

March 31 – April 5, 2006

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International League for Human Rights

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HUMAN RIGHTS & INDEPENDENT MEDIA

1. Andrzej Pisalnik: "We Can Be Isolated For Some Time. But It Does Not Mean That We Will Stop Doing What We Think Is Right..."

All journalists from Hrodna have been released lately. Some of them had to leave Belarus because of persecution.

Andrej Shantarovich (the editor-in-chief of *Mestnaja Gazeta*) had to leave for Ukraine. He informed the BAJ Press Service that the police had been looking for reasons to detain him again. He added that during his detention he was constantly being intimidated. Moreover, he fell seriously ill: an ambulance was called 3 times for him but he was not allowed to stay in hospital. According to A. Shantarovich, he also noticed that his flat was being watched. He managed to leave the flat and leave for Ukraine.

Ivan Roman – a freelance reporter from *Salidarnast* is to be released at about 11 a.m. on April 4. On March 23 he was sentenced to 10 days of detention for "misdemeanor".

Andrzej Pisalnik – the editor-in-chief of *Glos Zad Niemna na Uhodzstwie* – was released on April 1. He spent 12 days in detention for participation in a protest action that did not take place in reality. He was detained on March 20 – just after he had been released after a 5-days' sentence for "misdemeanor".

Ihar Bantsar (a journalist from *Glos Zad Niemna na Uhodzstwie*) and Aliaksey Rads (the administrator of forum.grodno.net) were also released after 10 days of detention.

"We can be isolated for some time. But it does not mean that we will stop doing what we think is right..." - commented Andrzej Pisalnik.

Source: *Belarusian Association of Journalists*; April 5 2006; <http://www.baj.ru/>

2. Criminal Cases During the Elections - Full List

According to Human right activists of Viasna Human right center politically motivated criminal cases were started against 21 civil and political activists. One of them was sentenced to 5 months of prison. 8 of them are in prison waiting for trials. Also thousands activists all over Belarus were punished in Administrative way (fines, Administrative arrests etc.). Police used violence against peaceful protesters.

Monitoring of Criminal Cases That Have Been Recently Brought against Public and Political Activists in Belarus: 1 Person Sentenced to 5 Months of Arrest, 21 -- under investigation, 8 in jail.

This monitoring contains information about the criminal cases that were brought for political motives during the presidential electoral campaign in Belarus in 2006. The electoral campaign is defined by a rapid growth of the number of criminal cases against activists of civil society, oppositional parties and non-governmental organizations.

On 16 December 2005 the Chamber of Representatives of the National Assembly of the Republic of Belarus appointed the presidential election on 19 March 2006. The day before, on 15 December, the Chamber of Representatives almost unanimously adopted the law of the Republic of Belarus On introduction of amendments to some legal acts of the Republic of Belarus with the aim to increase punishment for actions against individuals and public security. These amendments included article 193 (organization or directing of the activity of public association or religious organization that attempts on the individuality, rights and duties of citizens), article 193.1 (illegal organization of activity of public association, religious organization or fund or participation in their activity) and article 369.1 (discrediting of the Republic of Belarus).

These amendments were enforced on 1 January 2006 and the month after the first criminal case on one of the new articles was brought. The enforcement of the mentioned articles is a matter of

grave concern for members of human rights organizations of Belarus. These articles violate the fundamental civil rights - the right to association, liberty of expression, the freedom of opinion and convictions. They contradict to the main international pacts on human rights that were ratified by the Republic of Belarus - the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Convent on Civil and Political Rights.

It's worth mentioning that the authorities also actively use other articles of the Criminal Code for political purposes. It especially concerns youth activists. Often political graffiti were considered as hooliganism or malignant hooliganism. This gave the opportunity to detain the activists before trial and present them as petty criminals that have nothing to do with political activity.

The growth of the number of the politically motivated criminal cases witnesses the enforcement of the political repressions in the country on the eve of the presidential election.

Starting from December 2005 politically-motivated criminal cases were brought against 20 public and political activists. One of them was sentenced to 5 months of jail, 8 are kept in custody and haven't been tried yet.

1. Criminal case against Aliaksandr Kazakou and Dzmitry Zubro

The activists of the Zubr movement Aliaksandr Kazakou and Dzmitry Zubro were detained on 28 December 2005 for political graffiti (number 16 to call people to take part in the Day of Solidarity with political prisoners and families of the missing activists). The youngsters were kept for more than two days in the isolator of preliminary detention and were released on written undertaking not to leave the city. They are accused of violation of part 2 of article 363 of the Criminal Code (resistance to the police) and can be punished by up to five years of personal restraint or jail. The case has been passed to Minsk Tsentralny Borough Court and the legal proceedings have already started.

2. Criminal case against Pavel Krasouski

In the city of Zhodzina the case for violation of article 369 of the Criminal Code (public insult of duty officials) was brought against the youth activist Pavel Krasouski, member of the initiative group of Aliaksandr Milinkevich. The case was brought for publication of satirical charges of the city's authorities in the bulletin Naziralnik that was edited by Pavel Krasouski. These charges were also found during the search of his flat in December 2005.

At present Mr Krasouski is a suspect on the case and hasn't received official charges yet. Article 369 of the CC provides corrective fine, up to two years of corrective labor, up to six months of arrest or up to three years of personal restraint as punishment.

3. Criminal cases against Dzmitry Kaspiarovich

The activist of the BPF Party Dzmitry Kaspiarovich was detained at night between 17 and 18 December 2006 on suspicion in the outrage of the state symbols. According to Mr Kaspiarovich, he really climbed the roof of Minsk City Executive Commitete and tried to remove the official flag, because he considers it Stalinist. The outrage of state symbols (article 370 of the CC) doesn't provide imprisonment (the maximal punishment is 1 year of personal restraint). Besides, the persons accused on this article can't be kept in custody before trial. However, Mr Kaspiarovich was accused of violation of part 1 of article 339 of the CC (hooliganism), according to which he could be sentenced to up to three years of jail. That's why he was also detained before the trial.

On 27 February Minsk Maskouski Borough Court sentenced Dzmitry Kaspiarovich to five months of jail. The activist didn't take the blame and said he was ready to bear responsibility for outrage of the state symbols, not for hooliganism. He explained that he was well-bred and has never been a hooligan.

The trial was attended by the chair of the BPF Party Vintsuk Viachorka. He called the case against Dzmitry Kaspiarovich an example of double standards in the Belarusian court practice. He reminded that in 1995 the high state official Ivan Tsitsiankou tore the state white-red-white flag. 'I think that the reaction of the authorities is disproportional to the violation, in the case it really took place. What is even more important, the country mustn't have double standards. I mean that in the case some people are allowed to tear the national flag was also the state flag in 1991-1995, put signatures on it and receive no punishment, what can we expect from the people who can't bear the present artificial state symbols', Mr Viachorka said.

The court verdict was appealed at the college board of criminal cases of Minsk City Court.

4. Criminal case against Artur Finkevich

At night of 30 January in Minsk the police detained the activist of the youth organization Young Front for political graffiti. The criminal case was brought on part 2 of article 339 of the CC (malignant hooliganism) and the official charges were given on the same article. Now he can be sentenced to up to 6 years of jail.

At present Artur Finkevich is kept in the investigative isolator. The fact that the investigative organs purposefully qualify political graffiti as hooliganism or malignant hooliganism is alarming. Such accusations allow for pre-trial detention and punishment with jail.

5. Criminal case against Uladzimir Khomichau and Maksim Kokarau

On 2 March it became known that Niasvizh District Board of Internal Affairs brought a criminal case on two activists of the Young Front for political graffiti. The case was brought on article 341 of the CC (defilement of buildings and corruption of property), that provides corrective labor, fine or up to three months of arrest as punishment. The case is on the stage of preliminary investigation. The youth activists were released under written undertakings not to leave Niasvizh.

