

October 20– October 26, 2005

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Table of Contents

I. Domestic

1. Belarus Amends Criminal Code (*Interfax*)
2. First Belarusian Satellite To Be Launched in March 2006 (*RIA Novosti*)
3. Belarusian President Plans To Create "Silicon Valley" (*RIA Novosti*)
4. Against Resistance, Belarus Revives Its Poisoned Lands (*The International Herald Tribune*)
5. Lukashenko Says Belarus To Make Tax Laws Simpler (*Itar-Tass*)

II. Regional

6. Ukraine, Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus To Establish Joint Grain Market Committee (*APK*)
7. The Significance Of The Russia-Belarus Union (*The Jamestown Foundation*)
8. Belarus-Russia Union To Be Presidentless (*RIA Novosti*)
9. Constitutional Act to Come Up for Referendum (*Kommersant*)
10. Russia-Belarus Union State Referendum Postponed (*RosBusinessConsulting*)
11. LUKoil and MAZ Sign Cooperation Agreement (*Gateway to Russia*)

III. International

12. Belarus Opposition Politicians Meet With European Parliament Members (*Charter97*)
13. Trade-Economic Cooperation Between Belarus and Poland Has Positive Development Tendency (*The National Centre of Legal Information of the Republic of Belarus*)
14. White Greeting for Belarus (*ZUBR*)
15. Belarus Protests Lithuania's Plan To Store Radioactive Wastes Near Its Border (*People's Daily Online*)
16. Belarus and Slovakia Considering Economic Cooperation (*The National Centre of Legal Information of the Republic of Belarus*)
17. Belarus: A year after Cherkasova's Murder, Another Journalist Dies In Suspicious Circumstances (*Reporters Sans Frontiers*)

IV. Human Rights & Independent Media

18. BPF Members Detained For Distribution of *Narodnaya Volya* (*Charter97*)
19. Irina Khalip: "It's Recognition of Belarus' European Future" (*ZUBR*)
20. Political Prisoner Mikola Statkevich Not Allowed to Go to Minsk (*Charter97*)
21. The Case Of *Zgoda's* Editor-in-chief Is Being Tried by Minsk Office of Public Prosecutor (*BAJ*)
22. Third Massive Fine For Organizing Religious Worship (*Forum 18*)
23. Detentions For Preparation to Day of Solidarity (*ZUBR*)
24. French Woman, Polish Man Complain Of Belarus Expulsion (*The Tocqueville Connection*)
25. Hrodna Journalist Andrzej Pachobut Is Asked To Give a Written Pledge Not To Leave the Country (*BAJ*)

V. Business

26. Belarus Invites Tender For Tobacco Goods Importers in 2006 (*The National Centre of Legal Information of the Republic of Belarus*)

DOMESTIC

1. Belarus Amends Criminal Code

A provision has been added to the Belarus Criminal Code. The amendment states that the death penalty is introduced in the country temporarily.

The House of Representatives of the National Assembly approved on Wednesday the corresponding amendments proposed by President Alexander Lukashenko, an Interfax correspondent reports.

Lukashenko proposed the amendments at the end of June, the presidential press service reported.

"The Criminal Code is supplemented by a provision stating that the introduction of the death penalty is temporary. The death penalty may be applied in Belarus until it is cancelled as an exceptional form of punishment for particularly grave crimes, such as premeditated murder in aggravating circumstances," the press service said.

Source: Interfax; October 26, 2005; <http://www.interfax.ru/e>

2. First Belarusian Satellite To Be Launched in March 2006

The first Belarusian national remote sensing satellite BelKA (Belarusian spacecraft) will be launched in March 2006, the Belarusian Embassy in Moscow said Tuesday.

The satellite, which has a maximum resolution of two meters, is designed for cartographic, metrological and agricultural surveys and will orbit the Earth at an altitude of 550 kilometers.

The Russian Dnepr booster is set to launch the BelKA from the Baikonur launch site in Kazakhstan. The Dnepr has been used to launch 22 spacecrafts from nine countries.

Belarus has already received foreign proposals to sign contracts on the use of BelKA survey results.

Source: RIA Novosti, October 25, 2005; <http://en.rian.ru>

3. Belarusian President Plans To Create "Silicon Valley"

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko visited the site of a future high-technology park in Belarus Tuesday and urged that construction work be started as soon as possible.

The Belarusian "Silicon Valley," which is expected to cost \$930 million, will consist of a scientific research sector, company offices, housing and hotel complexes, and a conference center.

"If we achieve what is planned, the resulting development will be enormous. We must urgently begin this work," the president said.

Lukashenko said that construction work should be coordinated with the park's potential users from the very beginning.

Source: Olesya Luchaninova, RIA Novosti, October 25, 2005; <http://en.rian.ru>

4. Against Resistance, Belarus Revives Its Poisoned Lands

The winter rye is already sprouting green in the undulating fields of the state cooperative farm here. The summer's crop - rye, barley and rape - amounted to 1,400 tons. Best of all, said Vladimir Pryzhenkov, the farm's director, none of it tested radioactive.

This is progress. The farm's 1,618 hectares, or 4,000 acres, are nestled among some of the most contaminated spots on earth, the poisoned legacy of the worst nuclear accident in history: the explosion at Chernobyl's Reactor No. 4 on April 26, 1986.

Almost a quarter of all of Belarus - including some of its prime farmland - remains radioactive, to varying degrees, but two decades after the catastrophe, Pryzhenkov's farm represents a part of the government's effort to put the country's contaminated land to good use.

In 2002 the checkpoints that once restricted access to this region near the Russian border - some 240 kilometers, or 150 miles, from Chernobyl - disappeared. Families began returning; some had never left; all needed jobs.

And so the farm here in Viduitsy - no longer known as the Karl Marx collective, but still state-owned - reopened two years ago, with millions of dollars worth of new harvesters and other equipment provided by the government of President Aleksander Lukashenko.

Pryzhenkov, assigned here from another farm in what he called "a promotion," has also begun breeding horses and cattle for beef - though not milk. Milk produced here would be far too dangerous for human consumption.

"This was all falling apart," he said as he drove a battered UAZ jeep over the farm's muddy, rutted roads. "There was nothing to for the people to do here."

