

December 22 – December 28, 2005

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DOMESTIC

1. 2005 In Review: People Making A Difference -- Six Acts Of Courage

It takes courage to swim against the prevailing current, particularly in societies where political authoritarianism or social convention penalizes those who do. But there are inevitably individuals with such courage -- people who are ready to stand up for their beliefs and willing to tell the truth for the common good. RFE/RL profiles six people whose courage fueled their activities.

Belarus Oppositionist Undeterred

The authoritarian president of Belarus, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, has been deemed by some "Europe's last dictator."

Alyaksandr Milinkevich wants to change that -- by winning the presidential election next spring.

It is a potentially dangerous task. Belarusian opposition figures like Yuri Zakharanka and Viktor Hanchar have previously disappeared without a trace. Another challenger, Mikhail Marynich, is in jail on what many see as trumped-up charges.

But Milinkevich says he is undeterred.

"To tell the truth, if the intention is to kill me, no amount of bodyguards, not even a hundred men, will help," Milinkevich says. "I don't really think ahead about what my fate will be in the event of a loss. I only know that if we lose, it will not be a loss for Milinkevich; it will be a loss for Belarus."

For much of 2005, the 58-year-old Milinkevich has been traveling around the country to mobilize a constituency seeking democratic change, such as students, small-business owners, and opposition supporters.

Predictably, authorities have thrown up roadblocks for his team. And worse is expected as the election draws closer.

Milinkevich maintains that the opposition would prevail over Lukashenka if it were allowed access to the mass media, and if elections were free, fair, and transparent.

But even in the present unequal conditions, Milinkevich says he believes Belarus has a chance to repeat Ukraine's experience of peaceful transition.

"If the government falsifies the election yet again, we will have no recourse but to join the people and take to the streets, to defend our dignity and our future," Milinkevich says.

Belarus has set 19 March as the date of the presidential election.

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Excerpt from

Source: Breffni O'Rourke, RFE/RL; December 27, 2005; <http://www.rferl.org>

2. Belarusian President Signs Law on Ratification of Civil Law Convention on Corruption

The head of state signed the law of the Republic of Belarus "On ratification of the Civil Law Convention on Corruption". As BelTA has been told in the president's press service, the discussion of this draft law in parliament was initiated by the president of the country.

The parties to the Civil Law Convention on Corruption shall provide in their internal law for effective remedies for persons who have suffered damage as a result of acts of corruption, including the possibility to initiate an action in order to obtain full compensation for such damage, including loss of profits and non-pecuniary loss; shall provide for appropriate procedures for persons who have suffered damage as a result of an act of corruption by its public officials in the

exercise of their functions to claim for compensation from the State or appropriate government bodies.

Participation in the convention would enable the country to organize mutually beneficial cooperation with other states in civil legal procedures in corruption cases. Especially concerning the service of documents, obtaining evidence abroad, jurisdiction, recognition and enforcement of foreign judgements and litigation costs.

Source: The National Centre of Legal Information of the Republic of Belarus; December 28, 2005; <http://law.by/work/Eng/>

3. Lukashenko Replaces Vice Premier and Two State Ministers

On Tuesday, Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko removed from office Vladimir Drazhina, the country's Vice-Premier, Luidmila Postoyalko, Minister of Health and Mikhail Borovogo, Minister of Transportation and Communications.

According to the presidential press service, Lukashenko appointed Aleksandr Kosinets as the new Vice-Premier, Victor Rudenko as Minister of Health, and Vladimir Sosnovsky as the Minister of Transportation and Communications.

"The new five year plan begins and we need new people with new viewpoints. There should be staff renewal. This is the only reason this step is undertaken before the presidential elections. The forthcoming five-year period is very important and it is crucial that the recently appointed individuals started its first year and planned out the work of industries," said Lukashenko, according to the presidential press service.

[Text translated by the Editors]

Source: Gazeta.Ru; December 27, 2005; <http://www.gazeta.ru/>

4. Belarusians To Begin Collecting Signatures For Pres Candidates

Collection of voters' signatures in support of candidates for presidency begins in Belarus Thursday, Lydia Yermoshina, the chairwoman of the Central Electoral Commission said Wednesday.

Presidential election has been scheduled for March 19. Each of the candidates aspiring to getting into the election race is expected to collect no less than 100,000 signatures.

The Central Electoral Commission registered eight nomination groups supporting the leader of the Liberal Democratic Party, Sergei Gaidukevich, the current President Alexander Lukashenko, the leader of the Conservative Christian Popular Front Party, Zenon Poznyak, the former speaker of the upper house of parliament, Alexander Voitovich, the united candidate of the Belarusian opposition, Alexander Milinkevich, former members of parliament Valery Frolov and Sergei Skrebets (whose criminal case is being investigated on suspicion of involvement in economic crimes), and the leader of the Gramada Social Democratic Party, Alexander Kozulin.

President Lukashenko's nomination group includes 6,212 people. Its chairman is Alexander Sheiman, who filed a request Wednesday to relieve him of the duties of chief of the presidential administration staff.

"Law forbids using the work of people, who report to a candidate for presidency due to occupational duties, in the interests of nomination or election," Yermoshina said.

Source: Itar-Tass; December 27, 2005; <http://www.tass.ru/eng>

5. CEC Issued Warning For Aleksandr Milinkevich

The Central Election Commission of Belarus has issued an official warning to the united opposition's candidate for presidency Aleksandr Milinkevich that it is illegal to carry out pre-term election propaganda. It was said on December 27 at the CEC session on registration of initiative groups of prospective candidates.

As the member of the CEC Nadzeshda Kisyalyova said, the CEC receives materials from different towns of Belarus, that show that Milinkevich is carrying out a campaign "using external financing". In this connection the CEC reminded to Milinkevich and the head of his initiative group Aleksandr Bukhvostau that election propaganda is allowed only after registration of candidates and only with the use of budget funds.

After the session finished, the CEC head Lidziya Yarmoshyna answered the questions of journalists. She called the warning to A. Milinkevich "a preventive measure which aim is to make the initiative group stick to the law," the BelaPAN informs.

Source: Charter97; December 27, 2005; <http://www.charter97.org/eng/>

6. Belarus: Eight Candidates Meet First Hurdle In Presidential Vote

The Central Election Commission of Belarus today registered eight candidates, including incumbent Alyaksandr Lukashenka, for the March presidential vote. Having cleared one hurdle, the contenders now need to gather 100,000 signatures of support from eligible voters in order to be added to the ballot. The united opposition candidate, Alyaksandr Milinkevich, is among the most prominent challengers. But few are expecting a political upset to ruin Lukashenka's goal of a third term in office.

Lukashenka's presidential challengers face several key obstacles ahead of the 19 March poll.

They have limited access to mass media, very little money, and no right to free assembly.

Adding to the difficulties is the fact that local electoral commissions have almost no opposition representatives in their ranks.

Hard To Be In The Opposition

Alyaksandr Milinkevich is considered to have the best chance of any of Lukashenka's challengers.

