

December 1 – December 7, 2005

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DOMESTIC

1. Belarus Notes Steady Rise in Alcohol Abuse

Uladzimir Maksimchuk, chief addiction expert with the Belarusian Health Ministry, told journalists in Minsk on 6 December that the number of Belarusians with alcohol-abuse problems has been steadily rising, Belapan and RFE/RL's Belarus Service reported.

There are officially 175,000 regular alcoholics and some 60,000 people with serious alcohol-abuse problems registered in Belarus, which represents a 4 percent increase on last year's statistics. Citing a recent poll, Maksimchuk said that only 22 percent of Belarusians do not drink alcohol at all, while 42 percent may drink on rare occasions and 10 percent do on a regular basis. Last year's per capita alcohol consumption in Belarus was 9.4 liters, with smuggled and illegally distilled alcohol not included in the statistics.

Source: RFE/RL; December 7, 2005; <http://www.rferl.org>

2. Competitor for Windows? - Belarus developing operating system

Scientists in Belarus are working on their own computer software to serve as an alternative to the market-leading Windows operating system from U.S. firm Microsoft.

The inexpensive Belarusian operating system will work with open source code like Linux, reports computer scientist Michail Machanek from the Academy of Science in Minsk. Both the European Union and NATO have expressed interest in his project, he claims.

Authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko has previously criticized the high price of imported software.

"Ordinary citizens cannot afford to buy an operating system for 300 U.S. dollars," Machanek claims. This is why the Microsoft programme is so often pirated in Eastern Europe. The Belarusian Windows will cost only 12 euro (14 dollars).

Source: The Bangkok Post; December 4, 2005; http://www.bangkokpost.com/breaking_news/breakingnews.php?id=65851

3. Belarus Tightens Protest Laws Ahead of 2006 Election

Belarus' legislature passed a law that could criminalize political opposition and human rights advocacy in the former Soviet republic, setting out criminal punishment for discrediting the state. International rights groups have criticized the amendments to the Criminal Code, which still must be approved by the upper house and signed by President Alexander Lukashenko before entering law.

Belarus' security service, still known by its Soviet-era name KGB, said the amendments were needed to prevent a mass uprising such as those that followed elections and brought opposition leaders to power in three other former Soviet republics.

Opposition leaders poured scorn on the amendments. Anatoly Lebedko, chairman of the National Committee of Democratic Forces, told the Associated Press that "the authorities are trying to scare the people before the (2006 presidential) elections, so that no one will dare, even when abroad, to say anything bad in Lukashenko's address." He said the new legislation could lead to "show trials" of "enemies of the people," as in the darkest Stalinist times.

Among the changes is a clause that forbids "calls or exhortations for international organizations to commit acts intended to damage the internal security of Belarus, its sovereignty or territorial integrity," or "distribution of material containing such calls. "Violators would face up to three years in prison, more if the calls are distributed through mass media."

Other changes would criminalize "training or other preparations for participation in group actions or gross violations of social order, and equally, financing or other material assistance for such actions."

First elected in 1994 after campaigning against corruption, Lukashenko has prolonged his rule through elections and referendums that opposition groups and Western governments say were fixed. Last year, a popular vote gave him the right to run for a new term in 2006 and in any future elections. Next year's presidential election is expected in July.

Lukashenko has reintroduced Soviet symbols, disbanded parliament, closed independent media and maintained rigid Soviet-style state controls over the economy. Many opposition leaders have been jailed or have disappeared. The Belarusian leader has become a pariah in the West for his intolerance of dissent, and has accused Western governments of aiding opposition groups and seeking his ouster. The United States has labelled him "Europe's last dictator."

Source: MosNews.Com, December 3, 2005; www.mosnews.com

4. President of Belarus Signs Decree Protecting Entrepreneurs From Unwarranted Inspections

On December 1, 2005 president of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko signed a decree to amend the regulations on inspections (audits) of financial-economic activities and the procedure of applying economic sanctions, BelTA was informed in the presidential press service.

The decree applies to the law enforcement bodies. The issue is especially important for entrepreneurs who are subjected most often to all kind of unwarranted and unreasonable inspections".

The measures have been taken in an effort to ensure coordination of supervising efforts of different watchdog bodies, to observe the schedule of inspections, to prevent corruption crimes and unlawful inspections.

Source: The National Centre of Legal Information of the Republic of Belarus; December 2, 2005; <http://law.by/work/Eng/>

5. Vandals Damage Belarusian Memorial Site

Prague, 1 December 2005 (RFE/RL) -- Vandals are reported to have damaged a memorial to victims of Stalin-era repression outside the Belarusian capital Minsk.

The U.S. Embassy in Belarus said a memorial granite bench donated by the United States, and at least a dozen crosses, were damaged recently at the Kuropaty site.

Up to 200,000 people were believed to have been shot and buried in Kuropaty during repressions by Soviet leader Josef Stalin.

Source: RFE/RL; December 1, 2005; <http://www.rferl.org>

REGIONAL

6. Belarus Resumes Talks With Gazprom On Gas Transport JV

Gazprom and Belarus have resumed negotiations on setting up a gas transportation joint venture, Gazprom said in a press release following negotiations between Alexei Miller, the Russian gas giant's CEO, and Belarusian First Deputy Prime Minister Vladimir Semashko in Moscow on Tuesday.

"At Belarus's initiative, the establishment of a joint gas transportation enterprise based on Beltransgaz to improve the reliability of gas deliveries to Belarus and gas transit was discussed at the meeting," Gazprom said.

The press release does not specify whether the parties signed documents on gas supplies in 2006.

Source: Interfax; December 6, 2005; <http://www.interfax.ru/e>

7. Minister Says Russia's MTS May Get Control Over MTS Belarus

Russia's largest mobile operator Mobile TeleSystems (MTS) may get a controlling stake in its Belarus affiliate, MTS Belarus, in 2007, Belarus' Communications Minister Vladimir Goncharenko told a news conference Tuesday.