Lukashenko, a former collective-farm boss, declared last year that it was time to revive contaminated regions.

He outlined an improbably hopeful vision of new homes and villages, of new industry, of rejuvenated farms growing peas, onions and potatoes. "Land should work for the country," he said.

Lukashenko's authoritarian decrees - on this and other topics - have prompted fear and even ridicule, but a scientific study released last month by seven United Nations agencies and the World Bank more or less agreed.

The study concluded that the aftereffects on health and the environment had not proved as dire as first predicted. It recommended that the authorities in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus take steps to reverse the psychological trauma caused by Chernobyl by encouraging investment and redevelopment. Lands where agriculture was banned or severely restricted could be safe for growing crops again, though using techniques to minimize the absorption of radionuclides in food.

"It is desirable to identify sustainable ways to make use of the most affected areas that reflect the radiation hazard," the report recommended, "but also revive the economic potential for the benefit of the community."

The report's conclusions have stirred controversy. Greenpeace International denounced it as a whitewash intended to support the expansion of nuclear energy. Even a member of Lukashenko's government, Valery Gurachevsky, the scientific director of Belarus's committee on Chernobyl, called parts of the report "too optimistic."

But here in the contaminated countryside, where entire villages were left to rot amid an invisible scourge, the underlying principle is a welcome one.

Gennady Kruzhayev, 38, had just begun working on the Karl Marx collective farm when the accident occurred. He has since drifted from job to job. He drove a taxi. He pumped gas. On this day he was atop a tractor, plowing the rich black earth in preparation for next spring's sowing. "The main thing," he said, "is to have jobs."

The Chernobyl disaster spewed radioactive materials over all of Europe, but naturally the areas closest - Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, then republics of the Soviet Union - suffered the worst.

The Soviet authorities declared an emergency exclusion zone within 30 kilometers of the reactor, a circle straddling the border between Ukraine and Belarus. The zone remains closed - except to the workers overseeing the reactor's decontamination and safety, a few pensioners who have drifted back and, increasingly on the Ukrainian side, curious tourists on macabre day trips.

The contamination - particularly from caesium 137, as well as the more deadly strontium and plutonium - hardly remained within that circle, though. Areas that, to this day, are as radioactive as parts of the exclusion zone appear on maps of Belarus as irregular splashes of red across much of the eastern part of the country.

Those areas - with radiation levels exceeding 40 curies per square kilometer - remain off-limits. At least in theory, they do. All around the red spots are areas with lower levels, creating a confusing patchwork of go- and no-go zones that, by all appearances are routinely ignored.

Signs nailed to trees mark some areas. Some areas become apparent only when one notices that everything around is deserted and silent. The authorities distributed hand-held radiometers, but few people use them.

More than 130,000 Belarusians were relocated in the years after Chernobyl, but only to areas with lower levels of contamination, often only a few kilometers away. About 1.3 million Belarusians - more than a tenth of the population - live in contaminated areas, though officials say that, with certain precautions, they face little health risk.

In these areas, which suffered economic collapse, farming never stopped entirely. Instead, the state's farms adopted measures - like using calcium-based fertilizers - to minimize contamination of crops. Some crops absorb less anyway. Some that do not are used only for fodder.

Since Lukashenko came to power, the government has tried to expand agriculture in the region, removing restrictions and bans on less contaminated areas. Gennady Antsipov, who oversees reclamation for the country's Chernobyl committee, said the process was complicated and, despite Lukashenko's urgings, deliberate.

Of 2,600 square kilometers of contaminated land, only 140 square kilometers have so far been returned to active agricultural use, though in a periodic survey last year the government identified still more land that could be reclassified as less dangerous and reclaimed.

"Why should we rush this issue?" Antsipov said in an interview in the capital, Minsk. "It is like sending someone to the moon just to prove we can colonize it."

Lukashenko's government, despite its diplomatic isolation, has also worked closely with international agencies, including a program with the UN Development Fund, to improve crop yields and limit contamination of food products. All are intended to promote livelihoods in a place that, according to the recent study, suffered more from the psychological trauma of upheaval and fear than from exposure to radiation.

"We are trying to provide people a fishing rod, not a fish as we did before," Valery Shevchuk, the Chernobyl committee's deputy chairman, said.

Over time, the radioactive materials, especially caesium 137, with a half-life of 30 years, will decay, but living and working in the contaminated parts of Belarus will not soon be normal.

In Viduitsy, Pryzhenkov pointed to fields that remain too hot to grow even fodder for animals. With precautions, he says, the food grown here is safe.

The government claims to strictly check all produce; without a certificate, farmers cannot sell what they grow.

Other risks lurk in the forests and fields. Kitchen gardens - used, as in Soviet times, for subsistence - are basically unregulated. Mushrooms and berries, as well as wild game, absorb high levels of radiation. Keeping bees for honey is not considered a good idea.

Government advisories warn people not to eat these delicacies, but they do.

Vera Brausova, 73, who lives in the village Krasny Kukhani, picks mushrooms despite the warnings. Living on a pension, what choice does she have? Asked about health concerns, she said that she lived through World War II, Chernobyl and a fire that burned down the first house she was evacuated to. "What health are you talking about?" he said.

Gennady Bakhanov, the region's director of agriculture, said a healthy life in Chernobyl's shadow, as it were, depended on education and a basic precautions. "This is the trouble," he said. "It is invisible. There is no smell. This is why people act as they did before."

He drove into his native village, Samotevichy. It was abandoned.

Most of its wooden homes were buried, lest they catch fire and send radioactive particles back into the air. It is not recommended to spend prolonged periods there. He spoke wistfully of the time when the villagers might thrive again.

"Maybe in 20 or 50 years," he said, "they will come back."

Along the village's road, two men appeared. Nikolai Makarov and Vladimir Nesterenko, both in their 40s, moved back to this forsaken place a few years ago. They had been picking apples in orchards long ago abandoned.

"After a glass of moonshine," Nesterenko said, "you can eat anything."

*Source: Steven Lee Myers, The International Herald Tribune; October 20, 2005;
<http://www.ihf.com>*

5. Lukashenko Says Belarus To Make Tax Laws Simpler

Belarus will make simpler its tax legislation and alleviate the tax burden, since improvements in taxation are a permanent process, President Alexander Lukashenko said Wednesday in the course of a meeting on the prospects for this country's social and economic development in 2006, the national budget and guidelines for monetary and financial policy.

