

June 16-23, 2004

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International League for Human Rights

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## DOMESTIC

### 1. Deputies End Hunger Strike and Aim to Pull Country out of Apathy

One day prior to Chamber of Representatives consideration of the Respublika backed bill regarding changes to the election code, Valery Frolov, Sergei Skrebets and Vladimir Parfenovich have decided to end their hunger strike. However, they said, this certainly does not mean the protest is over.

The hunger strike participants consider their strike to have been successful. The decision on the relevant amendments to the election code will be made tomorrow, and though the outcome will not necessarily be favorable, the hunger-striking deputies are already summing up the benefits of their demonstration.

In particular, they believe that they consolidated active and constructive democratic forces in the country, mobilized Belarusian society, garnered international support for their demands and attracted attention to a possible ("in preparation," as it says without much doubt in a Respublika press release) referendum on the question of a third presidential term.

The deputies still insist that their demands must be met. Changes must be made to the election code, Mikhail Marynich must be released from custody and the third presidential term referendum, which according to them is already being prepared by high-level authorities, must be stopped.

But, as stated in a press release, the time for a hunger strike has passed and it is time to move on to a new stage of action. As Valery Frolov declared back on May 19, the summation of ten years of Aleksandr Lukashenko's presidency will take place on July 21 at a countrywide meeting. Aside from this, the hunger strikers believe that the movement "for fair elections," the purpose of which will be independent analysis and control of parliamentary election results, will receive a boost.

Tomorrow, on June 22, deputies will return to the Oval hall of parliament and will battle for their own amendments to the election code. Then on June 23, members of parliament will visit Brest and Grodno on June 25.

"Until July 21, when we will organize a demonstration devoted to the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Aleksandr Lukashenko's government, we must do an enormous amount of work. We must carry out more vigorous actions. We have planned many engagements and we are sure that will have many people's support," said Valery Frolov, the unofficial leader of Respublika.

According to political scientist Sergei Pankovsky, the deputies' confidence is not without reason. "First of all the deputies have gained a moral victory over the ruling party," the political scientist declared in an interview with *Belorusskie Novosti*. "First, the idea that those in power somehow 'did not notice' this hunger strike showed that they have trouble with ethical and universal points of reference. Secondly, the authorities did not appear to be ready for the unconventional reactions to their conventional acts. As it turned out, the authorities' pattern of action was breakable."

As for Respublika's future plans, Pankovsky says that despite societal apathy, these plans may not be completely utopian. "During the hunger strike, the deputies gained a lot of political weight. They showed that they have a system of values, which the authorities lack. The hunger strike in Minsk and beyond has caused a lively reaction, despite its limits. The hunger-striking deputies have found sufficient trust, in order to be supported in the future. Certainly, now, after the end of the hunger strike, there will definitely be splash of propaganda to discredit the deputies. But the fact that many people, including recent political opponents, have extended their support to the deputies speaks volumes. There are values greater than ambitions and political ends. And consequently more people will support the deputies now," predicts Sergei Pankovsky.

The hunger strike initiators' goal is to gather 30-40 thousand people in Minsk on July 21. And though many factors may prevent this, Respublika is undoubtedly trying to fulfill the role of 'a third force' in the Belarusian political arena, which many people have talked about for so long. [Translated from the Russian]

*Source: Sergei Pulsha, BelaPan; June 21, 2004; www.naviny.by*

## **2. Parliament Declines Amendments to Election Code**

The Chamber of Representatives declined amendments to the election code supported by the parliamentary group Respublika. Amendments initiated by Respublika offered the possibility of participation in the Election Commission by political parties and representatives from all levels of society, an increase in official observers, the abolition of pre-elections and the ability to appeal decisions made by the Election Commission in court. Only seven parliamentarians voted for the amendments initiated by Respublika. 71 deputies voted against it. "This is just another confirmation of our belief that we must move on to different forms and means of action. We invite everyone to take part in the protest on July 21, to evaluate the results of 10 years of Lukashenko's rule," said Respublika's leader, General Valery Frolov.

Members of Respublika think that the parliament's refusal to make amendments has provided a base for falsification of parliament elections. Respublika members say that Belarusian pro-

democracy forces should engage in public monitoring. "We must create strong public opinion that will influence the situation in the country and members of election commissions. We can only do this if we have a definite and active position. We need force and the ambition to change the situation," says general Frolov.

Amendments to the election code were among the demands made by Respublika members who started a hunger strike on June 3. Valery Frolov, Vladimir Parfenovich and Sergei Skrebets held the hunger strike for 18 days. They were also protesting a third term for Lukashenko and against the arrest of opposition leader Mikhail Marynich. None of the demands have been met. On July 21, members of Respublika are going to organize a protest action to evaluate the results of 10 years of Lukashenko's rule and to demand free elections.  
[Text Revised by the Editor]

*Source: Charter 97; June 22, 2004; www.charter97.org*

### **3. Belarusian Businessmen Declare Strike**

On Thursday, Belarusian businessmen dissatisfied with the ruling party declared a national strike and did not go to work.

