

June 9-16, 2005

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## DOMESTIC

### 1. Belarusian Opposition Politician Sentenced to 1 ½ Years

A district court in Minsk on 10 June sentenced opposition activist Andrey Klimau to 18 months in a correctional-labor colony, finding him guilty of disturbing the public peace during an opposition protest he organized in Minsk on 25 March (see "RFE/RL Newslines," 29 March 2005), RFE/RL's Belarus Service and Belapan reported. The previous day, Prosecutor Vadzim Paznyak demanded that Klimau be sentenced to three years in a high-security prison with no right to amnesty. Klimau admitted his role in organizing the 25 March demonstration but denied the accusation that the protest impeded traffic and the operation of governmental agencies. Klimau is facing another trial, as he is accused of defaming President Alyaksandr Lukashenka in three books and a leaflet. Klimau already spent four years in prison from 1998-2002 on charges of embezzlement and forgery, which were widely believed to be politically motivated.

Source: RFE/RL; June 10, 2005; [www.rferl.org](http://www.rferl.org)

### 2. Closed Belarusian University Reopens in Lithuania

The European Humanitarian University (EHU), which was shut down by the Belarusian Education Ministry in July 2004 (see "RFE/RL Newslines," 29 July 2004), will reopen in Vilnius, RFE/RL's Belarus Service and Reuters reported on 9 June. "We salute your determination and courage to work for the future of a democratic and prosperous Belarus from your outpost in Vilnius,"

Lithuanian President Valdas Adamkus said at an EHU inauguration ceremony in the Lithuanian capital on 9 June. The EHU, which currently has some 600 students, will reportedly receive 1.44 million euros (\$1.8 million) from the U.S. State Department and U.S. foundations and 488,000 euros from the EU for the upcoming academic year. The government closed the Minsk-based EHU, citing violations of its operating license, but President Lukashenka subsequently revealed that the main motive behind the closure was the fact that the university had trained Western-oriented students (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 24 September 2004).

*Source: RFE/RL; June 10, 2005; www.rferl.org*

### **3. Belarus is Once Again Censured by the ILO**

The ILO Committee on the Application of Standards has denounced the persistence of serious violations of Convention 87 in Belarus, which is threatening the very survival of independent trade unions in the country. In the conclusions of its debate, the Committee on the Application of Standards of the International Labour Conference urged the Belarus government to implement all the recommendations formulated by the Commission of Enquiry, insisting that it must take urgent steps to ensure that Convention 87 is finally applied in law and in practice and that the independent unions of the Official Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus are allowed to form and operate freely, without any more government interference.

The ICFTU welcomed the ILO Committee's decision to include its conclusions in a Special Paragraph devoted to the totally unacceptable situation still prevailing in Belarus concerning trade union rights violations.

Notwithstanding, the ICFTU also expressed its "total bewilderment at the election of the Belarus government to the ILO Governing Body".

"Without wanting to interfere in the free choice of governments to appoint their representatives, the ICFTU nonetheless considers the election of the government of a country that has been flouting trade union rights for many years, and that fails to respect its own commitments to fulfil the recommendations of the Commission of Enquiry, to be shocking. The Belarus government should have been the first to understand that it is one of the least well-placed to take part in governing an organisation whose recommendations it refuses to apply," said Guy Ryder, General Secretary of the ICFTU.

It should not be forgotten that following an official complaint lodged by the workers' delegates during an International Labour Conference, the ILO had decided in November 2003 to set up a Commission of Enquiry, the strongest measure this Organisation can take against a Member State and one which is only deployed for exceptionally serious cases. This action was taken following the Belarus government's refusal to abide by the recommendations of the ILO Committee on Freedom of Association, which has been dealing with this case for several years already. Following a six-month enquiry by the Commission, the ILO had, last October, published a report confirming each of the charges brought by the international trade union movement against Lukashenko's government regarding the registration of free trade unions, the meddling of the State and employers in trade union affairs, the discrimination, harassment and retaliatory measures levelled against trade unionists, and the arsenal of laws undermining trade unionism and social dialogue. Based on this report, the ILO had called on the Belarus government to rapidly implement changes and to comply with a series of important recommendations, most of which should have been implemented by 1 June 2005 at the latest.

Unfortunately, the ILO Committee on the Application of Standards has noted that the Belarus government has done nothing to comply with this request. The international trade union movement sees this as further proof of the Belarus authorities' unwillingness genuinely to work towards respect for trade union rights, and is thus even more determined to continue with its

already longstanding campaign for effective measures to be taken against the Belarus government, particularly by the European Union, with a view to convincing it of the need to respect internationally recognised social standards and fundamental workers' rights.