But he told RFE/RL that Belarusian authorities are making life increasingly difficult for him and his supporters.

"The situation in the country is very difficult. For instance, our [party] activists are being arrested for distributing leaflets about the result of our [party] congress, including information relating to the united opposition candidate," Milinkevich said.

"They [activists] are put on trial; huge fines are imposed. The authorities are afraid of even the smallest piece of alternative information."

Among other challenges, opposition candidate face a shortage of time.

Sudden Rescheduling Good For Lukashenka

The Belarusian parliament moved forward the date of the presidential ballot from July to March, leaving would-be candidates with very little time to register, campaign, and connect with the voting public.

Critics say the sudden rescheduling works almost exclusively in Lukashenka's favor.

But Milinkevich said such maneuverings are nothing new -- and that it's important to stay in the race regardless.

"Belarus is the country where laws haven't been observed for a long time already. We know that already for many years the votes haven't been properly counted during elections -- just the desirable results are recorded," he said.

"But nevertheless, we will participate in the elections, because for us it's a chance to meet people, to find ways into their hearts. It's very important for us to see people, and to bring information to them."

Professor Oleg Manaev heads a group of sociologists who have conducted independent public polls ahead of the ballot.

Manaev said the polls indicate Lukashenka is enjoying a strong lead, and would take 52 percent of the vote if it were held today. Milinkevich, by contrast, has just 7 percent support.

But even with little apparent suspense regarding the outcome of the vote, Manaev said the presidential vote is an opportunity for the opposition to gain crucial exposure, saying: "Of course it's not the same as speaking on the floor of parliament, or speaking on Belarusian television, but it's still something."

No Unity

Manaev said the rigors of the election may help notoriously fractious opposition officials patch up their differences and force a unified long-term political strategy.

For now, however, the opposition remains distinctly disparate. There are six opposition candidates in addition to Milinkevich staging a presidential bid.

They are Syarhey Haydukevich, leader of the Belarusian Liberal Democratic Party; Alyksandr Kazulin, leader of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Hramada); Zyanon Paznyak, the exiled leader of the Conservative Christian Party; and former General Valerii Fralou, who as an opposition lawmaker staged a hunger strike in 2004.

Two additional former lawmakers, Alyksandr Voytovich and Sergei Skrebets, are also running as independent candidates.

Not all observers are willing to accept the March vote as a fait accompli. Valerii Karbalevich, an analyst with the Strategy political analysis center in the Belarusian capital, Minsk, says it is too early to declare Lukashenka the definite winner.

"It's clear that Lukashenka has the biggest chance of winning, but I won't say it's a 100-percent guarantee, because every campaign brings unexpected things," Karbalevich said. "Experiences in different countries clearly indicate this is so."

Karbalevich didn't specify what, if anything, would provoke a surprise outcome in the presidential vote. But he noted that many people in Belarus, and particularly Minsk, are increasingly unhappy with the economic and social conditions they are subject to under the Lukashenka regime.

Source: Valentinas Mite, RFE/RL; December 27, 2005; <http://www.rferl.org>

7. Head of Lukashenko's Administration Resigns

Viktor Sheiman, head of the initiative group proposing Alexander Lukashenko's as candidacy as president has resigned as the head of the presidential administration, Chairman of the Belarussian Central Election Committee Lydia Yermoshina told reporters on Tuesday.

"The law prohibits to use [in the election campaign] persons who are dependent on a candidate during working hours," she said. "Viktor Sheiman has given notice and he is not just on a leave - he is resigning," she said.

Source: Interfax; December 27, 2005; <http://www.interfax.ru/e>

8. The Unenviable Task of Being a Dissident in Belarus

President Lukashenko has done everything he can to avoid a new "colored" revolution.

Beginning in less than a week, organizing anti-government protests in Belarus will be a criminal offence punishable by up to three years in prison. In a sense, this is a marked improvement for demonstrators: being detained is presumably preferable to being shot at, which the police has also been authorized to do.

Aleksandr Lukashenko has been the president of Belarus for 11 years and his ever-diminishing tolerance for political opposition is remarkable. In his three terms as president, Lukashenko has gagged the media ("discrediting Belarus' standing abroad" can bring a five-year prison term), tampered with elections and the constitution, and jailed those who oppose his rule.

Criticizing either Lukashenko or any of his top officials has already been outlawed for sometime. Both the United States and the European Union (EU) have expressed concern with Lukashenko's campaign against dissents, saying recently—with regard to the country's latest laws restricting political activity—that they "have the potential to severely undermined freedoms of assembly, association, and expression in Belarus." The Belarussian security services told reporters that the laws are designed specifically to prevent demonstrations such as those that occurred during the Orange Revolution in Ukraine.

A presidential election is scheduled for Mar, 19, 2006, and the opposition has by and large rallied in support of a physicist named Alexander Milinkevich. In all, eight people have submitted their registrations to be presidential candidates, including Lukashenko.

Given Lukashenko's crackdown against political dissension, opposition groups have had to devise less overt ways to express their dissatisfaction with the government. They have, for example, urged Belarussians to turn off their lights on the 16th of each month and place a candle in a window. Some 100,000 households took part in the first such demonstration and that number has reportedly grown each month. Another idea was born when an opposition activist turned his blue denim shirt into a makeshift flag at a protest before he was beaten unconscious by the police. Opposition groups have since adopted blue denim as their official attire and color.

As Lukashenko and his officials have been shunned by most Western countries on account of his government's deplorable human rights record, the president has in recent months begun a concerted effort to court the backing of China.

On a visit to China last week, Lukashenko heaped praise on his hosts, who in turn granted him a loan to take back to Belarus. On perhaps a more distressing note for the former Soviet republic's opposition groups, Lukashenko also bought internet blocking technology from the Chinese government, who has an infamous record internationally for disrupting the spread of any information that contradicts the official accounts. Until recently, the internet in Belarus was the one remaining mass medium that Lukashenko's government did not control.

When Lukashenko first ran for president, three years after Belarus seceded from the Soviet Union in 1991, he won based largely on the popularity he had garnered as chairman of an anti-corruption parliamentary committee. Both at home and abroad, he was considered a viable reformer for the country.

Despite the current resurgence of the economy, attributable at least in part to the region's construction boom, Belarus is very much dependent on foreign supplies of energy, particularly from Russia. This vital trade relationship has led to increasingly close ties between the two countries. Indeed, in 1999, Belarus and Russia engaged in a merger of both their tax systems and currencies.

Whatever else may be said of Lukashenko's obstruction of political activities in his country, opposition groups are beginning to find that general apathy may become their biggest concern. The current strength of the economy and the potentially astronomical personal cost in agitating for change have congealed into a uneasy complacency in much of the country's citizenry with the status quo.

Source: Angus Reid Consultants; December 26, 2005; <http://www.angus-reid.com/analysis/index.cfm/fuseaction/viewItem/itemID/10354>

9. Alexander Lukashenko Set for Elections

The first stage of the Belarusian presidential campaign finished late last week. Those willing to replace Alexander Lukashenko in the post of the president turned in their registration documents. Meanwhile, President Lukashenko made a reshuffles among local authorities, appointed new heads for TV channels and promised shake-ups in the Committee of the State Security (the Belarusian abbreviation is KGB).