6. Criminal cases against Siarhei Biazmen and Siarhei Lashkevich

On 2 March in Shchuchyn the police searched the flats of Vasil Biazmen and Siarhei Lashkevich, local activists of the headquarters of the candidate to the presidential position Aliaksandr Milinkevich. In both cases the police confiscated all information carriers, some printed editions and documents from personal archives. Siarhei Lashkevich was kept in the investigative isolator of Shchuchyn for several days. His mother, Iryna Lashkevich, was informed that her son was detained for 72 hours. According to the preliminary version of the investigation, he is suspected of preparation the mass actions that rudely violate the public order. The criminal case on part 3 of article 293 of the CC (mass riot) has been brought against him. However, the police don't tell which actions they qualify as mass riot. We should remind that according to the latest amendments to the Criminal Code part 3 of article 293 (training or other preparation of persons to participation in mass riot, or financing and other material provision of such activity) provides up to six months of arrest or up to 3 years of personal restraint as punishment.

7. Criminal cases against Aliaksandr Kazulin, candidate to the presidential position of the Republic of Belarus

These cases were mentioned in the appeal of the General Procurator's Office. One of them was brought in connection with the incident of 17 February, the day of registration of the candidates to the presidential position. That day Mr Milinkevich and his adherents burst into the National Press Center where his press-conference was appointed. 'Kazulin and his companions insulted and used physical violence against the guards of the concert hall Minsk and a policeman', -- stated the procurator's office.

As a result, on 1 March there was brought a criminal case on part 2 of article 339 of the Criminal Code (malignant hooliganism) with Aliaksandr Kazulin as suspect. The maximal punishment is 6 years of jail.

The second case was brought in connection with Kazulin's behavior at the police station after his beating and detention on 2 March, when he with a group of adherents tried to pay a visit to the All-Belarusian People's Assembly that was organized by the authorities. At the police station he smashed a portrait of Aliaksandr Lukashenka. As a result a criminal case on part 1 of article 339 of the CC (hooliganism) was brought. The maximal punishment is 3 years of jail.

The cases are on the state of the preliminary investigation. The official charges haven't been given yet.

It's worth mentioning that on 2 March, during the attempt to register as a delegate to the so-called All-Belarusian Assembly Aliaksandr Kazulin was violently beaten by representatives of secret services and the commandant of a special police brigade Dzmitry Paulichenka. After the beating Mr Kazulin was detained and taken to Minsk Kastychnitski Borough Board of Internal Affairs. Unknown persons shot in the car that followed the police car with Kazulin inside. Outside Minsk Kastychnitski BBIA persons in plain clothes assaulted activists of Kazulin's electoral headquarters and journalists. Dozens of them received bodily injuries. The correspondent of Komsomolskaya Pravda b Belarusi Aleh Uhlevich is still in hospital with broken nose.

8. Criminal case against Mikalai Astreika, Enira Branitskaia, Tsimafei Dranchuk and Aliaksandr Shalaika

On 2 March Mikalai Astreika, Enira Branitskaia, Tsimafei Dranchuk and Aliaksandr Shalaika received official charges on part 2 of article 193 of the CC (organization or direction of the activity of public association or religious organization that attempts on individuality, rights and obligations of citizens).

On 22 February these four members of the unregistered public initiative Partnership were detained on suspicion in directing organization that violated citizens' rights. KGB workers searched flats of the activists and confiscated all information carriers. Later the KGB chair Stsiapan Sukharenka called them coordinators of the provocations that were allegedly planned by the opposition during the street actions of 19 March. On 1 March at his press-conference Mr Sukharenka stated: 'The blood of victims will let the organizers of the protest action do anything they like. After this they will start seizing the official offices, railway stations and blocking the railway with the aim to stop the country's functioning', he said. According to him, the detained members of Partnership were to have coordinated the provocations and the organization also prepared false minutes of the exit-polls, according to which the candidate to the presidential position Aliaksandr Milinkevich won the election. At present all four detainees are kept in the investigative isolator of KGB in Minsk.

9. Criminal case against Iauhen Suvorau

The criminal case against the activist of Zubr Iauhen Suvorau was brought on part 1 of article 435 of the CC (evasion from military service). Other activists of Zubr say it is only a pretext for barring their friend. It is also confirmed by the fact that the military commission found him unfit for military service in peaceful time long ago. The guy has never hid from the authorities and has always come to the military committee on its subpoena. He was often detained by the police for handing out printed materials, but even the policemen had no pretensions concerning the military service.

On 14 February 2006 he was detained in Mahiliou for hanging a large banner with the urge to take part in the Solidarity Day that is carried out on 16th day of each month in Belarus. He was accused of violation of article 156 of the Code of Administrative Violation (petty hooliganism), but this accusation was only the reason for keeping him in custody - the violation report wasn't passed to court. Now Mr Suvorau is kept in the investigative isolator of Mahiliou.

10. Criminal case against Anastasia Azarka

The criminal case was brought on 5 March 2006 by the Main Board of Internal Affairs of Minsk Regional Executive Committee on article 193.1 of the CC (illegal organization of activity of public association, religious organization or fund or participation in their activity). She is suspected in activity on behalf of the unregistered organization Young Front and participation in distribution of the printed materials with the 'urges to fight against the present constitutional order and authorities'. The maximal punishment is 6 months of arrest or 2 years of personal restraint. The case is at the stage of preliminary investigation and no official charges have been given to Ms Azarka yet.

11. Criminal case against Iury Radzivil

Iury Radzivil, driver of the candidate to the presidential position Aliaksandr Kaaulin, was detained by persons in plain clothes on 2 March 2006. Before this a person in plain clothes shot in his car from a pistol. Iury Radzivil is suspected in resistance to the police and usage of force against them. The case was brought on part 2 of article 363 of the CC (resistance to a policeman or other person that guards the public order).

At present Mr Radzivil is kept in the investigative isolator of Minsk. Human rights activists of Belarus think that in such a way the authorities want to justify the lawless actions of the worker of law machinery who used firearms in peaceful times with no grounds.

12. Criminal case against Ivan Kruk

Ivan Kruk is an activist of the United Civil Party and the chair of Astravets district headquarters of the candidate to the presidential position Aliaksandr Milinkevich. On 3 February 2006 an investigator of Astravets District Procurator's Office brought a criminal case against him on part 2 of article 363 (resistance to a policeman or other person that guards the public order). According to the official accusation, Ivan Kruk used force against the police during the search of his flat. The search was conducted without legal grounds. The policemen paid interest to printed materials and information carriers. Mr Kruk smashed his computer not to let them confiscate it.

The case is at the stage of preliminary investigation.

13. Criminal case against the chair of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee Tatsiana Protska

On 1 March 2006 the Department of financial investigation of the State Control Committee resumed the criminal case about evasion from taxes by the Belarusian Helsinki Committee. This information was disclosed by the investigator Aliaskandr Zaleuski. A suspect in the case is the BHC chair Tatsiana Protska who is suspected in non-payment of 70 000 US dollars of taxes. The case was brought on part 2 of article 243 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus (evasion from payment of dues and taxes) that provides 2-7 years of jail with confiscation of property as punishment. More than a year ago the tax inspection decided that BHC was to pay taxes for the financial aid it received on TACIS program of the European Union. The support on this program was given to Belarus on the condition of complete exemption from taxes. At first the Supreme Economic Court took the side of human rights activists, but in the beginning of 2006 annulled its decision. The human rights activists consider it as persecution for political reasons, including the attempts to organize independent monitoring of the presidential election.

14. Criminal case against Andrei Panasik

The criminal case against the public activist of the town of Masty Andrei Panasik was brought on 11 March 2006 on article 193.1 of the CC (illegal organization of the activity of public association, religious organization or fund or participation in it). He is suspected in participation in the activity

of the unregistered public initiative Partnership. The article provides up to 6 months of jail or up to 2 years of personal restraint as punishment.

The case is at the stage of preliminary investigation. Mr Panasik hasn't received the official charges yet.

15. Criminal case against Nikita Sasim

March 14 at about 10 p.m. Zubr coordinator Nikita Sasim was arrested together with other Zubr activists Natallia Ushka, Nika Lazouskaya and Nikita Shutsiankou without reason near sub-way station "Pushkinskaya". They were just speaking when police bus arrived and riot police officers thrown them into it. In the police department he was taken bad. An ambulance was called in. He was operated on appendicitis in the night, and in the morning the youth leader in handcuffs was taken to his native town of Baranavichy. In baranavichi hospital interrogation was held. And Sasim was accused of "evasion of military service". Last fall, however, the young man was granted a deferment because of the head trauma caused by OMON officers during a protest action.

