with the deputies on hunger strike, such as pickets, demonstrations and the like. The Chamber of Representative's leadership has already promised to meet one of the deputies' demands – to place amendments to the Electoral Code on the agenda. However this is not enough to stop the deputies' hunger strike.
[Translated from the Russian]

Source: Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta; June 4, 2004; www.bdg.by

2. The Belarusian President Believes Science Should be Fully Devoted to Economic Development

Scientific research in Belarus should be directed to the maximum extent to finding solutions to important development problems in the economic and social spheres.

"Today, the state's strategic interests lie in the renewable and non-traditional sources of energy, the development of energy preservation, informational and telecommunication technologies, biotechnology, genetic engineering, microelectronics, mechanical engineering, medicine, scientific provision and the revival of the Belarusian countryside," the President of Belarus announced on June 4, during a celebratory graduation ceremony of the National Academy of Sciences members.

Aleksandr Lukashenko stressed that although Belarus has been shortchanged in terms of raw materials, it has considerable scientific potential. There are almost 300 scientific research and experimental construction organizations alone, and they employ roughly 30,000 workers, of whom 17,500 are directly engaged in scientific research.

Currently, the main goal of the whole scientific elite of the country is finding a solution to the problem of lowering Belarusian dependence on energy resources, and resources in general. "Those who desire to achieve a result in this sphere, we will show support morally and financially," stated the President.

Aleksandr Lukashenko noted the necessity of creating a more active and uninterrupted scientific and manufacturing system, which would ensure the completion of the classical chain: scientific idea, technology, adoption of technology in manufacturing, mass production, and product realization. "In recent years we have paid a great deal of attention to perfecting the organization of science. We are already seeing results, but we have not yet achieved effective integration of science and production," the President said.
[Translated from the Russian]

Source: BelTA; June 4, 2004; belta.press.net.by

3. In Belarus, Participants in Hunger Strike to be Tried

On June 7, the Lenin District Court of Minsk is reviewing the administrative cases of two activists from the United Civil Party who supported the indefinite hunger strike of deputies from the Belarusian National Assembly.

On June 5, UCP representative in the Minsk oblast Marina Bogdanovich and the UCP head of the Vitebsk oblast Genady Ananov joined the hunger strike, announced by three deputies of the National Assembly. The purpose of this protest is to bring about changes in the Electoral Code, elimination of political repression and changes in the measure on restriction of movement in connection with the former Belarusian ambassador to Latvia Mikhail Marinych, charged with violating the Criminal Code. The hunger strikers attempted to start the protest around the building in which the deputies of parliament reside, but they were detained by law enforcement agents. Bogdanovich and Ananov were forced to pack up their tents and a police report was filed against them for holding an unsanctioned protest, after which they were released. At the moment, they are continuing the hunger strike in the apartment of ideologue and MP Valery Frolov, who is participating in the protest, despite deteriorating health.
[Translated from the Russian]

Source: Prima News; June 8, 2004; www.prima-news.ru

REGIONAL

4. Russia to Grant \$200M Loan to Belarus

Russia is ready to extend a \$200 million state loan to Belarus, a source in the Russian Finance Ministry, quoted by *Itar-Tass* news agency, said. The money will be used to pay for natural gas supplies that will be delivered to Belarus by Russia's natural gas monopoly Gazprom.

"It is expected that negotiations on specific terms of a loan contract will resume after Beltransgaz and Gazprom have signed a contract," the Ministry's official said.

As MosNews reported earlier, Gazprom suspended gas supplies to Belarus on January 1, 2004, after it failed to reach a transit agreement with the Belarussian transit company Beltransgaz. Belarus demanded that Gazprom pay higher transit prices for transportation of its gas to Europe at the same time arguing that the low prices it paid for Russian gas should remain unchanged.

After suspension of Gazprom's deliveries Belarus has been purchasing gas on short-term contracts from independent Russian providers. Sibur, an affiliate of Gazprom, has been the sole supplier since the middle of April.

It is still unclear what price Belarus will have to pay for Russian gas, as an announcement is supposed to be made later today, after a round of talks between Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov and Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko. The sources in the government said that Belarus will have to pay \$55 per 1,000 cubic meters of gas, while Gazprom will pay \$1.09 for 100-kilometer long transit of 1,000 cubic meters. The Russian monopoly already supplies Ukraine on precisely the same conditions. The sources also named slightly different figures — \$54 per 1,000 cubic meters of gas consumed by Belarus and \$1.02 per 100-kilometer transit of 1,000 cubic meters of gas through the Beltransgaz pipeline network.

