

Belarus Update

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Belarus Update Exclusive: Interview with Dr. Charles Tannock, European Parliamentarian and Co-Author of Recent EP Resolution on Belarus

On September 16, the European Parliament adopted by a large majority a resolution strongly condemning the ongoing harassment and intimidation of opposition political leaders, the worsening conditions for civil society, the likelihood of electoral fraud during October elections, and the attempts by President Aleksandr Lukashenko to seek a third term in office by altering the Constitution. The resolution noted similar measures taken last spring by the UN Commission on Human Rights and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe to address the worsening human rights record of Belarus. In response to this timely resolution, *Belarus Update* had the opportunity to conduct a short interview with Dr. Charles Tannock, co-author of the resolution and Vice-President of the Parliament's Human Rights subcommittee.

1. BU: The Resolution mentions the willingness on behalf of the European Parliament to send an election observer mission to Belarus. If the electoral process does not meet international standards for free and fair elections, would the EP be willing to pull its monitoring team out of the country before voting takes place on October 17 as a symbolic statement that the elections are indeed illegitimate and fraudulent? The OSCE has taken similar action before.

CT: This decision would be taken by the observation team on the ground but I am sure if this was felt at the time to have more political impact it would be given serious consideration as a course of action. I am not aware that the EP observer missions have ever done such a thing before though

2. BU: The Resolution welcomes the involvement of UN Commission on Human Rights to tackle the problems in Belarus. In which ways can the European Union coordinate its efforts with the UN and the special rapporteur over the next year?

CT: There are few formal channels under current arrangements to coordinate our work with the UN or the Council of Europe but it is the intention of the Human Rights subcommittee of the EP of which I am the Vice Chairman to look at possible ways of improving this. One criticism often made though is that the UN Commission has members or even its Chair at times whose track record in terms of human rights is distinctly poor.

3. BU: The Resolution calls on member states to consider issuing travel bans on Belarusian officials like judges and policemen. Why not also issue bans on higher level officials, especially those implicated in the disappeared opposition figures? As you know, the Greek government decided to bar Yuri Sivakov, Belarusian Minister of Sports, from attending the Olympic Games this summer due to his involvement in the missing persons scandal.

CT: I would be happy to extend a travel ban to anyone implicated in criminal acts in Belarus who escapes prosecution solely due to political influence but its unlikely that all the member states would agree in all cases and this is a matter for the Council of Ministers not the European Parliament

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ELECTION NEWS

1. European Parliament Adopts Resolution on Belarus, Ahead of Elections (Full Text)

The European Parliament,

- having regard to its previous resolutions on the situation in Belarus,
- having regard, in particular, to its resolution of 24 October 1996 on the situation in Belarus⁽¹⁾, in which it decided that no further steps would be taken towards ratification of the EU-Belarus partnership and cooperation agreement until clear signals had been given by the Belarus authorities of their intention fully to respect basic democratic and human rights,
- having regard, in particular, to its resolution of 5 July 2001 on Belarus⁽²⁾, adopted prior to the 2001 presidential elections, and to the reports of the Parliamentary Troika (OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly and European Parliament) published after the 2000 general election (30 January 2001) and the 2001 presidential election (4 October 2001),
- having regard, in particular, to its resolution of 11 February 2003⁽³⁾ on relations between the European Union and Belarus: towards a future partnership,
- having regard to the OSCE's 1999 Istanbul summit declaration⁽⁴⁾,
- having regard to the resolutions by the Council of Europe on the situation in Belarus and, in particular, to its resolution of 28 April 2004⁽⁵⁾ on the persecution of the press in the Republic of Belarus,
- having regard to the recent declaration of the Head of the OSCE Office in Minsk criticising the prison sentences passed on two members of the Belarus opposition accused of defaming the President of Belarus,
- having regard to the declaration made on 30 July 2004 by the Dutch Presidency on behalf of the European Union on the unacceptable pressure exerted by the Belarus authorities on the European Humanities University in Minsk⁽⁶⁾,
- having regard to the Communication from the Commission of 11 May 2004 on the European Neighbourhood Policy (COM(2004)0373),
- having regard to the resolutions adopted by the UN Commission on Human Rights and its decision to appoint a special rapporteur for Belarus,
- having regard to Rule 103(4) of its Rules of Procedure,

