

April 6 – April 12, 2006

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International League for Human Rights

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HUMAN RIGHTS & INDEPENDENT MEDIA

1. Mikhail Marynich To Go At Large

Today a visiting session of the court has taken place in Minsk corrective labour colony UZH 15/1. A decision about early release of the political prisoner, former Minister of Foreign Economic ties and Extraordinary Ambassador Mikhail Marynich was passed by the session of the court. The administration of the colony, in which the political prisoner serves the sentence, has signed documents about his early release. As we have informed, Mikhail Marynich had a stroke in the colony, and at the moment he is a disabled person of the second category.

Mikhail Marynich is to be released from the colony one of these days.

On December 30, 2004 the court of Minsk region found Mikhail Marynich guilty of misappropriation of office equipment, that the Delovaya Initsiativa (Business Initiative) association, of which he was chairman, had received from the US embassy for temporary use. The politician was sentenced to five years of restriction of freedom in the maximum security colony and to confiscation of property.

A Minsk Regional Court panel on February 18 reduced the prison sentence for the politician from 5 to 3.5 years.

In the colony Mikhail Marynich had a stroke and a hard eyes disease.

The Amnesty International recognized him a prisoner of conscience.

Source: Charter97; April 12, 2006; <http://www.charter97.org/eng/>

2. Anton Filimonau Is Sentenced To 2.5 Years of Imprisonment With Suspension of Sentence

Today Anton Filimonau has been sentenced to 2.5 years of imprisonment with suspension of sentence for 2 years. The other accused have been sentenced to 2 years of imprisonment with suspension of sentence. The court reconsidered the case again and decided that the youngsters should be accused according to part 1 of art. 221 of the Criminal Code of Belarus

Source: Belarusian Association of Journalists; April 11, 2006; <http://www.baj.ru/>

3. Zubr Activists Sentenced to Two Years of Corrective Labor

Hearing of the case brought up against the activists of the youth resistance movement "Zubr" Alyksandr Kazakou and Zmitser Zubro took place in April 7 in the court of Tsentralny district of Minsk. Alyksandr Kazakou and Zmitser Zubro were sentenced to two years of restraint of liberty (corrective works).

As we have informed, Alyksandr Kazakou and Zmitser Zubro were detained on December 28, 2005 in the night for making political graffiti (number 16, which urged to take part in the Day of Solidarity with political prisoners). Young people were placed to the pre-trial detention center for two days. Later they were released with a written undertaking not to leave the place. They were charged with violation of the Article 363 Part 2 of the Criminal Code (insubordination to policemen).

Judge Esman was in charge of the case.

At the moment the activists of the Zubr are at large. Their lawyers are going to challenge the verdict in Minsk city court. After consideration of the cassation appeal the verdict is to come into force.

The human rights center Viasna believes that the criminal prosecution of the youth activists is politically motivated.

Source: ZUBR; April 10, 2006; <http://www.zubr-belarus.com/>

4. Police In Minsk Break Up Protest Demonstration

Belarusian police broke up a demonstration by some 50 opposition activists in central Minsk today, detaining at least two people.

The AP reports the activists were demonstrating against the inauguration of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka for a third term, due tomorrow.

They say the vote was flawed.

Source: RFE/RL; April 7, 2006; <http://www.rferl.org>

DOMESTIC

5. Over 1.3m In Live in Chernobyl Zone In Belarus - Parliament

More than 1.3 million Belarusians are living in areas affected by the Chernobyl nuclear accident that occurred two decades ago, the speaker of the country's lower house of parliament said Wednesday.

"Our fellow countrymen living in contaminated areas should be confident about their future," Vladimir Konoplev said. "It is time we addressed the vital problems of the people who inhabit these zones."

The speaker made his address at the opening of parliamentary hearings to promote a renewed global focus on the aftermath of the worst accident in the history of nuclear power. He said the government should ensure that those living in the Chernobyl zone were provided with jobs, legal protection, social benefits and medical care.

The radioactive fallout from the 1986 disaster has caused major health problems in one out of every five residents of Belarus and inflicted economic losses totaling 32 times the amount of the nation's annual budget in 1985, Konoplev said.

Belarus received 70% of the radiation released from the explosion of a reactor at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in neighboring Ukraine in April 1986. One-fifth of its agricultural land became unfit for farming as a result.