MTS holds a 49% stake in the Belarusian company and Belarus' state-owned Mezhdugorodnaya Svyaz (Intercity Communications) holds the 51% stake.

Goncharenko said that the Belarusian government may consider reducing its stake in MTS Belarus after antimonopoly legislation in the telecommunications sector takes effect, which is expected to happen in 2007.

MTS' President Vasily Sidorov said that MTS is looking to increase its stake in MTS Belarus to controlling, but even as a shareholder with a non-controlling stake MTS considers the Belarusian market as very attractive and does not plan to cut investments in the company's development.

MTS plans to invest U.S. \$150 million in MTS Belarus' development in 2006. In 2005 MTS Belarus plans to invest \$100 million in its operations.

MTS Belarus, or SOOO Mobilnye TeleSistemy (JV Mobile TeleSystems Ltd.), was registered in April 2002 and started commercial operations in June 2002.

With its subscriber base of 2 million users, MTS Belarus is the leading GSM operator in the country.

Source: Mansfield Publishing Limited; December 6, 2005; <http://www.cellular-news.com/story/15127.php>

8. Russia, Belarus To Sign Natural Gas Contract By Dec. 19

A contract on the supplies of Russia's natural gas to Belarus will be signed by December 19, the Belarusian president's envoy to Russia said Tuesday.

"The contract has almost been coordinated," Vasily Dolgolev said. "We expect it to be signed by December 19."

He said the price for Russian natural gas would remain unchanged at \$46.68 per 1,000 cu m. Dolgolev also said the sides were discussing volumes of natural gas supplies and that Belarus was insisting on 21.5 billion cu m.

Source: RIA Novosti, December 6, 2005; <http://en.rian.ru>

9. Belarus Bans Import of Ukrainian Poultry Products

Belarus has introduced a temporary ban on the import of Ukrainian poultry products following an outbreak of bird flu in Crimea.

The most dangerous type of bird flu virus has been revealed to be present in the Crimea, Belarusian chief state veterinarian inspector Alexander Aksyonov told Interfax on Monday.

Therefore, the Belarusian Agriculture Ministry has introduced a temporary ban on the import of all meat and dairy products, animal food and vitamins from the Crimea.

Source: *Interfax*; December 5, 2005; <http://www.interfax.ru/e>

INTERNATIONAL

10. Riding Roughshod Over Rights in Belarus

Statement in the U.S. Congress by Representative Christopher H. Smith, Co-Chairman, US Helsinki Commission

Mr. Speaker, as Co-Chairman of the Helsinki Commission and the sponsor of the Belarus Democracy Act, I remain deeply concerned about the violations of human rights occurring every day in Lukashenka's Belarus.

During a recent news conference, the autocratic Belarusian leader expressed confidence in his victory in the presidential election scheduled for next year, rhetorically asking why should he be rigging this election. Given his intensified assault on civil society, his dismal human rights record, and penchant for rigged elections, Mr. Lukashenka's statements ring hollow. Yet, Lukashenka's actions against democratic forces, non-governmental organizations and the independent media belie his stated confidence regarding electoral victory.

Last week, the lower chamber of Lukashenka's pocket parliament passed a law endorsing tougher new penalties for activities "directed against people and public security," a proposal submitted to the parliament only days before passage. These changes to the Criminal Code increase penalties for participation in organizations that were liquidated or warned to stop their pro-democratic activities, or for the training and other preparations for unauthorized demonstrations or other civic actions.

Mr. Speaker, to cite just one of the draconian provisions, the Code now gives authorities the leeway to jail an individual for up to two years for "providing a foreign country, a foreign or international organization with patently false information about the political, economic, social, military, and international situation of the Republic of Belarus." Putting aside the matter of such a provision violating free speech norms, if the past is any guide, it is clear who would be the arbiter of what constitutes "false information." There can be no doubt that the law aims to stifle the democratic opposition, and the head of the KGB (yes, in Belarus it is still called the KGB) himself recently admitted that the reasons for the law is to discourage street protests during the upcoming presidential race.

This law, while particularly blatant, is part and parcel of other actions designed to strengthen the regime's control and deny the Belarusian people any alternative voices as the presidential election campaign unfolds. Last month, a new law further controlling political parties came into force. A recent Council of Ministers decree clamps down on organizations that conduct public opinion polls. A Lukashenka decree further discriminates against independent trade unions, stipulating that only trade unions belonging to the pro-governmental federation are granted the right to premises at no cost. Yet another decree considerably limits students' opportunities to travel abroad.

Meanwhile, opposition activists are routinely beaten up or detained. Just last week, for instance, Ales Kalita was detained and at the hands of the police suffered a dislocated arm for merely distributing the independent newspaper *Narodna Volya*. Viktor Syritsya, a lecturer at Baranavichi College was fired for organizing a meeting of students with presidential opposition candidate Alexander Milinkevich. Belarusian State Economic University in Minsk expelled fourth-year student Tatsyana Khoma because she took a brief trip to France, where she was elected to the

executive committee of the Brussels-based National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB), an umbrella organization of 44 national student unions from 34 countries. The police beat activist Mikita Sasim. They detained youth activists Yauhen Afnagel and others. Other repressive actions include frequent arrests of activists of democratic youth movements such as ZUBR, a ban on worship by some religious congregations and other repressive actions against selected religious minorities, and continued harassment of members of the Union of Poles in Belarus.

Moreover, there is an emerging pattern of the regime putting obstacles in the way of Mr. Milinkevich. Recently, a public meeting in Borbuisk with him was disrupted by the authorities, with participants being told by the authorities to go home and threatened with tax inspections. During a press conference, the electricity in the room cut off, as did a "hot-line" phone with town residents.