- A. whereas elections for the Belarus Parliament will take place on 17 October 2004,
- B. whereas President Lukashenko has decided that a referendum will be held at the same time asking for the removal of an article in the constitution that limits the presidential term to a maximum of two consecutive periods of five years in office,
- C. whereas the Parliamentary Troika concluded that neither the parliamentary nor the presidential elections of 2000 and 2001 were free and fair and that they were preceded by arbitrary action by the government against the political opposition, independent media and election-observing organisations,
- D. whereas, instead of improving, the situation in Belarus has further deteriorated to a situation where human rights are violated with contempt, the Lower House is deprived of its legislative rights, and economic life is ruled by the President; whereas these violations include imprisonment of members of the democratic opposition and the use of other forms of repression against them, the de-registration of political parties in the run-up to the elections, the harassment and intimidation of opposition candidates and the banning of representatives of opposition parties at polling stations,
- E. whereas the EU has repeatedly condemned the arrest of prominent opposition leaders by the Lukashenko government and whereas no progress has been made in the unsolved cases of a number of disappeared persons,
- F. whereas over the past few years more than 50 democratic NGOs of different levels and different political orientations, over 20 independent mass media entities, several educational establishments and several political parties have been closed for "technical" reasons, but whereas it was clear that in all cases these organisations were punished for criticising the President and his policy,
- G. whereas politically motivated arrests and trials of activists of the democratic movement and independent journalists, and deportations of foreign citizens are continually taking place in Belarus; whereas only a few days ago two members of the Belarus opposition, Valery Levonevsky and Alexander Vasilyev, were condemned to two years in prison on a charge of defaming the President of Belarus,
- H. extremely concerned at the decision of the Belarusian authorities to revoke the licence to operate as a legal entity of the internationally recognised European Humanities University in Minsk, which is a remarkable example of academic freedom and the pursuit of true European values in teaching and research programmes, with dire consequences for the academic future of hundreds of students and teachers,
- I. having regard to the resolution of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe of 28 May 2004 which acknowledged evidence of involvement of top State officials in the abduction and alleged assassination of leading opposition figures in 1999,
- J. stressing the increasing political isolation of Belarus, the only Eastern European country with which the EU has not yet signed a partnership and cooperation agreement,
- K. underlining the fact that Belarus is included in the European Neighbourhood Policy, but at present is not benefiting from the offer of increased cooperation owing to the lack of democracy and the rule of law in the country, despite the hope of Belarusian citizens for increased cooperation with the European Union,
1. Strongly condemns the Belarus regime's indiscriminate attacks on the media, journalists, members of the opposition, human rights activists and any person who attempts freely to voice criticism of the President and the regime, as manifested through arbitrary arrests, ill-treatment of detainees, disappearances, politically motivated persecution and other acts of repression that flout the basic principles of democracy and the rule of law;
 2. Calls on the Belarus authorities to guarantee that the parliamentary elections of 17 October 2004 will be free, fair, equal, accountable and transparent and to ensure that the Parliament thus elected is given meaningful powers, and rejects as undemocratic the steps undertaken to eliminate major democratic opposition parties, including making the Labour Party illegal and the official "warning" given to the Belarusian National Front, which may be the first step towards its delegalisation;
 3. Calls upon the people of Belarus to participate in the forthcoming parliamentary elections; strongly urges the central election committee to provide all political movements in the country with equal access to the committee and the same chances to field candidates; appeals to the Belarus

government to allow international observers to monitor the elections in order to guarantee that they are carried out in a free and fair manner; recognises the great importance of these elections for the reestablishment of democracy in Belarus and the reintegration of Belarus within the international democratic community;