These figures are still not final, and indeed a sensational announcement is possible. *Kommersant* daily wrote today that on June 7, the deputy chairman of Gazprom, Alexander Ryazanov, told the newspaper's correspondent that Gazprom and Beltransgaz have already reached an agreement

and that natural gas will be supplied to Belarus for a lower than expected price of \$46.68 per 1,000 cubic meters. In return Beltransgaz will lower its transit tariff to \$0.68 per 1,000 cubic meters (per 100 kilometers).

Source: MosNews; June 8, 2004; www.mosnews.com

5. Sidorsky: Belarus is Fulfilling Union Obligations Towards Russia

Belarus is thoroughly fulfilling its Union obligations in relation to Russia in the gas sector, Prime Minister Sergei Sidorsky stated after a June 3, meeting with Pavel Borodin, the Union government's Secretary of State.

"We are fulfilling our Union obligations in the gas sector, despite having no contract, which is Gazprom's fault, and since January 1, of this year, we are providing the transit for Russian gas almost free," stated the head of the Belarusian government.

Consequently, he said that according to the Belarusian legislation and documents provided to Gazprom, the Russian side owes Belarus approximately \$50,000,000 for gas transit through its territory. "Unfortunately, this problem remains unresolved, and we receive gas only from independent providers at agreed prices," asserted Sergei Sidorsky.

According to him, Belarus "is waiting for a response from Gazprom regarding an agreement on the volume and prices of gas supply, as foreseen by the instructions agreed upon by both heads of state."

The Prime Minister also noted that Belarus "is basing this on a price denoted by the "Ukrainian variant": \$46.68 per 1,000 cubic meters of gas and \$1.02 per 100 kilometers of transit."

"This is an arithmetic formula that can in no way be called into question," Sergei Sidorsky stressed.

Nonetheless, according to him, Gazprom "does not comprehend this." Currently, the Prime Minister believes, the gas question must be discussed and a solution must be found during the upcoming June 8, Union Government sessions in Minsk.
[Translated from the Russian]

Source: Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta; June 4, 2004; www.bdg.by

6. Putin Says Belarus Gas Row Resolved

President Vladimir Putin and his Belarussian counterpart said Saturday that they had solved a conflict over Russian natural gas supplies that badly strained bilateral relations.

"We have an understanding how to solve these problems," Putin said after hosting Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko at his residence in the Black Sea resort of Sochi, news agencies reported.

"We have reached agreement on practically all issues," Lukashenko said.

However, neither of the two leaders said what specific agreements they reached.

Russian natural gas companies briefly suspended supplies to Belarus earlier this year in a dispute over prices. The move drew an angry response from Lukashenko, who accused Moscow of charging a higher gas price to blackmail Belarus into surrendering control over its pipelines, which also carry Russian gas to Western consumers.

Putin on Saturday cast the conflict as a dispute between companies. "Some problems are interpreted as interstate, but, in fact, they only exist between companies," Putin was quoted as saying.

Russian gas suppliers continued shipments, but only signed short-term contracts in an apparent attempt to maintain pressure on Belarus. They said they could no longer subsidize Belarus by supplying it with gas at a fraction of its market value.

Russia and Belarus signed a union treaty in 1996 that envisaged close political, economic and military ties but stopped short of creating a single state. A plan to introduce the Russian ruble as the two nations' single currency starting in January 2005 has run into problems amid Belarussian officials' concerns that it could give giant Russia too much leverage over the nation of 10 million.

Putin acknowledged Saturday that the two nations would fail to meet the January 2005 target for introducing the single currency. In a veiled attack at Lukashenko, he added that the move is fully prepared economically and only faces political obstacles.

"The issue lies in the political and psychological sphere," Putin said.

Lukashenko, an admirer of the Soviet Union who signed the original union treaty with then-President Boris Yeltsin, has become a pariah in the West for his authoritarian ways and crackdown on dissent.

Lukashenko has rejected a scenario floated by Putin in 2002 under which Belarus would essentially be absorbed by Russia. Moscow, for its part, has become increasingly impatient about subsidizing Belarus' ailing, Soviet-style economy.

Source: Associated Press; June 7, 2004; www.themoscowtimes.com

7. Fradkov: Russia, Belarus Believe in Union Potential

Russia and Belarus "believe in the Union potential," Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov said in Minsk on Tuesday. This is the first Belarusian visit of Fradkov in his capacity of the Prime Minister.

The Belarus-Russia Council of Ministers "will discuss important aspects of the bilateral integration, including the common currency plan and unified customs and tariff regulation. This is very important for the Union," Fradkov said.