"We must have the simplest possible tax system," Lukashenko said.

He believes that the tax burden will go down 0.8% already next year, as some levies to local housing and public-utility funds and fees for maintenance and repairs of housing will be lifted.

The rates for other specialized local fees will reduce to 3% from 4%, and the land tax will go down, too.

Belarusian authorities also plan to stop charging border fee from people crossing this country's state borders, and a number of steps will be taken to straighten out the system of taxation.

In 2006, inflation is expected to drop to 7% to 9%, and the goal for the forthcoming five-year period is to slash it to 2% to 4% by 2010.

Lukashenko named the boosting of people's real incomes by 8% to 9% the government's major goal. He believes the average monthly wage will go up to 300 U.S. dollars by the end of 2006.

Source: *Itar-Tass*; October 20, 2005; <http://www.tass.ru/eng>

REGIONAL

6. Ukraine, Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus To Establish Joint Grain Market Committee

Press-service of Ukraine's Agrarian Policy Ministry informed that at the meeting of the CIS Intergovernmental Council for Agro-Industrial Complex being currently held in the town of Sudak (Crimea, Ukraine) a decision had been taken about establishment of Intergovernmental Committee on Grain Market.

According to the report, the committee will be composed of representatives of Ukraine, Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus.

Source: *APK-Inform Information Agency*; October 26, 2005; <http://www.agrimarket.info>

7. The Significance Of The Russia-Belarus Union

On October 21, a draft version of the Constitutional Act of the Union State of Russia and Belarus was drawn up, based on two houses: a House of Representatives (103 members, including 28 from Belarus); and a House of the Union (36 senators and 36 deputies with an equal number from each state). The Union State would have a prime minister, but as yet it is unclear whether it would have a president. The draft will now be sent to the Supreme Council of the Union State, which could in theory sanction referendums in both countries on its acceptance (*RIA-Novosti, Moscow Times*, October 21).

The development of the Union State has raised fears that Belarus may lose its independence. However, many analysts remain skeptical of the future of the Russian-Belarus Union (RBU). Russian political scientist Sergei Karaganov is cited as stating that the RBU is a useful instrument for Lukashenka to claim political legitimacy, but it also reflects Russia's lack of a clear policy toward Belarus. The key figure in the formation of the RBU is its controversial State Secretary, Pavel Borodin, a man involved in a money laundering scandal in 2001 and who spent time in a New York prison cell. Borodin has advised Russian president Vladimir Putin to follow the example of Lukashenka and conduct a referendum on running for a third term in office. He also maintains that elections will be held for the first president of the RBU in 2006, with Putin as the main candidate, and Lukashenka as the candidate for vice-president. If that were to happen, then Putin could remain the president, in theory, until 2013 (*Belorusy i Rynok*, October 3).

One of the mysteries of the RBU has been the lack of publicity to date about the draft of the Constitutional Act. Evidently there are four variants, none of which has been published, despite claims that the Act would be subjected to broad public discussion. United Civic Party chairman Anatol Lyabedzka maintains that the discussion is essentially a dialogue between the two circles of power: that around Putin and that around Lukashenka: "99% of citizens of Belarus have never seen or read the Constitutional Act. They cannot even imagine what it consists of." Lyabedzka believed that October would be a crucial month in which Lukashenka must accept the Kremlin's proposals or alienate Russia (*Narodnaya Volya*, October 12). But in fact further delays occurred and no referendums are likely to take place before 2006.

Another opposition observer, Uladzimir Hlod, states that Moscow analysts believe Lukashenka is backed into a corner. He has three options according to this scenario: to follow the fate of former Yugoslav leader Slobodan Milosevic; to emigrate and end his political career; or to unite with

Russia quickly. In turn, Russia needs the Union State in order to legitimize the future political career of Putin (*Narodnaya Volya*, October 12). Thus implicitly the RBU could bring an end to the career of Lukashenka while ending the independent existence of Belarus.

General Valery Fralou offers yet another perspective. He comments that the Belarusian opposition adheres basically to the ideas of the Popular Front, and its initial leader Zyanon Paznyak in particular, i.e. that Russia is an empire that is constantly dwelling on the question of how to seize Belarus. The Belarusian opposition therefore chooses to cooperate not with the Russian authorities but with the Russian opposition, even though Belarus is 100% dependent on Russian gas, and 90% on Russian oil (a slight exaggeration). Russian energy policy, in his view, could have a critical impact on living standards in Belarus. If Lukashenka is to be removed from office in 2006, Fralou states, then it would be necessary to make some moves toward Russia. As an economically dependent state, Belarus cannot avoid such a course, even with allies in the West (*Narodnaya volya*, October 20).

Confusion over the real significance of the RBU is evident. Adding to the mix is the perspective offered by Grigory Yavlinsky, leader of the Russian Yabloko party, that Russia is satisfied with the Lukashenka regime and any thoughts that Russia might support democratic processes there are simply illusions (*Narodnaya Volya*, October 20). However, it may be more logical for Russia to wield influence over its neighbor without formal incorporation, which would bring formidable economic obstacles -- not least the protracted issue of a common currency, the existence of a large state sector in the Belarusian economy, and the complex taxation laws in Belarus. Consequently, the frequent delays in the formulation of the RBU are unlikely to trouble Moscow unduly.

On the Belarusian side, Lukashenka is both the architect of the RBU and the figurehead for Belarusian independence. He defends the role of the Belarusian National Bank and its right to issue currency, which he has always linked to the issue of sovereignty. He defends the "national rights" of his country, and he has described the attitude of Putin toward Belarus in the past as "humiliating" and "unacceptable" (*Pravda*, September 17, 2002). The issue will not go away, but it does not appear close to resolution either, perhaps because both sides prefer it that way. The only true believer in the RBU is Borodin.

Source: David Marples, The Jamestown Foundation; October 25, 2005; <http://jamestown.org/>

8. Belarus-Russia Union To Be Presidentless

A draft of the Constitutional Act of the Union State of Russia and Belarus has been agreed on. Yesterday, the bilateral commission preparing the document met in Moscow. The new Union will have a parliament but no president as of yet.