Especially egregious has been the regime's intensification of the war against the already repressed and struggling independent media. Newspaper closures, suspensions, threats, and exorbitant and absurd libel fines, pressures on advertisers and other forms of harassment have become routine. Outright police confiscations of independent newspapers are also not uncommon. A seemingly more subtle tactic, implemented just a few weeks ago, involved the decision by Belarus' monopoly state postal service to stop delivery to subscribers of a dozen private periodicals. Meanwhile, the suspicious murder in 2004 of journalist Veronika Charkasova has not been resolved. Authorities have refused to open a criminal investigation into journalist Vasil Hrodnikau's death. Lukashenka himself recently admitted to Russian journalists that his regime applies very serious pressure on the media, somewhat incongruously adding that "this does not mean I am crushing them."

Mr. Speaker, what I have cited is by no means an exhaustive list of abuses perpetrated by the Lukashenka regime, merely a sampling of the types of repressive actions employed on a daily basis by Europe's last dictator. As Helsinki Commission Co-Chair, I will continue to monitor closely and speak out forcefully regarding these and other violations of Belarus' freely undertaken OSCE commitments. I urge the Bush Administration to step up efforts to break the Lukashenka regime's near monopoly over the country's information space and provide timely assistance to pro-democracy forces in Belarus.

It is clear that Mr. Lukashenka and his minions are laying the groundwork for yet another un-free and unfair election - similar to the 2001 presidential elections and the 2000 and 2004 parliamentary elections - that will fall far short of OSCE standards. Lukashenka is once again showing that, despite his confident rhetoric, he fears his own people and profoundly fails to respect their dignity as citizens and as human beings.

Source: Unites States House of Representatives; December 6, 2005; <http://www.house.gov/>

11. Belarus-China Cooperation Turning Into Strategic Partnership - Lukashenko

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko said that a declaration outlining prospects for further cooperation between Belarus and China was signed during his state visit to Beijing.

"This document is about a strategic partnership that from now on will govern cooperation between the two countries," Lukashenko told journalists after negotiations in Beijing.

Commenting on his meeting with Chinese leader Hu Jintao, the president said that "we do not have any disagreements on the issues on the agenda. We stand for our states' free development, the idea of a multi-polar world, sovereignty and independence. But we are opposed to double standards."

Source: Interfax; December 6, 2005; <http://www.interfax.ru/e>

12. Belarus Blasts Western Interference in Legislation

Belarus on Tuesday criticized attempts by the United States and the European Union (EU) to interfere in its lawmaking process.

Washington and Brussels are trying one more time to influence overtly the law-making process in Belarus in violation of the key principle of non-interference in other countries' domestic affairs in international relations," the Foreign Ministry said in a statement, according to the Itar-Tass news agency.

President Alexander Lukashenko has submitted to parliament amendments to the country's criminal and criminal procedure codes, which would authorize the court to impose prison sentences for defamation of Belarus and its authorities and for making subversive calls to seize power or forcefully change the constitutional system.

The United States and the EU claimed these amendments violate international law and contradict Minsk's commitments to human rights.

The Foreign Ministry accused the United States and the EU of resorting to threats and sanctions in relations with countries that do not share their political views.

This approach is an absolutely inadequate basis for the development of closer and deeper relations with Belarus. We suggest another basis -- equal and mutually profitable dialogue on a whole range of issues," the statement said.

Source: Xinhua News Agency; December 6, 2005; http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2005-12/06/content_3885372.htm

13. Only Belarus May Back Up Russia in Ljubljana

The foreign ministries' meeting of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, or OSCE, begins in Ljubljana today, December 5, 2005. Most likely, Russia will have to go through hard times at the meeting, once it faces an ultimatum demand to execute Istanbul agreements in part of pulling out the troops from Transdniestria and Georgia. Moreover, some countries may put forward a resolution condemning Russia's new bill on nonprofit organizations.

"The OSCE's problem is that it was created as a forum for dialog on three dimensions of security -- military and political, economic and humanitarian, but has lost this function in the recent years," said Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov before he left for Ljubljana. Moscow expects the meeting to "launch a real reform of the organization, pass definite resolutions and the 2006 plan of reforms."

But the most likely scenario is quite different. GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova) intends to come out in a united front against Moscow, forcing the execution of Istanbul agreements, which, among other things, commit Moscow to pull out its troops from Georgia and Transdniestria. Another point of concern is the Kremlin's course on tightening control over the activities of nonprofit organizations in Russia and the future bill related to them.

In the meeting, Russia may refuse to yield to the pressure and even deny sealing a final political declaration. Should it happen, it would be the dead failure for the event.

Source: Kommersant; December 5, 2005; <http://www.kommersant.com>

14. European Union Declaration On the Anti-Revolution Bill in Belarus

The European Union regrets that it must once again express its concern about developments in Belarus following the Belarusian National Assembly's decision to approve in first reading a draft Anti-Revolution Bill amending the penal code. The provisions of the bill seem to go entirely against many of Belarus' human rights commitments, notably the rights to freedom of association

and freedom of expression. This legislation appears to be a clear attempt to intimidate Belarusians and stifle free speech as Belarus approaches presidential elections.

The EU urges the Belarusian National Assembly to reconsider their decision and to reject the draft legislation, especially in the light of Belarus' OSCE Human Dimension Commitments. The EU also calls on the Belarusian authorities to take concrete steps to demonstrate their willingness to respect democratic values and the rule of law, so that we can begin to develop closer and deeper relations.

Adopting such undemocratic legislation could incur serious consequences for Belarusian authorities. The EU recalls its readiness to take further appropriate restrictive measures against the responsible individuals in the event of failure to uphold international standards, as set out in the General Affairs and External Relations Council Conclusions of 7 November.

