

December 28, 2004 – January 13, 2005

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Table of Contents

I. Domestic

1. Belarus Imprisons Opposition Politician (*ABC News*)
2. Battle for Belarus (*Washington Post*)
3. Belarus President Waves Iron Fist (*BBC News*)
4. Belarusian Ministry Dissatisfied with Ideology Courses at Universities (*RFE/RL*)
5. Belarus Seeks to Improve People's Health Through BAA (*Itar-Tass*)

II. Regional

6. Belarusian President Lukashenko Recommends that Russia Correct Policy on Belarus (*Itar-Tass*)
7. Eastern Europeans Concerned with Belarus Situation (*EU Business*)
8. Lukashenko Accuses Russia of Breaching Gas Agreements (*Interfax*)
9. Rapprochement With Russia Remains Belarus' Key Priority (*RIA Novosti*)

III. International

10. OSCE Envoy Condemns Sentence on Former Belarus Minister (*Interfax*)
11. France Protests Travel Block on Children (*Washington Times*)
12. Analysis: Polls Split Ex-USSR (*BBC News*)

IV. Human Rights & Independent Media

13. Norwegian Group Sends Mission to Belarus (*International Network of Journalists*)
14. In Minsk Wearing Orange is a Crime (*Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta*)
15. Three Years of Imprisonment for a Broken BT Camera (*BAJ*)
16. FM Stations Meet the 75% Requirement (*BelaPAN*)

V. Business

17. Russia and Belarus Reach Agreement on Indirect Taxes (*RosBusinessConsulting*)
18. Belarus's Foreign Debt Totals \$800 Million (*RFE/RL*)
19. Gas Prices Gradually Rise (*BelaPAN*)
20. Belarus Posts Most Jan-Nov Industrial Growth in CIS (*Interfax*)

DOMESTIC

1. Belarus Imprisons Opposition Politician

A top opposition politician in ex-Soviet Belarus was sentenced to five years in prison on Thursday in what he denounced as an attempt to block his drive to make the ex-Soviet state more democratic.

Mikhail Marinich, who ran against President Alexander Lukashenko in 1991 elections, was detained in April by the state security service, still known by its communist-era initials KGB.

An allegation of illegally owning weapons was dropped for lack of evidence and he was convicted of stealing office equipment given to his liberal think-tank by the U.S. embassy.

The embassy earlier said it had no objections to Marinich's actions, although under the court ruling he must return the equipment to the embassy.

"This process is a politically driven prosecution, brought for my active work in civil society, for seeing Belarus developing on European lines, for putting forward my candidacy in the presidential elections," Marinich, 64, told the court.

Some analysts have suggested the prosecution was driven by Lukashenko's desire to remove a potential rival since Marinich has developed close ties in Moscow.

Russia is Belarus' closest ally but ties have cooled recently, and some observers have suggested it could support an opposition candidate in elections set for 2006.

Lukashenko won an internationally criticized referendum this year allowing him to stand for a third term in the poll. His allies won a simultaneous parliamentary election.

The former farm boss, who has run the country along Soviet lines since he came to power in 1994, has pledged to crack down on corruption and last year ordered prosecutors to pay special attention to opposition politicians.

The West accuses Lukashenko of stifling the independent press and cracking down on dissent and the European Union has slapped travel bans on top officials. The EU has also frozen high-level contacts with Belarus, a neighbor since the trading bloc expanded earlier this year.

Washington also criticized the conduct of elections in the increasingly isolated state.

Source: ABC News; December 30, 2004; abcnews.go.com

2. Battle for Belarus

Some of the most excited young people camping in Kiev's Independence Square during Ukraine's democratic revolution were not even Ukrainian. They were leaders of the youth group Zubr, of neighboring Belarus. In Minsk in October, Zubr's street protests against the fraudulent elections of a Russian-backed dictatorship were brutally crushed by security forces, and appeared almost quixotic. Then Ukrainians showed them that such a movement could triumph -- and that the wave of autocracy rolling from Moscow across the former republics of the Soviet Union could be turned back.