The ICFTU represents 145 million workers in 233 affiliated organisations in 154 countries and territories. ICFTU is also a partner in Global Unions: <http://www.global-unions.org>

For more information, please contact the ICFTU Press Department on +32 2 224 0206 or +32 476 621 018.

*Source: Union Network International; June 14, 2005; [www.union-network.org](http://www.union-network.org)*

#### **4. Belarus KGB Probes Terrorists' Claim of Chernobyl Attack**

Belarusian security services have set out to establish the origin of a group called the National Liberation Army, which, according to information available on the Internet, claimed responsibility for an accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant that allegedly occurred in late May.

"We were very alarmed by these rumors, we already have information about where the statement was put on the Internet from. We are doing all we can to investigate," First Deputy KGB Chairman Vasily Dementei told journalists on Thursday.

"It is hard to say how serious the aims of those who distributed this information were," Dementei was quoted by the Interfax news agency as saying.

He did not rule out the possibility of information terrorism occurring in Belarus in the future. "The KGB is generally concerned over the various rumors that have been spread in Belarus in general, such as an emergency in the Chernobyl station and pricks with AIDS-infected syringes in Brest and Minsk," Dementei said.

"All the rumors are unconfirmed, but criminal cases have been opened on them," Dementei said.

The catastrophe at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in Ukraine is widely regarded as the worst in the history of nuclear power generation. 30 people were killed immediately after the fourth reactor of the plant suffered a catastrophic steam explosion that resulted in a fire, a series of additional explosions, and nuclear meltdown. Most of the workers who went inside the reactor after the accident had no protective equipment which led to fatal radiation burns.

The explosion produced a plume of radioactive debris that drifted over parts of the western USSR, Eastern Europe, and Scandinavia. Large areas of the Ukrainian, Belarusian, and Russian republics of the USSR were contaminated, resulting in the evacuation and resettlement of roughly 200,000 people.

*Source: Mosnews; June 10, 2005; [www.mosnews.com](http://www.mosnews.com)*

### **REGIONAL**

#### **5. Georgia-Belarus Relations Hit New Low Over Visa Row**

Georgian MPs reacted indignantly late last week to reports in the Russian media on June 9 that the Belarusian government had imposed a special visa regime for Georgian citizens, reports that were categorically denied in Belarus.

The storm in a teacup followed reports in the Russian media on Thursday citing Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko's press service as stating that the president had personally ordered that a new visa regime be introduced to prevent Georgian criminals and illegal immigrants from infiltrating Russia via Belarus.

Belarusian officials were quick to state that no such decision had in fact been taken, although Foreign Minister Sergei Martinov admitted that the issue was under consideration.

Martinov said in an interview with the Belarusian state TV channel on June 10 that Lukashenko's decision on possible enforcement of visa requirements with Georgia was triggered by the threat of, as he put it, arrival of "revolutionary fighters" in Belarus from Georgia.

"The decision of the President was triggered by objective and understandable facts: it is not a secret that President Saakashvili, as well as the Georgian Parliament have made statements and also have decided to dispatch 'revolutionary' fighters [to Belarus], which will, naturally, be followed by criminal elements. We know about this [scenario] from the experience of other countries," the Belarus Foreign Minister said as translated by Civil.ge.

"What is the purpose of dispatching these "revolutionary" fighters to Belarus?" he asked. "To foster calm, dignified and prosperous life of the Belarus people? Definitely not. Apparently there are other reasons."

"Must the President [of Belarus], as the guarantor of the country's stability, defend the state from the raids of this kind? Of course he must. That is why, the President instructed the Foreign Ministry and the law enforcement agencies to look into the situation once again and if there is no change in the Georgian leadership's policy over dispatching here 'extremists' of instability, we will, possibly, recommend the President of Belarus to impose visa requirements with this country," Martinov said in the interview which is available at his ministry's website in Russian.

In Georgia, parliamentarians reacted angrily, Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee Kote Gabashvili initiating a special draft resolution labeling Lukashenko as a dictator and his decision as inappropriate. "If Lukashenko thinks that he can stop revolutions by such steps he is very much mistaken. There will be revolutions as democratic processes cannot be reversed," he said, as quoted by Rezonansi.