The EU underlines its willingness to act alongside international partners, in particular the US, in urging the responsible Belarusian authorities to reject the draft Anti-Revolution bill.

The Acceding Countries Bulgaria and Romania, the Candidate Countries Turkey and Croatia(1), the Countries of the Stabilisation and Association Process and potential candidates Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro, and the EFTA countries Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway, members of the European Economic Area, as well as Ukraine align themselves with this declaration.

1. Croatia continues to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.

Source: Voltairenet.Org; December 2, 2005; <http://www.voltairenet.org/article131968.html>

15. OSCE Minsk Office Concerned Over Amendments to Belarus Criminal Code

The Head of the OSCE Office in Minsk, Ambassador Ake Peterson, today said he was gravely concerned over the adoption by the House of Representatives of the National Assembly of Belarus of amendments that could deal a serious blow to civil society and individuals.

If approved, the "Introduction of amendments and changes to certain legislative acts of the Republic of Belarus on strengthening liability for the deeds, addressed against a person and public security," with its vague definitions, may open the way for arbitrary application of the law.

"As such, these provisions have the potential to become a flagrant violation of a number of the OSCE principles and commitments that Belarus has subscribed to," said Ambassador Ake Peterson.

"The Introduction of a new article in the law, on *Discrediting the Republic of Belarus*, raises a particular concern, since it provides for criminal liability for submitting to an international organization false information on the situation in the country. The OSCE Office in Minsk believes that this could have a negative impact on the co-operation between the Office and civil society and effectively undermine efforts to fulfill its mandate."

Source: OSCE; December 2, 2005; <http://www.osce.org>

16. Belarus Confirms Commitment to Ottawa Convention

Belarus confirmed its commitment to the goals of the Ottawa Convention. The statement to this effect was announced at the 6th annual meeting of the parties to the Convention on the prohibition of the use, stockpiling, production and transfer of antipersonnel mines and on their destruction, which is underway November 27 until December 2 in Zagreb (Croatia). The Belarusian delegation is headed by Alexander Baichorov, the head of the department for international security and control over armaments of the Belarusian foreign ministry.

The Belarusian foreign ministry told BelTA that the Belarusian party informed the meeting about the steps Belarus took at the nation-wide level pursuing its international commitments and about the programs of cooperation with the European Commission, NATO and the government of Canada.

The Ottawa Convention commitments demand from its participating states to destroy all antipersonnel mines within four years. By March 1, 2008 the Republic of Belarus should destroy almost 4 million antipersonnel mines.

Antipersonnel mine destruction envisages two large projects: the first is connected with Canada within the framework of the target fund of the Partnership for Peace program and the second one – with the European Commission in order to liquidate 3,3 million of antipersonnel mines.

The sitting is expected to consider the implementation of the convention, the plan of actions for 2005-2009 adopted in Nairobi and the program on cooperation and assistance within the framework of the Ottawa Convention.

The Ottawa Convention was opened to signing on December 3-4, 1997 and came into effect on March 1, 1999 after the deposit of the 40th instrument of ratification.

Some 147 states are parties to the Convention. The Republic of Belarus accessed the Convention on September 3, 2003. The Ottawa Convention came into effect in this country on March 1, 2004.

Source: The National Centre of Legal Information of the Republic of Belarus; December 2, 2005; <http://law.by/work/Eng/>

HUMAN RIGHTS & INDEPENDENT MEDIA

17. Belarus: Minsk Charismatic Church Loses Property Confiscation Challenge

Having failed to overturn the state's decision to confiscate its building and land, the embattled charismatic New Life Church now looks set to lose its property via the courts, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. In late November, New Life announced that it would commence monthly prayer meetings for victims of injustice on Friday 16 December.

The latest developments in the complicated story of New Life's attempts to retain its own property for worship originated in hearings on 17 and 27 October in the Belarusian capital's Economic (Khozyaistvenny) Court. New Life in the hearings attempted to challenge the validity of Minsk City Executive Committee's 17 August instruction curtailing the church's land rights and ordering the sale of its building, a disused cowshed it purchased in 2002. The Executive Committee's decision was based on the church's alleged violation of Article 49, Part 4 of the Land Code, which states that rights to land may be curtailed if it is not used in accordance with its designation.

Ruling against New Life, the Economic Court maintained that the 17 August decision was valid because the church had both used the cowshed as a house of worship and modernized it without obtaining state permission to change the designation of either the building or its attached land. According to the Court's 27 October ruling, such "modernization" legally qualifies as "a form of reconstruction" which, in turn, requires the state's approval under the 2003 Law on Architectural and Construction Activity.

In its appeal against the Economic Court's decision, posted on the church's website on 10 November, New Life points out that the 2003 Architecture Law is no longer in force, and that, since its 2004 replacement does not mention either "modernization" or "reconstruction," "no legislation exists regulating the procedure for converting or modernizing a building." Even if there were evidence that construction legislation had been violated, continues the church, this

would not constitute a legal basis for asserting that the land had not been used in accordance with its designation.

Also in its appeal, New Life argues that the Economic Court ignored the fact that the church is unable to use the cowshed in accordance with its designation because keeping cattle is illegal within city limits. The church adds that Minsk City Executive Committee has failed to present any legal grounds for withholding permission to change this designation. In particular, it points to the invalidity of the Committee's reference to its 1999 plan for a new suburb in which there is "no provision for" a church on the site of the cowshed since, as a draft, this document "has no legal significance."

Arguably in the church's favor, however, the Economic Court's verdict did note that Article 240 of the Civil Code indicates that confiscation of improperly used land and related property must be pursued via the courts - and thus may not, as in this case, be effected by order of a state department.