16. Criminal Case against Edvard Zeliankou

Homel Regional KGB Board brought a criminal case on suspicion in organization of the activity of unregistered public association and hooliganism against the activist of the Young Front Edvard Zeliankou, who is also a an active participant of the electoral measures of Aliaksandr Milinkevich's campaign.

Source: ZUBR; April 4, 2006; <http://www.zubr-belarus.com/>

3. Belarusian Independent Journalist Banned From Foreign Travel

Mikalay Markevich, a journalist currently working with the Polish-based Belarusian-language Radio Racja, has been banned from traveling abroad, Belapan reported on April 3. Markevich said a local migration and citizenship department in Hrodna refused to put a foreign-travel permit stamp in his passport, citing an order from the Committee for State Security (KGB).

Markevich told Belapan that the ban must be linked to his professional activities. "There are no reasons that would allow the KGB to impose an official travel ban on me. I don't hold any state secrets. I have no unpaid fines, no uncleared criminal record, I'm not implicated in any criminal case. That's why I can link the authorities' actions only to my involvement in resumed broadcasts by Radio Racja in Bialystok," Markevich said. Radio Racja, funded by the Polish government, started broadcasts to Belarus shortly before the March 19 presidential vote in that country.

Source: RFE/RL; April 4, 2006; <http://www.rferl.org>

4. Journalists Are Released

Today at about 11.30 a.m. a BAJ member Anton Taras was released from the confinement cell in Akrestsina Street after an 11-days' detention.

Several journalists have been released from the confinement cell in Zhodzina: a BAJ member Tattiana Vanina (8 days of detention) was released on March 31 and Vadzim Kaznachejeu (10 days of detention) was released on the night of April 3. Darya Kastsenka (10 days of detention) was released last night. On April 1 the editor-in-chief of *Glos znad Niemna Na Uchodzstwie* Andrej Piscalnik was released after 12 days of detention. Valery Shchukin's (a journalist from *Narodnaja Vola*) trial assigned for March 31 was postponed again and assigned for April 6.

By the way, there are still a lot of journalists who have not been released yet: Belarusian journalists Artsiom Liava and Syarhey Salash, Russian journalists – Eduard Glezin, Oleg Kozlovskij and Aleksandr Podrabinek, Ukrainian Journalists Andrej Lubka and Pavel Salyga, a

Georgian cameraman Georgij Lagidze, a Polish reporter Veronika Smalinska, and a Canadian journalist Frederic Levoie. All of them are in the confinement cell in Akrestsina Street.

Source: Belarusian Association of Journalists; April 3, 2006; <http://www.baj.ru/>

5. Protesters Tell of Abuse and Gas

Scores of people detained during opposition protests were released from prison Friday, with some reporting they were beaten, gassed and taunted by Belarussian police, and the opposition claimed one protester had apparently died in a hospital after being beating.

Sergei Kalyakin, the coordinator of the united opposition headquarters, said at a news conference Friday that Sergei Atroshchenko had been brutally beaten by police and died of head injuries Wednesday.

Police refused to comment on the report, and officials at a hospital where Atroshchenko was believed to be held said they never had such a patient.

The released were among the hundreds of opposition supporters seized a week ago when police raided an encampment on Minsk's main square. The camp had been the epicenter of an unprecedented wave of daily protests after the March 19 presidential elections, which many claimed were fraudulent. The election results gave President Alexander Lukashenko a third term in office.

Hundreds of protesters were rounded up in trucks and detained.

"They threw me into the truck, and I fell into a cloud of gas, and my head immediately started to hurt," said Vladimir Romantsov, 53, one of those released early Friday.

Kristina Shatikova, 30, left the Okrestino detention facility with a cap pulled low on her head to try to hide bruises on her face. "They beat us very hard in the trucks," she said.

She said police threw scalding water from a pot that camp members had been using to prepare food onto the face of one of the other detainees.

She also said some female detainees were sexually abused by police.

Artyom Lukyanchik, 21, said he was arrested about 1 kilometer away from the tent camp as he tried to bring warm clothing to people spending the night there. He was placed in a police bus with about 30 others. "In the bus, they made us lie on the floor, then they walked on our heads and beat us," he said. The police also forced people on the bus to say "I voted for Lukashenko," he said.

The opposition, led by presidential candidate Alexander Milinkevich, contends that the vote count -- which gave Lukashenko 83 percent of the vote -- was severely manipulated and is calling for a rerun of the election, without the participation of Lukashenko.

The United States and the European Union have sharply and repeatedly condemned the election the violence afterward. Hundreds of opposition supporters remain in jail, human rights groups say, and the EU on Friday demanded their immediate release.

Such calls appear to have little effect on Lukashenko, other than to reinforce his disdain for the West and his contention that Washington and Brussels are funding malcontents to try to overthrow him.

The Belarussian Foreign Ministry on Friday assailed Poland for making "unprecedented" moves that worsened bilateral relations and recalled Belarus' ambassador in Poland for consultations. The move follows Milinkevich's trip to Poland earlier in the week.

Milinkevich said Friday that he would have talks in Vienna on Monday with EU president Austria, go to the European Parliament in Strasbourg on Wednesday and Thursday, and attend a meeting of EU foreign ministers in Luxembourg on April 10, Reuters reported.

Source: Yuras Karmanau, *The Moscow Times*; April 3, 2006; <http://www.themoscowtimes.com>

6. Vadzim Aleksandrovich Is Released

After 17 p.m. a journalist from *Belorusy I Rynok* Vadzim Aleksandrovich was released. He should have been released half an hour earlier but he said he had been talking to the security service for almost an hour.

He said that he had been on a hunger-strike during his first three days in the confinement cell. But it was very cold in the camera and that is why he decided to start drinking tea. In the last days his cellmates persuaded him that it was better to stop the hunger-strike.

Moreover, people who supported them had sent them a lot of food and it would have been impolite to ignore their help.

Let us remind you that Vadzim Aleksandrovich was detained near Kastychnitskaja Square on March 22. The hearing of his case took place in the Zavodski District Court of Minsk. His relatives were told that the trial would take place in the Central District Court of Minsk and that is why neither relatives, nor the lawyer could attend the trial.

Source: *Belarusian Association of Journalists*; March 31, 2006; <http://www.baj.ru/>

7. The First Issue of *Narodnaja Vola* Published After the Election Is Available

Today a new issue of *Narodnaja Vola* (##48-49) has been delivered to Belarus. 11 thousand issues of the newspaper were published in Smolensk. On the night of March 31 it was brought to Minsk despite problems at the border.

"We were delayed at the border and I had to do everything possible to deliver the newspaper to Belarus...", - noted the editor-in-chief Iosif Syaredzich.

The newspaper contains photos of Kastychnitskaja Square on March 19 and an article by Iosif Syaredzich "Towards Liberty" where he explains why the newspaper was not published for some time and asks readers to support the newspaper. In the section "No Comment" there are letters to different officials where the editor asks to be allowed to print the edition in Belarus. There are also interviews with witnesses of the events of March 25, comments and photos.

"Belarus is experiencing many problems now. Everyone should decide what ideas to believe in. Journalists from "Narodnaja Vola" will continue carrying out their professional activities – we will do everything possible to make the newspaper more interesting", - says I. Syaredzich.

Source: *Belarusian Association of Journalists*; March 31, 2006; <http://www.baj.ru/>

8. Andrej Dynko Released

The editor-in-chief of *Nasha Niva* Andrej Dynko was released today.

He spent 10 days in the confinement cell. His relatives, colleagues and readers came to meet him.

Dzmitry Hurevich (a reporter from *Radio Polonia*) was released last night, while A. Dynko was released at about 11 a.m.

Before going home the journalist talked to his friend a little bit.

“The bench I slept on was 28 cm wide, we measured it with a matchbox.” - recalled A. Dynko.