The structure of the future state has already been roughly defined. It will have a bicameral parliament. The House of Representatives will be elected directly: 28 deputies from Belarus and 75 from Russia. The House of the Union will be a bicameral body, comprising 36 senators and 36 deputies, seconded by the participating states on a parity basis. The supreme executive body will be headed on a rotating basis by presidents of the two countries. The Supreme State Council will appoint a prime minister.

A decision on whether the Union will have its own president has not been reached. Yesterday, Union State Secretary Pavel Borodin said that the future state required a presidential vertical. Gennady Seleznyov, former speaker of the Parliamentary Assembly, disagreed. In the initial stages, the Supreme Council will fulfill the necessary functions, he said.

Alexander Ivanchenko, head of the Independent Elections Institute and former chairman of Russia's Central Election Commission, said general elections were feared both in Belarus and Russia. "The Russian and Belarusian officials are more comfortable with bureaucratic ways of

forming a state," Ivanchenko said. "Therefore, a Russia-Belarus union, as a way of extending the powers of either of the two presidents, is no longer relevant."

Valery Frolov, a deputy of the previous Belarusian parliament and a presidential candidate, agreed. Instituting a presidential post for Lukashenko would pose a direct threat to his "unlimited powers," he said.

Sergei Kozlovsky, director of the Belarussian Institute of Practical History, said the Constitutional Act had little chance of being adopted in Belarus in the next year and a half. "The unifying idea is a relic of the past, and besides, the Belarusian authorities have been proactive in anti-Russian propaganda over the past three years," he said. Source: Vedomosti.

Source: RIA Novosti, October 21, 2005; <http://en.rian.ru>

9. Constitutional Act to Come Up for Referendum

Speaker of the State Duma Boris Gryzlov announced yesterday that the draft Constitutional Act of the Union State of Russia and Belarus would be presented to the High Council of the Union for examination on November 15. The sudden burst of activity on the document, which has languished in working groups for several years, may indicate that the Kremlin sees it as a possible solution to its problem with the 2008 elections.

The latest meeting of the joint commission to prepare the Constitutional Act on the Union State of Russia and Belarus met in Moscow yesterday. There have been several similar meetings in recent years, but they did not bring about any concrete results. Yesterday, however, Duma speaker Boris Gryzlov announced that the draft Constitutional Act would be presented to the High Council of the Union for examination on November 15. The council is made up of the presidents and prime ministers of Russia and Belarus. "Then it will be put up for a referendum," Gryzlov added.

The sudden activity around the basic law of the Union State, work on which had been coming along at a snail's pace, suggests that the Russian-Belarusian union is still being looked upon in the Kremlin as one option for a new state construct at the end of Russian president Vladimir Putin's second term. (Other options are thought to be the appointment of Putin as "strong prime minister" with a weak president, or his election as leader of the ruling party, which will effectively appoint both the prime minister and the president.) However, the Constitutional Act in its current form does not solve the Kremlin's elections problem. According to the Act, the ruling body of the union state will be the Supreme Council, which both presidents will belong to. However, the system of executive power foreseen in the current draft may not be the final one. Yesterday, State Secretary of the Union State Pavel Borodin said in an interview with *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* that there must be a president and vice president in the union state. "The union state cannot develop without independent and effective authority in the person of a president. Introducing a presidential vertical serves the interests of effective management," he said in that interview.

Introduction of the institution of the vice president," Borodin continued, "will guarantee equality and the balance of interests of the member states in the Union State." He expressed the opinion that "it would be expedient to extend to seven years" the terms of the president and vice president, since "in four years, it is objectively impossible to carry out reforms and realize plans for socio-economic development. A seven-year term would be optimal. It will guarantee stability in the state, strengthen authority and make it possible for steady socio-economic development."

Independent Russian analysts are skeptical of Borodin's ideas. Andrey Ryabov, a member of the Moscow Carnegie Center's expert council, told *Kommersant* that the introduction of the post of president of the Union State "would be impossible without changing the Russian and Belarusian Constitutions." Moreover, he thought, "the attitude of the Russian elite to the president of Belarus has not changed. They were afraid of him as a whole and they still are." Ryabov also think that, in the West, such a scenario would be perceived "extremely negatively." "The West is ready to

accept the idea of the union, if it formed voluntarily. But, for that to happen, there has to be a single political will in the elite, and it isn't there in Russia or in Belarus.”

Deputy director of the Center for Political Technology Boris Makarenko suggested that, if the new union becomes “some supra-governmental formation, that will mean that that confederation can have a president, a supreme leader, but Russia will retain its president and its Constitution.” The post of union president in that case, Makarenko opined, will be “marital,” the way the confederation between Serbia and Montenegro is today, where the union president is far less significant than the executive powers in each of the republics individually.

If the Constitutional Act is signed in mid-November, under Russian legislation, a referendum initiated by the head of state can take place on March 12, 2006, the unified regional and municipal election day. The formation of the Union State two years before the next presidential elections will mean fundamentally new political conditions in Russia and give the Kremlin new room for maneuvering to solve its 2008 election problem.

Source: Dmitry Kamyshev, Viktor Khamraev, Kommersant; October 21, 2005; <http://www.kommersant.com/>

10. Russia-Belarus Union State Referendum Postponed

Russia-Belarus Union State will not to hold a constitution referendum in 2005, head of the Central Elections Commission Alexander Veshnyakov reported today in Moscow, commenting on the results of a meeting of joint commission in charge of the draft Constitution Act.

Co-chairmen of the commission, State Duma speaker Boris Gрызлов, and the deputy speaker of the Belarusian parliament's lower chamber, Vladimir Konoplev, should submit the draft for the Supreme State Council's consideration no later than mid-November 2005, Veshnyakov stated. After that, the document may be sent for revision or the referendum will be held. Veshnyakov did not give specific dates for the referendum.

Source: RosBusinessConsulting; October 20, 2005; <http://www.rbcnews.com/>

11. LUKoil and MAZ Sign Cooperation Agreement

LUKoil and the Belarus-based Minsk Automobile Plant (MAZ) have signed an agreement on technical cooperation, LUKoil's press service reports. The document is aimed at cooperation in manufacturing and supplying special automotive lubricants, including engine and transmission oils for cars' initial fueling.

