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DOMESTIC

1. The President Has Mobilized Television to Wage a War. An Informational war.

Belarus is in a state of informational war and the authorities are forced to conduct the war on all azimuths. At least this is conclusion that can be reached from topics of discussion of the meeting on the work of Belarusian television networks, which the president attended. The head of state declared the necessity for "a new qualitative jolt which must be accomplished in the development of domestic television." At the same time, Lukashenko yet again emphasized the importance of the television's political and ideological function.

According to a *BELTA* report, Aleksandr Lukashenko stated that both the West and Russia have galvanized informational pressure on Belarus.

According to the president, "this pressure will become stronger every day because of forthcoming political events." He is of course referring to the presidential election set to take place in one and half years. "On this bare political event of 2006, you know who will attack Belarus like hungry jackals. We must be ready for this and we will have to, as always, unilaterally resist this pressure," noted Lukashenko.

According to him, “in the worst traditions of the Cold War today new broadcast channels are directed toward our country’s territory – programs like *Voice of America* and *Radio Liberty*. Frequently biased and aggressive anti-Belarus propoganda on television channels from neighboring countries, especially Russia, is not far behind.”

He also noted that our television channels are often inferior to these channels in terms of quality of material and timeliness. In Lukashenko’s opinion, Belarusian television should influence public opinion and shape it, and not only tell people about events, especially as an attempt to vindicate [the state of affairs – Ed.]. “One must rebuff any insinuations, rather than attempt to justify [them – Ed.],” the president instructed journalists.

At the same time, he noted that this does not meddle in the work of television but simply closely monitors the development of domestic mass media. “It is one of the priorities of my work,” Lukashenko said.

Can Belarusian television channels meet the presidential demand and “rebuff” in a situation where, according to Lukashenko, “we are bombarded from all directions by professional and frequently libelous television channels?” Judging from the results of a referendum in October of last year, yes they can.

“It is a full-scale informational war,” says political scientist Valeri Karbalevish. “And it is not a war waged by the whole world against us, but of a war waged by Belarus against the whole world. Analytical shows on Belarusian television constantly tell us that we are surrounded by enemies.”

“Conspiracy plots against Belarus is one of the Belarusian president’s favorite themes. Before political campaigns these plots become more devious and larger. Counterpropaganda accordingly also gets stronger, says an expert from *Beloruskiye Novosti*.

[Text translated by the editor]

Source: *Sergei Pulsha; Naviny; February 16, 2005; www.naviny.by*

2. Analysis: Stuck In A Rut

At the beginning of this month, three European lawmakers from the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly visited Minsk to see whether the situation in Belarus has changed for the better. They have apparently found nothing new or interesting to report to their colleagues in Europe.

Summing up the three-day trip, Fred Ponsonby of Great Britain told journalists in Minsk on 3 February that the situation in Belarus over the last two years can be considered “stagnant or stable,” Belapan reported. Which means, Ponsonby added, that many aspects of life in Belarus have not improved. In fact, many aspects of life in Belarus have actually deteriorated over the past two years, even if their deterioration was not conspicuously fast but had a “stable and stagnant” character.

Belarus ended the year 2004 with two emblematic political events. On 17 October, President Alyksandr Lukashenka held a referendum on lifting the constitutional two-term limit on the presidency. Simultaneously, Belarusians went to the polls to elect the 110-seat Chamber of Representatives, the country’s lower house. According to the official results, Lukashenka’s hopes for staying in power indefinitely were supported by 5.55 million people, or 79.4 percent of all eligible voters. And Belarusians officially filled all but one seat in the Chamber of Representatives with Lukashenka’s backers and associates.

An independent international pollster found that Lukashenka’s proposal to clear the path to a presidency-for-life was supported by just 48.7 percent of all eligible voters, leaving it below the 50 percent threshold required for such a constitutional amendment. However, opposition protests

against what appeared to be a blatant falsification of the referendum results were lukewarm, lasted only several days, and gathered several thousand people at best.

Stable, Stagnant

Since the 2001 presidential election, the Belarusian opposition seems to have remained in protracted disarray. Sadly, there are no signs that the opposition is able to muster up any significant support for its candidate, provided it would agree on such a candidate, to challenge Lukashenka in the presidential election expected in 2006.

To demoralize the Belarusian opposition even further, a court in Minsk on 30 December 2004 sentenced Belarusian opposition politician Mikhail Marynich, 64, to five years in a high-security prison and confiscation of property. The court found him guilty of misappropriating several computers that the Dzelavaya Initsyatyva (Business Initiative) association, of which he was chairman, had received for temporary use from the U.S. Embassy in Minsk.

The bizarre case against Marynich and the harsh sentence he received were of a plainly political character. To compare, on 8 February the Belarusian Supreme Court sentenced Halina Zhuraukova, former head of the presidential administration's Property Management Department, to four years in prison, finding her guilty of embezzling \$3.4 million under the same article of the Criminal Code as applied to Marynich.