4. Considers President Lukashenko's attempts to seek an extension of his presidential term by referendum as a further confirmation of the authoritarian way in which he rules the country, and urges President Lukashenko to respect the conditions of the Belarus Constitution as regards the maximum term of office for the President of the Republic and to refrain from holding a referendum on this issue;

5. Calls on the Belarus authorities to immediately stop the harassment of all educational institutions in the country and to respect the basic principles of academic freedom, teaching autonomy and tolerance in education;

6. Expresses its deepest concern at the closure of the European Humanities University, a well-structured academic institution which has developed significant cultural cooperation activities with EU countries and embodies the principles of academic freedom and teaching autonomy; expresses similar concern at the closure of the Jakub Kolas school, the only secondary school where all courses were taught in the Belarusian language;

7. Calls on the Belarus authorities to release immediately Valery Levonevsky, Alexander Vasilyev and Mikhail Larinich and all other imprisoned political opponents of the regime;

8. Welcomes the decision of the UN Commission on Human Rights to appoint a Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Belarus and the objective of developing a human rights education programme for all sectors of society;

9. Calls on the Belarus authorities to respect trade union rights, and in particular the right of association guaranteed under the ILO conventions ratified by Belarus;

10. Emphasises once again that the further development of EU relations with Belarus will continue to depend on the progress made towards democratisation and reform in the country;

11. Calls on the EU Council Presidency to press the Belarus authorities to allow a delegation from the European Parliament to be sent to Belarus to observe the elections on 17 October 2004 and to create the conditions for independent observation;

12. Urges the Commission to make the most of the current spontaneous "people to people" exchange programmes between Belarusian communities of Chernobyl children and some municipalities in EU Member States; calls, in this connection, for the creation of a dedicated framework through which to support those Belarus municipalities sincerely committed to democratic values;

13. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission, the Parliaments and Governments of the Member States, the Government and the Parliament of Belarus, and the Parliamentary Assemblies of the OSCE and the Council of Europe.

Source: European Parliament; September 16, 2004; <http://www.europarl.eu.int>

2. Belarusian Opposition to Campaign Under Motto 'Say No to Lukashenka'

Parliamentary candidates fielded by the opposition coalitions Five Plus, Free Belarus, and Young Belarus, as well as members of the Respublika group in the Chamber of Representatives, will campaign for the 17 October elections under the common slogan "Say No to Lukashenka," Belapan reported on 13 September. The opposition forces are also planning to stage joint demonstrations on 10 and 18 October to protest Lukashenka's intention to run for reelection in 2006.

Source: Jan Maksymiuk, RFE-RL; September 16, 2004; www.rferl.org

3. European Parliament Calls on Lukashenko to Abstain From Referendum

Further development of relations between the European Parliament and Belarus depends on "the progress in democracy and reforms" in this country, said a special resolution on Belarus that was adopted in the European Parliament by overwhelming majority of votes on Thursday. As many as

449 deputies from 545 who attended the parliament's session voted for the document in tough tone.

In particular, the resolution contains a strong denouncement of the current Belarussian leadership for "large-scale" attacks on press, journalists, members of opposition and all those who are trying to openly criticize the president of the country and his "regime."

The European Parliament demanded to guarantee the freedom, fairness and transparency of the parliamentary election scheduled for October 17.

The European Parliament believes that attempts of president Alexander Lukashenko to achieve the prolongation of his presidential term with the help of a referendum confirm the authoritative method according to which he rules the country. In this connection the resolution calls on Lukashenko to respect provisions of the Belarussian Constitution in which the maximum presidential term is set.

The European Parliament called on Lukashenko to refuse from a referendum.

Deputies also asked the European council, the EU supreme executive body, to make the Belarussian authorities agree that the delegation of the European Parliament would come to observe the parliamentary election.

Source: Itar-Tass; September 16, 2004; www.tass.ru

4. Opposition Campaign Funded with Foreign Money, Says Lukashenko

Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko accused the opposition of receiving financial help from abroad for the parliamentary election campaign. "We know several centers that fund our opposition," Lukashenko told reporters in the course of his trip to the town of Volkovysk on Saturday.