Zenon Poznyak, the former leader of the Belarusian National Front, was the first to file documents to be registered as a presidential candidate. Yet, his registration is still open to question since Mr. Poznyak has been living in the United States since April 1996 whereas the Belarusian Constitution requires a presidential candidate to reside in the country at least ten years prior to the elections. Yet, Poznyak ran for the presidency in 2001, and the Central Election Committee has sent an inquiry with the Constitution Court to resolve the matter.

Incumbent President Alexander Lukashenko presented the documents second. His campaign is headed by Viktor Sheyman, who is suspected of the abduction of Dmitry Zavadsky, the cameraman of the Russian ORT TV channel. Opposition leader Alexander Milinkevich and quite loyal to Lukashenko Geydar Gaydukevich filed their applications too. The total of 8 presidential candidates turned in their documents for the registration.

In the meantime, President Lukashenko shook up the country's high ranks and media. Alexander Zimovsky and Yury Koziyatko, notorious for their Belarusian state propaganda, were appointed heads of national television channels. Vladimir Matveychuk, Lukashenko's class mate, took helm of the Culture Ministry. Reshuffles also rocked the country's KGB, the military prosecutor's office and local legislature. President Lukashenko does not make the secret of the fact that the shake-up is timed to the coming elections. "The real informational war has been unleashed against Belarus, so the role of ideology in our state is rising," he said hoping the nation would "withstand ideological assault on our country".

The president's speech on TV was crowned by Generalissimos, the film about Iosif Stalin who is depicted as the perfect leader of a nation.

Source: Kommersant; December 26, 2005; <http://www.kommersant.com/>

10. 140 Belarusian Towns Without Power

More than 140 towns and villages in Belarus were without power Sunday following a heavy snowfall, Itar-Tass reported.

The Ministry of Emergencies dispatched crews to fix power lines that snapped under the weight of the snow.

The outages were reported in the Brest and Grodno regions. The ministry said power was restored to some 80 communities by Sunday morning but 140 others were powerless.

Source: United Press International; December 25, 2005;
<http://www.upi.com/NewsTrack/view.php?StoryID=20051225-032828-5652r>

11. Belarusian Parliament Members Calls for Ethnic Cleansing

A member of the Belarusian parliament who once vowed that he is "ready to defend the president [Aleksandr Lukashenko] with a grenade launcher in my hands" has called for former military officers to unite and go to war against people from the Caucasus who have settled in Belarus, according to a December 14, 2005 report by the Prima News Agency.

Viktor Kuchinsky reportedly said that in the Brest region there are now "too many Chechens, Azerbaijanis and other people of Caucasian nationality" and that they need to be expelled by force. Since 1994, Mr. Kuchinsky has served as an aide to President Lukashenko. His latest statement was condemned by another member of parliament, Olga Abramova, who pointed out that it probably violates laws against inciting ethnic hatred.

Source: Union of Councils for Jews in the Former Soviet Union; December 23, 2005;
<http://www.fsmonitor.com/stories/122305Belarus.shtml>

12. Chamber of Representatives Adopts Amendments to Banking Code of Belarus

Today, at the second reading, the Chamber of Representatives of the National Assembly of Belarus adopted a draft law "On introducing amendments and addenda to the Banking Code of the Republic of Belarus".

According to chairman of the permanent commission for monetary policy and banking activity Roman Vnuchko, the law has been designed in line with international documents and the republican banking practice.

The principal amendments and addenda concern empowering the National Bank in the field of banking surveillance. So, the document introduces the notion of a banking group and banking holding company to empower the National Bank to exercise surveillance over all types of unions of legal entities with participation of banks and non-banking institutions. This is done to entitle the National Bank to control banking risks.

Besides, the National Bank is defined as not only the central bank but as a state body since it is endowed with certain authorities and entitled to legislate.

According to the amendments, the National Bank will issue a single license to banks for exercising banking activity replacing the prior many-license practice. As Roman Vnuchko believes, this measure is coined to simplify the licensing scheme, reduce circulation of documents in banks and enable the National Bank to regulate activity of other banks by spelling out a set of operations for them depending on their financial condition and outlook.

The draft law also prohibits the National Bank to grant loans for the government to finance the budget deficit and purchase securities after their primary distribution.

Since 2004 laws on the budget have not envisaged loans of the National Bank for these purposes. The decision was taken in line with the international practice and in agreement with international financial organizations.

The document expands the list of grounds on refusing to register banks and non-banking financial establishments and fixes requirements to the business reputation of bank managers. The bill also provides the notion "a subsidiary of the foreign bank" and stipulates the order on regulating its activity in Belarus.

At the same time the document simplifies procedures on granting loans to economic agents. In particular, it introduces amendments and addenda to the order on signing loan agreements, granting banking guarantees and attracting bank deposits. Thus, according to Roman Vnuchko, the target use of loans aims to liberalize loan relations.

The document envisages that banks reduce interest rates on deposits in national currency, i.e. reduce the refinancing rate of the National Bank, provide this norm in a deposit agreement and notify a depositor on the banking decision. Besides, the bill stipulates an opportunity to issue deposit and savings bearer certificates.

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

REGIONAL

13. Putin Receives Secretary of Russia-Belarus Union State

Pavel Borodin, secretary of the Russia-Belarus Union State, has told President Vladimir Putin about the drafting of documents for the coming meeting of the Russia-Belarus Supreme State Council, the President's press secretary Alexei Gromov said after a meeting of Putin and Borodin in Novo-Ogarevo on Wednesday.

Gromov reminded that agreement had been reached at the latest meeting of the Council of Ministers of the Union State on holding a meeting of the Supreme State Council on the level of presidents of the two countries late in January 2006.

Source: Itar-Tass; December 28, 2005; <http://www.tass.ru/eng>

14. Gazprom Signs 2006 Gas Supply Deal With Belarus' Beltransgaz; Price Unchanged

Russia's Gazprom signed a contract yesterday with Beltransgaz, Belarus' state-owned gas transport company, concerning the supply of natural gas to Belarus and gas transit via the country in 2006, BelaPAN news service reported.

Under the deal, Belarus will buy 21 bln cubic meters of gas from Gazprom in 2006 at 46.68 usd for 1,000 cubic meters.

Gazprom told BelaPAN 1.5 bln cubic meters of it is subject to technical factors.

Under the deal, Belarus will collect 0.75 usd in transit fees per 1,000 cubic meters/100 kilometers through the Beltransgaz network and 0.46 usd for gas transported by the Yamal-Europe pipeline, said BelaPAN.

This means next year's gas price for Belarus remains unchanged from 2005. Gazprom commented on this by saying that Belarus and Russia are forming a union state where uniform economic standards should be applied, BelaPAN added.