As reported by NTV, businessmen put forward six requirements, among them: the release of political prisoners, a review of tax laws, transparent customs policies with Russia and "no to a third presidential term."

The organizers prepared for the strike for seven days. They did not hide their surprise when discussing the numbers; they mobilized 80,000 people in such short period of time.

The report on the demonstration's results took place near a deputy's house. The press conference was held at the entrance of the building, where in a small apartment three national assembly deputies were on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of their hunger strike, demanding an end to amendments on electoral legislation. For the 15<sup>th</sup> day, a poster on the balcony read: "No to a third term."

Sergei Skrebets, a deputy of the Belarusian National Assembly stated, "It is very encouraging to see that businessmen have started making political demands, because it is useless to make economic demands, nobody is listening, no one ever listened."

On the square of one of Minsk's largest markets, the space that is usually filled by businessmen's tents now has some open spaces. Farukh, an Afghani trader, sells ladies handbags in the market. He knows about the strike, but he opened his tent, has says he is taking stock of inventory.

The Belarusian Union of Businessmen did not support the strike by small businesses.

Aleksandr Potupa, chairman of the Belarusian Union of Businessmen stated, "they're just getting people riled up before the upcoming parliamentary elections. We don't like this, if you want to be involved in politics, please, go ahead, make a party and do these things through your party. But doing this on the backs of businessmen, we don't like this approach, in principle. I think that this will not achieve anything, just like the hunger strike."

In Minsk the businessmen's strike was not widespread. Activists behind today's strike say that the markets' administrations put pressure on small merchants.

Business activist Anatoly Shumchenko said, "In the mini-markets yesterday market directors and administrators took up the role of agitators and went to businessmen and threatened them with the cancellation of rent contracts in the event of their absence today."

The hunger-striking deputies also spoke about economic pressure today, as they have been denied their wages. A trustworthy assistant was sent to the parliament's bursar and came back empty handed. The deputies have responded by saying that they will be more economical. Valery Frolov declared that what is more important today is to evaluate their own strength and the strength of those who support them.

Not only activists supporting the businessmen's movement but also medics from the government's ambulance service came to evaluate the capabilities of the hunger strikers [Translated from the Russian]

*Source: NTV; June 17, 2004; www.ntv.ru*

#### **4. Belarusian Opposition Wants OSCE to Start Monitoring Election Campaign**

The Belarusian opposition Five Plus coalition told two representatives of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), Ian Mitchell and Holly Ruthrauff, in Minsk on 16 June that they would like the OSCE to start monitoring Belarus's campaign for the 17 October parliamentary election as soon as possible, Belapan reported. The ODIHR representatives reportedly answered that their organization will dispatch a monitoring mission to Belarus as soon as it receives an official invitation from the authorities.

*Source RFE/RL; June 17, 2004; www.rfe/rl.org*

#### **5. Belarus an Attractive Country for Refugees**

Forced migrants no longer see Belarus as a country that only serves as a springboard for further advancement into Western Europe, but many have declared their intention to remain in the country. Evgeny Kremko, head of the Citizenship and Migration Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs made this announcement in a press conference today.

According to Kremko, about 3 thousand people from 33 countries have requested refugee status since February 1997, when Belarus began registration procedures for refugees. Almost 740 people from 13 countries have received refugee status. Of them, more than 660 are on the books of immigration organizations and five have already become Belarusian citizens.

Kremko said that the overwhelming majority of refugees who have stayed in Belarus are Afghani. There are also large groups of Tajiks and Georgians from Abkhazia.

As noted by the representative from the Belarusian Ministry of Internal Affairs, refugees possess almost the same rights as Belarusian citizens. Both are given access to national public health services, education, employment opportunities and vocational training. [Translated from the Russian]

*Source: Itar-Tass; June 21, 2004; www.itar-tass.com*

### **REGIONAL**

#### **6. Brest Honors the Memory of the Fallen in the First Days of WWII**

The requiem "On That Longest Day of the Year" played at the 63rd anniversary of the beginning of the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945 (the first attack by Nazi Germany on the Soviet Union) was held in the Brest Fortress near Terespol.

At 4 a. m. wreaths with burning memorial candles were lowered into the waters of the Bug River which flows past the walls of the fortress, the first to receive a blow dealt at the dawn of June 22 by Nazi troops in Soviet territory. Artillery salvos were fired in memory of the fallen in the first

minutes of the war.