In the meantime, the city authorities have already begun carrying out the Executive Committee's 17 August instruction by drawing up an estimate of the building's value. Received by New Life on 22 November, a 5 October evaluation of the modernized cowshed claims it is currently worth 35,552,939 Belarusian rubles (107,073 Norwegian Kroner, 13,458 Euros or 15,863 US Dollars). While this is more than twice the original purchase price, a 22 November statement on New Life's website notes that it is equivalent to less than 14 US Dollars per square meter. In its evaluation, Minsk City State Property Territorial Fund expressly states that it has not taken into account "expenditure on reconstruction carried out by the owners of the object in view of their illegal construction work."

Found to have violated Article 65 of the Land Code due to improper land use, New Life's Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko was fined three times the minimum wage (72,000 Belarusian rubles, 214 Norwegian Kroner, 27 Euros or 32 US Dollars) in February 2005 under Article 52 of the Administrative Violations Code. The same article sets the maximum penalty for this offence at ten times the minimum wage.

Precisely because of its lack of state-approved worship premises, New Life Church has been unable to obtain compulsory re-registration under the 2002 Religion Law. Some other religious organizations are in the same position. On 17 November New Life received its third re-registration rejection, in which Minsk city's Moscow district administration noted the church's lack of registered property rights among its grounds for refusal.

The latest re-registration rejection also requested the original of a document which would boost New Life's attempts to legalize its position - a so-called "Technical Passport," issued by the relevant local state department on 21 October 2005. A description of the church's building, this gives its designated usage as a house of worship, whereas the previous Technical Passport, dated 8 February 2002, stipulated the designation of the building as cowshed.

On 7 December Vasily Yurevich, New Life's administrator, told Forum 18 that, unbeknown to Minsk City Executive Committee, New Life requested a new Technical Passport in June 2005, and that the relevant local department - whose employees he described as "normal people" - confirmed that the building was a church following its September survey. Once Minsk City Executive Committee learnt of the existence of the new Technical Passport, however, they ordered its withdrawal, said Yurevich, and the designation of the building is now officially "undetermined." In late November New Life's website reported that the head of the department which issued the 21 October document - church member Lyudmila Yakimovich - had been informed that her employment contract would not be renewed at the end of the year and that her November wages would be reduced by 30 per cent.

In support of New Life, Pentecostal Union leader Sergei Khomich, Baptist Union leader Nikolai Sinkovets, Full Gospel leader Aleksandr Sakovich and Adventist leader Moisei Ostrovsky wrote to presidential administration chairman Viktor Sheiman on 25 October. Their letter asked Sheiman to annul Minsk City Executive Committee's 17 August decision confiscating the church's property and to allot the congregation either the disputed plot of land or another of equal value for the construction of a house of worship, while allowing temporary use of the disused cowshed until such time as a new church could be completed.

New Life has been worshipping at its disused cowshed as a last resort ever since being barred from renting a local house of culture in September 2004.

As church administrator Vasily Yurevich told procuracy officials in December 2004, the church was earlier refused requests to rent other public facilities by district administrations throughout Minsk.

Under the 2002 Religion Law, unregistered religious activity is banned.

Unable to comply with the same Law's registration requirements, New Life has now received five official warnings from Minsk City Executive Committee for continuing to hold consequently illegal worship meetings.

The fourth and fifth warnings, dated 8 and 17 November, were issued on the basis of large fines handed down on 23 September and 7 October to Vasily Yurevich, as the alleged organizer of "religious gatherings with the reading of prayers and sermons". Under the 2002 Law, two such warnings are sufficient to liquidate a religious organization.

Source: Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18; December 7, 2005; <http://www.forum18.org>

18. Belasajuzdruk Refuses To Cooperate With *Nasha Niva*

Sajuzdruk [state printing and distribution enterprises – Ed.] enterprises refused to cooperate with *Nasha Niva* and are not going to distribute the edition in 2006, - informed radio "Liberty" with reference to BelaPAN.

According to the newspaper's editor-in-chief Andrej Dynko, he received letters informing that Belasajuzdruk and Minabsajuzdruk will stop the edition's distribution starting from January 1, 2006. "Moreover, Minabsajuzdruk explains its decision by the fact that the weekly is not in popular demand", - added *Nasha Niva's* Editor-in-chief Andrej Dynko.

[Text Revised by the Editors]

Source: Belarusian Association of Journalists; December 6, 2005; <http://www.baj.ru/>

19. Post Halts Communist Paper Delivery

The state-run post office in Belarus has halted delivery of the communist newspaper, party officials said today, the latest sign in what the West says is an attempt to crush the opposition ahead of the election next year.

The decision to halt deliveries of *Tovarishch* (Comrade) was the most recent ruling against opposition publications as the ex-Soviet state gears up for the election in which President Alexander Lukashenko is to seek a new term.

"The Central Committee of the Belarusian Communist Party ... notes the political nature of this decision, proof of increasing pressure on non-state media ahead of the 2006 presidential election," a party statement said.

Post office officials said they halted the delivery because the newspaper suspended publication for three months this year after being denied permission to print inside Belarus. But party spokesman Sergei Voznyak dismissed that explanation, saying the post office had signed a new agreement on delivery after *Tovarishch* resumed publication. The weekly newspaper first appeared in 1994 and has a circulation of 9000.

It is clear the decision was not taken by those in charge at the post office," he said. "This is what happened with other publications."

Most opposition publications are printed outside Belarus and organize delivery networks outside the postal system. Similar refusals by the post office have hit the opposition newspapers *Narodnaya Volya* and *Solidarnost*.

Western countries accuse Mr. Lukashenko of closing independent media and harassing journalists. Both the United States and European Union say they will toughen sanctions against the country if next year's election is proved neither free nor fair.

The president, in office since 1994, has vowed to cut short attempts at upheaval like last year's "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine and parliament has passed a law with tough penalties for a variety of offences linked with activism. He has said he will either win next year's poll fairly or go into retirement.

Belarus's small and often divided opposition has nominated independent Alexander Milinkevich as the sole challenger to the president next year.