Speaker of Parliament Nino Burjanadze labeled the latest move of the Belarusian administration as symbolic of its death knell. She proposed that Lukashenko be declared a persona non-gratis in Georgia, adding, however, that no other Belarusians should face obstacles in entering Georgia. Chair of the parliamentary committee for European integration David Bakradze, meanwhile, explained away the reported decision of the president as the result of fear of revolution in the country.

"Lukashenko wants to control the situation in the country and all individuals who enter it. We don't have anything against the people of Belarus; we have great sympathy towards them and hope that they will soon be able to free themselves from this regime which is fairly called the last dictatorial regime in Europe," Rezonansi quotes him as saying.

Former MP Demur Georkhelidze commented that such a visa regime would have little impact on Georgia, as while Russia remains Georgia's leading economic partner, Belarus is not a major economic partner and few Georgian businesses are currently active in the country.

While officials in Minsk stress that no such visa regime has yet been put in place, in Georgia Parliament is to discuss a resolution responding to the situation on Tuesday.

*Source: M. Alkhazashvili; The Messenger; June 13, 2005; www.messenger.com.ge*

## **6. Georgia Parliament Puts off Resolution Banning Lukashenko's Entry**

The Georgian parliament decided on Monday to put off the discussion of a draft resolution banning entry to the country of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, head of the international affairs committee in the parliament Kote Gabashvili told journalists.

The committee worked out the draft resolution and submitted to parliament for consideration on June 10. Gabashvili said, "If Belarus suspends the procedure of the introduction of a visa regime with Georgia then the Georgian parliament will also suspend the consideration of a reply resolution."

A number of mass media reported on June 9 with reference to the press service of the Belarusian president that Lukashenko "has decided to introduce a visa regime with Georgia," motivating this step "by the necessity to continue efforts aimed at the intensification of fight against organised and transnational crime, as well as protection of third countries' interests in this sphere."

The Georgian parliament's foreign affairs committee proposed a reply measure by drafting a resolution which stated that "the decision of the Belarusian president to unilaterally break the Bishkek agreement and introduce a visa regime for Georgian citizens is view by MPs as an inadmissible step from the point of view of international law.

The Georgian parliament considered this "step of Minsk has nothing in common with the wishes of the Belarusian people and because of that decided to maintain a visa-free entry regime for Belarusian citizens to Georgia, but to ban the entry to the country to President Lukashenko and those Belarusian officials who implement the unfriendly for Georgia visa regime introduction decision."

On June 11, Belarusian Foreign Minister Sergei Martynov said the Belarusian president "has not made any decision" on the introduction of a visa regime for Georgian citizens. He said Lukashenko only "gave the go-ahead to the Foreign Ministry and law enforcement agencies of Belarus to consider the situation with the visa relations between Belarus and Georgia and if necessary, to take measures to protect the country's national security and special stability in the society."

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

## **INTERNATIONAL**

### **7. EU Slams Belarus Crackdown**

The European Union Tuesday strongly condemned the recent arrests of opposition leaders in the former Soviet republic of Belarus.

In a statement worked out by EU foreign ministers, and backed by Ukraine, Turkey and other neighboring countries, the bloc said it was concerned at the "growing oppression" of opposition forces, trade unions and independent journalists, and called for the immediate release of political prisoners.

"The EU sees these actions as attempts by the regime to eliminate potential opponents of President Lukashenko in the run-up to the forthcoming presidential elections," read the statement. Elections are slated for 2006 in the communist state that borders EU members

Poland, Lithuania and Latvia.

The Union also said it regretted the increasing use of anti-western language in state-controlled media and said it was "perturbed by Belarus's isolationist tendencies."

Last month U.S. President George W. Bush described Belarus under Lukashenko as Europe's "last dictatorship."

*Source: World Peace Herald; June 14, 2005; www.wpherald.com*

## **8. U.S. Starts Air Inspections Over Russian, Belarus Military Objects**

U.S. inspectors have started flights over Russian and Belarusian military objects.

The flights are being carried out in accordance with the Open Skies Treaty. The United States is using a modified OS-135 military plane with specialized video and photography devices.

Russia and the United States have agreed to make two to four flights per year over each other's military objects and regions of military training. Other parties to the treaty have agreed to make only one mutual inspection a year.

A source in the Russian Defense Ministry quoted by ITAR-TASS news agency said the foreign inspectors have already made 12 flights over Russian territory this year, as many as Russian inspectors have made over the other states' military objects. The Russian planes being used in the Open Skies Treaty are the An-305 and Tu-154MLK1. They have specialized optical and air-photo devices.