A "Memory Train" arrived in Brest from Moscow. The veteran-defenders of the Brest Fortress, Moscow schoolchildren, and representatives of public associations all came to take part in the commemorative action at the walls of the famous citadel.

In another Belarusian city, Grodno, which was also among the first to be attacked by the Nazi army, a solemn gathering in memory of the first days of the war and its first victims is being held.

A memorial for soldiers and border-guards will be unveiled in Grodno. It was built with the help of donations from national organizations, the Grodno public and border stations of several CIS states.

Events organized by the German embassy will be held in Minsk. The "60th Anniversary of the Liberation of Belarus: A Joint Clarification of Destinies and Reconciliation" conference will be held in the House of Friendship. During the conference, representatives of the association "Saxon Memorials" will speak about recently discovered documents recounting the fate of Soviet officers who died in Nazi captivity.

*Source: RIA Novosti; June 22, 2004; www.rian.ru*

## **INTERNATIONAL**

### **7. EU Envoys Call On Belarusian Lawmakers to End Hunger Strike**

A dozen Minsk-based EU ambassadors on 16 June visited the apartment in which three Belarusian lawmakers -- Syarhey Skrabets, Valery Fralou, and Uladzimir Parfyanovich -- and a group of opposition activists were in the 14th day of a hunger strike (see "RFE/RL Newslines," 16 June 2004), RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported. The lawmakers are demanding democratic changes to the country's Election Code and the release from custody of their political associate, Mikhail Marynich. Citing health reasons, the ambassadors called on the protesters to end the strike. "[We call on the protesters] to halt the hunger strike in order to preserve their health and use their courage that they have demonstrated in action for the sake of their country's future," French Ambassador Stephane Chmelewsky read from a joint statement. The Chamber of Representatives, Belarus's lower house, has reportedly decided to consider on 22 June the possibility of amending the Election Code.

*Source: RFE/RL; June 17, 2004; www.rfe/rl.org*

### **8. UN Appoints Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Belarus**

The Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC) has ratified the Commission on Human Rights' decision to appoint a Special Rapporteur for human rights in Belarus. The decision was made despite objections from Belarusian, Chinese, Cuban and Russian representatives. Among the Special Rapporteur's tasks will be the establishment of direct contacts within the government and with the people of Belarus with the goal of studying the human rights conditions in the country. The Rapporteur will oversee the development of an educational program on human rights for all levels of society, especially for law enforcement employees, judicial system workers, penitentiary system workers and civil society.

The Commission's resolution states that the decision to appoint a Special Rapporteur was made based on information from reliable sources. The document lists examples of human rights violations in Belarus. It specifically notes the involvement of highest-level government officials in the forced disappearance and/or execution without appropriate judicial proceedings of three political opponents of the current government, and one journalist.

As noted in the Commission's resolution, other human rights violations in Belarus include arbitrary arrests and detentions, and the prosecution and closing of non-governmental and religious organizations, national minority organizations and independent media.

*Source: Charter 97; June 16, 2004; www.charter97.org*

## **9. OSCE Representative Concerned about Deportation Case**

The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Miklos Haraszti, has expressed his serious concern about the decision on 21 June by the Belarusian security services, the KGB, to deport Mihail Padalyak, a journalist from the independent newspaper *Vremya* and a Ukrainian citizen.

"I am seriously concerned by this case for several reasons," Mr Haraszti wrote in a letter addressed to the Belarus Foreign Minister. "The deportation is happening admittedly to silence critical voices in the media. It is taking place outside the judicial process, with no apparent right of appeal against this arbitrary decision. And it is unacceptable on humanitarian grounds as Mr Padalyak's wife lives in Belarus and is a citizen of your country."

"This latest case is just one more in a pattern of harassment of media reported to my Office over the past several months," Mr. Haraszti wrote.

The official reason for the deportation of Mr. Padalyak given by the KGB was that his newspaper "reported in a biased fashion on the political and social developments in the Republic of Belarus."

The decision to deport the journalist was made under Sub-Article 2 of Article 25 of the Law On the legal status of foreign citizens and people without citizenship, living on Belarus' territory and on the Regulations on the order of deportation of foreign citizens and people without citizenship. Mr. Padalyak has been barred from entering Belarus for the next five years.

*Source: OSCE; June 23, 2004; www.osce.org*

## **HUMAN RIGHTS & INDEPENDENT MEDIA**

### **10. Ukrainian Journalist Deported from Belarus**

On the morning of June 21, Mikhail Podolyak, deputy editor-in-chief of the Belarusian independent newspaper *Vremya*, and a Ukrainian citizen, was deported from Belarus. State security officers placed him on the "Minsk-Odessa" train.