The parties agreed on a single technical policy related to the lubricants, so that their performance and ecological safety standards comply with international requirements. In accordance with the agreement, oil lubricants produced by LUKoil will be described in the MAZ automobiles' technical documentation, and the brand of the technical partner will be indicated under the hoods. In its turn, LUKoil will produce new types of liquids in compliance with MAZ technical requirements. LUKoil has already signed similar agreements with KAMAZ and AutoVAZ.

Source: Gateway to Russia; October 20, 2005; <http://www.gateway2russia.com>

INTERNATIONAL

12. Belarus' Opposition Politicians Meet With European Parliament Members

Leaders of Belarus' two major opposition parties went to Strasbourg to brief members of the European Parliament (EP) on the political situation in their country and the opposition's plans following the election of a common challenger to Aleksandr Lukashenko in next year's presidential election.

Anatoly Lebedko of the United Civic Party and Vintsuk Vyachorka of the Belarusian Popular Front are expected to meet with the heads of parliamentary groups, the European Parliament leaders and representatives in the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly (PACE). Before the departure, Mr. Lebedko told BelaPAN that he intended to talk about European countries' possible assistance to Belarus, especially in creating new opportunities for the opposition to disseminate information.

"People in our country need to exercise their right to receive alternative and reliable information. If we succeed in channeling international assistance into non-Lukashenko television and radio stations, and newspapers, the constitutional clause that has been of no use for 12 years would start working. This is a tough but important task," he said.

The second priority of international aid should be to defend persecuted opponents of the regime, Mr. Lebedko added.

The politicians also intend to ask the PACE and EP legal committees to assess the legality of Aleksandr Lukashenko's bid for a third consecutive presidential term. The conclusions may be used to prompt the European Commission for Democracy through Law (the Venice Commission) to launch a hearing on the issue.

Source: Charter97; October 26, 2005; <http://www.charter97.org/eng/>

13. Trade-Economic Cooperation Between Belarus and Poland Has Positive Development Tendency

The trade-economic cooperation between Belarus and Poland has been showing an upward development tendency. The statement to this effect was made during a meeting between Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Belarus to Poland Pavel Latushko and chairman of the Polish-Belarusian chamber of commerce and industry Josef Lochowski.

Thus, over the 8 months of the current year the trade turnover between the two countries jumped by 26.9 per cent to USD 913.5 million as compared to the same time last year. The Belarusian exports grew by 27 per cent to 551.5 million, Polish imports – by 26.8 per cent to USD 362 million.

The two sides noted that such a tendency promotes mutually beneficial development of the bilateral cooperation between economic agents of Belarus and Poland.

As a BelTA correspondent was told in the Belarusian embassy to Poland, in the course of the meeting the head of the diplomatic mission and the chief of the chamber of commerce and industry considered a number of other issues on economic cooperation development. In particular, the issue on holding in 2006 an economic seminar "Good-Neighborhood" with the participation of businessmen from Belarus and Poland and also a seminar on tourism development including via newly opened checkpoints in Belovezhskaya Puscha and Augustowski channel.

Source: The National Centre of Legal Information of the Republic of Belarus; October 25, 2005; <http://law.by/work/Eng/>

14. White Greeting for Belarus

Cultural event of Slovak Republic started in Belarus last week. Presentation of cultural life of this Slavic country under title "White greeting for Belarus" will be separated in several parts. In frames of the presentation Belarusians will have opportunity to get acquainted with works of Slovak music, cinema, culture, and fine arts. The event is organized by Association of culture, education and communication together with Ministry of culture of Slovak Republic, Ministry of foreign affairs of Slovak Republic and embassy of Slovak Republic in Belarus.

"Cultural activity is an effective instrument of external policy in the widest sense. It helps to create soil not only bilateral contacts but for cooperation in other spheres as well. Return to cultural Europe is impossible without close cooperation and contacts between citizens of out countries that follow from historical and spiritual connections between nations of our region. I am sure that in spite of closeness of our nations, our languages and traditions, this presentation will assist to direct contacts between representatives of civil societies of our countries and to better understanding of my people's culture," – said Charge d'affaires of Slovak Republic in Belarus Jozef Machishak.

Source: ZUBR; October 25, 2005; <http://www.zubr-belarus.com/>

15. Belarus Protests Lithuania's Plan To Store Radioactive Wastes Near Its Border

Belarus protests against Lithuania's plans to build a storage facility for radioactive wastes near its border with Belarus, Belarusian Prime Minister Sergei Sidorsky stated on Friday.

"We expressed our opposition to plans to build a radioactive waste storage facility near the Belarusian territory and will defend this position in the most vigorous way," Sidorsky said at a meeting with Lithuanian Ambassador to Belarus Petras Vaitekunas in Minsk.

The Belarusian premier said this issue was discussed during his recent visit to Vilnius, the Interfax news agency reported.

According to Vaitekunas, Lithuanian Prime Minister Algirdas Brazauskas assured him that "there are a lot of irrelevant points in this issue and that the press has made quite a fuss out of it".

The two prime ministers agreed to set up a joint task force to study the problem, he said.

Sidorsky noted that this problem should be resolved "in good faith", and the two sides should do all they can for the benefits of both countries. Source: Xinhua

Source: People's Daily Online; October 22, 2005; <http://english.people.com.cn>

16. Belarus and Slovakia Considering Economic Cooperation

Measures on increasing bilateral trade is high on the agenda of the 7th sitting of the intergovernmental commission on economic and sci-tech cooperation between the Republic of Belarus and the Republic of Slovakia started today in Bratislava.

As acting head of the foreign ministry's information department Ruslan Esin told a news briefing, the sides will analyze the state and dynamic development of the bilateral trade-economic cooperation and fulfillment of the previous agreements. They will also consider development of the legal-treaty base of the bilateral relations, ways to increase trade turnover between the two states, intensify cooperation in the sphere of industry, energy, agriculture and also in the credit-investment and sci-tech spheres.

The two-day sitting will prepare the protocol with commissions to ministries and other governmental bodies of the two countries on implementation of reached agreements, Ruslan Esin noted.