The euphoria didn't last long. On the return trip from Kiev, four of the Zubr leaders were pulled off a train by the Belarusian secret police, savagely beaten and tossed into a local jail. Only quick intervention by Western diplomats may have saved them from a worse fate: Opponents of the regime of President Alexander Lukashenko have disappeared permanently in the past.

That incident was an augur of the political struggle taking shape in a country of 10 million that lies astride the road from Berlin to Moscow, and now is the last Eastern European country governed by autocracy. Ukraine's "orange revolution" may have thwarted the ambition of Russian President Vladimir Putin to create a new empire based on the model of rigged elections, controlled media and thuggish intimidation. A toppling of the Lukashenko regime would probably make Putinism unsustainable even in Russia.

"Ukraine has had a great impact on Belarus," says Irina Krasovskaya, leader of the human rights group We Remember, who recently has been shuttling between Minsk and Washington. "It gives us hope for our victory, because we realized that Russia is not so powerful as they want to seem."

That truth has quietly resonated far beyond Belarus's small opposition movement. Even as the political crisis in Ukraine has wound down, democratic leaders from Kiev to Washington have begun to think about how Belarus might be transformed. Lukashenko, for his part, has launched a

preemptive offensive against the opposition -- one seemingly calculated to test the West's intentions.

The strongman's gambit was to dispose of the most likely Belarusian counterpart to Ukrainian president-elect Viktor Yushchenko: a former presidential candidate, ambassador and government minister named Mikhail Marinich. The 64-year-old Marinich, who like Yushchenko defected from the government in the hope of leading a democratic movement, was sentenced Thursday to five years in prison on the patently ludicrous charge of stealing U.S. government property. In fact, the U.S. Embassy in Minsk supplied computers to Marinich's "Business Initiative" movement, designating them a loan so they could not be easily confiscated. Marinich's sentence came in the teeth of American protests that the "stolen" property was not stolen.

Lukashenko has reason to fear Marinich -- and the Bush administration to support him -- because, like Putin, the president has adopted the practice of legitimizing his rule with one-sided elections. The next one is due in 2006, and Lukashenko knows he can't win fairly: In October, a Western-sponsored exit poll showed that a referendum he staged on eliminating presidential term limits received only 48 percent support. Ignoring reports of massive fraud by international observers, the regime duly announced that the referendum had passed with 77 percent, making it possible for Lukashenko to stay in office indefinitely. But he still must avoid the election-linked popular uprisings that in the past four years have ousted autocrats in Serbia, Georgia and now Ukraine.

Lukashenko's answer to that threat appeared three weeks ago in the sinister form of Viktor Sheiman, who was abruptly named head of his presidential administration. Two Belarusian prosecutors who fled the country fingered Sheiman as the architect of a death squad that between 1999 and 2001 murdered four of Lukashenko's most prominent political adversaries. "The latest events in neighboring countries have shown the importance of a strong and authoritative power as a factor for preserving stability," Lukashenko said in appointing Sheiman. "Once the authorities begin to display hesitancy, passivity and weakness, destructive forces immediately make use of this. Young people led by them, the crowd, and endless rallying paralyze the state and lead to anarchy and a grave crisis for the entire society."

Lukashenko clearly has absorbed Ukraine's lesson; so has Zubr. How about President Bush? In October he signed the Belarus Democracy Act, which mandated tighter sanctions against the Lukashenko regime and stepped-up support for the democratic opposition. Congress passed the act by unanimous vote. Yet if he acts forcefully on that mandate, Bush will risk the fury of his "friend" Putin, who considers Belarus his last foreign line of defense. Two months ago, the White House could dismiss the dilemma on the grounds that a Belarusian democratic uprising was anyway implausible. The orange revolution casts that judgment in a different light.

Source: Jackson Diehl; Washington Post; January 3, 2004; www.washingtonpost.com

3. Belarus President Waves Iron Fist

Belarus President Aleksander Lukashenko has insisted there will be no people's revolutions, whether "rose, orange or banana", in his country.

Mr Lukashenko, often described as Europe's last dictator, told a congregation at an orthodox Christmas mass in Minsk that Belarus would not witness the kind of popular protests in Georgia and Ukraine which saw the opposition rise to power.

