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International League for Human Rights

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DOMESTIC

1. Belarus President Orders To Investigate Expediency of Exit Visas

The Belarusian president met with chief of the Constitutional Court Grigoriy Vasilevich on December 20.

The Belarusian president's press service told BelTA, Grigoriy Vasilevich informed the head of state about performance of the Constitutional Court in 2005, response to appeals of individuals. In the period the Constitutional Court has received over 2 thousand appeals signed by over 6 thousand citizens of Belarus. On the whole, the appeals mainly touched upon social and economic sphere, taxation, protection of citizens' rights by criminal procedure laws. For example, there were appeals related to personal numbers in passports, the status of Ozarichi German camp, where Belarusians were kept, compensation of depreciated deposits.

Last year the Constitutional Court also considered 29 parliamentary inquiries, analyzed 46 bills. The head of state emphasized the necessity for responsible bodies to treat individual appeals carefully. He also charged the court with investigating the expediency of exit visas, which Belarusians need to leave the country, as well as the possibility to treat some kinds of labour as part of the record of service.

The president pointed out, the Constitutional Court can more actively contribute to the improvement of the Belarusian legislation and thus to the protection of rights and freedoms of citizens.

Grigori Vasilevich noted, in the near future the Constitutional Court will complete writing a report on the compliance of Belarusian laws with the constitution. The document is expected to be sent for the president's consideration in January 2006. After considering it, the head of state will give orders to responsible bodies to improve law-making practices and law enforcement in the country.

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

2. Belarus: Early Presidential Vote Likely Means Sparse Candidate List

Lawmakers in Belarus last week set the date of the country's presidential election not for July, as had been earlier suggested, but for 19 March. That decision leaves potential candidates with far less time to prepare for the race. Hopefuls now have just three days (until 23 December) to meet the first requirement in the registration process -- collecting the names of at least 100 supporters to form a nomination group. Critics say the earlier date is part of a strategy by incumbent President Alyaksandr Lukashenka to ensure his reelection to a third term and to deflate the threat of the political opposition.

In addition to Lukashenka, there are currently five potential candidates vying for a spot on Belarus's presidential ballot.

By 27 December -- when the nomination groups are formally announced -- there may be fewer. And by the 19 March vote, fewer still.

One challenger expected to stay on the ballot is Alyaksandr Milinkevich, the candidate of the united opposition forces.

Milinkevich announced his intention to enter the race in early October. Since then, he has conducted a grass roots campaign to build a support base, often going door-to-door in an attempt to meet potential voters.

Milinkevich is better prepared than most -- his nomination group will have far beyond the minimum 100 people required for registration. Still, he told RFE/RL's Belarus Service the new, early date for the presidential vote is a setback nonetheless.

"To include people in your nomination group, you need to talk with each of them [to make sure] they won't resign afterwards," Milinkevich said. "We have had our list of activists for a long time already. This work is being done now, [but] the group will not be as large as I had expected. I thought that by the summer we could have as many as 10,000 people. We will have fewer people [now]. However, they will be numbered in thousands, not hundreds."

Few observers were surprised by the decision to move up the date of the election -- or that the move was announced one day after Lukashenka met with his counterpart, Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Post-Soviet Revolutions

Russia, wary of a new "color revolution" in its post-Soviet backyard, is determined to see Lukashenka remain in power. It is also eager to gain greater control of Belarusian gas pipelines -- something it can do best with a pliable ally in the presidential office.

In return, it is providing Belarusians with some of the cheapest natural gas in the Commonwealth of Independent States -- while very publicly subjecting Orange Revolution Ukraine and Rose Revolution Georgia to fierce price hikes.

Lukashenka orchestrated his own reelection bid with a public referendum in October 2004. The poll, which was widely criticized in the West, allowed him to seek an unprecedented third term.

Few expect him to lose. But Milinkevich and other potential candidates -- like Syarhey Haydukevich, leader of the Belarusian Liberal Democratic Party -- hope to use the election to draw attention to what they say are Belarus's growing ranks of the politically and socially discontent.

"I will gather a nomination group as I have promised; I'm obliged to show that [my party] has the necessary structures. But I haven't made a decision yet. If it turns out that the situation isn't serious, I won't take part [in the election]," Haydukevich said.

Candidate hopefuls also include Alyaksandr Kazulin, leader of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Hramada); Zyanon Paznyak, the exiled leader of the Conservative Christian Party; and former General Valery Fralou, who as an opposition lawmaker staged a hunger strike in 2004.

They have until 23 December to turn in their nomination group lists. Those that manage to qualify for registration will be announced on 27 December. Then each group will have just four weeks (29 December-27 January) to gather at least 100,000 signatures needed for a candidate to be formally added to the ballot.

The early election date has other potential consequences as well. Some observers have suggested the earlier date is meant to keep Belarus off the radar of the international community, which will be focused on Ukraine, where parliamentary elections will be held just one week later. It is not yet certain if international election monitors will be on hand for the Belarusian ballot. The Lukashenka regime has accused foreign organizations of seeking to influence the outcome by providing funds and other aid to the opposition.

Mikalya Lazavik, secretary of the country's Central Election Commission, told RFE/RL's Belarus Service that monitors will be present -- as long as they have no political agenda.

"If they want to come here as observers, and not as participants in the political process, then why not? We're always open to cooperation," Lazavik said.

Both the European Union and the United States have called for the vote to be free and fair, and pledged, if it is not, to toughen sanctions against Lukashenka's administration.

Source: Daisy Sindelar, RFE/RL; December 20, 2005; <http://www.rferl.org>

3. Second Candidate to Challenge Lukashenko for Belarus Presidency

Former Belarusian MP, General Valery Frolov, has announced that he will run for the presidency in the ex-Soviet state's elections next March, RIA Novosti reported. He is only the second candidate to challenge current president Alexander Lukashenko, described by the West as a dictator.

Frolov will hand over all the necessary documents to the Central Election Commission just before the deadline on Dec 23. Currently he is a member of the opposition Social Democratic party, but will leave it if its leader Alexander Kozulin also runs for president. The latter does not rule out that possibility, but it is unclear how he will manage to gather the documents in time.

Currently, Lukashenko has only one rival who has officially registered— Alexander Milinkevich, who represents a grouping of opposition movements.

Source: MosNews.Com, December 20, 2005; www.mosnews.com

4. French Faces, Farewell: Belarus Has Beauties of Its Own

Something has changed on the boulevards of this city, though it is not so easy to spot at first. This much can be said: Cindy Crawford, reported to be a precipitating cause, has disappeared from Minsk's billboards. So have the likes of Kate Moss or "those Frenchwomen with grubby faces."

That, anyway, was how President Aleksandr G. Lukashenko put it a year ago when he bemoaned the propagation of foreign models on billboards "at every road crossing, including where the president drives."