Cause For Concern

The 17 October 2004 referendum and the Marynich case have received a fair amount of media coverage both at home and abroad. On a daily basis, however, there are many depressing and gloomy developments that do not make the headlines. Like the aforementioned issues, these developments, too, testify to the growing consolidation of the Belarusian authoritarian regime, which has tasked itself with not only uprooting any political dissent but also curbing any other unwanted or suspicious behavior.

For example, on 11 February police charged activist Aksana Novikava with beggary after she attempted in the subway to raise private donations for what she called an "orange revolution" in Belarus. "Some gave money, some refused to, and some just laughed," Novikava told Belapan. But the police proved to be less amused; Novikava is facing a fine.

On 5 February, police detained opposition activist Syarhey Antonchyk and some 20 people that gathered at his private apartment. Police have accused Antonchyk of organizing an unsanctioned rally and drawing up a protocol. If the case goes to court, Antonchyk has the chance of becoming the first person punished in Belarus for inviting friends to dinner.

In January, the authorities fired Rehina Ventsel, a rector of Baranavichy State University, and her deputy Ivan Kitsun. A group of students from their university had cracked a joke about President Lukashenka's salary at a forum of students in Minsk. "Alyksandr Ryhoravich, how big is your salary?" a student from Baranavichy asked another student who was impersonating the Belarusian leader. "Let me count. As president of the country I get 300 bucks per month. As president of the National Olympic Committee I get another 300 bucks. And I get an extra sum as supreme commander. Generally speaking, not so bad," the other wag from Baranavichy responded. Now all jokes from Baranavichy State University intended for the public reportedly have to be approved by the university's ideological supervisors.

In Minsk, the independent Belarusian-language literary magazine "Dzeyaslou" has recently been removed from Belarusian bookstores run by the Belkniha state distribution network. Belkniha reportedly charged that "Dzeyaslou" propagates smut by printing foul language. "Dzeyaslou" Editor in Chief Barys Pyatrovich told RFE/RL's Belarus Service that Belarusian bookstores are full of books by Russian authors with expletives and nobody is going to ban them.

According to Pyatrovich, the measure against "Dzeyaslou" is purely political -- the magazine has recently published several stories by Vasil Bykau, who remained very critical of the Lukashenka regime until his death in June 2003. In November 2004, the Belsayuzdruk state retail sales network for printed publications refused to distribute "Arche," another high-profile independent literary magazine in Belarus, while Belkniha refused to distribute an "Arche" issue that documented Lukashenka's decade in power.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, last week Belarusian state-run bookstores began stocking a book glorifying Soviet-era dictator Josef Stalin. The 700-page book, named "To Stalin Bow, Europe," is a collection of articles by Stalin as well as texts venerating the Soviet dictator by other authors and political leaders of the past. "This collection, which glorifies Stalin and condemns his closest entourage, is yet another attempt to whitewash the image of the Soviet leader and lay a theoretical foundation for the transition from authoritarianism to totalitarianism that we are witnessing in Belarus," Belarusian independent historian Ihar Kuznyatsou told Belapan.

Source: Jan Maksymiuk; RFE/RL; February 15, 2005; www.rferl.org

REGIONAL

3. Belarus Spends Over \$1 Billion to Liquidate Consequences of Chernobyl Catastrophe

Belarus annually spends over \$1 billion on the liquidation of consequences of the Chernobyl catastrophe, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko said.

According to him, international organizations render the republic insignificant aid. "Today we do not need clothes and foodstuffs but medical equipment," Mr. Lukashenko said in an interview with Russian America newspaper.

Once nationalists tried to add political coloration to this tragedy, the President noted. Today some countries build their policy on humanitarian aid. In his opinion, charity organizations should give their money through state structures in order to control their use.

The program on the liquidation of the consequences of the Chernobyl catastrophe was revised ten years ago, Mr. Lukashenko said. The rehabilitation of the regions which suffered from the tragedy was made the top priority of this program.

Moreover, the program is focused on the construction of medical institutions and the development of the infrastructure in these regions, the Belarusian leader noted.

After the catastrophe at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant (Ukraine), 23% of Belarusian territory was poisoned with radionuclides.

Source: RiaNovosti; February 14, 2005; www.rian.ru

4. Russia, Belarus Hold Joint Military Exercise

A Russian-Belarusian command and staff military exercise, codenamed "Union security-2005," began on Monday, a representative of the information and public relations department of the Russian Defence Ministry told Itar-Tass. Its purpose is to improve military security of the Russia-Belarus Union State.

"The training session will be held under the supervision of Colonel General Yuri Baluyevsky, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Force, and will last until February 18," he added.