Gazprom Deputy CEO Aleksandr Ryazanov said at yesterday's signing ceremony: 'Thus, the price is economically justified. Gazprom's policy with regard to Belarus suits the interests of the company's all shareholders -- both the state and private investors.'

Gazprom also said it obtained full ownership of the Belarus section of the Yamal-Europe pipeline and the two sides resumed talks on selling a stake in Beltransgaz to Gazprom this year, said BelaPAN.

The news comes as Gazprom is threatening to cut off deliveries to Ukraine on Jan 1 if it does not agree to an increase in the price it pays for gas. Western Europe receives nearly a fifth of its annual gas imports from Russia via Ukraine.

Russia wants to more than quadruple the price of supplies to the Ukrainian market to 220-230 usd per 1,000 cubic meters from 50 usd currently and switch to cash payments from the barter system.

Source: Forbes.com; December 28, 2005; <http://www.forbes.com/>

15. Alexander Lukashenko: CIS Must Be Preserved

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko is convinced that the CIS must be preserved, *Rossiyskaya gazeta* (Russian Newspaper) says.

"The CIS can exist even as a political club to coordinate actions. This is a 'ring-buoy', which we can always be used," said Lukashenko. He pointed out that the CIS have problems. "Yes, problems, but let this political club remain, maybe it will be our trump card in hard times," Belarusian President said.

According to him, the CIS has all the structures to "establish itself as one state". He said that the CIS must not be collapsed nowadays.

"The CIS's achievements in many spheres, such as antiterrorism struggle, are already topical in the republics. Afterwards, their role will only keep increasing," said Lukashenko.

Source: ARKA News Agency; December 26, 2005; <http://www.arka.am/en/archive/n12/n2712/271204.html>

16. State Duma Ratifies RF-Belarus Accord On Standard Migration Card

The State Duma has ratified the Russian-Belarusian intergovernmental agreement on the use of a standard migration card.

The document was signed back on October 5, 2004.

Russian First Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Chekalin presented the agreement to legislators.

In compliance with the agreement, Russian and Belarusian citizens will be issued standard migration cards during their stay in the host country.

The chairman of the State Duma Committee on the CIS and Russian Diaspora Relations, Andrei Kokoshin, pointed out that "the agreement allows to equalize Russian and Belarusian citizens' rights."

"It is one more step towards forming a common migration policy of the union state."

"The agreement will make standard the rules of entry, departure and temporary stay of foreign citizens in Russia and Belarus," he said.

The document is aimed at promoting closer relations between the people of Russia and Belarus and state and social integration.

At present, Russia and Belarus have a simplified control regime and some illegal migrants cross the border without migration cards.

Source: Itar-Tass; December 23, 2005; <http://www.tass.ru/eng>

17. Lukashenko For Export of More Belarusian Goods to Moscow

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko said Thursday that he supports a government proposal to increase the export of Belarusian goods to Moscow.

The president's press office said the goods were primarily construction materials and light industry and food products.

"Moscow is interested in increasing supplies of construction materials, for example crushed rock, cement, slabs and silicate wool," the press office quoted the president as saying.

At a meeting with Lukashenko Thursday, Belarusian Prime Minister Sergei Sidorsky discussed an agreement reached with Moscow Mayor Yury Luzhkov that stipulates a meeting between the sides in Moscow before January 20 to ratify a joint action plan for 2006.

Source: Olesya Luchaninova, RIA Novosti, December 22, 2005; <http://en.rian.ru>

INTERNATIONAL

18. Rights Watchdog Criticizes Closure of Belarusian Paper

Reporters Without Borders has criticized the closure of an independent newspaper in Belarus.

The international media monitoring group accused the government of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka of dealing a "last fatal blow" to the trade union newspaper "Solidarity," which printed its final edition last week.

Reporters without Borders accused Lukashenka of trying to silence the independent media ahead of presidential elections in March.

Editors at "Solidarity" said they were forced to close after the government took a series of measures against the paper, including canceling a contract with the state distribution agency.

Source: RFE/RL; December 28, 2005; <http://www.rferl.org>

19. U.S. Set to Spread Democracy in Russia, Belarus, Other Post-Soviet States

A senior State Department official said the U.S. agenda for the trans-Atlantic relationship in 2006 is to broaden NATO's mandate and extend its global reach; to advance democracy in Russia, Ukraine, the Caucasus and Central Asia; and to cooperate with Europe in every region of the world through political, economic and security partnerships, the State Department said on the official website.

R. Nicholas Burns, under secretary of state for political affairs, outlined U.S. goals for a European Institute audience on Dec. 15 in Washington. The State Department released his remarks Dec. 27.

Burns characterized 2005 as the year Europe and the United States stopped the trans-Atlantic war of words, rediscovered each other and got back to work on the world's problems, having

recognized they are “wed together in a long-term marriage with no possibility of separation or divorce.”

He cited a long list of U.S.-European achievements in 2005, ranging from Lebanon and Syria, where the United States and France led the way to “unprecedented and constructive U.N. action,” to Belarus, where the alliance is “delivering a united message for freedom against Europe’s last dictator.”

Turning to the agenda for 2006, Burns said the United States wants to continue to work through NATO as the core trans-Atlantic link but to broaden and extend NATO’s mandate to Africa, Asia and the Middle East. In working with the European Union, “the next great mission for us together is spreading the freedom we enjoy in Europe and America,” Burns said.

“We also need to complete our work in Europe by attending to the Balkans, Ukraine and Russia,” he said. “We need to continue fostering democracy and opposing repression in Central Asia and the Caucasus. And, most importantly, the United States and Europe need to intensify our efforts in the broader Middle East, as well as Africa and Asia.”

He reiterated the U.S. commitment “to pursuing the Freedom Agenda in Russia and Ukraine.” In Central Asia, he said, “we must engage Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, and demand reform from Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.”

Source: MosNews.Com, December 28, 2005; www.mosnews.com

20. World Bank To Extend Aid To Chernobyl-Hit Areas in Belarus

The World Bank will extend a 50-million-dollar loan to Belarus to eliminate the effects of the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear power plant accident, the deputy head of the Belarusian Committee on Chernobyl accident consequences, Valery Shevchuk said on Tuesday.

“The funds will be spent on laying gas distribution pipelines in the affected areas and introducing energy-saving technologies,” he said.

The loan is extended for 15 years with a five-year grace period at an interest rate of 3 to 5 percent.

“The technical part of the project has been studied already. At present, the president is considering it,” he said.

Source: Itar-Tass; December 27, 2005; <http://www.tass.ru/eng>

21. Democracy's High Price

A year after Ukraine’s Orange Revolution, Russia’s effort to combat the spread of democracy in Eastern Europe continues unabated. Its latest weapon is natural gas. As the heating season got underway this month, Moscow announced through its state-controlled energy company, Gazprom, that it would more than triple the price it charges Ukraine for gas supplies, to \$160 per 1,000 cubic meters. When Ukraine’s government sought to negotiate a more gradual increase, Moscow threatened to raise the price further, to more than \$200, or cut off supplies as of Jan. 1. Russian President Vladimir Putin chose to trigger this crisis just as Ukraine approaches a crucial parliamentary election on March 26. Thanks to Mr. Putin, soaring energy prices for Ukrainian consumers may be a punishing issue for the former Orange revolutionaries.