In a country where political power is absolute, where public dissent is not tolerated, where an all-encompassing, Soviet-like state controls what it pleases, Mr. Lukashenko's remarks eventually became a decree and then the law. Models who appear in public advertisements - whether on billboards, on television, in newspapers or magazines - must now be Belarusian.

"Photograph ours there and let them advertise the watches of our factories and imported watches, too," Mr. Lukashenko said. "Let them pay our girls."

The new law, which took effect in April, has roiled Belarus's modeling and advertising industries. Accompanying the citizenship requirements for models, all modeling schools and agencies were required to seek new licenses. And those were not forthcoming.

Sergey Nagorny's agency, the country's most prominent, received its license only last month. It was the second, after the state's newly created agency, the National School of Beauty. Before the law, there were 25.

Companies with well-planned promotional campaigns also had to scramble to comply, often by significantly revising their ads. "We have had difficulties in getting models for shoots," said Raman Lapchuk, an account manager for Hepta Group Publicis, an advertising agency here that represents such international companies as Renault, L'Oréal and Hewlett-Packard.

In some cases, he said, "We just used images without humans."

Mr. Lukashenko's decrees are often the subject of ridicule - openly abroad, less so here - but the campaign against foreign models is an example of how he maintains power, appealing to populist or nationalist sentiments even as he exerts greater control over economic, social and political life here.

Not long ago he decreed that at least 75 percent of songs played on radio stations must be Belarusian. It was an autocratic whim, perhaps, but one that was popular among musicians who received more exposure on the air.

"Each system has its own logic," said Pavel Daneyko, director of the Institution for Privatization and Management, a private consulting agency.

On the streets of Minsk, the visible results have not exactly been dramatic.

The modeling law coincided with new state advertising campaigns that included tributes to the 60th anniversary of the Soviet victory in World War II and paeans to the Interior Ministry. ("We are always next to you," one says in a message larded with double meaning here in what is considered a police state.) Those campaigns have had, arguably, a more noticeable impact on the cityscape.

For those ads featuring models, not militiamen, it is now safe to assume they are Belarusian, even if it is not possible to tell. While Slavic beauty - fair hair, fair skin, sculpted cheekbones - is a recognizable, even fashionable thing, it is difficult to quantify a uniquely Belarusian version of it.

"You do not have to be Belarusian to sell underwear," said Olga Popova, an assistant at Mr. Nargorny's agency.

Mr. Lukashenko's bureaucracy found a solution: every ad must now be submitted for approval to a new committee that requires a copy of the model's passport.

The law had stated motives, including supporting local jobs to campaigning against human trafficking (since at least some modeling agencies have been accused of luring vulnerable young women into prostitution abroad).

But Mr. Lukashenko's critics - at least those who dare to speak out, given that statements discrediting the state will soon be punishable by up to three years in prison - say the real goal was in keeping with his drive to limit contact with the outside world, especially Europe and the United States.

A new law passed by the lower house of Parliament last week, for example, would impose restrictions on Internet dating and marriage agencies, especially those catering to foreigners. It would also restrict college students from studying abroad without permission from the Education Ministry.

"There is a general trend that the government wants to control the social sphere in every way," said Andrei Dynko, the editor of *Nasha Niva*, an independent newspaper with a precarious future after a decree ending its right to be distributed through the state postal system.

Still, Mr. Lukashenko's decree on models has support.

Olga V. Seryozhnikova, director of the National School of Beauty, said the law had brought order to a chaotic, at times exploitive, industry. Instead of using foreign models on ads typically prepared abroad, companies must now hire locals, at \$25 to \$50 a shoot.

More importantly, said Ms. Seryozhnikova, who is a former model, those in the business now have a formal title in the country's Soviet-like labor classifications. They are now called "models (clothing demonstrators)," with what was and is again known as a labor record, a necessity to receive a pension later in life.

"It will be like it was in Soviet times," she said.

An obvious beneficiary of the change would seem to be Olga Antropova, crowned Miss Belarus last year. She is already the celebrity face of a Belarusian lingerie company, Serge. The law, she said, should help Belarusians "to realize themselves."

Belarus, though, remains a poor country, with few prospects for free-market expansion, given that the state controls some 80 percent of business. Mr. Lukashenko's decree might create more opportunities for models here, but as Ms. Popova said, "No decree can turn Minsk into a modeling center of the world."

Those with prospects do what aspiring models do everywhere. They head to Paris, New York or other fashion centers.

Miss Belarus, perhaps the most recognizable face in the country, except for Mr. Lukashenko's, has recently accepted a job with a modeling agency in Miami.

Source: Steven Lee Myers, The New York Times; December 19, 2005; <http://www.nytimes.com/>

5. Five Want To Run Against Incumbent in Belarus's Presidential Election

Following last week's scheduling of a presidential vote for 19 March 2006, the Central Election Commission said it will register nomination groups to collect signatures in support of presidential candidates until 23 December, Belapan reported.

To get on the ballot, a presidential contender needs to collect at least 100,000 voter signatures. Apart from democratic opposition candidate Alyaksandr Milinkevich, who was selected in October to challenge President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, four more aspirants have signaled their intention to run.

They are lawmaker Syarhey Haydukevich, leader of the Belarusian Liberal Democratic Party; Alyaksandr Kazulin, leader of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Hramada); former Foreign Minister Pyotr Krauchanka; and Zyanon Paznyak, exiled leader of the Conservative Christian Party. The 61-year-old Paznyak has been living abroad since 1996, when he fled the country for fear of being jailed.

Source: RFE/RL; December 19, 2005; <http://www.rferl.org>

6. Over 440 Belarusian Towns, Villages Having Blackout

Power supplies have stopped to over 440 towns and villages in the Brest and Grodno regions of Belarus because of heavy snowfalls.

"Wet snow damaged power lines, and lights are down," a source in the Belarusian Emergency Situations Ministry told Itar-Tass.

Snowfalls have also increased the rate of traffic accidents, and Minsk had over 100 of them on Saturday.

Weathermen said that the conditions would hardly improve on Monday.

Source: Itar-Tass; December 18, 2005; <http://www.itar-tass.com/eng/>

7. Belarus Sets Date for Presidential Election That Opposition Calls Its 'Last Chance'

The Parliament in Belarus voted Friday to hold the country's next presidential election in March, opening an accelerated campaign between its authoritarian leader, Aleksandr G. Lukashenko, and a beleaguered opposition movement.

The election will be a watershed for Belarus, which Mr. Lukashenko has led since 1994 with an increasingly repressive hand. He has revived symbols and policies of the country's Soviet past, eroded personal and political freedoms and stifled all forms of dissent.

The democratic opposition - now unified behind a single candidate, Aleksandr Milinkevich - has called for a free election, but its leaders doubt that one will take place. They have increasingly focused their attention on mobilizing people for mass protests like those in Ukraine last year after that country's fraudulent presidential election.