Source: The Advertiser; December 6, 2005;
http://www.theadvertiser.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5936,17476682%255E1702,00.htm

20. KGB Intimidates Zubr Activist

In Minsk the KGB officers threatened bodily harm to an activist of the "Zubr" movement Yuliya Liskouskaya. About an hour ago two men came to her place of work. They presented themselves as KGB (State Security Committee) officers. They asked her about the resistance movement "Zubr", its activists, printed materials and sources of financing.

After the girl refused to answer, the KGB men turned nasty and started to insult her. One of them said that a "brick can fall on her head". Besides, from the conversation the girl realized that phone lines of some of her friends are wiretapped by the KGB. When Liskouskaya demanded them to call their names, they said that she does not need their names.

Yuliya Liskouskaya plans to submit a complaint to the prosecutor's office.

Source: ZUBR; December 5, 2005; <http://www.zubr-belarus.com/>

21. People Are Forced To Subscribe For State Editions Again

Till January 20 heads and deputy heads of ideology departments of Dzyarzhynsk District enterprises (Minsk Region) must send written accounts to the District Executive Committee. The accounts should describe the results of individual and enterprise subscription for certain state editions. This is written in the official document signed by the head of Dzyarzhynsk District Executive Committee Kadet and dated November 15, 2005.

"In connection with the start of subscription campaign 2006 and taking into account the political importance of this event", Kadet asked the addressees to "take under control the subscription for such editions as *Sovetskaja Belorussija*, *Respublika*, *Zvyazda*, *Minskaja Prawd*a, *Stsia*h *Kastrychnika* and others. Filings of "leading" newspapers should be available at every enterprise", - stressed the author of the letter.

Individual subscription will also be controlled. The head of the Executive Committee ordered to "organize individual subscription with the help of ideology departments and trade union organizations ", and to "give moneyed assistance in subscription for state editions" to veterans and poor people at the expense of the organization.

Source: Belarusian Association of Journalists; December 5 2005; <http://www.baj.ru/>

22. Where Tyranny Rules

Is Belarus, Europe's last dictatorship, ripe for a people's revolution?

Nikolai Statkevich tried to buck the system in 2001: he ran for President of Belarus. The country calls itself democratic, but President Alexander Lukashenko, in power for 11 years, runs it like the last dictatorship in Europe and brooks no challenges to his neo-Stalinist rule. That's why Statkevich, 49, leader of the opposition Social Democratic party, found himself confined to a prison barrack in the town of Baranovichi, 120 km west of Minsk, the nation's capital. Last March, the government sentenced him to three years of forced labor for "resisting the authorities and obstructing traffic" during a protest in October 2003. So now Statkevich rises to the dawn sound of reveille, submits to a body search and roll call, then walks for an hour to a damp, cold shop where he repairs radios. This is the only work authorities will allow Statkevich, who holds a Ph.D. in technical sciences, to do. At 6 p.m. he walks back to prison for the night.

None of that has cowed Statkevich. He meets a Time correspondent during his lunch break in a modest café routinely bugged by the local KGB. (Lukashenko's secret police expressly retained the old Soviet acronym to play on Belarusians' ingrained fears.) But the prisoner of conscience doesn't seem to care what listeners might hear. "They packed me away because I said I would run for the presidency again," he says, looking as trim as the lieutenant colonel of Soviet missile forces he once was. "They assigned me to a room with six brutes, drunk, dirty, unkempt," he says. "In a week I taught them to behave and wash their socks." Then he turns serious. "In these 15 years, the Belarusian people have acquired a national identity and the desire for an independent country of their own. First it was just a minority, then this feeling took over the majority," he says. "The same will happen with democracy. It's the minority who start." Throughout lunch, a plainclothes cop is standing by the window outside. "He is a police major," says Statkevich. "Not a bad guy, but he has to follow the KGB orders."

A KGB of the old school is just part of what makes Lukashenko's Belarus such a throwback to the Soviet past. Statkevich is not the only opposition leader doing time: in the last decade, at least 4,000 citizens have been imprisoned on political charges. Under a law passed in 1998, any word or action interpreted as an offense against the President can be punished by up to five years in jail. Lukashenko's writ is enforced by the highest number of police per capita in Europe, and his government has cracked down hard on human-rights and democracy organizations that criticize him. The U.S. and Europe have repeatedly condemned Belarus as an outpost of tyranny.

Even at the forgotten edge of the Continent, a land where one man ruthlessly controls all state institutions, the economy and the media would seem ripe for the kind of popular uprising that has swept other repressive regimes from power in Ukraine and Georgia. Yet here the public at large seems to show little taste for rebellion. Opinion polls are highly unreliable: some show 60% of the population opposes Lukashenko, but others say 60% support him. The Belarusian character is temperate and slow to anger, and so far, the majority has kept silent.

So Belarus could remain in Lukashenko's grip for some time to come. Last year, in a referendum widely censured as fraudulent, the President rammed through a constitutional change allowing him unlimited terms in office. By next July, he intends to run for his third five-year term, in effect sealing his presidency for life — this in a European country of some 10 million educated, skilled and remarkably law-abiding people. Lukashenko's hold on power is shored up by the Kremlin, where Russia's leaders are as determined as he is to prevent another people's revolution. In an

interview last July on TVTS, a Moscow-based channel, Lukashenko made his position plain: "I will defend my state and my presidential power with weapons."

Even so, dissidents are agitating for change. Ten parties, ranging from nationalists to communists, agreed in October to nominate physicist Alexander Milinkevich, a former university professor and vice mayor of the city of Grodno, as their single candidate to run against Lukashenko. The objective, Milinkevich tells TIME, is simple: "Restoring Belarus to a democracy." But since "free democratic elections are no longer possible in this country," he says, the opposition may try to emulate Ukraine, urging citizens into the streets in a peaceful protest against a rigged vote. The risks of a bloody crackdown are obvious. Nobody wants to die, says Milinkevich, "but living under this dictatorship doesn't leave our children any future either."