The first center comprises oligarchs and big-time businesspeople, and some Russians, who give pennies, in the hope that the opposition will come to power and pay back. "It won't come to power and won't pay back," the president said.

Secondly, there are "ours" abroad; one can hardly call them entrepreneurs, they were kicked out of the country at one time, and now run some kind of business that brings them money; these wish to return home "riding high." They also back the opposition, especially those of them who live in Russia and the United States, Lukashenko said.

Americans are the third source of funding. "Our opposition is simply thrilled, pushing America and its president and Congress to pass a law on democracy in Belarus. It is being done to "strangle the country," to make people turn away from Lukashenko, the president said.

A number of European foundations are the fourth source, such as the Goethe Institute. "There are many such funds; Germany behaves very negatively in this sense," he said.

Lukashenko underlined that he was not opposed to domestic business people's taking part in politics. However, they should not engage in politics in the capacity of business people, he said. Once they enter politics they have to start living by political laws, and should not complain, he stated. No matter how much money is injected into the country by the opponents of the so-called hated regime, they will not succeed. If the people say "yes", Lukashenko will win. "If I lose, I'll sincerely thank the people in two years," the Belarussian leader said.

Source: Itar-Tass; September 20, 2004; www.tass.ru

5. Another Allegation Against Lukashenko

Elena Ravbetskaya, the chief editor of the independent Grodno newspaper “Information Exchange” makes an allegation against president Alexander Lukashenko in the article “Treachery against the people”, which was published by the newspaper on September 9th.

On September 16th, Elena Ravbetskaya gave evidence to the public prosecutor for the Leninskii district of Grodno. Action was brought against her in accordance with Section 10, Article 172: Administrative Offence code of Belarus, due to her breach of Article 5 and the Law concerning the press: “The use of the media to distribute information that discredits the honesty and virtue of the President of Belarus is prohibited”. If the journalist is found guilty, she could be fined between 50 and 100% of her minimum earnings.

The allegation against Alexander Lukashenko was considered by the public prosecutor to be in the phrase: “The referendum (without which there will be no third term) is explained by Mr President as a call to society. It is necessary to have not only a lack of conscience but also “the Mister’s” contempt for the plebs”.

The journalist affirms that “I have humiliated nobody, I have not used abnormal vocabulary but the opposite: Aesop’s language... Therefore we’ll undergo a long and painful trial. I propose that not one linguistic expert will be called in to understand whether there is an insult to honesty and virtue or whether I am expressing my own opinion and am speaking the truth”.

Elena Ravbetskaya is the fourth Belarusian journalist to be accused of making allegations against President Lukashenko. Her predecessors (chief editor of Grodno newspaper “Pagonya” Mikola Markevich and his journalist Pavel Mozheiko, and also the chief editor Viktor Ivashkevich of the “Workers” newspaper) were sentenced to years in prison to pay for their crimes.

Source: Prima News; September 20, 2004; www.prima-news.ru

6. After Registration of Candidates for Deputy Electoral Race, 359 People Continue to Run

In 110 election districts 359 candidates for deputy in the Chamber of Representatives in the Belarusian National Assembly have been registered, reports secretary of the Central Election Commission on elections and adoption of referendums Nikolai Lozovik.

In all, 692 documents for registration of candidates for deputy were issued to the district commission.

In the Brest oblast 63 candidates for deputy are continuing their electoral race; in Vitebsk- 64; in Gomel- 33; in Grodno- 34; in Minsk- 64; Mogiliev- 41; in Minsk proper- 60.

Most of the registered candidates—151—were nominated by political parties; 137 people from labor collectives and 71 by way of collection of signatures.