"If our campaign is effective, then we will get people out into the street," Mr. Milinkevich said in an interview this week while campaigning in the western Belarusian city of Brest. "This is the last chance for us, the last battle."

The election has raised the specter of a new and possibly violent confrontation over democracy following popular upheavals in two other post-Soviet nations, Georgia and Ukraine, and more suspect elections recently in two others, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan.

With 10 million people, Belarus borders new members of the European Union that have openly called for democratic change there, as has the United States. During a meeting with President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia in May, President Bush called for "free and fair elections" in Belarus. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice called Belarus "the last true dictatorship in central Europe."

"It is time for change to come," she said in April.

Mr. Lukashenko is eligible to run again only because of a constitutional amendment approved in a referendum in October 2004 that abolished presidential term limits, allowing him to seek office indefinitely. That referendum approval, officially supported by 77 percent of voters, was widely denounced as a fraud. An independent survey of voters leaving polling places indicated that only 48 percent had voted in favor of abolishing term limits.

Mr. Lukashenko has responded defiantly to international criticism. With the election approaching, his government has put independent newspapers under new pressure by revoking their ability to be sold through state-owned kiosks or delivered through the state postal system.

The two houses of Parliament also toughened criminal penalties for organizing protests, joining banned organizations or speaking against the national interest. The legislation, awaiting Mr. Lukashenko's signature, would impose prison sentences of up to three years for anyone convicted of advocating the overthrow of the government and up to two years for "discrediting the country."

Parliament voted to set the election for March 19 in a hastily called session. Under the country's Constitution, twice revised by Mr. Lukashenko, the next election could have been held as late as July. But with Mr. Milinkevich's campaign showing signs of winning popular support, according to its own polls, many of his aides believed that Mr. Lukashenko would move to compress the election campaign.

Nikolai I. Lozovik, a spokesman for the Central Election Commission, said in a telephone interview that the date had been set because of more prosaic concerns: "July is the time of vacations." He added that March elections were "an old Soviet tradition."

The Parliament's vote came a day after Mr. Lukashenko met with Mr. Putin in the Black Sea resort of Sochi. Mr. Lukashenko was quoted by news agencies as saying he would discuss the elections with the Russian leader. Although the two men have had chilly relations at times, Mr. Putin has been a reliable ally.

The Kremlin, dismayed by the Orange Revolution in Ukraine that overturned an initial victory by a Russian-backed candidate, appears unlikely to break with Mr. Lukashenko to support an opposition candidate promising democratic, economic and political reforms.

In a telephone interview after the vote on Friday, Mr. Milinkevich said the earlier election date would curtail his time to travel and meet voters in person - something essential to his campaign because of a blackout on state television and radio.

An abbreviated campaign could also limit the influence of foreign assistance, including nearly \$12 million pledged by the United States to support civic and political groups, though not Mr. Milinkevich directly.

At the same time, Mr. Milinkevich said the decision to hold elections in March underscored the government's concern over signs that popular support for Mr. Lukashenko has waned after nearly 12 years in power.

"This decision is more evidence of their uncertainty," he said of Mr. Lukashenko and his circle. "They realize they cannot win in honest competition."

Source: Steven Lee Myers, The New York Times; December 17, 2005; <http://www.nytimes.com/>

8. Belarus Opposition Calls Special Meeting To Discuss Elections

The election headquarters of the Belarusian opposition is holding an emergency meeting in response to the parliament's decision to move up the date of the presidential elections, a United Civil Party spokesperson said Friday.

Earlier today, the Belarusian parliament set the date of the elections for March 19, 2006, though they were previously expected to be held in June.

Opposition leader Alexander Milinkevich is on his way to the capital, returning from a campaign tour around the Brest Region.

According to an opposition member, the decision to move up the elections shows a lack of confidence on the part of incumbent President Alexander Lukashenko due to growing criticism of his ruling style among the Belarusian population.

"It [the earlier date] is an attempt to give the opposition less time to conduct the election campaign," the opposition member concluded.

Source: Olesya Luchaninova, RIA Novosti, December 16, 2005; <http://en.rian.ru>

9. Belarus To Set Up Public Agency To Create and Maintain the Electronic State Register

Ivan Rak, deputy Minister of Communications and Informatization of Belarus has recently informed BelTA that Belarus will set up a public enterprise to create and maintain electronic state information resources and systems by the mid of 2006.

The new body, subordinate to the department of the Informatization of the Ministry of Communications and Informatization, will create and maintain the state electronic information resource services through integration of information systems and organization of the inter-agency interactions.

The new agency will be the holder of the electronic Register of the population. According to Ivan Rak, Belarus is going to use the experience of Moldova's Registru agency.

Source: Mikhail Doroshevich, E-Belarus.ORG; December 16, 2005; www.e-belarus.org

10. Minsk Police To Visit Homes In Santa Suits

Police in Minsk will soon launch a holiday season campaign to improve their tough image by making random early evening visits to homes dressed "in an unexpected costume" (typically, Father Christmas and a female assistant), dpa reported on 15 December, citing Interfax.

The program is called "Who's There? It's the Policeman Santa Claus!" and will run from 19-23 December. The callers will ask "security related" questions and award gifts for correct answers, according to the police.

One goal of the project is to "raise the level of security-consciousness among Minsk citizens," and home owners "will have the opportunity to place their residences in police registers from the comfort of their own sofas."

The police announcement concluded that "a visit from 'Santa in a police uniform' will be a special holiday for any little Minsk residents in the house." The police and security forces in Belarus are not known for having a cuddly image.

Source: Jan Maksymiuk, RFE/RL; December 16, 2005; <http://www.rferl.org>

11. Belarus Toughens Responsibility for Financing Terrorism

The bill introducing the amendments and addenda to several legal acts to suppress financing of terrorism has been approved today at the second reading at a sitting of the third session of the Chamber of Representatives of the National Assembly of Belarus.

Presenting the bill deputy chairman of the permanent commission on national security Yuri Andreev has noted that the document aims to bring the country's legislation in line with the International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism.

In particular, the amendments to the Criminal Code envisage that "the people providing or collecting the funds, securities or other property for financing of terrorism will be liable to an 8-12 year imprisonment with the sequestration of property. Similar crimes, repeated or committed by an organized group or an official in the exercise of his functions, entail an 8-15 year imprisonment term with sequestration of property. At the same time the bill envisages that a person who has financed terrorism is acquitted of the crime in case he has opportunely reported the crime to the law-enforcing bodies and cooperated in preventing a terrorist act and detecting a crime".

Yuri Andreev added that the bill nails down the terms "financing of terrorism" and "a terrorist organization".