Belarus is represented by deputy foreign minister of the Republic of Belarus Alexander Mikhnevich and Slovakia – by state chancellor of the economy ministry of Slovakia Laslo Pomoty.

Source: The National Centre of Legal Information of the Republic of Belarus; October 21, 2005; <http://law.by/work/Eng/>

17. Belarus: A year after Cherkasova's Murder, Another Journalist Dies In Suspicious Circumstances

Reporters Without Borders today said it was disturbed by the death of journalist Vassili Grodnikov of the opposition daily *Narodnaya Volya* whose body was found with signs of head injuries on 18 October, almost exactly a year after the murder of Veronika Cherkasova of the independent trade union *Solidarnost*, who very probably killed because of her work.

"We are very worried by the constant harassment of journalists and news media in Belarus as the 2006 presidential election approaches," the organization said. "The many arrests, the banning of news media and above all the death of two journalists in one year are clear evidence of the desperate plight of press freedom in this country."

Reporters Without Borders added: "The investigations into Cherkasova's death of 20 October 2004 and the disappearance of cameraman Dmitry Zavadski on 7 July 2000 have gone nowhere. We hope the same will not happen with the Grodnikov investigation and we call on the authorities not to rule out the possibility that he was killed because of his work."

Grodnikov's body was found in his apartment in a suburb of Minsk with his head covered in blood. The exact circumstances of his death are still unknown but there are grounds for suspecting he was killed in connection with his work.

His newspaper was forced to turn to a printer in the Russian city of Smolensk after its Belarusian printer suddenly refused on 1 October to continue printing it.

Cherkasova, who was stabbed to death in her Minsk apartment, was a general reporter, covering a wide range of subjects, but she also undertook investigative work on sects and organised crime and had recently written a series of article headlined, "The KGB is still watching you." Shortly before her murder, she had been investigating the possibility that the Belarusian government sold arms to Iraq when Saddam Hussein was in power.

Right from the outset, the police investigating her murder worked on the assumption that it was a crime of passion linked to differences within the family. Her 15-year-old son, Anton Filimonov, and her father-in-law were quickly identified as suspects.

On 31 January, a judge ordered a psychiatric examination of Filimonov to determine whether he was mentally disturbed at the time of his mother's death. The order was rescinded on 9 March and then, on 18 April, the authorities said neither the son and or father-in-law were any more under suspicion.

But a member of the Minsk criminal investigation department reported on 18 October that DNA tests showed that blood found at the murder scene was Filimonov's.

Cherkasova's mother, Diana Cherkasova, told Reporters Without Borders she was surprised by this revelation just two days before the first anniversary of the murder, after the absence of any previous progress in the investigation. "This proves nothing," she said. "My grandson is innocent. I suspect the investigators of trying to influence the media just as they were preparing to mark the first anniversary of my daughter's death."

Source: Reporters Sans Frontiers; October 20, 2005; <http://www.noticias.info>

HUMAN RIGHTS & INDEPENDENT MEDIA

18. BPF Members Detained For Distribution of *Narodnaya Volya*

On October 25 in Minsk members of the "Belarusian Popular Front Youth" Pavel Batueu and Ales Mazanik were detained for distribution of the new issue of the independent newspaper

Narodnaya Volya, the human rights center "Viasna" informs. Policemen took the detainees to the police department of the Tsentralny district of Minsk.

As said by the lawyer of the human rights center "Viasna" Valyantsin Stefanovich, actions of the policemen are illegal, as it is an officially registered newspaper, and can be disseminated freely in the country, and it can be given for free as well. "The detained young people have not violated the law in any way. It is more likely that a task has been set for the policemen to stop dissemination of the independent newspaper by any means," V. Stefanovich said.

Source: Charter97; October 26, 2005; <http://www.charter97.org/eng/>

19. Irina Khalip: "It's Recognition of Belarus' European Future"

"It's a great honor for me to be among European heroes in Time magazine. It is recognition of a European future for Belarus, among other things," told the well-known Belarusian journalist Iryna Khalip (Irina Khalip) during the "Hero of Europe" award-giving ceremony in the nomination "Brave Heart". The ceremony was held on October 24 in London. Together with Iryna Khalip, a French journalist from "Liberation" newspaper Florence Obenas, kidnapped in Iraq, and a London metro driver who rescued people during the terrorist attacks on July 7, were given the award.

"Here I represent my colleagues many of whom are today in courts, under arrests or underground. Journalists all over the world often become victims since honest journalism is dangerous everywhere. However only in totalitarian states they have to become also freedom fighters," Iryna Khalip said.

"My country today is the last dictatorship in Europe, but my colleagues have already made their truly European choice and Belarus will become truly European very soon. Thank you for your support of our choice and our fight," the journalist added.

The prize "Hero of Europe" has been founded by the American magazine "Time". This year a Spanish tenor Placido Domingo, a well-known rock musician and public figure Bob Geldof, a leader of the band U2 Bono, and a renowned Spanish filmmaker Pedro Almodovar have been named "Heroes of Europe".

By the way, as said by Iryna Khalip to the Charter'97 press center, a legendary rock musician and a famous public figure Bob Geldof told that he had become interested in the situation in Belarus. In a conversation with the Belarusian journalist he told that he is indignant with the existence of Lukashenka's totalitarian regime in Europe. Besides, Bob Geldof said so at one of his press-conferences in London in presence of Belarus' official representatives.

Source: ZUBR; October 26, 2005; <http://www.zubr-belarus.com/>

20. Political Prisoner Mikola Statkevich Not Allowed to Go to Minsk

Administration of Baranavichy special commandant's office denies giving the head of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Narodnaya Hramada) Mikola Statkevich a short leave. The oppositional politician has been serving the term for three months already in a so-called "chemistry", correctional labor colony, for organizing street demonstrations as a protest against rigged results of the referendum and elections in October 2004.

Mikola Statkevich believes by not allowing him to go for a leave, local policemen are implementing an order from above.

According to the law, every prisoner who does not breach the internal code of conduct and hadn't have reprimands, he should be given a three-day leave after a month of serving the sentence.