Next door in Belarus, pro-Moscow President Alexander Lukashenko has no such worries. He, too, has an election coming up, on March 19; he abruptly scheduled it last week, the day after holding a summit meeting with Mr. Putin. At that meeting, Mr. Putin agreed to hold the price of gas for Belarus steady next year, at \$46 per 1,000 cubic meters. Belarus’s democratic opposition, which had been preparing for a presidential election in July, was left with one week to register its

candidate and just a few more to campaign, without the benefit of mass media, money or the right to free assembly.

Western leaders tended to assume after the Orange Revolution that Ukraine had turned the corner toward democracy and could be expected to follow the path of other former European communist states, such as Poland and Hungary. Belarus, they hoped, might be next: President Bush publicly singled it out as "Europe's last dictatorship," and both Congress and the European Union approved multimillion-dollar programs to support pro-democracy movements. But the attention of Western governments to Eastern Europe has slackened in recent months while Mr. Putin has stayed focused. He has never accepted the Orange Revolution, describing it as a plot by Western intelligence agencies. He has directed much of his foreign and domestic policy in the past year to stopping similar democratic movements in Eurasia while making sure no such cause can arise in Russia.

March could be a landmark in his counterrevolution: first the reelection of Mr. Lukashenko, who can be counted on to use fraud and violence against his opponents; then, one week later, a Ukrainian election that could greatly weaken the pro-democracy parties Mr. Putin unsuccessfully tried to suppress a year ago. That may not be all. An official statement describing Mr. Putin's meeting with Mr. Lukashenko last week promised new steps toward a long-discussed "union" that could eliminate Belarus as an independent state, including the finalization of a union constitution and the adoption by Belarus of the Russian rouble.

Will the West stand up for democracy in Belarus and Ukraine? So far there's not much sign of it. The European Union decided shortly after Mr. Lukashenko's announcement to postpone the launch of a radio service intended to provide uncensored information to Belarusians. Poland's foreign minister, Stefan Meller, spoke with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice about Ukraine's gas price problems during a visit to Washington this week, but they did not reach agreement on a concrete response. Many in the administration remain unwilling to react to, or even acknowledge, Mr. Putin's aggressive campaign to undermine Mr. Bush's pro-democracy policy. As U.S. lassitude continues, Mr. Putin's price keeps going up.

Source: The Washington Post; December 24, 2005; <http://www.washingtonpost.com>

22. Vietnam Expects To directly Export To Belarus

Vietnam expects to be allowed to directly export seafood and farming produce to Belarus, said Deputy Prime Minister Vu Khoan at a working session with the Belarus-Vietnam Inter-governmental Committee on December 22.

Deputy Prime Minister Khoan expressed pleasure at the ever-growing co-operative relations between Vietnam and Belarus and expressed his hope that the annual Inter-governmental meeting would increase the two countries' co-operation in different areas.

Deputy Foreign Minister Gaisenov, who is also Chairman of the Belarus-Vietnam Committee on Economic, Commercial, Scientific and Technological Co-operation heading the Belarus delegation, affirmed Belarus' great demand for Vietnamese goods, notably rice, seafood and other farming products.

He pledged Belarus' commitment to co-operate with Vietnam on engineering, tyre and tube mass production, tractor manufacturing, transfer of microchip technology and chemicals production.

The Vietnam-Belarusian Inter-governmental Committee on Economic, Commercial, Scientific and Technological Co-operation gather for its third session in Hanoi on December 22-23.

The Vietnamese delegation to the session was led by Deputy Trade Minister Le Danh Vinh, who is also the Chairman of the Vietnam Sub-committee, and the Belarusian delegation, by Deputy Foreign Minister Gaisenov, who is also Chairman of the Belarusian Sub-committee.

The two sides reviewed the implementation of a MoU signed at the Committee's fourth session and worked out solutions to increase co-operation in economics, commerce, science and technology. They also agreed on measures to boost two-way trade.

The two sides also encouraged Vietnam's farm product exports to Belarus as well as co-operation between the two countries' banks.

In addition, they agreed to accelerate exchanges of information and relations between Vietnamese and Belarusian businesses on the basis of strengthening operations of the local commercial chambers, and co-operation and promotion of activities relating to the transfer of Belarus's technology to Vietnam, and co-operation in the areas of oil and gas, education, sports, tourism, aviation and commerce.

Source: *NhanDan Online*; December 23, 2005;
http://www.nhandan.com.vn/english/news/231205/domestic_vnex.htm

HUMAN RIGHTS & INDEPENDENT MEDIA

23. Pen vs. Sword

Editor Iryna Vidanava Is Pushing Change in Belarus. The Government Is Pushing Back.

After more than a year in the United States, Iryna Vidanava says she doesn't feel like an idiot when she smiles on the street. In her homeland of Belarus, spontaneous good humor toward strangers just isn't done in public places. In the grimly efficient, Soviet-era subway and on the rattletrap buses that ply the drab streets of Minsk, almost every face is studiously expressionless. Even most young people put up a shell and stay nervously within it.

Changing that, in some ways, has become her life's work. And it may land her in prison. Vidanava, a graduate student at Johns Hopkins University, holds down three jobs -- putting in long days including a commute between Washington, where she lives, and Baltimore, where she studies. She has two gigs with the university, where she works as a research assistant and a teaching assistant.

And then there's what she calls "my night job" -- as editor of *Student Thought*, perhaps the most edgy and professional publication left in Belarus, where the government has been ruthlessly shutting down all independent media. Although Minsk is almost 5,000 miles away, she still works -- with cell phone and e-mail -- to keep alive the magazine she has edited since 1998. But as Belarus, a landlocked country sandwiched between Poland and Russia, prepares for an election in March, things have never been more difficult.

Last month, the government seized all but a handful of copies of the magazine. And now Vidanava is under investigation for financial crimes and infractions against the country's draconian press laws.

If charged, the 27-year-old editor could face a huge fine and up to six years in prison. But it's hard to know exactly what's happening with her case in Belarus. One investigator is on vacation; another has given no word on where things stand.

As Vidanava faces the possibility of a long, shadowy journey through the sphinxlike world of justice in Belarus, her father, Aliksei Karol, has just emerged from the same nightmare. Like his daughter, he is an editor; he heads one of the country's last independent newspapers. And like his daughter, he has faced down the authorities. In October, the government fined him \$1,200 for insulting the president, a charge based on some satirical cartoons found in his newspaper's office when government agents raided it last spring. In a country where \$250 a month is a good salary,

the fine is staggering; but at least it's not prison, which was a distinct possibility. "He paid it just to keep the newspaper alive," Vidanova says, with both affection and admiration.