When the Soviet Union crumbled in 1991, most people of Belarus were taken aback by their sudden freedom, and shocked by an onslaught of corruption. In 1994, they elected Lukashenko, 51, a former state farm boss, popularly known as the Batska (which means both father and leader). The charismatic member of parliament with a bushy mustache and a talent for fiery oratory built his presidential campaign on a pledge to stamp out corruption, rein in the high-handed bureaucracy and restore ties with Russia. Many voters hoped that such an alliance would ease the burden of cleaning up after the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster next door in Ukraine, which contaminated almost 23% of Belarus and still costs the government nearly 25% of its meager \$3 billion budget.

The Batska promised to prevent Russian-style plunder of the new nation by capitalist oligarchs. But voters never imagined he would take them back to the Stalinist past. Once in office, he rolled back privatization, stifled economic reforms, renationalized most banks, stepped up centralized controls and preserved collective farms. Minsk today looks like the set for a 1950s Soviet movie. Its broad boulevards, designed for military parades and tanks, are clean, orderly — and dull. Monotonous rows of Stalinist apartment blocks line the streets, and there are no traffic jams or bright advertising to bring life to the city. The omnipresent police keep crime in check, but also beat up "undesirables" in broad daylight. Some modern shops stock luxury consumer goods — at least in their windows — but most shoppers earn wages that barely cover staples. At night harsh floodlights glare over silent, empty streets.

Exporting leftover Soviet weapons worldwide and, allegedly, serving as a conduit for illegal arms trafficking from Russia, help keep the Lukashenko state afloat. It is also dependent on Russia for the country's main legitimate source of income: two oil refineries that process cheap Russian crude and sell it to Europe as high-priced diesel and other heavy fuels. All the oil and weapons export revenues flow into the shadowy presidential budget that the Batska personally controls. Otherwise, he claims, unworthy officials would embezzle the money. That makes him "the only oligarch in this country," says Anatoly Lebedko, chair of the opposition United Civil Party (UCP). "He can redistribute profits at will among state-owned and even private enterprises." From these proceeds Lukashenko maintains a Soviet-style welfare state providing basic medical services, education and pensions — though the payouts are meager. Yet relations with Russia remain uneasy: there is no love lost between Lukashenko and Russian President Vladimir Putin, says Andrei Sannikov, former Belarusian Deputy Foreign Minister, and the Kremlin is keen to bring Belarus back into Russia's fold. If Moscow were to shut off the oil, Lukashenko's regime would collapse. But for now, the ornery President holds off another democratic revolution on Russia's borders.

Lukashenko does that the old-fashioned way. Every corner of the 208,000-sq-km country comes under his iron fist. He personally appoints all officials from ministers and regional governors down to village store managers — who are fired or arrested if they fail to deliver. The Batska's authority does not rest on a monolithic party but on a personal ideology, such as it is, based on his own proclamations. A sample: "Private property has the right to exist, but it must be under the state's control." Lukashenko has decreed his views must be taught at schools and universities, and ordered every company, state-run or private, to name a director for ideology who functions as the

regime's political commissar. "The President," says a senior Western diplomat, "controls all levers of power in government as well as in society."

To maintain that supremacy, Lukashenko relies on raw force and on keeping Belarusians dependent on the state. No less than 80% of the population live on federal salaries, pensions, stipends and subsidies. This repressive climate has fueled rumors about the fate of those who oppose the regime. When, in 1999, Gennady Karpenko, a former member of parliament then challenging the President, died of an apparent brain hemorrhage, people were swift to suggest he had been murdered. Three more prominent opposition activists have since disappeared. And in 2000, when a Russian TV cameraman was kidnapped and murdered, some alleged he had been the mistaken victim of a politically motivated assassination. Christos Pourgourides, delegated by the Council of Europe's parliamentary assembly to look into these cases, concluded in a January 2004 report that top state officials took steps "to cover up these disappearances" and "may themselves be involved." All such charges have been flatly denied by Lukashenko and his aides.

In public, Belarusian citizens display a remarkable indifference to the rigors of their life. At home, though, they're grumbling. Alex, a small businessman who refused to give his last name, says he envies the freedom people have "to make money and live" in Ukraine. "They don't have to pay bribes now, they are no longer afraid of the police, fire inspectors, tax officials and other extortionists," he says. Tanya Trupsh, 38, a former television journalist, quit her job when private stations lost their independence. "You're free to say whatever you please," she says, "as long as you don't say it in public." Sometimes it's not enough to keep things private. Last August the KGB raided the apartments of several students who had e-mailed each other cartoons lampooning Lukashenko. The youths now face trial and stiff prison terms. Late last month, the rubber-stamp legislature passed a bill outlawing virtually every form of political dissent and authorizing wider use of pretrial detention, and stiffer jail sentences. It will come into effect just as the presidential election campaign kicks off. "Of course you'll elect me," the Batska declared earlier this month. "What else can you do?"

Western nations have criticized Lukashenko's regime, but have done little else. Last April, while attending a nato meeting in Lithuania, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice called Belarus "the last remaining true dictatorship in the heart of Europe," and said "it is time for change to come." Lukashenko and other officials have been barred from traveling to the U.S. and Europe, and last month, the European Union threatened Belarus with sanctions for suppressing freedom of speech. Still, Belarus' opposition leaders fret that Western governments do not do enough about the country's plight. "We're not a pivotal area, like Ukraine," says Milinkevich, "so the world doesn't really care."