First the administration informed Mikola Statkevich that a list from the police head of Pershamajski district in Minsk had been received, saying that Statkevich's visit could "destabilize the situation in the city". In the second time the oppositionist got the same answer.

Mikola Statkevich told to Radio Svaboda that the deputy head of the special commandant's office assured him that he would not be allowed to visit Minsk until the end of his term. Then Mikola Statkevich lodged an appeal to go for a leave in Baranavichy. Yesterday policemen were to answer, however they explained that the question is studied and would be answered later.

Mikola Statkevich believes that Baranavichy policemen are executing orders of higher authorities.

Source: Charter97; October 26, 2005; <http://www.charter97.org/eng/>

21. The Case Of Zgoda's Editor-in-chief Is Being Tried by Minsk Office of Public Prosecutor

On October 18 Aliaksey Karol, *Zgoda's* editor-in-chief, received a letter from Minsk City Court saying that his case would be tried at Minsk Office of Public Prosecutor. On October 24 he distributed a press-release to draw people's attention to the problems that his newspaper and its editorial staff were facing.

On September 23 Partysanski District Court of Minsk (Ms. Dziominskaja was the judge) fined him and Aliaksandar Zadvizhkau for 100 base amounts each (2 550 000 BRB, or about 1200 USD). The journalists were found guilty of violating part 10 of art. 172-1 of the Administrative Code - distributing false information disgracing the President of Belarus through mass media. A.Karol and A.Zdvizhkou lodged a complaint to Minsk District Court and asked to cancel the decision of Partysanski District Court of Minsk.

The journalists were assured that their complaint would be taken into account but in fact it was not.

"We cannot count on the fact that the authorities would release pressure on independent mass media", - says the author of the press-release. He added that Partysanski District Office of Public Prosecutor had not returned 2 computers that had been taken by the police during the search on October 24. Mr.Filimontsau, the investigator, said that the computers were in KGB. "Why, according to what law? These questions seem to be rhetorical", - says A.Karol. He proposed the people working for the law machinery to take those computers instead of the fine.

Source: Belarusian Association of Journalists, October 25, 2005; www.baj.ru

22. Third Massive Fine For Organizing Religious Worship

The administrator of the Minsk-based charismatic New Life Church, Vasily Yurevich, has been fined a third time for leading unauthorized worship. The latest fine is the massive amount of 3,825,000 Belarusian rubles (11,645 Norwegian Kroner, 1,488 Euros or 1,780 US Dollars), which is well over 10 times the average monthly wage in Belarus. The official text of the local court decision, which has been seen by Forum 18, relies upon police testimony – which Yurevich and congregation members strongly dispute - identifying him as the organizer of a Sunday service "by his outward appearance." New Life's Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko – who has also been fined for unsanctioned worship – insisted that the church would continue to meet for worship. It has also been denied state permission to turn a disused cowshed it purchased into a church building, on the grounds that it is technically a cowshed. A number of other Protestant churches have also reported recent moves by state officials to limit their religious activity, on the basis of technical violations.

The administrator of the Minsk-based charismatic New Life Church, Vasily Yurevich, has been fined a third time the massive amount of 3,825,000 Belarusian Roubles (11,270 Norwegian Kroner, 1,434 Euros or 1,727 US Dollars) for leading unauthorized worship. The average wage in Belarus is estimated to be between 100 and 150 US Dollars per month. The official text of the 7

October local court decision, which has been seen by Forum 18 News Service, relies upon police testimony identifying him as the organizer of the congregation's 4 September Sunday service "by his outward appearance." Yurevich had argued that he was on leave at the time, did not enter the church building and was present only to talk to Mayor of Minsk Mikhail Pavlov if he accepted New Life's invitation to speak at the service about the city authorities' recent decision to confiscate the church's.

While meted out milder punishments, a number of other Protestant churches have also reported recent moves by state officials to limit their religious activity on the basis of technical.

Yurevich has already been given two similarly massive fines for the same offence and 28 September 2005, and was on this third occasion found guilty of violating the procedure for conducting religious gatherings as set out in the law on demonstrations, whose requirement of state permission for public meetings was extended in 1999 to religious organizations in instances where their gatherings are not held at specially designated religious buildings or sites.

In addition to being refused permission to rent public facilities by district administrations throughout Minsk, New Life has been denied state permission to turn a disused cowshed it purchased in 2002 into a church building as well as to hold services there – on the grounds that it is technically a cowshed. Similar obstacles have not been placed by the authorities against an Orthodox community's use for worship of a disused railway carriage 500 metres (yards) away from the cowshed.

The Administrative Violations Code holds the leader and/or organizer of religious meetings responsible for failing to observe the legal procedure for holding them. In this latest case, Judge Nadezhda Reutskaya accepted police officers' testimony that Yurevich must have been the organizer of the 4 September service because one policewoman "spoke to him as the person responsible," "people approached him, he greeted them and invited them to enter the church" and "his outward appearance differed from church members, who were simply dressed while he wore a suit." Although New Life lawyer Sergei Lukanin and a church member told Minsk's Moscow District Court that Yurevich was speaking to police and journalists outside the church and did not participate in the service, Judge Reutskaya ruled that there was no contradiction between the witness statements and that they all supported his conviction.

Yurevich, who has paid neither his first nor second fine, has told Forum 18 that New Life members formally decided on 21 November 2004 that they attend church services on their own initiative. He is currently preparing to file an appeal against the latest fine with Minsk City Court. Speaking to Radio Free Europe in the wake of the fine, New Life's Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko – who has also been fined for unsanctioned worship – insisted that the church would continue to meet for services at its former cowshed. He also pointed out that the congregation was the first to encounter such difficulties: "We were the first to be thrown out of houses of culture. The authorities are banking upon dealing with us first in order to intimidate the rest."

This is not the only instance of a repeat fine been handed down to a church leader. In western Belarus, the pastor of a Pentecostal church in Kobrin (Brest region) was issued a second fine of 25,000 Belarusian rubles (74 Norwegian Kroner, 9 Euros or 11 US Dollars) on 17 October for not having a fire extinguisher of the correct capacity. "I was told I needed one holding 10 liters, whereas ours holds five or eight," Nikolai Radkovich commented to the Evangelical Belarus Information Centre. "But I believe the main reason for the visit was that our church is unregistered." Radkovich was fined almost two years ago for leading unregistered worship but encountering no subsequent restrictions.