As the country heads into elections, opponents of authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko are struggling to keep some measure of a democratic movement going. They don't expect to win outright. In a country where there's no opposition access to radio or television, no easy legal means of taking a simple poll, and where the KGB still monitors anyone not firmly loyal to the government, opponents of Lukashenko don't know how much support they have. But there's a mantra, among publishers and journalists, leaders of independent groups and clubs, and the beleaguered political opposition -- just stay alive through the election.

Vidanava, a short, energetic woman with a ready laugh, seems to have inherited a pretty evenhanded genetic mix of her parents' attributes. Her mother is irrepressibly good-natured and has supported her husband through three attempts at winning a seat in the country's parliament. "She's always in the front row at protests," Vidanova says.

Her father is more given to the soft chuckle than her mother's great gales of laughter. He is quiet, and often serious, and has played a large role in his country's intellectual life as Belarus emerged as an independent country after the breakup of the Soviet Union.

Iryna has both her mother's sparkling nature and her father's seriousness. Her magazine was, in some ways, a fusion of these attributes. When she took over editing it in 1998, it was a small, serious publication aimed at members of the Belarusian Students Association. Within a few years, she had transformed it into a broader, more appealing, more youth-oriented magazine, aimed at Belarusian kids who looked longingly to the West for music, fashion and a feeling of freedom they lacked at home. It had an edge, and though it was apolitical, it had a larger cultural agenda: to spark some life in what Belarusians call "the gray mass."

"We don't know why this issue became a target," Vidanova says, holding one of the few remaining copies of the magazine's most recent publication. The government claimed it was printed with "dangerous ink," she says, with a sardonic laugh. The cover story is about shoplifting and shows an attractive young woman with various purloined goods stuffed into the top of a pair of long, sexy stockings. It's a typical cover, and fairly racy for Belarus, where state media manage to be both dull and paranoid, and rarely deal with serious social issues. Vidanova assumes that the crackdown is election-related.

"Young people don't like Lukashenko," she says. "They want to travel. They want to have normal lives. He understands that he needs to control them. Young people will go to the streets -- they don't have that much to lose."

So *Student Thought*, to stay alive, will now go even more underground than it was before. The next issue, says Vidanova, will definitely come out, but she doesn't want to say exactly how. Meanwhile, she waits, in limbo, for news of her own future.

Lenin After Lenin

Last summer, before the government confiscated the October issue, the offices of *Student Thought* hummed with the controlled frenzy of magazine offices everywhere. With a picture of Iryna on the wall -- laughing -- the young journalists who manage the day-to-day editing while she is away explain how they hope their magazine can influence the country's youth. For them, Western music and fashion aren't just luxury goods; they're a statement, a refusal by young people to disappear in the country's "sovietized" society.

Designer jeans, chic glasses, colorful shoes, a haircut that isn't just another military brush cut, are all about standing out from the faceless, brutalized crowd. Bono is a hero to them for his mix of music and social consciousness. They want to be "Belarusian Europeans," not Belarusian

Russians, the cultural identity that Lukashenko promotes through close ties to Vladimir Putin's leviathan state to the east.

"We are not political," says Max Aheeu, the pen name of one of the magazine's two main editors. Only Iryna has her real name on the masthead. The magazine's offices are in a nondescript, Khrushchev-era apartment flat. They've moved four times in the past three years. The KGB has tried to infiltrate the group, approaching one of the magazine's lead writers. When she realized she was being tracked, she quit her job and changed apartments. They apparently lost the scent. Aheeu says the magazine isn't political, but it is certainly independent, and that's bad enough. *Student Thought* has published investigations into the rampant bribing of college professors during exam season -- the cover showed an exam book stuffed with cash. It has profiled music promoters and young political leaders. It has published a very popular guidebook to studying abroad, but that was before Lukashenko instituted new restrictions making it increasingly difficult for students to study outside of Belarus.

"For us, the most important thing is to stay alive and have access to young people," Aheeu says. "The major idea is you should stay active. You should not lose hope, you should not be like this gray mass."

Across town, in the offices of Iryna's father, the message was the same.

"The main thing is to live until the elections," Karol says. If the editors at *Student Thought* look to reform youth culture with European values, Karol looks to his country's past to explain his mission.

After the breakup of the Soviet Union, he says, Belarus was left a little lost. Other former Soviet republics embraced independence. There was a flourish of nationalist sentiment in the Baltic states to the north, and Ukraine to the south. But under Soviet rule, Belarusian national identity had been ruthlessly squelched. So while Belarusians became independent, they did so without a strong sense of who they were and what the future might be after communism. Unlike in most of the rest of the old Soviet Union, the statues of Lenin never came down, and many people still associate "democracy" with the turmoil and privation of the first few years of independence. Karol struggled to change that.

"In the Brezhnev era, we intellectuals weren't satisfied," he says. "We understood that the current system was a vicious system and needed to be changed. As a historian, I had access to closed archives, and I was working to rehabilitate the people who had suffered from the regime in the 1920s."

Karol used his access to state archives to put together a better understanding of the Stalinist purges against Belarusian nationalists. With perestroika, he and other intellectuals started advocating for the revival of a distinct, Belarusian cultural life. And then they started forming political parties. Karol founded one, and also a newspaper in 1992. At one point his circulation was about 50,000, but now, he says, people are afraid to buy it, or be seen reading it. As of last summer, circulation was down to fewer than 6,000. The offices have been robbed, computers have been confiscated, and in September 2002, Karol was attacked in the street, by government agents, he assumes.

Iryna is close to her parents, communicating with them often by instant message over a cell phone. Her father has advised her over the years, and now she advises him as well.

"We are friends, partners," she says. "He brought me to the movement, and we discuss everything. I was lucky to be born there."

She describes a childhood in which her father wasn't a dissident, but "in our house we always had unusual books." Her mother has supported her family's often dangerous political activities.

Her brother, a financial analyst living in the United States, sends financial advice stories home to his father's newspaper.

"In Belarus, people really know very little about how to manage their money," says Iryna. Or, she might well add, how to function in a free society. Both Iryna and her father are part of a wider movement to reform Belarusian values. Lukashenko's power is so absolute, his ability to steal elections so certain, they argue, that the opposition must work to change the basic culture before it can hope to change the government.

Even some politicians, including the opposition candidate Alexander Milinkevich, speak of a deeper "Belarusian" problem that must change if their country is to change.

"The main problem of Belarus is not Lukashenko himself but the mentality of each Belarusian," Milinkevich said one day last summer. "Unfortunately, Belarus as a country was sovietized in the strongest way, compared with other post-communist countries. The process of decommunization did not take place. And there are two major problems: The first is fear and the second is the absence of information."

Leaf through any of the official, state-sponsored newspapers and you see the depth of the problem. "Economic crisis in Ukraine goes hand in hand with political crisis," began a typical article one Sunday, suggesting that Ukraine's Orange Revolution, which unseated another post-Soviet authoritarian government, had brought nothing but chaos. "Dead at Disneyworld" screamed another story about accidents and heart attacks at the American theme park. And then there was the almost comical discovery, early last summer, of a shadowy new group called the "Belarusian National Liberation Army," a terrorist group threatening mayhem. Independent journalists just laughed at what they said was a government hoax.