The decision on recognizing an organization as a terrorist organization will be taken by the Supreme Court of Belarus upon application of the Office of General Prosecutor. In this case the activity of the organization is banned in the country and the organization is liquidated."

Source: The National Centre of Legal Information of the Republic of Belarus; December 15, 2005; <http://law.by/work/Eng/>

REGIONAL

12. Moscow To Increase Investments in Belarus

Moscow is ready to invest in Belarus' housing construction industry, the city mayor Yuri Luzhkov said today at the Belarus-Moscow business cooperation council meeting in the Russian capital. The city also plans to increase investments in Belarusian cement production and its exports to the Moscow market.

A delegation of construction and investment specialists from Moscow will visit Belarus in January 2006 to promote economic and trade cooperation between the two states, the mayor added. Moscow and Belarus are also interested in building large warehouses in Moscow to be used by Belarusian producers.

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

13. Russia/Belarus: Where Do We Go From Here?

It has been nearly 10 years since Russia and Belarus declared their will to form a common state. In September, Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka promised "landmark" decisions to be taken by the end of this year regarding Belarus's integration with Russia. However, his meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin last week did not provide any clue as to what those decisions might be.

It was long expected that Lukashenka and Putin would meet in Moscow, in mid-November or mid-December, within the framework of the Higher Council of the Russia-Belarus Union State. That forum also includes the prime ministers and foreign ministers of both countries.

Back in September, Lukashenka suggested that this upcoming meeting would be "significant, momentous, and landmark, particularly in furthering our unity."

But Lukashenka's meeting with Putin in the Russian sea resort of Sochi on 15 December was held at very short notice. And, contrary to expectations, it was devoted to economic matters, not political. At least this transpires from what Putin told reporters after the meeting.

"I want to confirm our agreements regarding relations between our financial agencies. You will recall our talks about the need to support our Belarusian partners and achieve balanced decisions with respect to energy supplies," Putin said. "The Russian government has prepared the necessary documents and I hope they will be adopted by the end of this year."

Primacy Of Politics

Did Lukashenka really want to meet Putin just to confirm that Belarus will receive Russian gas in 2006 at the same price as this year, that is, at \$46.68 per 1,000 cubic meters? Putin promised not to increase this price for Belarus as early as in April, and Gazprom officials have reconfirmed this pledge on more than one occasion.

It was indirectly confirmed that Lukashenka may have discussed political issues with Putin when, the following day, Belarus's lower house of parliament hastily and unexpectedly announced that next year's presidential election will take place on 19 March. The election will take place four months ahead of the latest date allowed for the vote by the country's constitution.

Many Belarusian and Russian commentators have said that Lukashenka met with Putin primarily to communicate his decision to hold the presidential election at an earlier date and seek the Kremlin's approval for his anticipated third term. Whatever answer he might have received from Putin, Lukashenka looked rather pleased when thanking the Russian president for continuing gas and oil supplies at discount prices.

"I want to thank you, Vladimir Vladimirovich [Putin], because your government and your energy companies have carried out your order and we have practically finalized our contract for gas and oil supplies to Belarus. We have learned to save, and to save well. This year we may have not

even imported the agreed volumes of gas and oil in full because our supplies have been sufficient for our economy," Lukashenka said.

Colored Revolutions

It is likely that, once again, Putin will back Lukashenka's bid for the presidency. After the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003 and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004, Moscow seems to have developed an allergy for any other "colored revolution" in the post-Soviet area. Therefore, Lukashenka, a loyal political ally of Russia since his inauguration in 1994, could count on the Kremlin's political and economic support for his reelection this time as well.

It is not clear, however, what Lukashenka had to promise to Putin in exchange for such support. Last year, Moscow unambiguously indicated that it wants control over Beltranshaz, the state-run operator of Belarus's gas pipeline network. Lukashenka, who promised in 2002 to set up a Belarusian-Russian venture to run Belarusian gas pipelines, backed down on his decision in 2004. That provoked an angry response from Gazprom, which even cut off Belarus's gas flow for one day.

Earlier this month in Moscow, Belarusian Deputy Prime Minister Uladzimir Syamashka said the talks about the purchase of a stake in Beltranshaz by Gazprom have been reopened.

The most recent Lukashenka-Putin meeting also appears to signal that Moscow has shifted its attention from political to economic issues in its relations with Minsk even further than before. Earlier this month, Russia-Belarus Union State Secretary Pavel Borodin divulged to journalists that both sides are currently working on no fewer than nine versions of the Constitutional Act of both states, that is, a common-state constitution. However, neither Lukashenka nor Putin found it necessary to say a word about this issue after their talks in Sochi.

This may not be so surprising when one recalls that Russia's clearest stance so far on integration with Belarus was formulated by Putin in August 2002. Putin then proposed an "ultimate unification" of both states by incorporating Belarus into the Russian Federation as a whole or dividing it into seven new federal regions. Arguably, such a form of integration hardly needs any additional constitution at all.

At that time Lukashenka indignantly rejected this incorporation proposal. But will he be able to withstand such an integration scenario during his anticipated third term, when economic considerations might force the Kremlin to increase gas prices for Russia's staunchest post-Soviet ally as well?

Source: Jan Maksymiuk, RFE/RL; December 19, 2005; <http://www.rferl.org>

14. Russia-Belarus Union Programs Financing Exceeds \$85 Mln in 2005

Russia and Belarus spent more than 2.5 billion rubles (\$87 million) on bilateral programs, or 90% of the Belarus-Russia union state's budget in 2005, the Belarusian prime minister said Monday.

Speaking at a session of the union state's council of ministers, Sergei Sidorsky said the funds had been used for 40 programs and other joint events in 2005. He added that Russia and Belarus had signed 18 documents to promote trade and business cooperation within the union state, which was founded in 1997 but largely remains on paper.

In addition, Sidorsky said the two countries had made a stride toward ensuring equal rights for Russian and Belarusian citizens, which had brought them closer to signing a raft of agreements in this field.

Russia and Belarus, which retain their sovereignty, formed the union to foster political and economic integration, in particular by standardizing taxes and tariffs. However, much of the initial

enthusiasm that greeted the original declarations when presidents Boris Yeltsin and Alexander Lukashenko signed the documents seems to have been lost. Belarus was to have adopted the Russian ruble as a single currency for the state this year, but the move has been postponed.

Source: RIA Novosti, December 19, 2005; <http://en.rian.ru>

15. Russia Hopes Its New Belarus Ambassador Will Assume Office In Early 2006 - Diplomatic Source

Russia will soon launch the process for the coordination and accreditation of its new ambassador to Belarus, a source from the Russian Foreign ministry told Interfax on Monday.

"According to the rules of procedure the Russian State Duma gives its consent to appoint a diplomat, then Russia sends its agreement," the source said, adding that "the two sides had no problems with the new Russian proposal, former governor of the Altai region Alexander Surikov."