Source: RIA Novosti; April 12, 2006; <http://rian.ru>

6. The Modest Charm of the Little Dictator

The price of the question

Watching the inauguration of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko on all television channels, I tried to pinpoint what that most celebration reminded me of. I knew there was something, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it. Then it came to me: the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow. The ones that were boycotted by half the world because of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the ones Moscow observers called the "Spartacade of the police and special forces" for their special role in the event. The main resemblance was the true scale of the event and the organizational fuss around it. The Olympics were less significant than what surrounded them. The inauguration was more significant.

The Olympics were funny for the contrast between the huge cost of them and the flop they turned out to be. The Olympic village was the size of a decent town, but practically empty. Regiments of police were brought in from all over the country to stand on empty Moscow streets, which had already been cleared of gypsies, alcoholics, dissidents and similar denizens. The stadium was

stuffed full of Komsomol members, and only Komsomol members. Blowup Mishas, the sweet bear mascot, floated against the Soviet sunset. It was all ridiculously pompous. The only thing that fit in with the failure of the huge operation was the mumbling, shuffling head of state. It looked like he had been blown up too.

In Minsk, it was equally ridiculous, but for the opposite reason. The significance of the event did not correspond with its modesty and reserve. It was after all the fourth time Europe's last dictator took up his post. You might expect a well-planned triumph, chanting crowd, a sumptuously decorated hall, delegations of grateful peasants, tradesmen and artists, a military parade, wreathes and ribbons. There was none of it. A boring stage on which some woman was continually turning her back to the Church hierarch to shield him from the public, a dry, forced reading of a text from crib notes, the appearance in a slightly shiny uniform (clearly not that of a generalissimo) before a small contingent of the poorly armed forces. And that was all. Only Lukashenko was adequate – big, statuesque, severe. It became clear that he will make it through his next term, that he is not a dilapidated general secretary, but the completely healthy president of indivisible Belarus, that he will not allow to be swayed from the right path by the opposition or foreign enemies. Even the slightly dyspeptic look on his courageous face bore witness to his heartiness. He was a little run down after the election campaign, but his opponents are completely gone from political life.

If Soviet power continued for 11 years after those Olympics, how long will the president of Belarus last? We have miscalculated.

Source: Alexander Kabakov, Kommersant; April 10, 2006; <http://www.kommersant.com>

7. Lukashenko Sworn In For Third Term

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko was sworn in for a third term Saturday following an election denounced by the West as undemocratic and fraudulent.

Lukashenko took his oath during a pomp-filled ceremony attended by several thousand officials and lawmakers at the Palace of the Republic, a huge concrete Soviet-era palace of congresses. He received blessing from the head of the Belarusian Orthodox Church and top officials. The audience hailed Lukashenko with a standing ovation.

In his brief speech after inauguration, a somber-looking Lukashenko accused the West of fomenting unrest in the ex-Soviet nation. "They want to humiliate our nation and turn it into another testing ground for a color revolution," he said in a reference to protests that helped oust unpopular governments in other ex-Soviet nations.

The building in downtown Minsk was tightly encircled by police, who also blocked the public from entering other central areas of the Belarusian capital in an apparent effort to prevent the opposition from mounting rallies.

Following the inauguration ceremony, Lukashenko donned a military uniform and went out to the adjacent square to receive an oath of allegiance from the military and security troops. "We won't allow anyone to speak to us in a posture of force," Lukashenko told the troops.

On Friday, Belarusian riot police broke up a demonstration by dozens of opposition activists in the Minsk central square that was the epicenter of protests against Lukashenko's re-election last month.

Lukashenko has faced international condemnation of the March 19 election, which he won with 83 percent of the vote according to official results.

Lukashenko lashed out at his foes, accusing them of being manipulated by the West.

"Belarusians can't be strangled, they can't be manipulated," said the president, who has ruled his former Soviet nation since 1994 and has been labeled Europe's last dictator for his relentless crackdown on dissent.

The main opposition candidate Alexander Milinkevich, who received only around 6 percent of votes, has alleged widespread fraud.

"Lukashenko grabbed victory through force and lies," Milinkevich told The Associated Press Saturday in a telephone interview from neighboring Lithuania. "The civilized world doesn't recognize Lukashenko, and he will find it hard to convince the Belarusian people of his victory."