The Beautiful Land

"It is an essential part of the justice dispensed here that you should be condemned not only in innocence but also in ignorance," said a bitter Joseph K., the frustrated hero of Franz Kafka's "The Trial." This might be Iryna's motto, as she awaits word on her legal status.

Belarus today is somewhere between Kafka's dark fantasy of opaque and authoritarian bureaucracy and the brutal Big Brother of George Orwell's "1984." Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has called Belarus "the last true dictatorship in Central Europe." Europe and the United States shun Lukashenko and his government, especially those top officials implicated in the 1999 disappearances of opposition figures. To intellectuals and opposition figures in Belarus, Lukashenko is just a thug, and a rather ridiculous one, given to rantings about spies and terrorists and American agents determined to overthrow the government.

But Lukashenko's steady campaign against publications such as Iryna's *Student Thought*, and her father's newspaper, has created a vast, dead, negative space within the country. It's a society in which even the mood of the people is a mystery.

Vidanava hopes her magazine will bring something new, something independent and questioning into the lives of young people, "who lead very sad, gray lives." But Belarus is also relatively prosperous, and it's not clear how many young people are, in fact, unhappy with their existence. It's an unknowable fact in a land of silence.

One morning last summer, Vidanava got up early to make a telephone call home. Her parents were serving lunch to a reporter in their small dacha on the outskirts of Minsk. She called to remind her mother, an unsinkably good-humored woman, not to talk too much. The call prompted a chuckle from her father and hearty laughter from the kitchen, where Olga Karol was bustling about a meal of prunes stuffed with garlic, Georgian cheese pie and potato-and-pork pancakes. There seemed a mutual agreement among all three, even though they live on different continents,

that these daughter-mother calls were obligatory whenever guests came by -- and that the calls never did any good. Nor did anyone care very much, because her mother's burbling stream of conversation was as relaxing as the crickets and late afternoon sun.

A bottle of Georgian red wine was produced, the thick grass and fruit-laden trees seemed to hum, and for a moment it was hard not to think of a Belarusian proverb, a proverb with currency in other countries that have suffered in the orbit of Russia over the centuries. God made the land so beautiful, they say, that He felt obliged to compensate by giving the people bad rulers. It was the sort of afternoon that Turgenev described in "On the Eve," a novel about a country pregnant with revolution: It was an afternoon of "radiant haze," when "it was pleasant to sit in the cool shade and hear that hot sound of life."

In Minsk, a half-hour away by car, the parks were filling with young people, some of them cocooned in the spell of MP3 players, other sharing bottles of beer and -- perhaps it was the brew or the summer sun -- laughing . At least a little.

"Isn't it a selfish word," asked one of Turgenev's characters, about the idea of happiness, about the kind of feeling one has on a radiant summer afternoon. "I mean, a word that keeps people apart."

After centuries of suffering at the hands of the Russians, and especially the Germans, the country is at peace. Many of its younger people know no other leadership than that of Lukashenko; many of its older people have known much worse. Many, it seems, are content to leave democracy to others and spin out passably decent lives. Not Vidanova, or her father, or her mother.

She will go back, she says, if charges are filed. The Belarusian government generally tends to be very bad at things people wish governments would do well. It can take an hour simply to mail a package in the government post office. And it tends to be very efficient at things that people wish it would do less well, like keep tabs on its citizens. But, just like the silent bureaucracy that threatened Joseph K. with The Trial, the government of Belarus is also capricious and hard to predict. Vidanova thinks she can mount a defense, if need be, even on the government's own terms.

But it's not really a question of whether she can win her case. Returning isn't a question at all. "I am Belarusian," she says. "That's the most important thing, and I love my country. I feel comfortable there despite all the problems. And I want it to be better."

*Source: Philip Kennicott, The Washington Post; December 28, 2005;
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/>*

24. Stop Provocations!

On December 23 in Homel during an illegal detention by the unknown people in mufti, an activist of the "Zubr" resistance movement Pavel Madzhara and his friend Alyaksandr Marozau were planted packs with illicit drugs. Right after that during a house-search in the private apartments of the young people police seized independent newspapers and other printed materials, flags. A criminal case relating violation of the Article 328 of the Criminal Code (illicit drug trafficking) has been initiated against Pavel Madzhara and Alyaksandr Marozau.

It is worth mentioning that such provocations have been used earlier by Kuchma secret services against the Civil campaign "Pora". Models of explosive devices were planted to their offices. The secret services of Yugoslavia used the same methods against the movement "OTPOR!" activists. In the both cases such methods had not saved the regimes, which resorted to such methods against their own citizens, and the persons giving criminal orders and instructions, as well as actual perpetrator of crimes, had been prosecuted and convicted.

“Zubr” addresses the law-enforcing agencies of the country with the demand to stop similar provocations, not taking their cue from persons who had opted for illegal seizure of power in the country, and are ready to return the country to the year 1937.

We inform everybody who are instigated to illegal actions against Belarusian citizens, activists of the democratic movement of Belarus by the regime, that with the overthrow of the regime all these facts would be investigated. We know the names of the perpetrators, the consequences and details of this and other provocations. All the collected facts are to be submitted to investigatory agencies later, and the independent court is to judge these actions and those who are involved.

The “Zubr” movement

Source: ZUBR; December 27, 2005; <http://www.zubr-belarus.com/>

25. Solidarity Ceases Publication In Belarus

The Belarusian magazine Solidarity published its last edition today. The magazine was the publication of independent unions representing workers in a variety of trades in Belarus.

In a message to readers in the last issue, Solidarity editors said the Minsk government had taken a number of measures, including canceling a contract with the state distribution agency, that made it impossible for the magazine to continue publishing. The editors said the government had "completely shut off all our sources of revenue. The magazine has been left without the means to continue."

Solidarity was founded in 1991 and had a print run of 5,400 copies.

Editor Alyaksandr Starikovich said he doubts the magazine can resume publication as long as Alyaksandr Lukashenka is president.

Source: RFE/RL; December 23, 2005; <http://www.rferl.org>

26. Police Detain Son of Political Prisoner Valery Levonevsky

On December 22, in Grodno, police detained democratic opposition activist Vladimir Levonevsky – son of political prisoner Valerie Levonevsky. He was detained at the city’s Central Market for distributing the bulletin "Owner", a Strike Committee publication.

Vladimir Levonevsky was held in the police department for more than two hour, 250 copies of the bulletin were taken and he was charged with "Propagating printed material without output data" according to the Codex of Administrative Offenses. Vladimir Levonevsky is an activist of the Strike Committee of the Owners of Belarus, headed by his father and a member of the Council of Civil initiatives "Free Belarus".

Source: Prima-News Agency; December 23, 2005; <http://www.prima-news.ru/eng>

27. Belarus: Supreme Economic Court reinstates enormous penalties against the Belarusian Helsinki Committee

Human rights group may be forced to close; leaders may face criminal charges.