"I hope that the new ambassador will assume office early in the new year," the source said.

Source: Interfax; December 19, 2005; <http://www.interfax.ru/e>

16. Russia, Belarus Agree on Gas Export Terms, Ukraine Still in Negotiations

Russia and Belarus have agreed on the terms of Russian natural gas exports in 2006. Next year Belarus will buy 21 billion cubic meters of Russian natural gas for a reduced price of \$46.68 per 1,000 cubic meters. Russia's natural gas monopoly Gazprom and the Belarusian state-owned gas pipeline operator Beltransgaz have received orders to draw up the relevant agreement.

Monday, Dec. 19, is the decisive moment of the gas dispute between Russia and Ukraine. MosNews has reported on several occasions that the two countries have been unable to reach agreement over the terms of future deliveries of Russian gas to Ukraine and of its transit through Ukrainian territory to Europe. Kiev has been buying Russian natural gas at the price of 50 dollars per 1,000 cubic meters up until now and paying for a large portion of deliveries in barter for gas transit services.

Numerous political observers agree that following the Orange Revolution when pro-Kremlin candidate Viktor Yanukovich lost the Ukrainian presidential elections Russian authorities want to "punish" Ukraine with new gas delivery conditions.

Russian monopoly Gazprom demanded that all payments are from now on made in cash and not barter and suggested that beginning next year Ukraine starts to pay \$160 per 1,000 cubic meters for Russian gas. After the Ukrainian authorities refused to consider such a price, Gazprom raised the price to \$230, saying that is what the average gas price for European consumers will be next year.

On Monday, Dec. 19, Ukrainian Prime Minister Yuri Yekhanurov came to Moscow to negotiate the gas issue with his Russian counterpart Mikhail Fradkov. It is unclear at the moment what will be the result of negotiations, but the president of the Russian think-tank Energy and Finance Institute, Leonid Grigoryev, quoted by the Russian Mayak radio station, said that in his opinion Russia will be able to assert its position.

"I forecast that in the long run Russia will get the gas prices it wants, but Ukraine will insist that the new prices should be introduced gradually over a period of several years. But what will be the final results of the negotiations I cannot say, because Ukraine finds itself in a very difficult position. The Ukrainians will have to radically redefine their domestic policies and their budget to be able to face the new situation. The negotiations will be very difficult. I hope they will end in a compromise," Grigoryev said.

Source: MosNews.Com, December 19, 2005; www.mosnews.com

17. Belarus' Joining SCO Needs To Be Discussed With Members - Putin

The possibility of Belarus joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a regional security body, will have to be discussed by all the member-countries, the Russian president said Friday.

Asked whether Belarus would join the SCO, Vladimir Putin said: "The SCO is an open organization."

However, Putin said the issue had not been raised in his talks with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko Thursday.

Source: RIA Novosti, December 16, 2005; <http://en.rian.ru>

INTERNATIONAL

18. Belarus Rejects Romania's Criticism

Belarus authorities said they view Romania's statements claiming violations of human rights in Belarus as an attempt to divert the international community's attention from the problems in Romania, Belarusian Foreign Ministry spokesman Ruslan Yesin said.

"Romania's statements criticizing Belarus are nothing other than an attempt to divert attention from its own problems and allay the international community's strong suspicions of the gravest violations of human rights on Romanian territory," Yesin said.

The Council of Europe's Ministers Committee, which is currently chaired by Romania, said on Wednesday that the Belarus authorities are not very careful when it comes to human rights. The Ministers' Committee expressed concern over the Belarus' National Assembly's plan to enforce a new law which would amend the Criminal Code.

"The amendment might undermine even more the rights of the people, NGOs, and political parties," the Ministers' Committee stated in a press release.

In addition, the Ministers Committee demanded the Belarusian authorities reconsider their position and reject those provisions that could lead to violations of human rights and freedom.

Source: Denisa Maruntoiu, Bucharest Daily News; December 19, 2005; http://www.daily-news.ro/article_detail.php?idarticle=20549

19. Iran Seeks Closer Cooperation With Belarus in Withstanding Pressure

Iranian Parliament Speaker Gholam Ali Haddad-Adel said at a meeting with Chairman of the Belarusian National Assembly's Chamber of Representatives Vladimir Konoplyov that the two countries need to step up their cooperation in withstanding outside pressure.

"There are various groundless complaints against your country, and we are subject to pressure as well. I believe that independent countries like Belarus and Iran can counter intrigues against them more effectively through joint efforts," the Iranian deputy said.

Iran wants "Belarus to be a powerful state and will never put up with attempts by international organizations to put pressure on your state. Rather, we will help counter such attempts," he said.

"Belarus is a genuinely independent country, and all decisions taken by your nation do not depend on other countries' views," he said, applauding political relations between Belarus and Iran.

Source: *Interfax*; December 16, 2005; <http://www.interfax.ru/e>

20. U.S. Concerned About Media Freedom in Belarus, Central Asia

State's Finley says more progress needed in some OSCE states

The United States again has expressed concern about government treatment of media in several countries that belong to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), particularly Belarus.

"There has been some progress, but much remains to be done throughout the OSCE region," said Julie Finley, U.S. permanent representative to the OSCE, in response to a report December 14 by Miklos Haraszti, the OSCE representative on freedom of the media.

"The number of media outlets means little if only a tiny fraction of their number is genuinely independent," Finley said in Vienna, Austria. The meaning of "independent media," she added, "is that it is not under governmental control and that it can openly, freely put forward views, analysis and commentary from across the spectrum, including those that disagree with government policy."

The ambassador expressed particular concern over the "repressive behavior" of Belarus towards independent media.

"We join Mr. Haraszti in worrying as well about Belarus' looming criminalization of the 'knowing dissemination of false information,'" she said, urging that Belarus "desist from enacting further restrictions on freedom of the media and information."

Finley also cited concerns about the use of administrative harassment to curb media freedom in Central Asia, such as in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, and she discussed U.S. legal safeguards for freedom of the press and freedom of speech in relation to the jailing of then New York Times reporter Judith Miller.

"We submit that the vast amount of press coverage -- pro and con -- of the Miller case is continued proof of the vitality of the media in our country," Finley said.

The ambassador's statement on Looming Enactment of New Repressive Legal Measures in Belarus is available on the Web site of the U.S. Mission to the OSCE.

Following is the text of her remarks:

United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement In Response To the Representative On Freedom Of the Media, Mr. Haraszti

I

As delivered by Ambassador Julie Finley to the Permanent Council, Vienna

December 15, 2005

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Although this is my first opportunity to welcome the Representative of Freedom of the Media to the Permanent Council, I have already had the pleasure of meeting him on many occasions and I have followed his activities closely since assuming my duties here in August. Mr. Haraszti, it is nice to see you here.