From the political parties, according to Central Election Commission data, most of the candidates were registered under the Liberal-Democratic Party: 38. For the liberal democrats, the United Civil Party is running 26 candidates. Belarusian Social-Democratic Party (Norodnaya Gramada)- 25; Party of the Belarusian National Front- 24; Party of Belarusian Communists- 21; Belarusian Social-Democratic Gramada- 8; Communist Party of Belarus- 6; Social Democratic Party of National Harmony- 2 and the Republican Party- 1.[text translated from the Russian by the Editor]

Source: BelaPan; September 20, 2004; www.naviny.by

7. Authorities Deprived Prominent Political and Public Figures Opportunity to Run in Elections

The preliminary results of the candidate registration stage show that "the Belarusian authorities have deprived prominent political and public figures of the opportunity to run in the elections," says the outlawed Vyasna human rights group.

According to its statement, more than 40 percent of the nominees of pro-democracy opposition parties were denied official registration as parliamentary candidates.

The authorities were openly interfering in the candidate registration process to ensure the election of pro-Lukashenko candidates to the lower chamber, the statement says. "Members of nomination groups and pro-democracy candidates often came under pressure at their place of work, were intimidated and dismissed; pressure was widely applied to voters who had put their signatures and placed their trust in representatives of the country's pro-democracy forces."

"Pro-democracy political parties that took an active part in the election campaign, especially the ones that had concluded an agreement on joint activities in the framework of public coalitions, also fell under the authorities' pressure," the Vyasna group says.

"All this has already provided grounds to insist that the elections for the National Assembly's House of Representatives are undemocratic and do not meet the principles of free, fair, transparent elections, and the international standards of organizing and conducting elections," the statement says.

Source: Charter 97; September 20, 2004; www.charter97.org

DOMESTIC & REGIONAL

8. Half of Ukrainians Wish to be in a Single Union with Russia, Belarus

Nearly half of Ukrainians (49 percent) believe they would have a far better life in one union with Russia and Belarus, while a mere 29.3 percent wish to be part of "democratic Europe," as follows from the results of a sociological poll held by the Kiev International Institute of Sociology in cooperation with the Democratic Initiatives foundation. In the course of the poll 2,000 men and women were questioned on August 25 through September 3.

According to the poll's findings, 67.8 percent believe that Ukraine and Russia must be independent but friendly countries with open borders and without any visas or customs. Twenty percent are for the two countries' merger into one state, and 8.4 percent believe that relations should be in no way different from those with other countries, with closed borders, visas and customs.

Forty three percent of the polled said Ukraine should stay out of military unions and have an equal degree of cooperation with NATO and Russia, 20.9 percent want the country to join the CIS military union, and 10.7 percent believe that Ukraine should try to become a member of NATO.

As for the status of the Russian language, 38.6 percent said it must become a second official language, 39.5 percent want it to be a second official language only in those areas where most citizens know the language, and 17.6 percent believe Russian should be banned from official use in all parts of Ukraine.

Source: Itar-Tass; September 14, 2004; www.tass.ru

INTERNATIONAL

9. PACE President: "Belarus Referendum Must be Held in Conformity with Council of Europe Standards"

Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) President Peter Schieder today expressed great concern over the Belarusian President's decision to hold, in parallel with the parliamentary elections on 17 October 2004, a referendum on allowing a president to run without limitations in future presidential elections.

"While we cannot deny the right of the Belarusian authorities to hold a referendum in this context, we urge them to ensure that it be held in conformity with Council of Europe standards, as also stressed by the EU Council.

Our concern is based on the undemocratic way in which the November 1996 referendum was held, giving sweeping powers to the President, and on the gross manipulation of subsequent parliamentary and presidential elections. As a consequence, the Assembly suspended the Belarusian parliament's special guest status in January 1997. Belarus' accession process to the Council of Europe has remained frozen since then.

The hardening of Mr Lukashenko's dictatorial regime over the past years is clearly evidenced by the persecution of opposition groups and NGOs, and the repression of the independent media. Moreover, the authorities have refused to properly investigate serious allegations that high representatives of the regime were involved in the disappearance of opposition politicians and a critical journalist.