He said his main task was to assure peace and security "no matter what it costs."

Mr Lukashenko, who has been in power for a decade, recently won a disputed referendum which allowed him to run for a third term.

The vote was held at the same time as parliamentary elections, in which not a single opposition candidate was elected to the house.

Subsequent demonstrations in the capital, Minsk, were violently dispersed.

In Ukraine, popular protests dubbed the "Orange Revolution" helped bring about a presidential re-election, in which the opposition triumphed.

Georgia meanwhile recently celebrated the anniversary of its "Rose Revolution" - protests which resulted in the president's resignation.

Source: BBC News; January 8, 2005, news.bbc.co.uk

4. Belarusian Ministry Dissatisfied with Ideology Courses at Universities

The Education Ministry has criticized the level of teaching of state ideology at the country's institutions of higher education, *Belapan* reported on 29 December, citing an official press release. "It is intolerable that instructors sound insincere while lecturing, have superficial knowledge of the basics of Belarus's ideology, or do not understand the substance of the country's political, social, and economic developments," the release said. In order to improve teaching standards, the ministry reportedly suggested that top-rank instructors share their experience with their colleagues, and that members of the Belarusian National Youth Union, which has cells in all institutions of higher education, actively involve themselves in ideological work.

Source: RFE/RL; December 30, 2004; www.rferl.org

5. Belarus Seeks to Improve People's Health Through BAA

Belarus scientists seek to improve people's health by means of biologically active additives (BAA) to food.

A government-endorsed resolution on a procedure for the production and turnover of BAAs has entered into force in the republic to regulate the BAA quality and safety to human life and health.

In particular, the resolution sets out lists of plants and products of their processing, mushrooms, animal products, microorganisms, and bioactivity substances that are banned for sale to the population as BAA.

Boosting the production of BAAs, vitamins and microelements, experts maintain, will help overcome a number of current negative trends in the republic, such as low expectancy of life (74.7 years for women and 62.7 years for men), an increase in the incidence of cardio-vascular and neoplastic diseases, and an insufficient consumption of vitamins, macro- and micro-elements, iodine, iron, fluorine, selenium, and complete proteins.

Scientists maintain that the consumption of BAAs will make it possible to render people's diet optimal and remedial, without changing or changing only slightly the customary diet.

In Belarus, not more than 3 percent of people regularly consume BAAs, as against 50-90 percent by people in Western Europe or Japan.

Source: Itar-Tass; January 4, 2005; www.itar-tass.com

REGIONAL

6. Belarusian President Lukashenko Recommends that Russia Correct Policy on Belarus

Russia should radically revise its position in the Russia-Belarus Union, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko said on Friday. "I have said before that Russia cannot lose Belarus, because that would start disintegration of Russia," he noted.

"There are many problems that harm bilateral relations, and those who do not want good relations between Russia and Belarus under the pressure of the United States and other countries are gaining strength," he said. However, Europe is sobering and coming to realize that "they do not need a country with destabilized economy in the European center," he said.

He said higher costs of Russian natural gas for Belarus would not affect bilateral trade and economic relations. Trade will grow because of positive factors, which are stronger than "18% increase of Russian gas prices for Belarus starting from next year," he said.

"We will survive higher costs of Russian gas, but the Russian administration must understand that this situation cannot last forever. Russia should correct its policy and be more attentive to Belarus," Lukashenko said.

"What are we arguing about, three or four dollars for 1,000 cubic meters of gas? Aren't we brothers?" he said. "The people of Belarus will not be harmed despite difficulties – salaries and pensions will be paid," he added.

Source: Itar-Tass; December 31, 2004; www.itar-tass.com

7. Eastern Europeans Concerned with Belarus Situation

Former Soviet bloc states voiced concern Wednesday at developments including "violation of norms and basic principles" in neighbouring Belarus, whose authoritarian rule has come under international criticism.

"The situation in Belarus is a matter of concern to the entire European Union, and Poland in particular," said Polish Foreign Minister Adam Rotfeld. Poland, now a member of both the EU and NATO, shares a border with Belarus.