Special attention will be devoted during the military training exercise to the mastering of control over the Russian army group in the West with the participation of the joint command of the regional army group of Belarus and Russia. According to the representative of the Defence Ministry "the subject of the military training exercise deals with the planning of measures for ensuring military security of the Union State."

Source: Itar-Tass; February 14, 2005; www.itar-tass.com

5. Russia Concerned about Foodstuffs from Ukraine and Belarus

The Russian food inspectors are concerned about the food products coming to the country from Ukraine and Belarus, Head of the Federal Veterinary and Phytosanitary Inspection Service Sergei Dankvert stated on Wednesday, reporting to the State Duma on the situation with the country's veterinary and phytosanitary control.

Large quantities of "unchecked and counterfeit" farm products are being brought into Russia over the borders with those two countries, he noted. "We are disturbed by this situation and are endeavouring to prevent the import of bad quality products into the country," Dankvert added.

He said the farm inspectors would shortly get down to "the inspection of bread grains, too".

In turn, Head of the Federal Agency for Fisheries Stanislav Ilyasov told the parliamentarians that it was necessary to improve the legislation on agriculture and food products. "It is clear to our Agency that imperfection of our legislation is among the major problems facing us today," he complained.

Source: Itar-Tass; February 10, 2005; www.itar-tass.com

INTERNATIONAL

6. Iran Counts on Belarus Support Over US Attacks

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko has congratulated President of the Islamic Republic of Iran Seid Mohammad Hatami on the occasion of the 26th anniversary of the Islamic revolution in Iran, the press service of the Belarusian president reported on Friday.

Abdolkhamid Fekri, Iranian ambassador to Belarus, told journalists on Thursday that his country counted on the diplomatic support of Belarus over the verbal attacks of the United States, which accuses Teheran of working on the creation of mass destruction weapons.

Commenting on the relations between Iran and Belarus, Fekri said that after the visit of Lukashenko to Iran in 1998 and of Mohammad Hatami to Belarus in 2004, the relations between the two countries had been on the rise. According to Fekri, the two countries develop cooperation in all spheres, including science, economy, culture and inter-parliamentary contacts. They have signed some 20 agreements. "We are willing to promote the export of your products to Iran. At the same time, many Iranian enterprises, specifically oil companies, express the desire to deliver their products to Belarus," the Iranian ambassador said.

Source: Itar-Tass; February 11, 2005; www.itar-tass.com

7. Veterans Living in Israel Awarded for Belarus's Liberation from Nazis

The veterans who had fought at the three Belarussian Fronts and in guerrilla units during the Great Patriotic War against Nazi Germany (1941-1945), and who reside in Israel now were awarded with medals "The 60th anniversary of the liberation of the Republic of Belarus from Nazi invaders."

All in all, 148 veterans received medals and letters from Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko, the Belarussian embassy in Moscow reported.

On July 3, 2004 Belarus celebrated the 60th anniversary of its liberation from the Nazis. The Belarussian president established a medal in honor of this event. Many Russian veterans have already received this award.

Source: RiaNovosti; February 14, 2005; www.rian.ru

HUMAN RIGHTS & INDEPENDENT MEDIA

8. Two Zubr Activists Detained In Minsk

Two activists of the Zubr movement Pavel Yukhnevich and Andrei Baranau were detained today at the entrance checkpoint of Minsk tractor plant (MTZ) for handing out the newspaper "Svobodnaya gazeta", informing about the Belarusian political prisoners Mikhail Marynich, Valery Levaneuski and Alyaksandr Vasilyeu.

At the moment Zubr activists are kept in the police department of Partyzan district of Minsk. A report for violation of Articles 172 Part 3 of the Administrative Code (dissemination of printed materials without imprint) was drawn up against them.

Source: Zubr; February 11, 2005; www.zubr-belarus.com

9. A New Draft Law on Mass Media Will Be Passed to the Chamber of Representatives in March 2005

In accordance with the President's decree "On Approving the Plan of Preparing Draft Laws in 2005" of February 1, 2005, a newly edited draft law "On the Press and the Other Mass Communication Media" is to be passed to the Chamber of Representatives in March this year.

Despite the fact the former Minister of Information Mikhail Padhajny promised to submit the legislative draft for the Council's of Europe consideration four years ago, neither the European nor the Belarusian experts have had an opportunity to see the document till now.

However, there was held a range of special closed sessions on the issue. The most recent discussion on the draft law elaboration was arranged by the Standing Committee of the Chamber of Representatives on Human Rights, National Relations and Media with the participation of the Minister of Information Uladzimir Rusakievich on January 26, 2005.

The draft law hasn't been passed to the Parliament so far. The Standing Committee of the Chamber of Representatives on Human Rights, National Relations and Media officials informed the BAJ Press Service last March the document was regarded by the President's Administration

specialists, the National Center's for Legislative Activity at the President of Belarus experts and the Ministry's of Information analysts.