The treaty came into force on Jan. 1, 2002, and currently involves 30 states. The treaty establishes a regime of unarmed aerial observation flights over the entire territory of its participants. It is designed to enhance mutual understanding and confidence by giving all participants, regardless of size, a direct role in gathering information about military forces and activities of concern to them. Open Skies is one of the most wide-ranging international efforts to date to promote openness and transparency of military forces and activities.

*Source: Mosnews; June 15, 2005; www.mosnews.com*

## **HUMAN RIGHTS & INDEPENDENT MEDIA**

### **9. Weekly *Narodnaya Volya* faces ruin after a 47,000-dollar fine for defamation**

Reporters Without Borders reacted with dismay after a judge in Minsk slapped a 47,000-dollar fine on the country's leading independent newspaper, *Narodnaya Volya*, tipping it into probable bankruptcy.

Judge Lyubov Valevich, sitting in the regional Leninsky Court, imposed the heavy fine on the paper on 14 June 2005 for defaming the leader of the Liberal Democratic Party, Syarhey Haidukevich. Editor Yossif Syaredzich said he would appeal within ten days.

The newspaper was fined for a 1st March 2005 article headlined, "The Haidukevich letter and the fax he was sent", revealing that the Liberal Democratic Party, member of the ruling coalition, was financed by Saddam Hussein's regime.

The worldwide press freedom organisation said the ruling "confirmed the impossibility in Belarus of publishing any investigation that upset the authorities even if the newspaper has carefully checked its facts."

"We condemn this decision by the courts leading to the financial ruin of a newspaper that is essential to pluralism of information in the country. We urge the government to cancel this swinging fine that threatens the survival of *Narodnaya Volya* and to stop the repeated sentencing of the few independent newspapers that try to operate in Belarus".

The offending article included a photocopy of a fax dating from 2002 sent by an Iraqi-based company saying that the Liberal Democratic Party leader owed about one million dollars to Iraq's oil minister.

The article also included an account written by an interpreter working for the Iraqi foreign ministry saying that he had helped Haidukevich, during his negotiations with Saddam Hussein's government. The article was illustrated by a photo showing Haidukevich with the then Iraqi vice-president with a portrait of Saddam Hussein in the background.

At the trial, former deputy leader of the Liberal Democratic Party, Alexander Rabotai, called by the defence, confirmed that leading officials in the Iraqi oil ministry had asked him, during a stay in Iraq, to remind Haidukevich about his debt to them. He revealed that the party had sold two million barrels of oil in 2001 but had not honoured its agreement with Baghdad to pay 30 cents commission per barrel.

The court took the view that the article damaged the honour and dignity of Haidukevich and decided that the fax the paper had published a copy of on 1st March, was a forgery.

*Source: Reporters without Borders; June 16, 2005; www.rsf.org*

## **10. Belarus: Punished for Exercising their Right to Freedom of Expression**

The clampdown on all forms of opposition to the regime of Alyaksandr Lukashenka in Belarus continues. In a blatant violation of their right to freedom of expression three more opposition politicians have been imprisoned to punish them for organizing peaceful protests over the past two weeks.

Andrei Klimov, Nikolai Statkevich and Pavel Severinets have all been sentenced under Article 342 of the criminal code which outlaws the organizing or participation in public actions that disrupt public order.

On 10 June Andrei Klimov was sentenced to a year and a half of "restricted Freedom" under Article 342 of the criminal code for organizing mass protests in Minsk on 25 March 2005. Andrei Klimov will live in an area outside Minsk under special police surveillance and will perform "community service". Andrei Klimov was released in the courtroom pending his appeal. Investigations are still ongoing under another charge against Andrei Klimov for libel against the president. The date of the court hearing for that charge has yet to be announced.

On 31 May Nikolai Statkevich and Pavel Severinets were sentenced by Minsk Central District Court to three years of corrective labour under Article 342 for organizing protests in Minsk after the referendum and elections in October 2004. As a result of an amnesty declared in connection with the 60th anniversary of the Second World War their sentences were automatically reduced to two years. Nikolai Statkevich is already in detention where he is being held for contempt of court, because of his refusal to stand up during the trial, and Pavel Severinets remains at liberty pending an appeal. Nikolai Statkevich has refused to appeal in protest at the injustice of the legal process. Both men have been under constant pressure from the authorities for their opposition

activities. Nikolai Statkevich, is chair of the social-democratic opposition party, and Pavel Severinets, is head of the Popular Front youth movement. Amnesty International is concerned over the increased risks citizens face for criticizing the government of Belarus and it is particularly alarming that the authorities have chosen to prosecute these three men under the criminal code as opposed to under the administrative code which carries much lighter sentences. It demonstrates the increasing intolerance towards any form of criticism or dissent by President Lukashenka.