It won't be easy for Belarusians to free themselves. The opposition parties that still exist are not allowed to publish newspapers, and face routine police harassment. Their ranks have dwindled to several thousand members. But leaders are hoping that a show of unity behind one candidate might make a difference at the polls. Even so, Milinkevich is already looking beyond the July vote. He says a senior law-enforcement official told him privately that the police might switch sides if tens of thousands march against a rigged election.

Lukashenko is convinced Belarusians prefer his stability and government handouts. He knows how to make small, insignificant gestures. Late last month, after a Swedish diplomat visited Statkevich in a very public show of solidarity, Lukashenko allowed the dissident to spend his nights at home with his seriously ill father. But his days are still spent in forced labor. And as long as Lukashenko is President, real freedom will remain elusive for Statkevich — and 10 million other Belarusians.

Source: Yuri Zarakhovich, Time.Com; December 4, 2004; <http://www.time.com/time/europe>

23. Belarusian Prosecutors Interrogate Prominent Sociologist

Belarusian investigators on 1 December questioned Professor Aleh Manayeu, head of the Vilnius-based Independent Institute for Socioeconomic and Political Studies (NISEPI), in connection with his recent press articles about the popularity ratings of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka and opposition presidential candidate Alyaksandr Milinkevich, RFE/RL's Belarus Service reported.

NISEPI was forced to move to Lithuania after Belarusian authorities closed down the polling agency in April. NISEPI participated in conducting an independent exit poll during the October 2004 constitutional referendum, which suggested that Lukashenka actually lost the plebiscite and should not run for a third term in.

Last month the Belarusian government issued a directive requiring that all pollsters who plan to conduct surveys concerning national referendums, presidential and parliamentary elections, and the political situation in the country, and then make public their results through mass media, should apply for accreditation to a special panel under the Belarusian National Academy of Sciences. "Someone in the top echelons of power is trying to do everything possible to prevent all poll results, apart from those obtained by government-controlled pollsters, from being published in the press," Manayeu told RFE/RL.

Source: RFE/RL; December 2, 2005; <http://www.rferl.org>

24. Belarusian KGB: Foreign Mass Media Will be Left without Accreditation and Expelled from Belarus

The chairman of the KGB (State Security Committee) of Belarus Stsyapan Sukharenka stated that the KGB has information confirming existence of illegal groups that at one point can incite mass riot in the country. "The work is underway, and I hesitate to speak of concrete figures, but very many young people got under influence of destructive forces," the chairman of the KGB said to journalists on Friday. Speaking about the legal responsibility for "fraudulent representation of situation in the Republic of Belarus" in reference to foreign mass media in the country, the head of the KGB said that in this case "foreign mass media would be deprived of accreditation and expelled from the country". As for Belarusian journalists, contributing to the foreign mass media, Stsyapan Sukharenka stated: "They should read the law and think it over".

Commenting on the draft law, passed by the illegitimate "chamber of representatives" on Friday, which introduce criminal responsibility for discrediting Belarus and its government authorities, Stsyapan Sukharenka noted that "these amendments are not tailor-made for a certain person". "Nobody set an objective to limit somebody's actions, but we were trying to make these actions civilized, within the law, and not damaging the interests of the state," he said.

The KGB chief emphasized that "there would be a reaction for concrete actions". Stsyapan Sukharenka vigorously opposes the comparison of the adopted law with the situation of Stalin-time mass repressions. "All the time we are being intimidated by the 1937, we are always compared to the year 1937. But such norms exist in many countries, and they are considerably harsher, and nobody speaks of the years 37th or 38th," Stsyapan Sukharenka says.

As said by him, "we are speaking of those elements which are really forming now, and one time they can take to the streets; that's why we are taking preventive measures".

As said by him, "we have enough information, and we have prepared a number of interesting materials, which have been submitted to the deputies, so that they could bring it to the attention of their voters and told about our viewpoint to the situation".

Source: Charter97; December 2, 2005; <http://www.charter97.org/eng/>

25. Belarus: Distribution of Independent Weekly *Solidarnost* Cut Off

The independent weekly paper *Solidarnost* lost its distribution network on 29 November when Minobsajuzdruk, the Minsk subsidiary of the national press handling firm Belsayuzdruk, cancelled in writing a contract it had signed two months earlier with the paper for all of next year. No reason was given. Three weeks ago the state post office cancelled a contract for mailing copies to subscribers.

The paper has been forced to print outside the country, in Smolensk (Russia), since the state printing firm Krasnaya Zvezda refused to renew its contract. *Solidarnost* and the country's only opposition daily, *Narodnaya Volya*, no longer have a legal way to distribute in Belarus.

"It's now impossible to print and circulate independent papers," *Solidarnost* editor Aleksandr Starikevich told Reporters Without Borders. "What kind of media can survive in this country?"

Only the weeklies *Belorusy i Rynok* and *Belgazeta* have so far escaped the repeated attacks on the independent press and continue to be sold on the streets and sent through the post.

Source: *Noticias.info*; December 1, 2005; <http://www.noticias.info/>

BUSINESS

26. MTS Belarus Has Now 2 mln Subscribers

MTS Belarus has conducted a press-conference in Minsk regarding MTS' 2 millionth subscriber. Speaking at the press conference, Minister of Communications and Informatization of Belarus Vladimir Goncharenko emphasized that company's success was due to joint efforts of MTS and Ministry.

MTS president Vasili Sidorov said that the company's strategic objective in Belarus is to remain a company having the biggest number of subscribers and to get more profit than any other mobile operator in Belarus.

Vasili Sidorov informed that ARPU per one MTS subscriber in Belarus totals 11 USD, while for Russia this figure is 2 dollars smaller. MTS is planning to invest USD 145 mln into its network development in Belarus in 2006. In total, during the three years of MTS operations in Belarus, the company has invested USD 250 mln.

Source: *Mikhail Doroshevich, E-Belarus.ORG*; December 7, 2005; www.e-belarus.org

The Belarus Update is a weekly news bulletin 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, 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.