In spite of numerous official appeals to the draft law elaborators, the Belarusian publicity hasn't had an opportunity to learn the document contents so far.

Nevertheless, the Belarusian "third sector" representatives managed to get the text of the document in October 2003.

Consequently, the Belarusian Association of Journalists prepared the draft law analysis as well as an alternative legislative draft with the assistance of a number of international expert organizations. The documents were submitted to the Chamber of Representatives in October 2004.

The Belarusian Association of Journalists has published a digest, depicting the Media draft law public discussion results. The brochure contains the analysis of most dangerous draft legislation norms, the international experts' conclusions (Article 19, "The Reporters without Borders", The Swedish Helsinki Committee and others) as well as a number of proposals on the document democratization. A number of digest materials can be found at the BAJ Web site (<http://www.baj.ru/centre/centre.asp>).

Source; Belarusian Association of Journalists; February 9, 2005; www.baj.ru

10. Hrodna Journalists Stand for Their Rights

Constant ignoring of non-governmental press representatives by the Ideological Work Department at Hrodna Regional Executive Committee was the main issue, discussed during the regional journalists' meeting with the department head Uladzimir Amielka. At the end of the meeting, the Hrodna BAJ branch activists handed over a request to the official, asking to issue special passes to the representatives of non-governmental media so that the latter could attend the actions, arranged by the Ideological Work Department. Also, they submitted a list of journalists to be invited to official press-conferences.

The journalists laid claims to the department head as there hadn't been invited a single independent journalist to the press-conferences, organized by the Ideological Work Department in the year of 2004. Uladzimir Amielka regarded this fact as "some blunder" and gave instructions to his subordinates to change the situation.

Also, there was discussed the situation with the "Birzha Informacyi" Hrodna-located newspaper, suspended for three months from publishing by the Ministry of Information last November. Hrodna regional printing house refuses to re-sign an agreement with the newspaper publisher. But for that, Skidziel branch of Hrodna District Customers' Association refuses to prolong the agreement with the newspaper publisher on distributing the periodical at Skidziel stores this year.

At the beginning of this year, Uladzimir Amielka sent out official letters to all state organizations and enterprises, requesting to place their announcements in state newspapers only. The department head confirmed it had been his initiative, aimed at supporting state newspapers in the area, as the latter cover 84 % of their publishing costs only. "We don't oblige anyone to follow these recommendations. But for that, I acknowledge it was an untimely decision," - stated Uladzimir Amielka. However, the official stated he wouldn't withdraw "the advisory letters".

Source; Belarusian Association of Journalists; February 9, 2005; www.baj.ru

11. Charter'97 Presented Monitoring of Human Rights Violations in Belarus for 2004

Human rights section of the civil initiative of the Charter'97 presented the most comprehensive monitoring of the human rights violations in Belarus in 2004. According to the document, more than 1,500 citizens were subject to arbitrary detentions last year in Belarus. More than 600 arrests and detentions were carried out for handing out newspapers with information about forcible abductions, political prisoners, illegitimate character of the ruling regime. More than 100 participants of the protests against forcible abductions in Belarus were arrested. More than 300 activists were arrested and more than 100 activists were imprisoned for protests against lawlessness of the current regime and of the social and economical instability. We present the monitoring to your attention (only a Russian version yet:
<http://www.charter97.org/eng/news/2005/02/09/monitoring>)

Source: Charter 97; February 10, 2005; www.charter97.org

BUSINESS

12. Belarus Businessmen Go on Strike Demanding Abolishment of VAT

Belarusian businessmen who are engaged in wholesale and retail sale at markets went on a one-day strike with demands to abolish the VAT. Businessmen who buy most goods in Russia, mainly in small companies and at markets went on the strike.

Belarus and Russia shifted to VAT levying on the country of origin principle to the world practice of the destination country principle since January 1. If a seller earlier paid the VAT in the budget of his country, now a buyer should do it.

However, Belarusian businessmen said Russian partners who do not have to pay 18 percent of VAT any longer, refuse to reduce the price of goods by this sum, alongside many of them do not produce any documents that confirm the origin of goods.

Incidentally, Belarusian businessmen have to raise the price by the sum of VAT or refuse from purchases. As a result, the volume of Russian goods has reduced considerably in Belarusian shops and their range reduced in January.

According to estimates of some experts, some enterprises have some problems. Tax bodies and economic entities did not prepare timely to the new VAT payment procedure in the absence of a customs border between Belarus and Russia.

Specialists noted that those Belarusian companies and businessmen who worked and are working with suspicious partners have especially big problems. Customs relations between solid companies of the countries are normalizing gradually.

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko said on Wednesday he believes that the problem of levying indirect taxes, particularly the VAT, in trade with Russia is practically solved.

Source: Itar-Tass; February 10, 2005; www.itar-tass.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.