He also advised relatives of the other detained to bring them more newspapers. He added that everything was not as bad as it may have seemed: “At first it was rather difficult because I did not know what was going to happen, but in the end we were joking and looked upon the situation with humor...”

A journalist from *Belorusy I Rynok* Vadzim Aleksandrovich served his sentence together with Andrej. He will be released today after 4 p.m.

Aliaksandar Starykevich, the editor-in-chief of *Salidarnast* said: “To tell you the truth, I think that the police tried to detain not the editor-in-chief of *Nasha Niva* but a regular citizen heading for the meeting. Otherwise they could have accused him of participating in an illegal meeting, but they accused him of misdemeanor just like all the others. I would believe that a deaf-mute used bad language rather than Andrej did...”

Aliaksey Shein, A. Milinkevich's press service (he also spent 5 days in the confinement cell): “The judges did not take into account whether the detained were journalists or regular participants of the meeting: if you were detained your journalist certificate could not save you...”

Source: Belarusian Association of Journalists; March 31, 2006; <http://www.baj.ru/>

9. Riot Policemen Assaulted Zubr Activist For National Flag

An underage Zubr activist Andrei Kuzminsky was detained on March 24 in the night during the liquidation of the tent camp on October Square in Minsk by riot policemen. He was one of the first to be seized by riot policemen. He defended tents together with his friends, clasping the hands. “I was thrown in an armoured truck. I was holding a national flag. Riot policemen started to snatch it from my hands, they knocked me on the ground, but I refused to give the flag. In Akrestsin Street I was dumped from the truck. I fell, then I stood up and tried to run to the fence, but they started to kick me,” the activist told to the Charter’97 press center. Now Andrei Kuzminski is hospitalized in a surgery department of 9th hospital and diagnosed a blood tumor and kidney rupture.

As we have informed, on March 24 in the morning the Internal Affairs Department of Minsk city executive committee and the Internal Affairs Ministry reported that all underage defenders of the tent camp had been released. The policemen had not told that after beating up by riot policemen they were hospitalized.

It's not the first time when Andrei Kuzminski is beaten up by riot policemen. On March 15 the Zubr activist took part in the picket in front of the Russian Embassy in Minsk. The Zubrs held a streamer: “Support of the dictator is disgrace for Russia!” Andrei was beaten up by riot policemen in masks then. He regained conscience in an ambulance car. His rib was injured, he had many closed wounds.

Source: ZUBR; March 30, 2006; <http://www.zubr-belarus.com/>

DOMESTIC

10. Belarus Opposition Leader Outlines Plans To Oust Lukashenka

Belarusian opposition leader Alyaksandr Milinkevich said today that free elections, free speech, and free education will be the main planks in the opposition's program following disputed presidential elections last month.

Milinkevich said protests will be just one part of the opposition's strategy for peacefully uprooting the regime of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, who was reelected in the March 19 vote.

In a statement on his website, Milinkevich said opposition supporters will collect signatures for a petition to demand changes in the election code and call for parliamentary and local council deputies to be recalled.

He said independent TV and radio stations for Belarusians have been set up abroad and promised support for print media.

He also said students expelled from Belarusian universities for anti-Lukashenka protests will be transferred to European universities.

Milinkevich was in the European Parliament in Strasbourg today, April 5.

Source: RFE/RL; April 5, 2006; <http://www.rferl.org>

11. Missing Strongman of Belarus Is Fine, Say Aides

Aides to President Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus tried yesterday to end speculation over the disappearance of the man branded as Europe's last dictator. He was neither ill nor sulking, they said.

The president has hardly appeared in public since his reelection last month, leaving the country mystified. Opposition activists and some diplomats have suggested that he could be sulking after the European Union and America imposed travel sanctions on him following allegations that the election was rigged. Others suggested that he had suffered a stroke.

Gennady Nevysglas, his chief of staff, said the president had played a weekend game of ice hockey - a sport in which his opponents are said to be told to play badly. "He beat everybody by a huge score, so I would suggest that the state of his health is excellent," he said.

Officials then announced that the president's inauguration would be held on Saturday. It had been due last week but was postponed because the president was too busy to attend, a government website said.

Source: Adrian Blomfield, Telegraph Group Limited; April 4, 2006; <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/>

12. Belarus Sets Date For Swearing In

Alexander Lukashenko is to be sworn in for his third term as president of Belarus on Saturday, after winning the recent disputed elections.

He had been due to be inaugurated on 31 March, but the ceremony was postponed for reasons not made public.

The 19 March election results were widely condemned as fraudulent by the opposition and by Western observers.

Opposition leaders, who led protests after the elections, want a fresh vote - without Mr. Lukashenko as a candidate.

The president, who Washington calls "Europe's last dictator", has kept a low profile since the elections and widespread international condemnation.

Hundreds of opposition protesters, including a runner-up candidate, have been jailed for taking part in protests after the results were announced.

The US and EU have agreed to impose sanctions on Belarus, which will probably include a travel ban against Mr. Lukashenko, who has been president for more than a decade.

Belarus insists Mr. Lukashenko's win was fair.

Source: BBC News; April 3, 2006; <http://news.bbc.co.uk>

13. Belarus Opposition Leaders Seek to Declare Presidential Elections Invalid

Belarus opposition leaders who lost the recent presidential elections to Alexander Lukashenko have filed suits to Belarus Supreme Court demanding to declare the elections invalid, Itar Tass said Saturday.

Alexander Kozulin's and Alexander Milinkevich's elections staff filed separate suits Friday, seeking to declare the elections of March 19th invalid.

Alexander Milinkevich's complaints, including violations in the pre-elections campaign and the elections management, are listed on 700 pages.

Kozulin's complaints include Lukashenko's illegal running for a fourth presidential term.

Source: MosNews.Com, April 1, 2006; www.mosnews.com

14. Belarus Opposition Probes Protester Death Amid Official Silence

Belarusian opposition groups said Friday they have launched a probe into the alleged death of a protester during a March 25 rally that ended in confrontation with riot police.

A spokesperson for opposition leader Alexander Kozulin said a protester apparently injured during clashes with the police later died in a local hospital. Two more protesters have been missing since they accompanied Kozulin in an attempt to negotiate with the police, the spokesman said.

Official sources denied all knowledge of the incident.

Kozulin, one of three defeated candidates in the March 19 elections, was arrested during a rally on March 25 and has been kept in a pre-trial detention center 30 kilometers (about 19 miles) from Minsk. He has been charged with serious public order offenses and hooliganism, and could face up to five years in prison if convicted.

Incumbent leader Alexander Lukashenko was re-elected to a third presidential term March 19 with 83% of the vote. Opposition candidates - all of whom polled in single figures - denounced the elections as rigged, and staged a five-day protest on central Oktyabrskaya Square in Minsk until police disbanded them on March 24.

The next day, crowds protesting Lukashenko's re-election clashed with riot police, who detained 300 people.

Lukashenko has been dubbed "Europe's last dictator" by Washington, but has domestic support within the country for providing relative stability in comparison with some other former Soviet states.

Russia's Foreign Ministry earlier said that the March 25 events in Minsk were a failed attempt to repeat the tactics used by opposition groups in other former Soviet republics to protest election results.

Source: RIA Novosti; March 31, 2006; <http://rian.ru>

15. Belarus Opposition to Face Presidential Sentence

Former opposition candidate at election of Belarus' president, Alexander Kozulin faced criminal charges Thursday. Belarus authorities are getting ready to bring accusation against another candidate at election, Alexander Milinkevich. According to Milinkevich, who is in Warsaw now, Alexander Lukashenko is living in dread after the recent rallies of opposition.

Alexander Kozulin has faced charges on two counts. He is accused of having staged "group actions that grossly shatter public order" and of malicious hooliganism, meaning detention up to three years under the first count and up to six years under the second count.

Gramada's leader Alexander Kozulin was arrested March 25 in the wake of clashes with police near the National Press Center, due to brawl near the Railway Cultural Center, for March 25 appeal to go and "help new heroes of Belarus, who are in Okrestino," and for the march of protesters, which ended by clashes with special forces.