The Representative is engaged in many vitally important tasks. We are all familiar with his crusade to have defamation and libel decriminalized in all participating States, to have insult

removed from all civil and criminal codes and his efforts to foster the understanding of citizens' and journalists' rights to access to government-held information.

Mr. Haraszti has also actively promoted freedom of speech on the Internet and now has turned his attention to public service broadcasting.

As his report indicates, there has been some progress, but much remains to be done throughout the OSCE region. Many governments resort to the creative use of statistics to allege that the media are freer than they actually are. The number of media outlets means little if only a tiny fraction of their number is genuinely independent and the national system for disseminating their views is inadequate. Independent media does not mean that it is, necessarily, non-partisan or objective. What it means is that it is not under governmental control and that it can openly, freely put forward views, analysis and commentary from across the spectrum, including those that disagree with government policy. Government-controlled media, in all too many cases, is not more objective or non-partisan than the independent media governments so often attack.

A country of special concern for my government is Belarus. Mr. Haraszti has accurately described that country's repressive behavior. It is difficult to imagine as presidential elections approach next year that the government will not further stifle what little independent media remains. We join Mr. Haraszti in worrying as well about Belarus' looming criminalization of the "knowing dissemination of false information." The United States joins the Office of Freedom of the Media in urging Belarus to desist from enacting further restrictions on freedom of the media and information.

As an annual donor to both the Central Asian and the South Caucasus media conferences, we would like to commend Mr. Haraszti and his team for their continued good work in those regions. Unfortunately, we have noted the use of so-called administrative harassment to curb media freedom in Central Asia. Most prevalent are efforts to complicate the registration of newspapers and the licensing of television. The frequent application of censorship, as has been the case in post-Andijan Uzbekistan, is also a popular government tactic.

We were also dismayed by seizures of independent newspapers in Kazakhstan and the lack of balanced media coverage before the December 4 Presidential election.

The topics chosen by Mr. Haraszti for the South Caucasus Media conference -- public service broadcasting and the Internet-- were timely and relevant. We note that there appears to be a great deal of confusion in the region about what constitutes public service broadcasting. The low level of Internet connectivity in the region and many governments blocking certain Internet sites create a worrisome portrait of media freedom. It is disturbing as well that the practice of blocking Internet sites tends to increase during election campaigns.

In both of the media conferences, participants noted a lack of proper journalistic education and its effect on the quality of journalism practiced in the region. We agree and welcome Mr. Haraszti's initiative to train journalists. We urge the governments of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan to accept his offers of assistance.

Mr. Chairman, we recognize and welcome the fact that Mr. Haraszti's work knows no national boundaries and no artificial geographic divisions. In our reply to his July 2005 report, we extensively reviewed U.S. legal safeguards for freedom of the press and freedom of speech. The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution has been interpreted by the courts to provide journalists with a limited privilege not to disclose their sources or information to litigants who seek to use that information in court. In the case *Branzburg v. Hayes*, the Supreme Court held that reporters did not have the right to refuse to answer a grand jury's questions directly related to criminal conduct that a journalist might have been aware of. It has been held that the *Judith Miller* case falls precisely into that category.

You are no doubt aware that subsequent developments in the Judith Miller case have prompted much debate in our country. It is reported that soon The New York Times will be issuing new, stricter guidelines on the anonymity of sources. There is also a congressional proposal for a Federal shield law. We submit that the vast amount of press coverage -- pro and con -- of the Miller case is continued proof of the vitality of the media in our country.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman

Source: Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State; December 15, 2005; <http://usinfo.state.gov>

21. Statement on Looming Enactment of New Repressive Legal Measures in Belarus

As delivered by Ambassador Julie Finley to the Permanent Council, Vienna

December 15, 2005

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

A U.S. State Department press statement of December 2nd expressed deep concern over new proposed amendments to Belarus' criminal code that would further institutionalize government repression. We take this opportunity to reiterate our dismay with the continued advancement of these amendments through the Belarusian legislature.

The amendments were explicitly initiated by President Lukashenko and include a new article on "Discrediting the Republic of Belarus" that would establish tough penalties for disseminating allegedly false information about the country. There are also new penalties for participating in activities of liquidated or suspended organizations or for preparing for so-called group actions that violate public order.

Belarus has a record of enacting laws with vaguely-defined definitions of proscribed activities and applying them in a political fashion against independent civil society, political parties and media, which lack recourse to an independent judiciary. It is clear that the amendments are aimed at intimidating Belarusian society and critics of the regime in the run-up to the Belarusian presidential elections in 2006.

Enactment and implementation of this new legislation threatens to violate any number of OSCE commitments on freedom of expression, assembly and association. Numerous distinguished individuals and organizations have expressed similar concerns, including the OSCE Office in Minsk; the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media; Adrian Severin, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Belarus; the EU; and the International Helsinki Federation.

The United States joins them in calling on Belarus, once again, to desist from enacting these new repressive legal measures and to take concrete steps to fully comply with its OSCE commitments in the human dimension.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Source: United States Mission to the OSCE; December 15, 2005; <http://osce.usmission.gov/>

22. OSCE Office To Open an Aarhus Public Environmental Information Centre in Minsk

The first Aarhus Centre in Belarus, which aims to raise the public's awareness of environmental issues and encourage participation in decision-making, will open on 20 December in Minsk.

It is the result of a joint project between the OSCE Office in Minsk and the Ministry of Environment. Vice Minister Aleksander Apatsky and Ambassador Ake Peterson of the OSCE Office will take part in the opening.

The 1998 Aarhus Convention, which Belarus supports, establishes a number of environment-related public rights and calls on authorities to promote them. It helps enhance the information conveyed to the civil society on environmental matters, encourages citizens to participate in discussions and decisions in the environmental area, and provides legal advice and expertise on decisions, issues and legislation concerning the environment.

Source: OSCE; December 15, 2005; <http://www.osce.org/>

HUMAN RIGHTS & INDEPENDENT MEDIA

23. Detentions In Anniversary of Zubr Activist Death

Three Zubr activists were detained by police yesterday night near building of Homel KGB department.

Andrey Kirylau, Denis Chikaleu, Dmitry Sauchanka were distributing portraits of Zubr activist Andrey Zaytsau who had been led to suicide by KGB agents four years ago.

Zubrs were taken to police station. And chief of Central district police department said that they will arrest for at least 5 days these people if another action of Zubr would be held in Homel within this week.

After that Zubr activists were released without protocols.

Source: ZUBR; December 21, 2005; <http://www.zubr-belarus.com/>

24. An Independent Newspaper *Hantsavistki Chas* Will Not Be Distributed Through Brestoblsoyuzpechat's News Stalls in 2006

The head of Intex-press Publishing House Ltd. Uladzimir Yanukevich received an official notification about the cancellation of the contract between Intex-press Publishing House Ltd. and a republican unitary enterprise Brestoblsoyuzpechat.