Belarus -- formerly the Soviet constituent republic Belorussia until the Soviet Union's collapse -- is now an independent state under the controversial regime of President Alexander Lukashenko. "We cannot accept violation of norms and basic principles to which Belarus is committed as a member of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)," said Rotfeld. "We are talking among other things about respect for civil rights and press freedom," he told journalists after a session linking foreign ministers and deputy foreign ministers of former Soviet bloc states Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, together with Austria and Slovenia.

In October the European Parliament -- the EU elected assembly -- denounced the "quasi-dictatorial" Lukashenko regime.

Last month Belarus journalist Zhanna Litvina appealed to the European Parliament to investigate missing persons in her country, listing cases of newspapers being closed down, court action against authors of critical articles and even cases of missing journalists:

"The regime has succeeded in creating a closed, isolated, society based on ignorance of democratic values," she said.

A communique following the six-nation central European regional partnership session Wednesday expressed concern at the sentencing of former Belarus foreign trade minister Mikhail Marinich to five years labour camp.

Opposition politician Marinich, 64, was convicted last month of stealing computers and telecommunications equipment provided by the US embassy to his non-governmental organisation Business Initiative.

Washington insisted it had no claim against Marinich and called for his release, denouncing the charges as politically motivated.

The Warsaw meeting also expressed support for another eastern neighbour Ukraine, which recently underwent a protracted presidential election process in which pro-westerner Viktor Yushchenko emerged winner.

"We all agreed on the need to help Ukraine," said Slovak junior foreign minister Jozsef Berenyi: "It must be helped to achieve the status of a country with a market economy and to join the World Trade Organisation."

Source: EU Business; January 12, 2005; www.eubusiness.com

8. Lukashenko Accuses Russia of Breaching Gas Agreements

Belarusian President Alexandr Lukashenko has accused Russia of breaching agreements on the pricing of gas supplies to Belarus within the framework of the bilateral Union Treaty.

"Russia breached all our agreements, especially those stipulating equal prices inside the Russia-Belarus Union. We should have the same prices as in Russia, and corresponding agreements were signed with the Russian Federation," Lukashenko said at a government meeting devoted to gas, electricity and heating tariffs and pricing policy.

"Why don't we raise tariffs for gas transit? Why don't we raise transit tariffs by 20%? You say Gazprom waved its fist at us. Let them do so, and we will be adding up their debts if they square accounts at higher prices," Lukashenko told Cabinet members.

"We must search for a way out, but not at the expense of people who are strained beyond limit," he added.

Lukashenko does rule out offsetting the price increase from profits of Belenergo, Beltopgaz and Beltransgaz companies. "Maybe we can raise the money by tightening the belts of these monopolists? I think we can find at least one-third of your account settling there," he said.

Source: Interfax; January 11, 2005; www.interfax.com

9. Rapprochement With Russia Remains Belarus' Key Priority

The policy of rapprochement with Russia will remain the key priority of Belarus' foreign policy in 2005, the Belarussian ambassador to Russia, Vladimir Grigoryev, said at a news conference in Moscow on Friday.

He said that "there will be no turns and twists next year", "we pursue a multi-vectored policy aimed at developing relations with many countries, including the US, but the main condition is

non-interference in our domestic policy," the ambassador emphasised. "We are in a position ourselves to sort things out," he added.

The main task "is for us to remain united with Russia in deeds, not words," Grigoryev said. "The reciprocal influence of our economies will provide the foundation for serious political decisions," he noted.

"Russia's role in supporting Belarus on the world stage is great," the diplomat said. "Without Russia's prestige it would be more difficult for us, and we are grateful to Moscow for this," Grigoryev said.

Speaking of events in Ukraine, he pointed out that Minsk is prepared to work with the president elected by the Ukrainian people. Replying to the question, the ambassador indicated that "when the CEC makes an official confirmation, congratulations will follow".

Source: RIA Novosti; December 31, 2004; www.rian.ru

INTERNATIONAL

10. OSCE Envoy Condemns Sentence on Former Belarus Minister

The head of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) office in Belarus on Tuesday condemned a court sentence on a former Belarussian minister and diplomat who had been convicted of embezzlement.