Amnesty International considers Nikolai Statkevich to be a prisoner of conscience and demands his immediate and unconditional release, and asks for the charges against Andrei Klimov and Pavel Severinets to be dropped. Amnesty International will consider all three men to be prisoners of conscience if they are imprisoned or if their freedom is restricted under police surveillance.

## Background

The demonstrations in October 2004 for which Nikolai Statkevich and Pavel Severinets were sentenced were held to protest against parliamentary elections and a referendum that were held on 17 October. The Belarusian authorities announced that in the referendum more than 77 percent of eligible voters had supported President Lukashenka, who has held power since 1994, to run for a third consecutive term. Independent observers including those of the OSCE said that the elections and the referendum fell far short of democratic standards. About 50 demonstrators were herded onto buses by police with batons and 40 subsequently stood trial. Many including Pavel Severinets and Nikolai Statkevich were sentenced to administrative detentions of up to 15 days.

On 25 March 2005 up to 2,000 people gathered on October Square in the centre of Minsk to take part in the Freedom Day demonstration, which lasted approximately four hours. At least 30 people were arrested and a number of the detainees were severely beaten, particularly in police vans on the way to pre-trial detention centres throughout Minsk. Freedom Day commemorates the creation on 25 March 1918 of the Belarusian People's Republic (BPR), considered a forerunner of independent Belarus. It was a short-lived entity, as the Bolsheviks on 1 January 1919 announced the establishment of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic, which later became part of the Soviet Union. For intelligentsia and a number of opposition parties in Belarus, Freedom Day is a symbol of national pride, but the authorities do not recognize the date, reportedly claiming the BPR was created by German occupation forces. Since Belarus gained its independence in 1991 the date has seen mass-scale protests, which have in past years also resulted in large-scale detentions.

For further information:

"Belarus: Suppressing the last voices of peaceful dissent" (AI Index: EUR 49/004/2005)

*Source: Amnesty International; June 14, 2005; [www.amnestyusa.org](http://www.amnestyusa.org)*

## **BUSINESS**

### **11. Popularity of Ruble Deposits Continues to Grow**

According to the press-service of the National Bank of Belarus, bank deposits have increased by 23.1% for national currency and 5.4% for international currency in the January-May period.

Between January and May, Belarusian ruble (Br) bank deposits increased by 540 billion (23.1%), while foreign currency deposits increased by 38.3 million USD (5.4%). At the beginning of June, citizens' deposits in the national currency reached almost 2.9 trillion Br and foreign currency deposits totaled 751.5 million USD.

The growth in deposits is in large part attributed National Bank interest rate policies. The National Bank is committed to maintaining favorable savings conditions for Br and increasing the availability of bank credits for the population and other economic actors.

This year banks introduced new kinds of deposit that are more attractive to the population. For example "Accumulated" accounts in Br for 3 years receive 18% interest; the "Special" deposit in Br with differentiated rates depending on the length of the deposit: 3-month deposits receive 16%, 6-month deposits receive 17% and 9-month deposits receive 18% with interest paid monthly through an ATM; "Bonus" deposits for 1.5 years receive the refinancing rate +2%, with additionally payments and incremental rate increases of .5% annually, causing the rate to vary based on the bank scale.

Additionally, banks modified existing deposits by introducing new conditions (automatic extension of the contracts, free-of charge bank cards, and monthly capitalization of interest through a bank card transfer, etc.)

Thus, deposit conditions have been maintained, and interest rates, despite their reduction, are adjusted for inflation and have increased profitability of hard currency. The most favorable deposits are those with terms longer than one year. This stimulates long-term bank deposits and increase credit resources to the economy and population.

The National Bank plans to continue to protect deposits in Br from depreciation, while reducing the cost of credit, thus promoting social and economic development in Belarus.

[Text translated by the editor]

*Source: BelaPAN; June 13, 2005; www.naviny.by*

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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 63rd 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 [ssethi@ilhr.org](mailto:ssethi@ilhr.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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