Thousands of people demonstrated in central Minsk after the election to protest the result, and hundreds of opposition protesters were jailed after the breakup of a protest tent camp in Oktyabrskaya square and a violent clash between demonstrators and riot police.

Another opposition leader, Alexander Kozulin, who also ran to challenge Lukashenko, has been in jail since leading an opposition march last month. He was charged with organizing mass disturbances.

Kozulin's wife, Irina, told the AP that he sent yet another appeal to the nation's Supreme Court Saturday demanding that it invalidate the election results.

The European Union is expected next week to approve a visa ban on 31 top Belarus officials including Lukashenko in protest at his re-election.

Lukashenko, who despises the West, relies on political support and cheap energy resources from Russia.

However, the Russian state-controlled Gazprom natural gas giant turned the heat on Lukashenko quickly after his re-election, announcing a plan to raise gas prices for Belarus to market levels -- a move widely interpreted as an attempt to bargain for control of the Belarusian gas pipeline network that also carries Russian gas to European customers.

Source: CNN.Com; April 8, 2006; <http://edition.cnn.com/>

8. Jailed Rival May Watch Lukashenko Inauguration On TV

Alexander Kozulin, the arrested rival to incumbent President Alexander Lukashenko at the March 19 presidential election, will be able to watch Lukashenko's inauguration as re-elected president on Saturday on television from his jail, jail officials said on Friday.

"A television is due to be delivered to Kozulin's cell today or tomorrow," the officials told Interfax.

The officials said Kozulin, whose jail is in the town of Zhodino, had asked for a television set and that the jail administration had granted his request.

"Kozulin has been put in a four-bed cell in which two more persons are kept - an economic administrator who was arrested for embezzlement and a herdsman from one of the collective farms who was arrested for theft," the officials said.

Source: Interfax; April 7, 2006; <http://www.interfax.ru/e>

9. President Approves Republican Program "Youth of Belarus" For 2006-2010

President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko signed into force Decree #200 to approve the republican program "Youth of Belarus" for 2006-2010.

As BelTA has been told in the press service of the Belarusian leader, the program aims to further the state youth policy. Its main goals is to enhance the prestige and improve the accessibility of

quality education, support creative and scientific young people, bring up citizen-a patriot, develop a system to promote permanent employment of young people, popularize healthy lifestyle, render assistance to young families, develop youth tourism, adopt preventive measures to stop crime, hard drinking, drug addiction from spreading among young people.

The program promotes conditions for more active involvement of young people into social-economic, political and cultural life of the society, development of positive children and youth initiatives.

The program is expected to raise the quality of life in rural regions, reduce youth migration, including young specialists working in rural areas, reduce the youth unemployment and develop the system of temporary and seasonal youth employment.

The program also aims to improve the health, revive family values and strengthen the institute of family, increase the birthrate, consolidate the public youth movement to build up a strong and flourishing Belarus.

*Source: The National Centre of Legal Information of the Republic of Belarus; April 6, 2006;
<http://law.by/work/Eng/>*

REGIONAL

10. Lukashenka Enters Third Term Fraught With Economic Dangers

Alyksandr Lukashenka has won the opportunity to continue serving as Belarus's president, but he must now face harsh realities that could make his third term a rocky one. Looming large among them is a possible price hike for the gas imports Belarus depends on. Russia's Gazprom recently announced that it will seek to triple the rate Belarus pays for its gas imports as a new contract for 2007 is negotiated. Such an outcome could increase pressure for changes in the way Belarus's planned economy is run -- changes that Lukashenka is unlikely to back. Belarus currently enjoys economic stability and growth, but is highly dependent on cheap Russian energy resources.

Stuart Hensel of the London-based Economist Intelligence Unit says the Belarusian economy is built on sand. "Lukashenka clearly faces some economic challenges in the next couple of years," he says. "I think the main problem for him is that a lot of what has helped the Belarusian economy grow so strongly in recent years is not necessarily set to continue."

Gazprom Gets Tough

The country's economy is highly dependent on the inexpensive oil and gas supplies it receives from Russia. Belarus currently pays less for gas than any other country in the Commonwealth of Independent States -- about \$47 per 1,000 cubic meters.

With Western European countries paying around \$240 per 1,000 cubic meters, Russian supplier Gazprom's recent announcement that it will seek European rates from Belarus has raised concerns in the country.