Mikhail Marinich, a former foreign economic relations minister and an ex-ambassador to Latvia, was sentenced to five years' imprisonment in a high security jail and to property confiscation.

Source: Interfax; January 11, 2005; www.interfax.com

11. France Protests Travel Block on Children

France has urged Belarus not to limit the freedom of Belarussian children to travel abroad, Interfax-West news agency said Friday.

The French ambassador to Belarus, Stefan Szmeevski, told Interfax-West he hoped the new measures limiting Belarussian children's opportunities to travel abroad for recreation would not be implemented.

"Statements to this effect have impressed European civil society and aroused deep misunderstandings," the French diplomat said.

Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko has told parliament that programs to take the nation's children to health resorts abroad should be curtailed.

"Don't you see the change in our children after their return from abroad? How can this way of life benefit us? Here in Belarus, consumerism has infected the younger generation and the whole nation. We don't need this method of raising children," Lukashenko said. "This practice must be done away with once and for all," he said.

Source: Washington Times; December 31, 2004; www.washingtontimes.com

12. Analysis: Polls Split Ex-USSR

Almost 14 years have passed since the Soviet Union ceased to exist - and elections in the region this year revealed continuing obstacles on the road to democracy and free markets.

In many countries of the region, there is still a very long way to go.

This year, presidential elections were held in Russia and Ukraine, and a parliamentary election was held in Belarus. These are three countries with largely the same, Soviet legacy.

Yet the three elections were very different.

Over recent weeks, international attention has been focused very closely on Ukraine.

Fraudulent presidential elections in November led to demonstrations in Kiev and other big cities, in which hundreds of thousands of ordinary Ukrainians took part.

Conspiracy theories abounded. In particular, allies of the Prime Minister, Viktor Yanukovich, insisted that the West was behind the demonstrations. In response, Viktor Yushchenko's allies pointed to the generous Russian financial contribution to Mr Yanukovich's campaign.

But the "Orange Revolution", as it became known, suggests that, in Ukraine at least, there is something of a civil society.

Russian stagnation

Russia's presidential election was a much more sedate affair.

Vladimir Putin continues to enjoy a very high degree of popular support, and he was re-elected for a second term with an overwhelming majority.

While many Russians are dissatisfied with their lives, they tend to blame "politicians" in general, rather than the president in particular, for their problems.

Mr Putin's opponents complained that they were unable to gain equal access to the electronic media, which was blatantly biased in his favour. But after the election, his opponents on both the left and the right began squabbling among themselves over who was responsible for their crushing electoral defeat.

The Ukrainian and Russian presidential elections may have been controversial. But they offered the electorate a genuine choice.

A very different situation prevails in neighbouring Belarus, a much smaller country, and also one way behind Russia and Ukraine in terms of political and economic reform.

Belarussian clampdown

Belarus held a simultaneous referendum and parliamentary election in October. The referendum's purpose was to seek approval for lifting the constitutional two-term limit on the president, Alexander Lukashenko, staying in office.

It was not the first time Mr Lukashenko, widely considered to be Europe's last dictator, had resorted to referendums to bolster his own authority.

In the event, no opposition candidates were elected to parliament. Indeed, many were barred from participating in the race after being disqualified on technicalities.

European observers, in stark contrast to their Russian counterparts, concluded that the referendum was grossly flawed and undemocratic.

Subsequent demonstrations in the capital, Minsk, were violently dispersed. This was one of the major factors which led to the European Union imposing a travel ban on a number of top Belarussian officials.

The official who oversaw both votes, Central Electoral Commission Chief Lidia Yermoshina, was unrepentant and said the EU ban would be "counter-productive".

Source: BBC News; December 31, 2004; news.bbc.co.uk

HUMAN RIGHTS & INDEPENDENT MEDIA

13. Norwegian Group Sends Mission to Belarus

In a show of support for journalists in Belarus, a Norwegian literary group is sending a delegation there to gather information, participate in a seminar, and look for other ways to help.

Norwegian PEN, a member of the International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX), plans to send a group of writers and publishers to Belarus from February 15 to 20, IFEX reported.