Around 480 Belarussians, who joined the rallies against the third presidential term of Alexander Lukashenko, have been condemned in Belarus, according to data of right advocates. But this list is hardly complete. Even Belarus Prosecutor General Pyotr Miklashevich spoke of 500 detained.

Former Polish Ambassador to Belarus Mariusz Maszkiewicz, who had been jailed for taking part in an unauthorized protest in central Minsk, was delivered to Minsk hospital yesterday due to suspected heart attack. Maszkiewicz denied hospitalization first. "You either undergo treatment here and now or we will treat you in Okrestino," the guards told the former ambassador.

Meanwhile, the clouds are piling up for another opposition leader, Alexander Milinkevich. Miklashevich made clear Wednesday this former presidential candidate is likely to be accused of Administrative Code's violation (taking part and arranging unauthorized rallies).

Source: Kommersant; March 31, 2006; <http://www.kommersant.com>

REGIONAL

16. Is a Russian-Belarusian Gas War Brewing?

At a meeting with Belarusian officials on March 30, Aleksei Miller, the CEO of Russia's state gas monopoly Gazprom, announced that in 2007 Belarus will be charged European rates for Russian gas. That could mean the country paying up to five times as much -- something that could seriously affect the Belarusian economy, which has long depended on cheap gas imports.

Could this be the start of a new gas war?

Only a few weeks after being reelected, Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka could now face a gas war with Russia.

Things looked much rosier in December 2005. Russia and Belarus signed a one-year contract for 2006 gas deliveries at \$46.68 per 1,000 cubic meters. In return, Belarus agreed to complete on schedule its section of the Yamal-Europe pipeline, which will transport gas to Germany via Poland. Belarus also agreed to resolve problems regarding the leases for land on which Russian compressor stations are to be built.

Meeting with Lukashenka in Sochi on December 15, 2005, Russian President Vladimir Putin backed Lukashenka in the forthcoming presidential election. Putin was optimistic about ties with Belarus.

But the spirit of bonhomie wasn't in existence on March 30 when Miller met with Belarusian Energy Minister Alyaksandr Ageyev and Dimitry Kazakov, the head of Beltransgaz, the Belarusian state company that owns and operates the country's gas-pipeline network.

Miller gave them advance notice that in 2007 Belarus will be charged European rates for Russian gas deliveries. Western European buyers of Russian gas now pay approximately \$230 per 1,000 cubic meters.

The official reason for this was later explained by the Russian ambassador to Belarus, Aleksandr Surikov, who said that the price increase was needed in order for Russia to be accepted into the World Trade Organization, Belapan news agency reported on March 31.

Some analysts have suggested that Gazprom's announcement could be meant to lessen criticism of Russia's use of gas as a tool of foreign policy prior to Group of Eight (G-8) industrialized countries' summit in July. The topic of energy security will top the agenda at the meeting. Russia, which is currently the chair of the G-8, could then say it is being even-handed in its gas-pricing policy and is selling to friend and foe alike at "European prices."

Syarhey Zvanko, head of the Department for Russia and the Union State in the Belarusian Foreign Ministry, reacted cautiously to the news that Gazprom might raise prices in 2007. He explained on March 31 that, according to a Belarusian-Russian agreement, "economic entities in both countries are to enjoy equal conditions and a price policy accord that entitles Belarus to gas deliveries at the rate charged for consumers in Russia's fifth price zone," Belapan reported.

Gazprom sells gas to its domestic customers on the basis of 11 regulated geographical price zones. The price for 1,000 cubic meters of gas in the fifth zone, including VAT, in March was \$46.72 for nonresidential consumers and \$36.52 for residential users.

Overall, prices in the zones vary from \$28.65 in the first zone to \$54.81 in the 11th. This unwieldy system was designed to prevent a "payments crisis," after Gazprom was faced with nonpayment of gas bills from domestic consumers in the early 1990s.

Does this mean the era of cheap gas for Belarus is now coming to an end?

Valery Karbalevich, an analyst with the independent Minsk-based Strategy Center for Political Analysis, thinks probably not. He says the Belarusian authorities do not seem to be overly concerned as they know that the country offers Russia a transit route to its European markets and there is very little Gazprom can do to impose its will.

Karbalevich says if the price is pushed up, the Belarusian authorities could just take as much Russian gas as they need to satisfy the country's requirements, as Ukraine has done.

"If Russia refuses to supply the gas, he [Lukashenka] will simply take the gas being transported to Europe and all the problems will be settled," Karbalevich says.

He adds that Russia has very few possibilities to pressure both Minsk and Kyiv until a pipeline under the Baltic Sea, which will bypass Belarus and Ukraine, is completed by the end of this year.

Belarus's current gas contract with Russia was signed at the height of the Ukrainian-Russian "gas war." The low price for Belarus was used by Western critics as proof that Russia was raising gas prices for Ukraine as part of a policy to punish the new, pro-Western Ukrainian leadership, while subsidizing its friends in Belarus.

Lukashenka then tried to counter Western critics who claimed that his country was getting cheap gas for political reasons.

"Belarus gets Russian gas cheaply not for friendship's sake," Lukashenka told the Russian newspaper "Rossiiskaya gazeta."

"We do not ask Russia to sell us gas for a song," he said. Lukashenka added that the transit of Russian gas through Belarusian territory costs one-fifth to one-third less than that through Ukraine.

Russia pays Belarus \$0.75 per 1,000 cubic meters per 100 kilometers for transporting gas via the Beltranshaz pipeline and \$0.46 per 1,000 cubic meters per 100 kilometers along the Yamal-Europe pipeline.

Another important factor is the ownership of the trunk pipelines running through Belarus. One pipeline was built in Soviet times and is owned by the Belarusian state. The second, the Yamal-Europe pipeline, will be completed by the end of this year and is currently running at reduced capacity. This pipeline belongs to Gazprom, but the land on which it is built belongs to the Belarusian state and is leased to Gazprom on a long-term basis.

Jan Maksymiuk, RFE/RL's Belarus and Ukraine analyst, says that Moscow has pushed Minsk to give up control of the Belarusian gas-pipeline network.

"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," Maksymiuk says. "That provoked an angry response from Gazprom, which even cut off Belarus's gas flow for one day."

Belarus owes Gazprom \$120 million for gas debts run up since the 1990s. A substantial price increase for 2007 gas deliveries could place Belarus in a difficult position and might force it to relinquish control over Beltranshaz to Russia in return for a cheaper gas price and the cancellation of the debt.

This could further upset the already shaky foundations for a union between the two countries. It could also raise European concerns over reliable gas deliveries through the Yamal-Europe pipeline. (Roman Kupchinsky) // RFE/RL's correspondent Valentinas Mite contributed to this report.

Source: RFE/RL; April 4, 2006; <http://www.rferl.org>

17. Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus To Sign First CES Documents Soon - Putin

President Vladimir Putin has announced that Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus would soon sign the first package of 38 documents meant to establish the Common Economic Space (CES).

"As for our Ukrainian partners, we will be glad if they are ready to sign. But as far as we know from experts our Ukrainian friends will attend the signing and are ready to sign several documents from the package, but not the entire package," he told a Tuesday news conference in Moscow.

Source: Interfax; April 4, 2006; <http://www.interfax.ru/e>

18. Gazprom Says It Will Triple Gas Price for Belarus in 2007

Gazprom said Tuesday it planned to triple natural gas prices for Belarus starting in 2007. "Belarus is the only country that is still not paying the market price for [Russian] gas," deputy board chairman Alexander Ryazanov said. "We believe the price should be tripled in 2007."

The former Soviet republic is currently paying \$46.68 per 1,000 cubic meters of natural gas, compared with figures of \$110 for the Caucasian republics of Armenia and Georgia, and \$230 for Ukraine.

Ryazanov said Ukraine was currently buying Russian gas in limited volumes, and that raising gas prices for former Soviet republics was an economic rather than a political decision.