He hopes that Russia and Belarus will verify and coordinate their approaches.

Source: Itar-Tass; June 8, 2004; www.tass.ru

8. Latvia Finances Newspaper of Belarusian Opposition

Riga, June 8. "Open Newspaper," a Belarusian opposition publication in which the Latvian government is an actively participating, is expected to appear soon. The Latvian Foreign and Defense Ministries promised to provide 10% of financial support. According to *Kommersant Baltic Daily* newspaper, the first step leading to the publication of the paper was the creation of the civil society organization "Open Belarus." It was founded by the Latvian Transatlantic Organization (LATO) with the financial assistance of the United States, Norway, and Denmark. Peteris Vinkelis, former executive of the Latvian Foreign Ministry (First Secretary of the Latvian Embassy in Russian and Counsel of the Latvian Embassy in the United States), and currently deputy director of the Soros Foundation in Latvia, was appointed head of the organization.

According to the Latvian State Secretary Maris Riekstins, the Latvian government's participation in the publication of the Belarusian opposition newspaper doesn't interfere with the internal affairs

of Belarus since it is a non-governmental organization. "We are a democratic state and on our territory we do not hinder the creation of non-governmental organizations," Riekstins said.

Latvian Foreign Ministry Press Secretary Rets Plesums noted that this is not the first time Latvia has shown support for opponents of the current Belarusian government. For example, last February in Riga, the Foreign Ministry helped host a conference of the Belarusian opposition. [Translated from the Russian]

Source: Rosbalt; June 8, 2004; www.rosbalt.ru

INTERNATIONAL

9. International Solidarity With Belarusian Strikers

Ambassadors of the European Union share the aims of the hunger strike deputy group "Respublika," said French Ambassador to Belarus Stephane Chmelewsky during the meetings with deputies Sergei Skrebets, Uladzimir Parfyanovich and Valery Frolov. Other ambassadors of EU countries accredited in Belarus (Poland, Lithuania, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Sweden, Germany, United Kingdom) also took place in the meeting.

As stated by Stephane Chmelewsky, the purposes of the hunger strikers are "the purposes of the EU as well". On the same day, protesters were visited by OSCE mission representatives, headed by Ambassador Eberhard Heiken. "The OSCE has insisted on making amendments to the Election Code over the last few years, and also expects the authorities to carry out an investigation of Marynich's case in conformity with the law," said Heiken.

Today OSCE Chairman-in-Office, minister of Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria Mr. Solomon Passy, who arrives in Minsk on June, 8, is to visit the strikers. The official representative of the Bulgarian Foreign Ministry, Petr Krajchev told Radio Svaboda that a meeting with opposition will be part of Solomon Pasi's visit. Sofia announced that the OSCE Chairman-in-Office knows about the strike of Belarusian deputies and keeps up to date with it. The deputy of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe Christos Pourgourides, the author of the well-known report "Disappeared in Belarus," expressed his support to the protesters as well.

Additionally, the presidium of the Political council of the Union of Right Forces (SPS) of Russia sent a letter of support to the participants of the hunger strike. As Rosbalt was told by the press service of the United Civil Party on Monday, the Russians expressed their admiration of the courageous move made by protest participants. "We know how difficult it is to resist the regime of Lukashenka in today's Belarus. Moreover, an unlimited hunger strike is a protest which constitutes real danger to life," the Russian politicians say in their letter.

As we have previously reported, three deputies of "Respublika," together with four activists of the UCP are demanding an election reform bill consideration by the parliament, and release of famous opposition activist Mikhail Marynich. [Text revised by the Editor]

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

10. OSCE Chairman-in-Office Discusses Implementation of OSCE Standards and Commitments With Belarusian Leadership

The OSCE Chairman-in-Office, Bulgarian Foreign Minister Solomon Passy, said on Wednesday he was satisfied with his visit to Belarus, which provided him with the opportunity to get acquainted on the spot with the situation in the country and to conduct talks, which will undoubtedly contribute to the normalisation of the OSCE-Belarus dialogue.

It was the first visit of a Chairman-in-Office to Belarus in six years.

Ending a two-day visit to Minsk, during which he was received by President Alexander Lukashenko and met Foreign Minister Sergei Martynov, the Chairman of the House of Representatives Vadim Popov, and representatives of NGOs, political parties and of the opposition.

Minister Passy expressed the hope that forthcoming parliamentary elections in Belarus would be free and fair and be conducted in line with OSCE standards and commitments. He also reiterated his full support for the work of the OSCE Office in Minsk, which is headed by Ambassador Eberhard Heyken.