According to a Prima News correspondent and the information center of the Belarusian KGB, Mr. Podolyak was kicked out for violating "rules on visits of foreign citizens or stateless citizens to the Republic of Belarus." In addition, "his entrance visa and permission for temporary stay on the territory of the Republic of Belarus were annulled... and he was prohibited from entering the country for a period of five years." Whether this particular punishment will be carried out if Belarus and Ukraine work out an agreement, the KGB did not confirm.

According to the KGB, the violations of the rules consist in the fact that Mr. Podolyak "helps issue the newspaper *Vremya*, which is biased towards the socio-political condition in Belarus... the paper published materials which contain libelous inventions about the real state of affairs in the country, called for destabilizing the political situation in Belarus, contradicts the interests of state security, and is in violation of laws on the rights of foreign citizens and stateless citizens in Belarus."

Bidding farewell to colleagues, Mr. Podolyak stated that the deportation appears none other than a reaction to his hard-hitting publication. He plans now to write even more controversially.

Moreover, as the editor of *Vremya* Pavel Zhuk stated, Mr. Podolyak will keep his position as deputy editor.

Mikhail Podolyak became the third journalist exiled from Belarus. In 1997 and 2003, Aleksandr Stupnikov and Pavel Selin, directors of the Belarusian branch of the TV channel NTV, were kicked out.

Mikhail Podolyak has been residing in Belarus since 1990. He had not formalized his Belarusian citizenship due to technical grounds, he claims.  
[Translated from the Russian]

*Source: Prima News; June 21, 2004; www.primanews.ru*

### **11. Wife of Deported Journalist Determined to Defend Her Husband's Rights**

Irina Podolyak, wife of the Ukrainian freelance journalist Mikhail Podolyak who was deported from Belarus June 21, says she is going to fight for the rights of her husband to return home. In particular, she is going to appeal the deportation decision signed by KGB and the Prosecutor's Office and the decision of the passport and visa service to annul her husband's residence permit.

According to Irina, she has addressed the Ukrainian Consulate in Belarus with the request to clarify the situation. Despite the preliminary agreement to have a telephone conversation with the Council, the conversation has never taken place.

Irina Podolyak says that after she gave interviews to several Ukrainian TV and radio stations, people from these channels called her and said that state Ukrainian mass media was asked "not to stir up a scandal" and to "quietly avoid this topic"

*Source: Belarusian Association of Journalists; June 23, 2004; www.baj.ru*

### **12. Radio Liberty Correspondent Detained**

Radio Liberty correspondent Yury Svirko was detained near the House of Government in downtown Minsk. He was trying to get to the session of the Chamber of Representatives where he was officially accredited, but was stopped by police at the entrance of the building.

According to "Radio Liberty", Mr. Svirko showed a pass to the Chamber of Representatives with the stamp of the security service, valid until December 31, 2004 and a certificate of registration of Radio Liberty in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, valid until April 9 2005. After seeing the name of the organization, the guard in the uniform of the presidential security service said he wouldn't let him in.

When the correspondent turned on the tape recorder and asked on what grounds he was refused entrance to the Chamber of Representatives, the guard took away the equipment from the journalist and ran out of the building.

Mr. Svirko was grabbed by people in civilian clothes who twisted his arm and threw him out of the building. A security service officer returned the equipment only after deleting the tape.

Eberhard Heyken, head of the OSCE office in Minsk and head of OSCE PA Uta Zapf were witness to the incident. "I haven't seen anything like this before", Uta Zapf said later.

When Yury Svirko tried to enter the building again, he was stopped at the entrance by a person in civilian clothes, who took away both his accreditation IDs, saying that they become invalid from now, and ordered to "clear the room". When the journalist asked him to show an ID, he was

grabbed by six people in civilian clothes and dragged to a police car with a license plate number "MN0773". In the car the journalist was banned from making or answering phone calls.

"Where do you live?" the head of policemen asked. "We are going to take you there and won't take any money from you – think of it as a taxi", he said. Yury Svirko said he lived at Engels Street, so he was taken there and then freed.

[Text revised by the Editor]

Source: *Belarusian Association of Journalists; June 23, 2004; www.baj.ru*

## **BUSINESS**

### **13. Belarus foreign trade deficit down 36%**

Belarus' foreign trade deficit was reduced by 36.1% year-on-year to \$115.6 million in January-April 2004, the country's Ministry of Statistics and Analysis told *Interfax*.

Belarus' foreign trade turnover grew 24.9% to \$8.883 billion in the four months. Exports increased 26.5% to \$4.383 billion and imports rose 23.4% to \$4.499 billion.

Belarus traded with 151 countries in January-April. Its main trading partners were Russia, with 58.1% of total trade, Britain (5%), Germany (4.9%), Poland (4.2%), Ukraine (3.4%) and the Netherlands (2.7%).

Source: *Interfax; June 18, 2004; www.interfax.com*

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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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