Source: RIA Novosti; April 4, 2006; <http://rian.ru>

19. Day of Unity of Peoples of Belarus and Russian Officially Marked in Moscow

The 10th anniversary of the Day of Unity of the peoples of Belarus and Russian was marked in Moscow on April 3. A festive event in the state concert hall "Rossiya" gathered together deputies of the national parliaments of the two countries, government members, representatives of the Union State Permanent Committee, Parliamentary Assembly of the Belarus-Russia Union, figures of science and culture and general public of Belarus and Russia.

Chairman of the Council of the Republic of the National Assembly of Belarus Gennadiy Novitskiy read out an address from the Chairman of the Supreme State Council of the Union State, President of the Republic of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko. The address notes that the Union of Belarus and Russia is a locomotive of integration processes. "We can retain this role by moving forward, by developing single economic, information and sci-tech space, improving the well-being of people" reads the address.

Deputy Chairman of the government of Russia Alexander Zhukov read out an address from President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin. The Union State Treaty signed 10 years legalized the desire of the two peoples to build a common future, the Russian President stresses in the address. He also notes that for the recent decade the Belarusian-Russian cooperation has advanced in all spheres. Vladimir Putin is convinced that the cooperation will continue in the interests of stable development of Belarus and Russia.

Speaking to the audience, Speaker of the upper chamber of the Russian parliament Sergei Mironov noted that for the last decade relations between Belarus and Russia have been brought up onto a new level. Belarus and Russia have created a solid legislative base. In particular, within the framework of union cooperation about 200 various agreements and treaties have been signed. Sergei Mironov also stressed that the constitution act to set a political structure of the Union State is soon will be completed.

*Source: The National Centre of Legal Information of the Republic of Belarus; April 4, 2006;
<http://law.by/work/Eng/>*

20. Russia To Raise Gas Price for Belarus Up On WTO Membership

A Russian foreign ministry official said Monday that the decision to raise natural gas prices for Belarus was not related to the two countries' efforts to create a union state but to Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization.

Vyacheslav Kovalchuk, head of the foreign ministry's second CIS department, told a news conference that once Russia had joined the WTO, it would raise domestic gas prices.

"If Russia joins the WTO, the gas price will also be raised for Belarus," the diplomat said.

The global trade body has pressured Russia to increase domestic prices for gas and other fuels, whereas Russia has insisted on its right to what it calls natural advantage.

Kovalchuk added, however, that it would be logical for Russia and Belarus, who have been working since 1999 on establishing a union state, to have common prices for natural gas.

The two former Soviet nations signed an agreement in December 1999 to restore a common political, economic, legal, defense, and humanitarian space while retaining their sovereignty. The plan, however, has largely gathered dust, although occasional steps forward have been made.

Russian natural gas monopoly Gazprom said in late March that it would raise gas prices for Belarus, which transits Russian gas into Europe, to European levels starting in 2007.

Under a contract between Gazprom and Belarus' Beltransgaz signed in December, Gazprom will deliver 21 billion cubic meters of gas this year at \$46.68 per 1,000 cubic meters, the same as last year.

Gazprom said the price of gas and transit took into account the future Russia-Belarus Union State, which implies single standards for financial and economic indicators.

The Russian energy giant first raised the gas price for Belarus in 2005. Late last year, Russia gave its neighbor a \$146-million loan to cover gas price hikes.

Source: RIA Novosti; April 3, 2006; <http://rian.ru>

21. Russia Begins Supplies of Air Defense Systems to Belarus

Russia has begun supplies of modern S-300PS defense systems to Belarus, Air Force chief Vladimir Mikhailov told Itar-Tass upon arriving in the Belarusian capital on Monday.

"Belarusians are literary fine fellows, doing everything on time and even slightly pacing ahead, in order to receive the modern air defense missile systems," Mikhailov said.

Belarusian specialists have been working in Russia for five months, "controlling the quality of repairs and shipments and other issues related to the purchase of new S-300 units," he went on to say.

Answering a question about a possible deployment of Russian air bases in Belarus, the General said "we have the intention to strengthen our military-technical cooperation, and the deployment of our air bases is envisioned as contingency case."

"But this will not happen tomorrow or the day after tomorrow. It's a perspective," Mikhailov underlined.

He noted that all the air bases in the Republic of Belarus are "in good conditions, and are ready to receive us anytime."

"We, too, are ready to fly over and begin duty at a specific command," the Russian Air Force chief said.

Source: Itar-Tass; April 3, 2005; <http://www.tass.ru/eng>

22. Belarus Marks Day of Unification of Belarusian And Russian Peoples

Belarus is marking the Day of Unification of Belarusian and Russian peoples and the 10th anniversary of allied relations between the two countries.

Flags wave all over the country. All newspapers' articles, TV and radio programs are devoted to stepping up Russian-Belarusian union state building.

Official events will be held on April 3, the head of the Minsk department of the Permanent Committee for the Union State, Vasily Sholodov, said. Russian and Belarusian popular singers will make performances in Minsk and across the country.

The day of all schoolchildren will begin from an information lesson devoted to the issue of the day.

On the eve, Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko congratulated Belarussians on this event.

Source: Itar-Tass; April 3, 2005; <http://www.tass.ru/eng>

INTERNATIONAL

23. Belarusian Foreign Policy Vectors Are Unchanged – Lukashenko

The recent presidential elections in Belarus did not change main vectors and principles of the Belarusian foreign policy, President Alexander Lukashenko said at a Tuesday meeting with Foreign Minister Sergei Martynov and Belarusian Ambassador to Poland Pavel Latushko.

“Belarus is a country open to the world and interested in the interaction,” he said.

“Belarus gives a lot to the world and Europe, from security to economic cooperation and anti-crime measures,” Martynov said.

The interlocutors stressed their interest in the development of relations between Belarus and Poland, primarily dynamic trade and economic cooperation that had tripled over the three past years.

“Pragmatism and neighborliness should be the main factor in the development of relations with Poland,” Latushko said. “Belarus thinks that Polish partners realize the futility of influence on the internal political situation. One should bear in mind that the Belarusian people make independent decisions about its future, and the choice has been made,” he said.

Belarus temporarily withdrew its ambassador from Poland for consultations on March 31. The ambassador will go back to Warsaw when the consultations are complete.

Source: Itar-Tass; April 5, 2005; <http://www.tass.ru/eng>

24. Belarus May Reconsider Partnership Program With NATO

April 4, 2006 -- Belarus says it might reconsider its partnership policy with NATO following the alliance's criticism of last month's presidential election.

NATO officials said last week that the organization would refuse to deal with any Belarusian official who had been involved in the repression of peaceful demonstrations against the reelection of President Alyaksandr Lykashenka in the March 19 election.

The alliance also said it is reassessing its relations with Belarus.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Andrey Papou accused NATO of "intentionally politicizing" its relations with Belarus, which signed a Partnership for Peace agreement with the alliance in 1995.

Hundreds of people were detained and many remain in prison following the election. The Belarusian opposition, Western governments, and international observers say the vote was neither free nor fair. // Belapan, AP

Source: RFE/RL; April 4, 2006; <http://www.rferl.org>

25. Belarus Opposition Leader: West Can Help Democracy

Alexander Milinkevich, who led protest demonstrations in Belarus against electoral fraud, says the West could help democratic forces fighting for freedom in his country. Marlene Smith has more for VOA from Vienna, where the opposition leader had talks with EU politicians.

Alexander Milinkevich only won six percent of the vote in last month's presidential election, but his fame has spread well beyond the borders of Belarus.

The politician visited Vienna and spoke to journalists at the invitation of the Austrian Christian Democratic Party, led by Prime Minister Wolfgang Schüssel.

Milinkevich said without Russian support, the government of President Aleksandr Lukashenko would collapse, but that the west could also play a role in helping democracy.

He says the regime in Minsk is strong because it allows no free information and has a monopoly on the media. Milinkevich says the press is government controlled and only a few radio broadcasts such as Radio Free Europe can be received from outside.

He says Belarus state television offers a diet of anti-U.S. propaganda and longwinded speeches by the president visiting tractor factories.

Milinkevich continued, many young people and students are now suffering because they took part in demonstrations against the government. He said he wants the European Union to help with facilitating visas and grants so that such students could continue their education outside Belarus.