The visitors will meet with the Belarussian chapter of PEN and the Belarussian Association of Journalists (BAJ). The BAJ is the group recently honored with the European Union's human rights award, the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of.

The PEN delegation also will attend a human rights seminar in Minsk on February 18 and 19. The seminar, organized by the Human Rights House, aims to measure the Belarussian human rights situation to European standards and will include a workshop on "Freedom of Speech and Protecting the Rights of Journalists."

Norwegian PEN said it is looking for other ways to help journalists in the country. IFEX reports that BAJ and Belarussian PEN are seeking funds to establish an annual free expression prize for the country. They would announce the winner every May 3, World Press Freedom Day.

International media advocates consider the Belarussian government to be the most repressive in Europe. President Alexander Lukashenko tolerates little dissent, and in a recent speech said that the media should help propagate the state ideology. U.S. officials call him Europe's last dictator.

The Associated Press reported in December that the Belarussian government had closed 19 independent newspapers in 2004. It shut many of those down in the run up to the October parliamentary elections.

Source: International Journalists Network; January 7, 2005; www.ijnet.org

14. In Minsk Wearing Orange is a Crime

On 28 December, roughly 18 people were detained in downtown Minsk for taking part in a demonstration of solidarity with the democratic forces of Ukraine, whose leader, Viktor Yushchenko claimed victory in the presidential elections.

This is not the first case of arrests for support of the “orange revolution” in Ukraine. Earlier, members of the group Zubr were arrested during solidarity demonstrations.

The demonstration in Minsk was organized by the United Civil Party (UCP), and the city branch of the youth UCP and members of other youth opposition movements.

The protest was planned in the form of a performance. At 6pm, some ten people wearing orange met in the Yanka Kupala. From there they planned to go to the circus building and set up an orange tent they brought from Kiev. They planned to have an orange Santa Clause and orange Snegurochka distribute oranges and orange ribbons. Finally the procession would reach the building of the Presidential Administration and symbolically deliver pumpkins to representatives. “Like the real girls used to do when they were accosted by unworthy suitors,” explained one of the participants in the demonstration.

However, the performance could not even begin. Law enforcement workers in civilian clothes pushed demonstrators into cars that had been especially brought to the park. Law enforcement officials in civilian clothes actually outnumbered the protestors themselves. High-ranking officials from the Department of Internal Affairs ordered the detention. While making arrests police officials told people to “go to Ukraine, there is nothing for you to do here.”

Those who were arrested were taken to the central booking office and were released after two hours writing an explanation. Among those arrested were Marina Bogdanovich, head of the Minsk Region UCP, Arthur Finkevich of Maladoga Front, Irina Tolstik of Zubr and Olga Klaskovskaya of Narodnaya Volya.

[Text translated by the editor]

Source: Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta; December 29. 2004; www.bdg.by

15. Three Years of Imprisonment for a Broken BT Camera

On December 29, the Piershamajski City District Court of Babrujsk sentenced Illa Famianok, a Babrujsk market director to three years of imprisonment for the obstruction of legal journalist activities and the abuse of power. The charged offender got detained in the court-room. The court examination was caused by a conflict between the head of "Zachodni" market in Babrujsk and a filming group from "Mahileu" TV and Radio Company affiliated by the National State TV and Radio Company. A journalist and a cameraman came to the "Zachodni" Marketplace Ltd. in order to film a report on the work of Babrujsk markets. The latter had been criticized severely at the previously held session of Babrujsk City Executive Committee.

However, the market director Illa Famianok prevented the journalists from shooting a report. He hit the TV camera. (The evaluated damage of the broken equipment amounted to 1,000,000 Belarusian rubles, i.e. approximately 460 USD).

The Radio 'Liberty' emphasized this incident had been mentioned by Alexander Lukashenka during his meeting with the Belarusian State TV and Radio Company team. Ales Dajneka, the "Mahileu" TV and Radio Company legal advisor was not prone to connect this fact with the severe court decision. He was sure the journalists would feel more protected after this judicial precedent.

However, the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) lawyers disagreed with this opinion. According to them, thus "the authorities catered for the state ideological mechanism", the ordinary journalists remaining completely unprotected. In connection to this, the BAJ deputy chairman Andrei Bastuniec reminded the recent beating of NTV and "Ren-TV" Companies' cameramen (Russia) on October 19, 2004 as well as a range of similar incidents in the past.