The International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights (IHF) and the Belarusian Helsinki Committee (BHC) are extremely concerned by the 20 December 2005 ruling of the Supreme Economic Court (SEC), which, in a reversal of its earlier ruling, reinstated enormous sanctions against the BHC that were first introduced by tax authorities almost two years ago. The SEC Presidium ordered the human rights group to pay around \$75,000 in back taxes and fines.

In early 2004, the Taxes and Dues Ministry Inspection of the Maskouski district of Minsk ordered the BHC to pay 155 million rubles in allegedly unpaid taxes and penalties on grants received from the European Union TACIS Programme. The State Control Committee's Department for Financial Investigations brought tax evasion charges against BHC officials in connection with the case.

The Minsk City Economic Court annulled the penalties in July 2004, explaining that technical aid in the framework of the TACIS Programme was non-taxable under an agreement between the Belarusian government and the European Union. The tax authorities lost a series of appeals against this final ruling.

However, despite the fact that this matter is *res judicata*, the SEC First Deputy Chair Eugene Smirnov contested this ruling, prompting a rehearing of the case by the SEC Presidium, and obtained reinstatement of the sanctions against the BHC.

The IHF and the BHC protest against the new, obviously politically motivated, SEC decision, which creates obstacles to BHC efforts to monitor the ongoing presidential campaign and other issues, and paves the way for closing down the last remaining national human rights organization.

Moreover the new SEC ruling opens opportunities for the criminal prosecution of BHC officials who may face up to seven years in prison and confiscation of property.

The IHF and the BHC will continue to defend human rights in Belarus, and appeal to the SEC to revise the Presidium's ruling.

We appeal to the international community to help convince Belarusian authorities to protect the rights of the Helsinki Committee and other civil society organizations.

Source: Human Rights Education Associates; December 23, 2005; <http://www.hrea.org>

28. Belarus: Year-End Expulsions For Two Catholic Priests

Fr Robert Krzywicki is being expelled from Belarus after a decade working as a Catholic parish priest in the country. "I was told a week ago that my visa is not being renewed and I must leave by the end of the year," he told Forum 18 News Service from the town of Borisov (Barysaw) near the capital Minsk on 22 December. "I committed no crime." He attributes his expulsion to his work with young people in the town - both Catholics and non-Catholics - and his involvement with other Christian Churches in ecumenical and humanitarian events. Both he and another priest being expelled are Polish citizens.

Fr Krzywicki says his parishioners in Borisov have launched a petition drive which has now gone nationwide calling on the authorities to overturn their decision not to renew his visa.

Of the 250 or so Catholic priests in Belarus, more than half are foreign citizens. The Catholic Church faces tight restrictions on priests it invites, being subject to an annual quota and unable to transfer them from one parish to another without the religious visa being cancelled and reissued. Moreover, foreign religious personnel are banned from serving in Minsk itself.

Forum 18 has learnt that the other Catholic priest being expelled also worked in the Minsk-Mogilev diocese in a village parish near the capital and has served in Belarus for the past decade, but neither he nor the diocese is contesting the decision. The Minsk-Mogilev diocese declined to comment to Forum 18 on 22 December about the expulsions, while the Apostolic Nunciature in Minsk said it had no information.

"The Church doesn't want any conflict with the authorities," Fr Krzywicki commented. He says the authorities have allowed a new priest from Poland, Fr Zbigniew Grigorzewicz, to come to Belarus to serve his parish of the Descent of the Holy Spirit in Borisov from the New Year.

Fr Krzywicki reports that his activity led to opposition from the authorities. "I cooperated with other Christian churches, including the Baptists, Pentecostals, Full Gospel Church and the Adventists, in joint prayer services," he told Forum 18, adding that the Orthodox Church took no part in such ecumenical events. He said he was also active in a town forum which worked with young people and their concerns. "I didn't ask permission from the authorities for my activity, but I know they watched it," he reported.

He says the expulsion decision was communicated to him by the deputy head of the religious affairs committee of Minsk region, but believes the decision was taken by the government's central religious affairs office in Minsk, which is headed by Stanislav Buko. Forum 18 was unable to reach anyone at either office on 22 December.

Fr Andrei Ablameika of the Greek Catholic parish of St Joseph in Minsk says the ten or so Greek Catholic priests in Belarus are all local citizens. "We're not eligible to invite any foreign priests as we can't get registration as a religious association," he told Forum 18 from Minsk on 22 December. He said the Greek Catholics want to be able to invite foreign priests, as many of the priests are overstretched, having to serve more than one parish.

Fr Krzywicki, who serves Mass in Belarusian with sermons in Russian, says the authorities' expulsion of foreign priests who have served a long time in the country makes it difficult for the Catholic Church to provide clergy who understand their parishioners. "It takes about five years for a foreign priest to learn the language, the culture and the situation," he told Forum 18. "When a new priest arrives from abroad he doesn't understand these."

Source: Felix Corley, Forum 18; December 22, 2005; <http://www.forum18.org>

BUSINESS

29. Belarus Government To Triple GDP by 2010 Against 1996 - Premier

The Belarusian government wants to triple GDP by 2010 against 1996, the country's premier said Thursday.

Sergei Sidorsky said at a meeting with Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko said the GDP has increased 42% from 2001 to 2005 and almost doubled since 1996.

He said Belarus is producing more high-technology products and 38% of the industry's volume is exported to the European Union.

The premier said Belarusian export deliveries had increased by 2.5-fold in the last five years. According to Sidorsky, Belarus has one of the lowest inflation rates at just more than 6% this year and salaries increased to \$250 against \$70-80 in 2000.

Source: Olesya Luchaninova, RIA Novosti, December 22, 2005; <http://en.rian.ru>

30. Belarus Says Russia Remains Major Foreign Trade Partner

Russia remained Belarus' major trading partner in the first 10 months of 2005 accounting for 48.6 pct of total trade value, reported the Belarusian Ministry of Statistics and Analysis.

Other major partners were the Netherlands (7.5 pct of the total trade value), Germany (5.4 pct), Poland (4.4 pct), Ukraine (5.7 pct), the UK (3.8 pct), China (2.2 pct), France (1.4 pct), Italy (1.7 pct), Lithuania (1.5 pct) and the United States (1.5 pct).

The ministry says that a year-on-year decline in exports to Russia is attributable to a sharp decrease in deliveries of oil products, spare parts for trucks and tractors, truck tractors and refrigerators.

Belarus reduced imports of batteries, wires, cables, plastic goods, pulp and paper and ferrous metals.

The country's export of oil products to the Netherlands, Ukraine and Poland surged by 180, 340 and 40 pct, respectively.

An increase in exports to Germany was propelled by sales of oil (a 120-pct year-on-year rise), ferrous metals (50 pct) and measuring devices and medical appliances (40 pct).

Belarus sold goods to 137 countries and bought goods from 158 countries in January-October. Belarus' foreign trade totaled over 26 bln USD in that period. Exports jumped by 17 pct year-on-year to 13 bln USD and imports grew by 4.8 pct to 13 bln USD.

Source: Forbes.com; December 22, 2005; ' <http://www.forbes.com/>

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.