On election night Milinkevich spoke to thousands of supporters in Minsk who defied special units of the state police to protest, what they called, the manipulation of the presidential election. He stayed in makeshift tents on the main city square with demonstrators before the police moved in and made hundreds of arrests.

Official results gave the incumbent President Lukashenko 83 percent of the vote with a turnout of more than 90 percent. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe said the vote was marred by serious violations, intimidation, and electoral fraud.

Source: Marlene Smith, Voice of America; April 4, 2006; <http://www.voanews.com/english/>

26. Swiss Cooperation Office Belarus Allocates \$300 000 For Computerization Schools in Gomel and Mogilev Regions

Swiss cooperation office Belarus, a branch of Swiss agency for development and cooperation is planning to provide financial assistance for computerization of schools in Chernobyl disaster affected areas in Gomel and Mogilev regions. \$300 000 will be allocated within the framework of assistance to schools in Chernobyl area in 2006.

This is a part of the scheme negotiated by Ministry of Communications and Informatization of the Republic of Belarus, Beltelecom, Svizforminbest, Swiss cooperation office Belarus and Siemens representative office in Belarus.

Beltelecom, on its part, will cut the price of Internet access by 50% for schools in the area. On April, 1, 2006, Beltelecom launched new access services package "For Schools" with monthly fee of \$7.

Source: Mikhail Doroshevich, E-Belarus.ORG; April 4, 2006; www.e-belarus.org

27. Polish Journalist Freed From Belarus Prison

A Polish journalist detained by Belarusian police during a demonstration in Minsk against the Lukashenko regime on March 24 has been released from prison. Weronika Samolinska, who writes for the mass circulation Gazeta Wyborcza daily, was sentenced to 10 days behind bars on March 27. She was detained alongside several hundred Belarusian opposition supporters when the police cracked down on protesters in Minsk. Among them was also a former Polish ambassador to Minsk Mariusz Maszkiewicz, who is now in hospital due to problems with his heart.

Samolinska described the conditions in the prison as appalling but said that the spirit of solidarity prevailed among the detainees.

Source: Polskie Radio, April 3, 2006; <http://www.polskieradio.pl/polonia/>

28. Belarusian Ambassador Temporarily Recalled From Warsaw

Belarusian Foreign Minister Sergei Martynov said the Belarusian ambassador in Warsaw has been recalled to Minsk for consultations in the wake of a series of anti-Belarusian moves made by the Polish government.

"The Belarusian ambassador has been recalled temporarily," Martynov told the press on Monday.

The ambassador is expected to return to Belarus "following consultations," he said.

Source: Interfax; April 3, 2006; <http://www.interfax.ru/e>

29. Polish President Lech Kaczynski Considers the Situation in Belarus "Very Complex".

Kaczynski arrived in Lvov on an official visit on Saturday. Commenting on the detention of former Polish ambassador to Belarus Mariusz Maszkewicz, who was found guilty of having participated in an authorized mass rally organized by the Belarussian opposition on the night from March 23 to March 24, the Polish president said, "We'll take energetic measures because it can't be true when the Polish ambassador was beaten and arrested for 15 days."

The former Polish ambassador to Belarus was arrested for 15 days in Minsk on Monday. On the night from March 23 to March 24, he visited the camp city set up by the opposition in central Oktyabrskaya Square. He was detained when police cleared the square of the tents. Leaving the court after the verdict, the former diplomat said, "I am proud that I was there in Oktyabrskaya Square".

The Polish Foreign Ministry said on Monday Poland will introduce visa restrictions for some of Belarussian officials. It did not name the officials to be denied entry to Poland but said the restrictions would apply to those who "bear responsibility for the falsification of elections in Belarus and for repressions against the opposition."

The ministry also asked the European Union to introduce similar measures.

The ministry has decided to temporarily suspend the work of its consulate general in Grodno, Belarus. Foreign Ministry spokesman Pawel Dobrowolski said the consulate general would not resume operation until the reasons that led to its closure are investigated.

He held Belarus fully responsible for the consequences of this decision for its citizens. The work of the Polish consulate general in Grodno was suspended after Belarussian authorities had denied entry to Consul General in Grodno Andrzej Krentowski and his deputy Janusz Dombrowski on the border last Sunday.

In violation of international norms Belarussian authorities demand that their diplomatic cars be searched, the ministry said. // *Itar-Tass*

Source: BelaPAN; April 2, 2006; <http://www.naviny.by/ru/>

30. More Europe Invitations For Belarus Opposition Head

Belarus's President Alexander Lukashenko sank deeper into international isolation on Friday as his main opponent in a disputed presidential election was invited to put his case in European capitals.

Belarus, described by Washington as Europe's last dictatorship, hit back at its critics by recalling its ambassador to European Union member Poland and accusing Warsaw of meddling in its internal affairs.

Alexander Milinkevich came a distant second to Lukashenko in the election on March 19 which was judged unfair by Western observers. The result triggered protests against Lukashenko's rule unprecedented in the tightly controlled ex-Soviet state.

Milinkevich said he would have talks in Vienna on Monday with EU president Austria, go to the European Parliament in Strasbourg on April 5-6 and attend a meeting of EU foreign ministers in Luxembourg on April 10.

The invitations are a stinging rebuke for Lukashenko, who dismisses Milinkevich as a troublemaker with no support at home.

Prosecutors have threatened Milinkevich with up to 15 days in prison for violating public order, similar to sentences passed on hundreds of other protesters.

Lukashenko is supported by Russia and is popular with millions of voters who credit him with ensuring stability when other former Soviet states have descended into chaos.

"None of us (in the opposition) has the slightest doubt that this regime won't last for another five years," Milinkevich told a news briefing. "I don't want to be a prophet, but it will fall much earlier."

"Such foreign trips are extremely important ... Democratic states are now forming a consolidated position on Belarus," he said after chairing an opposition strategy meeting.

"We want to see the creation of a whole front of states which will support democracy in Belarus."

"Rattled"

Lukashenko postponed his inauguration ceremony this week, saying he had no space in his timetable. He has looked strained in brief public appearances since the vote and his opponents say he is rattled by the scale of the protests.

The Foreign Ministry in Minsk said it had recalled its ambassador in Warsaw for consultations and also summoned the Polish charge d'affaires in Minsk to complain about what it called unprecedented Polish interference.

Belarus's neighbour Poland has joined other EU nations and Washington in demanding the release of opposition activists jailed after police broke up their protests over the vote.

A day earlier, Milinkevich had talks in Warsaw with Polish President Lech Kaczynski, winning pledges that Poland would act as Belarus's advocate with the EU.

A week of protests led by Milinkevich gathered 10,000 people at its peak. Police took no action for several days, but dispersed a march on a detention centre, arresting hundreds. Some, released on Friday, told Reuters they had been beaten by police when they were arrested. Officials deny using excessive force.

In Brussels, the 26-nation NATO issued a statement deploring the use of force against protesters and saying it would have no dealings with officials involved in repression. "NATO will pursue a policy focused on encouraging reform," it said.

In Geneva, the International Labour Organisation said it feared trade union rights were being denied.

The pressure on Lukashenko was increased further by an unexpected source on Thursday when Russian state-owned gas giant Gazprom said from 2007 it would end Minsk's hefty discounts for gas supplies. (Additional reporting by Andrei Makhovsky in Minsk and Mark John in Brussels)

Source: Dmitry Solovyov, Reuters AlertNet; March 31, 2006; <http://www.alertnet.org>

31. OSCE Concerned by Detentions in Belarus

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe is expressing grave concern about the detention of opposition protesters in Belarus following controversial elections in the former Soviet Republic. The OSCE and other monitoring groups say the elections were undemocratic.

Ambassador Christian Strohal has just returned from an OSCE election observation mission in Belarus, where official result confirmed Alexander Lukaschenko as president with 83 percent of the vote.

But Ambassador Strohal says the election was marred by state oppression and election practices which fell well short of international standards.

"We have been observing, not only before, but also after the election, as you say, and have been seriously concerned about the way in which peaceful demonstrators have been treated, [people] have been arrested, have been detained, have been tried," said Strohal.