“We sincerely believe that the visit will stimulate the constructive and open dialogue with Belarus and is a sign of hope for the future. Measurable progress towards democracy and respect for human rights will provide the necessary preconditions for enhanced relations with the international community” the Chairman-in-Office said.

Minister Passy noted that the enlargement of the EU in 2004 had made Belarus a direct neighbour of the EU. Historically and culturally Belarus belongs to Europe and we would like to see it rejoining the rest of the continent in good and close cooperation and shared values. Recognising some positive development the Chairman-in-Office encouraged the Belarusian authorities to impose a moratorium on death penalty as the next step towards abolition of capital punishment.

The Chairman-in-Office said there was strong international interest in the forthcoming elections in Belarus. “I hope the Belarusian authorities will interpret and implement the Electoral Code in a way that allows for genuinely democratic elections,” he said.

He noted that it is important that the invitation to the OSCE s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) to observe the elections be issued in good time.

The Chairman-in-Office expressed concern about reports that some opposition leaders were facing harassment and about the closure by the authorities of some NGOs. “I attach great importance to unhindered and legitimate activities by NGOs in key OSCE areas such as democratic elections, institution-building and freedom of the media.”

Minister Passy said he had asked the OSCE Office in Minsk to continue reporting on developments concerning freedom of the media in Belarus. “Freedom of the media is key to the development of a society based on the rule of law and independent media are vital for the health of a democratic society,” he said.

Cases of disappearances of a number of people were causing concern in the international community and should be thoroughly investigated, the Chairman-in-Office said. “Only through such an investigation can responsibility be assigned, justice done and this matter be closed,” he added.

Minister Passy welcomed greater co-operation between the OSCE and Belarus in the politico-military dimension and said the recent successful OSCE Assessment Mission on Small Arms and Light Weapons should provide a good basis for follow-up activities in this field. The Chairman-in-Office discussed a possible international assistance for the destruction of stockpiles and landmines.

Minister Passy paid serious attention to difficulties related to overcoming the consequences of the Chernobyl tragedy in Belarus. The OSCE/OOM will continue to offer support through project implementation in the framework on the CORE Programme.

Source: OSCE; June 9, 2004; www.oscel.org

HUMAN RIGHTS & INDEPENDENT MEDIA

11. Belarusian Government Suspends Publication of Non-state Newspaper

Information Minister Uladzimir Rusakevich on 3 June suspended publication of the Minsk-based weekly "Rabochaya solidarnast" for three months, charging the newspaper with violating the media law, Belapan reported on 5 June.

The formal reason for the suspension was the weekly's failure to report its new address following the withdrawal of its cofounder, the Belarusian Union of Automobile and Agricultural Implement Workers, in March. Under the law, the other cofounder, the Belarusian Party of Labor (BPP), should have made appropriate changes to the newspaper's registration certificate within one month. The BPP applied to the Minsk city authorities in early April for registration of its new address. The authorities, however, notified the newspaper more than a month later that it was still considering the request. "Rabochaya solidarnasts" has a circulation of 9,000-12,000 and is distributed primarily among workers.

BPP leader Alyaksandr Bukhvostau said that the paper is being targeted for its criticism of the pro-government Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus.

Source: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty; June 5, 2004; www.rfe/rl.org/newsline

12. Belarus Police Detain Hunger Strike Sympathizers (Reuters)

Police in Belarus, an ex-Soviet state widely accused of curbing human rights, on Saturday detained two sympathizers backing parliamentarians on hunger strike to press for improved electoral laws.

Police seized the activists after they had pitched tents by the building where three members of parliament were fasting to demand fairer rules for October general elections -- a barometer of President Alexander Lukashenko's popularity.

"They (the police) will have plenty of work to do," Marina Bogdanovich, a member of the opposition United Civic Party leading the sympathy protest, told Reuters. "We have plenty of other tents. And at least 10 people say they want to join our protest."

The three members of parliament -- Valery Frolov, Vladimir Parfyanovich and Sergei Skrebets -- began refusing food on Thursday while acknowledging that a hunger strike was not the best way to press for change. Belarus's liberal and nationalist opposition fears widespread fraud in the October parliamentary vote and has demanded new laws providing for more independent observers and broader rights for them to oversee voting.

The hunger strikers are also demanding the release of opposition politician Mikhail Marinich, detained in April on charges of stealing official documents.

October's election will provide an indicator whether Lukashenko, in power since 1994, still holds sway over public life in the country of 10 million between Russia and Poland.