Hensel says even a minor price increase in energy prices could significantly affect the Belarusian economy, but he doubts the Lukashenka will see a major difference once a new deal for 2007 is worked out.

"The No. 1 concern he [Lukashenka] should have at this point, probably in terms of an immediate external shock, is these recent noises coming from Russia concerning a significant rise in Belarusian gas prices, much as has been seen in other former Soviet republics," Hensel says. "I think he should, as in the past, be able to avoid significant rise in these gas prices."

Former Soviet republics Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia last winter found themselves in disputes with Russia over gas deliveries -- and all eventually agreed to significant price hikes.

And this week, Gazprom announced that it has inked a new deal with Armenia under which it would gain control of a pipeline being constructed to import gas from Iran.

A gas dispute with Russia could see Belarus losing control over its pipeline operator Beltranshaz -- and with it some economic sovereignty. Control over the Belarusian pipeline operator might well be what Russia is really seeking.

Russia's Best Friend?

But Tatyana Manionok, an economic analyst for the Minsk-based weekly *Belarusy i Rynok* (Belarusians and the Market), says Lukashenka might still be able to work out a good deal. This, she says, is because Russia treats Belarus differently than other countries for political reasons.

"I cannot seriously believe that it [Russia] will put its only ally, President Lukashenka, into some kind of blind alley," Manionok says. "I don't think that it is useful for Russia now. This is the reason I think some compromise will emerge concerning both a price for oil and also for gas."

Manionok says Belarus is important to Moscow both militarily and as a transit country for Russian goods. She also notes that Belarus is the only post-Soviet country that openly seeks to unite with Russia.

Energy Not The Only Problem

Regardless, Minsk's economic worries go beyond its dependence on cheap energy.

During his rule Lukashenka has steered Belarus away from the economic reforms that have swept through the region. This has left the country with no functioning market economy and about 80 percent of its industry in state hands.

And, as Hensel of the Economist Intelligence Unit notes, Lukashenka has consistently raised pensions and wages in an effort to sustain popular support. "Wages have been growing extremely fast under Mr. Lukashenka," he says. "That's something that's probably unsustainable. That's put a lot of pressure on Belarusian companies also in terms of competitiveness."

Nearly 60 percent of Belarus's factories are currently operating at a loss. The burden this places on the economy is partly offset by a small number of profitable companies that provide subsidies and contribute to state social programs.

Such a course is difficult to maintain, but while Hensel believes economic reforms are in order, he says Lukashenka has become a slave to his own economic policy.

"His economic policies have not encouraged the degree of investment and restructuring that the economy needs in order to ensure sustainable growth," he says. "The problem for him is his entire political model and his entire ability to retain political control depends on the sort of economic structures that he has put in place. Namely very strong state control."

Implementing market reforms would mean the closure of factories and higher unemployment -- which would harm Lukashenka's popular support. The rise of private business and a middle class could potentially pose a challenge to his rule.

So ultimately, Hensel believes Lukashenka has placed himself in an uncomfortable situation -- one in which he cannot continue as before but is also unable to move forward.

Source: Valentinas Mite, RFE/RL; April 12, 2006; <http://www.rferl.org>

11. Ukraine To Inspect Belarus Enterprises

State Veterinary Department of Ukraine intends to lift ban on import of meat products from Belarus enterprises, checked by Ukrainian Veterinary Service.

“We intend to inspect Belarus enterprises, which deliver meat and meat foods to Ukraine; and those, which were inspected earlier, would be allowed to import in the near future,” said State veterinary inspector Ivan Bisyuk.

According to him, the main demand of the Ukrainian veterinary service to Belarus suppliers of meat and meat foods is that the products must be produced from local raw materials.

Bisyuk mentioned that Belarus meat products, delivered to Ukraine, were produced from foreign raw materials. Besides, it was established facts of products' deliveries without documents, which confirmed their quality and safety, with improper marking, expired use-by date.

As for the acting ban on import of meat and meat foods from Poland, Bisyuk reported that a meeting between Ukrainian and Polish veterinary services was scheduled for April 13.