The letter dated December 16, 2005 was signed by the head of Brestoblsoyuzpechat Mareika. It says that "the term of the contract will not be prolonged according to art. 391 of the Civil Code of the Republic of Belarus".

Source: Belarusian Association of Journalists; December 19, 2005; <http://www.baj.ru/>

25. Political Prisoner Refused Permission To Attend Father's Funeral

Political prisoner Valery Levonevsky was refused permission to attend his father's funeral by administration of penal colony in Ivatsevichi, reports the press centre of Khartiya-97 civil initiative quoting political prisoner's son, Vladimir Levonevsky. Levonevsky's relatives asked for him to be released for only two days.

Valery Levonevsky's father died on 14 December from heart disease. Head of the colony, Mikhail Karmanovich, said on that day that Levonevsky's temporary release was "quite possible"; however, the decision must first be agreed with Prosecutor's Office. Next day the request for his release was dismissed on the grounds of the prisoner's reputation as "a persistent violator of prison regulations". According to the prisoner's relatives, they were told so by a member of prison administration.

As a rule, in case of a death of a prisoner's close relative, they are allowed a short leave that, according to Belarusian law, may last up to seven days. The law also leaves it to the penal institution's administration to decide whether to grant prisoner a leave in exceptional circumstances.

Before the arrest, Valery Levonevsky, resident of the city of Grodno, headed the Entrepreneurs' National Strike Committee and was an activist of the Council for Civil Initiatives Svobodnaya Belarus (Free Belarus). On 7 September a court found Valery Levonevsky and Alexander Vasiliev, his deputy at Entrepreneurs' Strike Committee, guilty of "publicly insulting President of Belarus, entailing allegations of committing a serious crime". Both businessmen were sentenced to two years in prison. Their arrest and subsequent imprisonment were prompted by a sentence from the Strike Committee's leaflet: "Come and say that you are against someone going on holiday to Austria to ski and enjoy oneself at your expense". After landing in prison, Levonevsky staged several hunger strikes in protest against violation of Belarusian prisoners' rights.

Source: Prima News; December 19, 2005; <http://www.prima-news.ru/eng>

26. Several Oppositionists Detained in Minsk

Four activists of opposition were detained on December 16 in Minsk during the action of solidarity.

Palina Babina, Yury Kalychau, Danila Barysevich, Ruslan Matveeu were detained by police at about 8 p.m. by the Yakub Kolas Square for making pictures of candles in the windows. Young people were taken to a police department of Soviet district of Minsk. Policemen were trying to question the detainees, but they refused to give explanations. The opposition activists were released only at 11.30 p.m.

Source: ZUBR; December 19, 2005; <http://www.zubr-belarus.com/>

27. 300 000 Belarusians Have Taken Part in Day of Solidarity

"This time much more people have taken part in the Day of Belarusian Solidarity. According to our common estimation, we can speak of 300 thousand Belarusians who on November 16 took part in the action of solidarity. I would like to note in particular the activeness of people in the regions. Many regional centers, settlements and villages lit up candles of Freedom," told a well-known journalist Iryna Khalip, who was one of the initiators of the Days of Solidarity, to the Charter'97 press center. "I think that by December 16 there would be even more supporters of the Day of Solidarity. It arouses understanding, strikes a deep chord in the heart of every concerned citizen. Those who are burning candles today, tomorrow are to form a basis of future mass resistance to dictatorship, and finally, this would lead us to victory".

"We are greatly thankful to Vaclav Havel, Bronislaw Geremek, Aldis Kuskis, Azim Mollazade, Christos Pourgourides and other emblematic personalities, who have supported the Day of Belarusian Solidarity. The Day of Solidarity has become a national day already, and very soon, I hope, it is to become the day of international solidarity with Belarus. More and more states, politicians, Human rights activists, common citizens are supporting us.

Another initiator of holding the Days of Belarusian Solidarity, a coordinator of the Zubr movement Mikita Sasim stated that the awareness campaign before the November 16 was much wider than before the October event. According to the estimation of the "Zubr" movement, about 1.5 mln of people have learnt about the action and about 300,000 have taken part in it.

Source: Solidarity With Belarus; December 17, 2005; <http://www.solidarity16.org/eng/>

28. One More Refusal To Start a Criminal Case Concerning the Death of Hrodnikau

On December 14 Dzmitry Kirylchik, an investigator from Minsk Region Office of Public Prosecutor decided not to start a criminal case concerning the death of a freelance reporter of *Narodnaja Vola* Vasil Hrodnikau.

The first refusal was received on November 28. The reason for it was "the absence of components of crime". On November 29 the Office of Public Prosecutor cancelled this decision

and sent the case papers to Minsk Region Office of Public Prosecutor for an additional investigation.

During the investigation Dzmitry Kirylchyk concluded that Hrodnikau "could have received physical injuries as a result of his own careless actions".

According to BAJ, Vasil Hrodnikau's relatives and lawyer are going to lodge a complaint to Minsk Region Office of Public Prosecutor.

Source: Belarusian Association of Journalists; December 16, 2005; <http://www.baj.ru/>

29. President Woos Religious Believers While Worship Restrictions Continue

In the run-up to the 2006 presidential elections, the state authorities appear to be seeking religious organizations' support by exempting their land and property from tax. While a long list of eligible religious organizations includes those denied compulsory re-registration but not yet liquidated by court order, the administrator of New Life Church joked to Forum 18 News Service that this would be of little use to his community as its property is due to be confiscated by the state authorities. Although the country's top religious affairs official has rejected recent US allegations that Belarus restricts religious freedom, some religious communities continue to be fined or warned for worshipping in private homes. A new amendment to the Criminal Code allows the state to imprison participants in unregistered or liquidated religious organizations for up to two years.

Recent developments suggest to Forum 18 News Service that, while continuing to restrict worship, the Belarusian state authorities are beginning to make overtures towards religious organizations in the run-up to the 2006 presidential elections.

In a surprise concession, a decree signed by President Aleksandr Lukashenko on 1 December exempts religious organisations from land and property tax. Under the decree, tax-exempt land is that occupied by houses of worship, "including diocesan offices, monastic complexes and theological schools." An appendix lists 3,025 religious organisations thus exempt from land tax – as far as Forum 18 can ascertain, all currently holding state registration, including some denied compulsory re-registration under the 2002 religion law but not yet formally liquidated by a court. The Minsk-based charismatic New Life Church and the Minsk Society for Krishna Consciousness, for example, both appear on this list, whereas the recently liquidated Minsk-based Belarusian Evangelical Church and Belarusian Evangelical Reformed Union do not. Notably, the list features confessions often regarded negatively in Belarus as elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, such as Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons.