Source: Belarusian Association of Journalists; December 29, 2004; www.baj.ru

16. FM Stations Meet the 75% Requirement

According to the Ministry of Information, none of the FM radio stations in Belarus has yet broken the January 1 requirement that 75% of the total broadcast should be by Belarusian artists. Experts have declared that all radio stations strictly observed the established requirements with the first few days of the new year.

As the Ministry of Information noted, it is possible that some FM radio stations will change the creative concept or format of an announcement. In the case of a failure to meet the requirements on domestic music, a station may lose its rights. The ministry also stated that the prospect of creating a Belarusian production center for promoting domestic musical products is now being discussed.

Source: BelaPAN; January 4, 2005; www.naviny.by

BUSINESS

17. Russia and Belarus Reach Agreement on Indirect Taxes

An agreement between the governments of Russia and Belarus on regulations on collecting indirect taxes relating to exports and imports, as well as other business sectors will take effect beginning January 1, 2005. Vladimir Grigoryev, ambassador of Belarus to Russia, pointed out at a news conference in Moscow today that the principle of indirect tax collection in the destination country would be implemented for the first time in the CIS. Additionally, no customs clearance will be required at the border between the two countries. At the same time according to the diplomat, these regulations will apply only to goods originating from Russia and Belarus. As for goods from third countries, the old regulations on customs clearance and taxation will still be valid for them.

Source: RosBusinessConsulting; December 31, 2004; www.rbcnews.com

18. Belarus's Foreign Debt Totals \$800 Million

Finance Minister Mikalay Korbut told journalists on 29 December that Belarus's foreign debt rose by \$150 million in December, pushing the country's total debt to some \$800 million, Belapan reported. The debt increase largely stemmed from a \$175 million loan Belarus received from Russia in mid-December, of which \$25 million will be used toward paying off old debts to Russia. According to Korbut, the government is planning to use the Russian loan to finance the budget deficit. The loan, disbursed by the Russian government under the Libor floating rate plus 0.8 percent, is to be repaid between 2006 and 2010.

Source: RFE/RL; December 30, 2004; www.rferl.org

19. Gas Prices Gradually Rise

The increase in gas prices in Belarus can be compensated for by Belarusian energy sector's profit. Aleksandr Lukashenko made this announcement at a meeting on prices and tariffs for natural gas, electricity and thermopower.

The president was briefed on 2004 earnings and budgets of BelTransGaz, BelEnergo, BelTopGaz.

Aleksandr Lukashenko emphasized that even if the gas prices in Belarus were to increase, they would do so gradually, by 3%-4% per quarter. This will be achieved at the expense of the energy sector, which is far from the poorest sector in our country.

[Text translated by the editor]

Source: *BelaPAN*; January 11, 2005; www.naviny.by

20. Belarus Posts Most Jan-Nov Industrial Growth in CIS

Belarus posted the most industrial growth among Commonwealth of Independent States countries in January- November 2004, with output increasing 15.8% year-on-year, the CIS inter-governmental statistics committee reported.

Industrial output grew 13.8% in Tajikistan in January-November, 13.4% in Ukraine, 10.0% in Kazakhstan, 6.6% in Moldova, 6.2% in Russia, 5.7% in Azerbaijan, 4.9% in Kyrgyzstan, 3.9% in Georgia and 1.4% in Armenia. The committee had no figures for either Turkmenistan or Uzbekistan.

Average GDP in the CIS increased 7.0% year-on-year in January- November, industrial product 8% and retail trade 12% on average.

Ukraine's GDP expanded by 12.4% year-on-year in January-November, Belarus's by 11.1%, Tajikistan's by 10.5%, Azerbaijan's by 10.0%, Armenia's by 10.0%, too, and Kyrgyzstan's by 6.4%.

Output of goods and services in Russia's core economic sectors increased 6.6% in January-November.

Source: *Interfax*; January 12, 2005; www.interfax.com

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 Sanwaree Sethi at sanwaree_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.