These undemocratic policies have caused the country to be increasingly isolated from the international community, to the detriment of the Belarusian people. The Assembly is prepared to contribute to assuring the fairness of the forthcoming parliamentary elections by participating in an international observation mission. If the referendum moves forward under less than free and fair circumstances, the Council of Europe and its Assembly will draw the necessary consequences."

Source: Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe; September 14, 2004;
<http://assembly.coe.int/>

10. Minsk Views PACE Head's Referendum Remark as Pressure

Minsk views critical remarks by foreign politicians concerning the upcoming referendum in Belarus as "a factor of pressure on the country," Deputy Belarusian Foreign Minister Aleksandr Sychyov told journalists on Tuesday.

"We proceed from the assumption that forming an opinion about this or that event even before it has happened is a factor of pressure. Belarus is doing all it can to ensure the upcoming election campaign is transparent, open, fair and compliant with international standards," the diplomat said. "Organizing referendums is an internal affair of any country and is regulated by national law," he said.

Source: Interfax; September 14, 2004; www.interfax.ru

HUMAN RIGHTS & INDEPENDENT MEDIA

11. Levonevsky's Son Detained at Market in Lida for Distributing Leaflets

Dmitry Levonevsky, the eldest son of the jailed leader of market vendors' strike committee in Grodno, was detained in Lida, Grodno region, on Sunday after attempting to pass out leaflets and

a news bulletin at a local market.

As the activist told BelaPAN, he was first questioned by the market's director and later taken to a police station where an officer searched him in the absence of witnesses. "Witnesses were invited and a search report was drawn up only after the search had been conducted and the leaflets counted," Mr. Levonevsky said.

All items that police considered to be illegal printed matter, including CDs containing an audio recording of his father's trial, were seized from Mr. Levonevsky.

"I was not read the administrative detention report and was not given a copy. I was given only the search report," said the activist.

Valery Levonevsky and Aleksandr Vasilyev, deputy head of the strike committee, on September 7 were sentenced to two years in prison each for allegedly insulting Aleksandr Lukashenko. In a dual trial, the judge ruled that a leaflet distributed by the two men prior to a May Day demonstration in the city defamed Aleksandr Lukashenko.

According to the ruling, a phrase contained in the leaflet, "Come and say no to someone's holidaying in Austria, skiing there and being free-living at your expense," referred to Mr. Lukashenko.

Source: Charter 97; September 20, 2004; www.charter97.org

BUSINESS

12. Russian-Belarusian Trade Turnover to Breach \$15 Billion by Late 2004

Russian-Belarusian trade turnover may reach \$15 billion on 2004 results, said Belarusian Prime Minister Sergei Sidorsky on Monday at a meeting with representatives of industrial enterprises of Nizhny Novgorod (400 km east of Moscow).

The premier stressed that without fruitful work of the government and cooperation, this result will not be reached.

By the data of the Nizhny Novgorod regional economics ministry, for the first six months of 2004, trade turnover of Belarus and the Nizhny Novgorod region (compared to the similar period last year) grew by 53% to reach \$114 million.

The yearly plan on trade turnover between regions is \$230 million. In Mr. Sidorsky's words, before late 2005 this figure will be raised to \$300 million.

The Nizhny Novgorod region has 120 partners, among them Belarus is in second place in terms of imports and in first place in terms of exports. Nizhny Novgorod-Belarusian cooperation is carried out in the framework of the agreement on trade, economic, scientific-technical and cultural cooperation signed in September 2003 by regional governments.

A Belarusian delegation led by Mr. Sidorsky arrived in Nizhny Novgorod on a two-day visit on Monday. Delegation members examined an exposition of Belarusian enterprises represented at the ninth all-Russian scientific-industrial forum Russia United, over today at the Nizhny Novgorod fair.

Then Mr. Sidorsky met with representatives of Nizhny Novgorod industrial enterprises and visited the Gorky automobile plant.

Source: RIA Novosti; September 13, 2004; www.rian.ru

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.