Lukashenko stands accused by the European Union and United States of failing to uphold human rights, harassing opposition leaders and cracking down on independent media.

The president still cherishes a dream of post-Soviet reunification with Russia, but Kremlin leader Vladimir Putin has grown cool to the idea.

Source: Reuters; June 5, 2004; www.reuters.com

13. Oksana Novikova Sentenced to Corrective Labor Facility

On June 9, Minsk's Oktyabrsky District Court judge Irina Bosko sentenced Oksana Novikova to two and a half years at a corrective labor facility, in accordance with Part 2 Article 367 of the Belarusian Criminal Code ("libel against the president of the Republic of Belarus"). Novikova was charged with distributing leaflets in tunnel #2 of the Minsk-Passazhirsky Station on April 5, which "contain libelous, that is false and insulting information about the Belarusian President, along with accusations of serious and heinous crimes." Novikova is a single mother of a three-year-old child.

At the beginning of the trial, the accused asked for a new judge in the case, and also petitioned to stop the criminal case, due to a lack of proof of her guilt, as well as petitioned to request a number of individuals to be questioned, including Head of State Aleksandr Lukashenko, Prosecutor General Viktor Sheiman, former and current Ministers of Internal Affairs, Yuri Sivakov and Vladimir Naumov, Special Forces Commander of Interior Troops Dmitry Pavlichenko, and also the former Presidential Administration Manager, Ivan Titenkov.

In addition, Novikova proposed that Chairman of the United Civil Party, Anatoly Lebedko, his deputy Aleksandr Dobrovolsky be examined as witnesses, along with the PACE Rapporteur, Christos Pourgourides, whose recent report implicates high-level government officials' involvement in the disappearance of political opponents of the current government and other displays of state arbitrariness. Novikova argued that the results of such an investigation "would have shown my innocence." However, the judge did not comply with the defendant's petitions.

During her court appearance, Novikova refused to declare herself guilty, saying that in distributing the leaflets, she did not libel the president, but rather informed citizens about crimes that have been committed, which the official media is keeping hushed up. At the same time, Novikova stressed that "all the facts stated in my leaflets are reality because they are published and have never been refuted by anyone. The court now has the opportunity to prove the opposite."

Despite the fact that the judge introduced various publications and documents submitted by the defendant to the case, they were not reviewed during trial.

The prosecutor asked for a three-year prison sentence.

In her interview with BelaPAN, Novikova noted that the court did not examine the main issue which is "why this sentence will be a guilty one." Her lawyer, Pavel Sapelko believes that the judge significantly violated procedural norms by not questioning as witnesses Lebedko and Dobrovolsky, who were present in court.

Others found guilty of libeling Lukashenko who received different corrective labor sentences are journalists Mikola Markevich, Pavel Mazheika and Viktor Ivashkevich.
[Translated from the Russian]

Source: Charter 97; June 9, 2004; www.charter97.org

BUSINESS

14. Belarusian National Bank to Lower Interest Rates

The Belarusian central bank announced that as of June 7, it will lower interest rates on its operations in the financial market

Thus the overnight rate will be lowered from 29% to 28%. One-day overnight credit, which is paid back on the day it is given, will be reduced from 12% to 11%. Starting June 7, the collateral credit

rate will be lowered from 29% to 28%, and the rate of collateral credit which is paid back on the day it is given will be lowered from 12% to 11%. The rate of deposit with brought in from 2-7 days will be 7%-9% as opposed to the previous 8%-10%.
[Translated from the Russian]

Source: *Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta*; June 4, 2004; www.bdg.by

15. Putin: No Common Currency for Russia, Belarus on January 1, 2005

Russian President Vladimir Putin said Russia and Belarus are unlikely to adopt a common currency on January 1, 2005.

"It is unlikely that we will be able to realize the plans to introduce the Russian ruble on the territory of Belarus from January 1, 2005," Putin said after meeting with his Belarussian counterpart Alexander Lukashenko in Sochi on Saturday.

At the same time, he stressed that "from the point of view of specialists and the economic interests of Belarus and Russia, these issues have practically been resolved." "We are currently at the political-psychological point of decision-making," Putin said.

"Time is needed to prepare society for this step," Putin said.

Putin also admitted that "specialists have some other questions." "We will discuss all issues in a calm and friendly fashion. We will not stop this work and will continue it," he said.

Lukashenko, in turn, stressed that "all agreements on the introduction of a common currency, except for one, which will likely have to be amended, are practically ready. As soon as the time comes when we will be able to consciously decide to introduce a common currency, we will make that decision," he said.

Source: *Interfax*; June 7, 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. 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.