The Evangelical Belarus Information Centre also reported that in western Belarus the Brest congregation belonging to the Baptist Council of Churches, whose communities refuse on principle to register with the state authorities in post-Soviet countries, prevented the private

building which they have used as a prayer house since 1990 from being sealed by the local authorities on 17 October. On 14 October the Baptist Council of Churches said that the owner of the building, Mariya Khotynyuk, reported that she was fined the equivalent of 24 US Dollars [51,569 Belarusian Rubles, 157 Norwegian Kroner, or 20 Euros] on 11 October after a health and safety inspector found the building to be in violation of sanitation regulations and prohibited its use.

Two Baptist Union congregations report some recent improvements in their situation, however. In Brest region, a church in Orekhovsky village founded three years ago by Baptist missionaries from nearby Divin village was finally registered by the local authorities on 28 August after reportedly being refused three times on the basis that "there are already so many Protestant churches."

On 9 September a second Baptist Union congregation was granted permission by Vitebsk [Vitsyebsk] city authorities in north-east Belarus to turn the private building it uses for services into a prayer house, although subsequent reconstruction plans will still have to be approved by the relevant state departments.

The restrictive 2002 religion law permits worship only by registered religious organizations in either designated places of worship or venues which have been approved by the local state authorities.

Source: Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18; October 25, 2005; <http://www.forum18.org>

23. Detentions For Preparation to Day of Solidarity

Activists of "Zubr" Alena Kopach and Natallia Ushko were detained on Monday for distributing leaflets with call to take part in Day of solidarity with victims of repressions on November 16.

Young ladies were detained by police officers at about 7 p.m. They spent in police station about two and a half hours. They were released after protocols were compiled for violating article 143 of Administrative code ("Insanity").

Representatives of civil society called Belarusian citizens to hold Day of Solidarity with Belarusian political prisoners, disappeared oppositionists, their families, independent journalists, with all who struggle for freedom and democracy in Belarus on the 16th day of every month.

Source: ZUBR; October 25, 2005; <http://www.zubr-belarus.com/>

24. French Woman, Polish Man Complain Of Belarus Expulsion

A French woman and a Polish man said on Saturday they faced being expelled from Belarus where they had legally gone to attend a seminar on the European Union.

The police questioned us and did not give us back our passports," Sophie Wozniak, a French volunteer of the Centre of International Relations in Warsaw, told AFP by phone.

She added that within two hours they were due to be taken to Minsk to be put on a train headed for Poland.

Pole Michal Papina said he represented the Centre of Strategic Studies of Lower Silesia at the seminar taking place in Mozyr in southern Belarus.

Another participant of the meeting organized by a group of young Belarusians told AFP that eight police officers had come to a private house where they were, filmed them, checked their papers and had looked for weapons.

Then the foreigners and the Belarusians who did not have passports on them were taken to the police station," Artem Bourila said.

Wozniak said she had no problems with her passport, had a visa and had registered her visit.

The regime of Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko has been criticized by the European Union and the Council of Europe over human rights.

Source: The Tocqueville Connection; October 22, 2005; <http://www.ttc.org/>

25. Hrodna Journalist Andrzej Pachobut Is Asked To Give a Written Pledge Not To Leave the Country

On October 20 Andrzej Pachobut (a journalist from Hrodna, a Union of Poles' activist) was detained by the police, and at about 9.30 p.m. he was asked to give a written undertaking not to leave the country. Andrzej Pachobut informed BAJ about it on October 21.

Andrzej Pachobut, the editor-in-chief of *Magazyn polski* and a reporter of *Glos znad Niemna*, left the office at around 6.00 p.m. and was waiting for an acquaintance of his in the street. But he was detained by the police and told he would have to answer some questions concerning the last issues of *Glos znad Niemna* that had been printed in Poland and later distributed in Belarus. The journalist was taken to the police office and the deputy public prosecutor said that a check-up would be carried out to find out whether the newspaper had violated the law or not. A.Pachobut was asked to give explanations but he refused to do it.

Then the police officers said that Pachobut would have to wait for investigators from Shchuchyn (a criminal case where A.Pachobut is one of the suspects is now being investigated by Shchuchyn Office of Public Prosecutor).

They arrived at 8 p.m. and took A.Pachobut to Shchuchyn. At 9.30 p.m. he was asked to give a written undertaking not to leave the country. He refused to sign it saying he would do nothing without consulting his lawyer.

Text revised by the Editors

Source: Belarusian Association of Journalists, October 21, 2005; www.baj.ru

BUSINESS

26. Belarus Invites Tender For Tobacco Goods Importers in 2006

An interdepartmental commission on the open tender for import quotas for tobacco goods has announced a tender for suppliers of these goods to Belarus in 2006, BelTA was informed in the ministry of trade.

The deadline for presenting tender offers to the trade ministry is November 3, 2005.

The ministry informed that the offer should include requisites of the tender participants, volume, assortment, terms and schedules of delivery of tobacco goods, terms of payments, wholesale and retail prices per one pack. Apart from that the tender participants should state the source of funding of the deal, a scheme of sale of tobacco goods to trading companies and present several other documents.

The fee for taking part in the tender is 20 basic amounts.

We remind that in line with resolution #1123 of the Council of Ministers of October 12, 2005 in 2006 quotas for import of cigarettes, cigars and cigarillos is 1.5 billion units, 1,8 times less than in 2005. A quota costs Br1.125 billion.

A quota for other industrial tobacco and its substitutes was fixed at the amount of 3 tons /as in 2005/.

In line with the provision on import quotas' tenders, one winner can purchase 10 per cent /for consumer cooperation – 3 per cent/ but not more than 50 per cent of the import quota for tobacco products.

We remind that the right to deliver tobacco products was granted to the republican unitary company Trading House Vostochnyi, unitary company Belkoopvneshtorg, AF and Co, British-American Tobacco Trading Company and Delfidealing.

Source: The National Centre of Legal Information of the Republic of Belarus; October 20, 2005; <http://law.by/work/Eng/>

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 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 Maria Kabalina at cis@ilhr.org or Olga Tarasov at otarasov@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.