A second appendix details tax-exempt property belonging to organisations listed in the first. Most of the items stipulated are used by Orthodox and Roman or Eastern-rite Catholic communities; various types of church plate, vestments and church bells are mentioned, as well as icons. The list also includes some items used in Judaic worship, however, and a range of literature applicable to all confessions, such as service books and music, prayer books, theological works and educational and missionary materials. Interestingly, it also includes the sixteenth-century Shulkhan Arukh Jewish law code, about whose alleged extremist sentiments a group of 500 nationalists complained to Russia's public prosecutor in January.

While aimed at all registered religious organisations, the publication of the new decree was accompanied by a display of state support for the dominant Belarusian Orthodox Church. According to a 30 November report on his official website, President Lukashenko promised the Church's Synod at a meeting the same day that he would continue to support the Orthodox first and foremost. Lukashenko also reportedly paid special tribute to the Church's social and youth work, and its efforts to "consolidate society."

The new presidential decree will be of no benefit to the many - predominantly Protestant - organisations unable to obtain houses of worship or those assisting them with premises, however. While houses of worship themselves are not taxed under a 1991 law on real estate, a law governing tax on real estate introduced in January 2004 resulted in the Minsk-based Light of the Gospel Church being fined heavily for offering its premises to other registered Baptist Union congregations without their own prayer houses. Under the legislation, tax must be paid if a legal personality rents its premises to another, even if free of charge.

Unaware of the new presidential decree when contacted by Forum 18 News on 7 December, New Life's administrator Vasily Yurevich joked that the new tax exemption would not benefit his church – despite being listed in its appendix – as its property is due to be confiscated in accordance with a 17 August Minsk City Executive Committee decision.

Notwithstanding the introduction of the new presidential decree, the restrictive impact of the 2002 religion law continues to increase steadily, in particular the requirement that all religious activity should be registered and take place in state-approved, non-residential premises.

According to the Evangelical Belarus Information Centre, court bailiffs warned Vasily Yurevich's family on 9 December that his personal property would be seized and wages docked if he failed to pay eight million Belarusian rubles (23,807 Norwegian kroner, 2,996 Euros or 3,604 US dollars) within three weeks. Yurevich has been repeatedly handed down but refused to pay heavy fines for allegedly organizing New Life Church's "illegal" worship.

On 25 November Minsk's Partisan District Court issued a warning to Christ's Covenant Reformed Baptist Church for holding unsanctioned religious services. The 30-strong congregation meets for prayer and Bible study in a private home. It had unsuccessfully sought independent re-registration under the 2002 law after previously being affiliated to the mainstream Baptist Union.

On 24 November New Life Church reported that its sister Full Gospel congregation, Light to the World, is unable to re-register at its previous legal address. In the third such incident, according to its pastor, Andrei Sidor, a landlord who had agreed to lease his premises to the church was told informally by state representatives that his organization would be shut down if he did so. Forum 18 has discovered that several other churches in Minsk have had similar experiences.

Last year Minsk's Frunze District Court fined Pastor Sidor 380,000 Belarusian rubles (1,110 Norwegian kroner, 136 Euros or 174 US dollars) for "violating regulations on holding religious events" by conducting a Sunday service at his own home.

On 17 November, according to a report from the Council of Churches Baptists, which refuses on principle to register with the state authorities in post-Soviet countries, a member of its Brest congregation was fined 145,000 Belarusian rubles (432 Norwegian kroner, 54 Euros or 65 US dollars) by a local administrative commission for conducting unregistered religious worship. A January report by Brest region's top religious affairs official lamented the low prosecution rate of local unregistered Baptist congregations and called for the situation to be rectified by 1 December 2005.

Released on 8 November 2005, the latest US Department of State religious freedom report on Belarus details restrictions and harassment of some religious communities, including those experienced by New Life, Light to the World and the unregistered Baptists. Responding to the report at a 9 November press conference, chairman of the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Stanislav Buko reportedly maintained that the facts contained within it were "either inaccurate or out of touch with reality." In a 10 November article published on Radio Free Europe's Belarusian website, a Belarusian Orthodox Church representative similarly rejected the US report as "biased and unobjective," adding that the 2002 law "does not differentiate at all, but is even deeper and richer in content than the laws of western European countries and the USA."

A representative of the Catholic Church in Belarus declined to comment, maintaining that he was unfamiliar with the contents of the US report.

Such reluctance to criticize state religion policy may now increase. Under amendments to the Criminal Code passed on 2 December, "discrediting" Belarus or its state authorities by "intentionally passing false information to a foreign state or organization about its economic, social, military or international position, or the legal position of its citizens," may result in a prison sentence of up to two years.

Another addition to the Criminal Code states that participation in a religious organization (as well as political party or social organization) that is unregistered or has been liquidated by a court is punishable by a fine or imprisonment for up to two years.

Source: Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18; December 15, 2005; <http://www.forum18.org>

BUSINESS

30. Belarus Receives First Foreign Loan

Vneshtorgbank, Raiffeisen Zentralbank Oesterreich AG and Priorbank have signed an agreement for a \$32m syndicated loan to Belarus, Vneshtorgbank reported today. This is the first external loan acquired by Belarus' government.

The raised funds are to be allocated to different budget items. The deal caused a stir among potential investors, which led to the initial sum of \$15m being increased more than twofold. The loan's maturity is 364 days with a possible prolongation. The interest rate is LIBOR + 4.25 percent per year.

Source: RosBusinessConsulting; December 21, 2005; <http://www.rbcnews.com/>

31. Belarus Passes 2006 Budget, Raising Wages and Pensions

The Belarus parliament has passed a 2006 budget which uplifts the wages and pensions, according to reports reaching here from the Belarus capital, Minsk.

The budget, which sets a deficit of 1.5 percent of gross domestic product, the same as this year, was backed by 104 deputies in the 110-seat lower house. No one voted against.

"On the whole, we have a good result," Finance Minister Nikolai Korbut told reporters late on Wednesday after the vote. "When working on the budget, we planned for maximum gross domestic product growth of 8.5 percent."

The budget calls for lowering some local taxes. Total spending amounts to 12.4 billion US dollars, with 11.8 billion in revenues, 2.5 billion increase in spending and revenue compared to this year's levels.

The economy of the former Soviet republic is still run along Soviet-era command lines, with the government maintaining controls over most prices and telling companies what to produce.

This year the government targets 8.9 percent growth. But the International Monetary Fund has forecast the economy will grow by up to 7.1 percent in 2005 against 11 percent last year.

President Alexander Lukashenko has said he saved his 10 million people from transition shocks that have jolted other ex-Soviet states.

The Belarus economy depends heavily on developments in neighboring Russia, its main trading partner.

Source: Xinhua News Agency; December 15, 2005; <http://news.xinhuanet.com/english>

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.