Opposition groups in Belarus say hundreds of demonstrators, including a presidential candidate were arrested, and some beaten by police.

"We have been requesting access, and we have been able to establish some contacts, and are trying to follow up on this," he added.

Belarusian authorities have announced the detained pro-opposition activists are now being given prison terms. The European Union is demanding that Belarus free the demonstrators.

The ambassador, who heads the OSCE's Warsaw-based Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, calls civil society activists in Belarus very courageous, but says they are constantly under threat and harassment.

The U.S. and the EU have decided to impose sanctions on the Belarus government, including a travel ban on President Lukashenko who has ruled Belarus since 1994.

Source: Marlene Smith, Voice of America; March 31, 2006; <http://www.voanews.com/english/>

32. Belarus Protest Leader To Seek EU Backing in Vienna

Belarus's main opposition leader is to have talks in Vienna next week with EU president Austria, keeping up Western pressure on President Alexander Lukashenko over a disputed presidential election.

Alexander Milinkevich came a distant second to Lukashenko in the March 19 vote which was judged unfair by Western observers and triggered protests against Lukashenko's rule that were unprecedented in the tightly-controlled ex-Soviet state.

Milinkevich said on Friday he would use a meeting with Austrian Chancellor Wolfgang Schuessel on Monday to enlist the European Union's support for his cause.

Police broke up the week-long protests last Friday and arrested dozens of opposition activists. Lukashenko has postponed his inauguration, a move his opponents said showed he was rattled by the scale of the protests.

Washington has described Lukashenko, an ally of neighbouring Russia, as Europe's last dictator. He says he has brought stability to Belarus and that voters do not want any political upheavals.

"The main issue I will discuss in Austria is the situation in Belarus after the election and the possibilities for cooperation between the EU and Belarus civil society," Milinkevich told Reuters.

"We also consider it very important to discuss the EU's assistance to those Belarus citizens who suffered from reprisals for their political convictions," he said, referring to the arrest of protesters.

The pressure on Lukashenko was upped by an unexpected source when Russian gas giant Gazprom on Thursday said from 2007 it would be ending Minsk's hefty discounts for gas supplies.

Gazprom is phasing out the discounts to ex-Soviet states but analysts had expected that Belarus, as Russia's closest ally, would get preferential treatment.

Vienna confirmed Milinkevich would be received on Monday by Schuessel, acting in his capacity as holder of the EU's rotating presidency. Milinkevich is also expected to meet Austrian Foreign Minister Ursula Plassnik.

Jailed Protesters

In a statement to the media, Plassnik demanded the immediate release of all the opposition supporters "who have been arrested purely because they exercised their basic right to freedom of expression."

Belarus officials have threatened to jail Milinkevich for up to 15 days for violating public order. He made a one-day visit to neighbouring Poland on Thursday where he received assurances from President Lech Kaczynski and Prime Minister Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz that Warsaw would act as Belarus's advocate with the EU.

Milinkevich said he would chair a council of opposition forces later on Friday to discuss what action to take next.

Several dozen jailed protesters were released on Friday from a detention centre on the outskirts of Minsk. Some said they had been beaten and threatened by police.

"At first, they (police) calmly and politely led us to a bus," said Denis Sheleg, 23, who was detained last Friday.

"But in the bus, seeing that there were no journalists about, they beat me severely," Denis said. "They mainly kicked me on the head and kidneys."

Kristina, a 30-year-old mother of two, had a large bruise on her face. "They beat us fiercely after throwing us into a police truck," she said. "Then they said they were taking us outside the Minsk ringroad to bury us. They said they would rape the girls first."

Police deny using excessive force against protesters. Officials have said only two people were injured when police broke up the protest last Friday.

Source: Andrei Makhovsky , Reuters AlertNet; March 31, 2006; <http://www.alertnet.org>

33. Who Should Travel, Who Should Not

The aftermath of the rigged presidential election and brutal crackdown on pro-democracy protesters in Belarus has elicited a predictable response in the West. The European Union and the United States have reimposed a travel ban on top Belarussian officials, while economic sanctions are also likely to be imposed. We've been here before. In 2004, Brussels and Washington imposed a travel ban on high-ranking Belarussian officials in response to Belarus' poor human rights record, flawed elections and referendums. These moves did not bring about the desired response -- respect for democracy and human rights -- and the new travel bans and mooted economic sanctions are unlikely to succeed either. It's time for a new and radical tactic: to relax entry requirements to the EU and increase study and work opportunities for ordinary Belarussians.

Economic sanctions do not work at changing governments, but they are good at hitting ordinary people, vividly demonstrated by the humanitarian crisis in Iraq brought on by Saddam Hussein's indifference to his people's suffering. Sanctions have also failed to remove Fidel Castro in Cuba and helped to spawn a thriving black market in the Balkans that served only to foster instability and benefit dubious power groupings.

As Russia has made plain through its open support of President Alexander Lukashenko, Belarus is to remain within its sphere of influence. Any attempt to impose economic hardship on Belarus by the West is certain to be amply compensated for by Moscow, which already heavily subsidizes gas supplies to that country. Therefore, economic sanctions against Belarus would only preserve the political status quo, even strengthen it, ensuring that Belarus was as dependent economically on Russia as the Lukashenko regime is dependent on it for political support.

Moreover, the ensuing economic and political stagnation would sound the death knell for the long-embattled independent media. Already last week, Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta, a respected business newspaper, became the latest independent paper to announce it is ceasing publication due to state interference with printing and distribution. Any worsening of the economic environment in Belarus would ensure that the state's information blockade, along with government propaganda, would continue unchallenged.

Why did the pro-democracy "revolution" in Belarus fail? Is it that the movement for democracy is weaker in Belarus than in Ukraine or Georgia? Or is it simply because, after years of increasingly authoritarian rule, the "disappearance" of leading opposition figures, ready use of police violence at demonstrations, a loyal security service and absent any internal financial heavyweights among the opposition, any pro-democracy movement in Belarus is doomed to struggle? The answer is probably all of the above. Yet the past week has seen the opposition hold some of the boldest and largest demonstrations in years, which suggests that something is stirring. This should be nurtured.

A travel ban on top officials will have little impact when most ordinary Belarussians are unable to travel abroad themselves for want of visas or the means to pay for the trip. Before Poland acceded to the EU, shuttle traders from Belarus regularly, and one suspects profitably, plied their trade across the border. The EU's tough border controls put a stop to that.

Relaxed entry requirements coupled with enhanced work and study opportunities would help to expose Belarussians to functioning market economies and democracies. Income from EU-based jobs would be sent back to Belarussian families. The information blockade would crumble. The desire and means of ordinary Belarussians to change Belarus for the better would grow. At a stroke, the West would demonstrate the ready benefits to the Belarussian people of open democratic governance and vibrant market economies. With a population of just 10 million, the impact of Belarus on the EU labor markets would scarcely be felt. EU monitoring of border movements, for example to prevent smuggling and human trafficking, could continue and should be unaffected by easier travel from Belarus. And what better demonstration of the worth of a travel ban when ordinary Belarussians are able freely to travel to the EU and the Lukashenko elite, for all their domestic power, are not?

Of course, Belarus may in response restrict the right of its people to travel abroad. It often has imposed such temporary restrictions to prevent key opposition figures from attending meetings or conferences. However, such restrictions would have to apply to all Belarussians and encompass not just the land borders shared with Poland, Latvia, Lithuania and Ukraine, but Russia as well, with whom Belarus currently maintains an open border policy.

Opening up travel and work opportunities to the European Union from Belarus while maintaining a ban on the president and the governing elite would send a very strong message. Although any "revolution" thus prompted would not happen overnight, opening Europe's door could ultimately

provide the opposition with the momentum sadly lacking in recent days, a momentum that could become unstoppable.

Malcolm Hawkes is a former researcher on Belarus for New York-based Human Rights Watch and currently works as an independent legal consultant. The views expressed are his own.

Source: Malcolm Hawkes, The Moscow Times; March 31, 2006; <http://www.themoscowtimes.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.

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.