Source: ForUm; April 11, 2006; <http://en.for-ua.com>

12. Belarus Asked to Share Oil Export Profits

Friendship of Nations

Belarus has received a new energy-related claim from the Russian government. Russia has demanded that the Western neighbor return a share of export duties on the oil products, processed from Russian oil at local refineries, to the Russian budget, a source in the Belarusian government said. The request is capable of disrupting the economic growth in Belarus, heavily dependent on the growing output at the Novopolotsky and Mozyrsky oil refineries.

The Russian government sent a letter to Minks demanding that Article 4 of the Customs Union of Russia and Belarus Treaty of 1995 be implemented, a source close to the Belarusian government told the Prime-TASS news agency on Monday. The article provides for sharing Belarusian export duties on oil products manufactured from the oil delivered to Belarusian refineries between budgets of the two countries.

The Russian Government and the Finance Ministry, responsible for the customs affairs, denied sending the letter yesterday. However, sources close to the authority reported that the document had been sent to the Belarusian government in late March without being made public. The Belarusian government declined to comment.

The Mozyrsky and Novopolotsky refineries, which have recently underwent a modernization, are now processing between 18 and 20 million metric tons of Russian oil, compared with 10-12 million tons in 2000 and 2001. The country is now expanding its export to Europe via Baltic ports competing with Russians there.

The claim seems to be connected with Gazprom's intention to raise gas prices for Belarus or take over stocks of Beltransgas instead.

Belarus imported 19.2 million metric tons of oil from Russia last year, exporting 13.5 million metric tons of oil products. Export prices on oil products went up to \$360 per 1 metric ton in Belarus in 2005, the growth of the oil refinery industry accounting for 40 percent in the national GDP growth. Thus, the argument may cost Belarus' budget some \$900 million or \$1.1 billion.

Source: Dmitry Butrin, Nataliya Grib, Kommersant; April 11, 2006; <http://www.kommersant.com>

13. Russian Citizens Freed in Belarus

On the evening of April 7th, the following Russian citizens were released from the Okrestina Street police station in Minsk: Editor-in-Chief of PRIMA–News Agency, Aleksandr Podrabinek, and participants in the youth movement "Defense", Oleg Kozlovsky and Edward Glezin. All three Russians were deported the same day.

Podrabinek, Kozlovsky, and Glezin were detained on March 24th in Minsk's October Square area during the break up of a peaceful protest meeting against the falsification of Presidential elections in Belarus and were sentenced to 15 days administrative arrest.

Source: Prima-News; April 11, 2006; <http://www.prima-news.ru/eng>

14. Gazprom To Raise Gas Prices For Belarus From 2007

Gas prices for Belarus "should be at least three times higher," said Alexander Ryazanov, deputy CEO of Gazprom. This means about \$140 per 1,000 cu m.

The news shocked the Minsk authorities, which had said they were ready to pay a higher price but apparently did not imagine it would be so high. The price rise will tear nearly a \$2 billion hole in the Belarusian budget.

According to a contract between Gazprom and Beltransgaz, the Belarusian state-owned gas company whose pipelines carry Russian gas to Europe, this year the Russian gas monopoly is to deliver 21 billion cu m of gas at 2005 prices (\$46.68). In return, Minsk promised to assist Gazprom's operation in the republic, notably not to change gas transit tariffs.

First, the two states are creating a union state, Gazprom deputy CEO Alexander Medvedev, director general of Gazexport (a 100% subsidiary of Gazprom), said, explaining the non-market price. Second, Belarus is the only country where Gazprom owns the trunk gas pipeline and leases the land under it. And third, the gas holding has resumed takeover negotiations with Beltransgaz, he said. If the negotiations are successful, Gazprom will take under its control the entire Belarusian gas transportation network.

But the talks are apparently skidding because Ryazanov said a price compromise was contingent on Gazprom's involvement in the gas transportation and distribution infrastructure of consumers.

Minsk flew into a fury. Such statements "are an element of blackmail and outrageous behavior," said Stepan Pisarevich, head of the Belarusian upper house's commission on the economy, budget and finance. Price rising is an unavoidable element of discussions on the creation of a joint venture on the basis of Beltransgaz and Gazprom, he said.

Pisarevich recalled that gas prices for Belarus were stipulated in the Union State Treaty and the agreement on creating equal conditions for economic entities.

Prime Minister Sergei Sidorsky said almost the same. "The Belarusian government will adhere to the existing agreements on equal energy prices for the economic entities of the Union State," he said.

Gazprom has the same price policy for all former Soviet republics, company press secretary Sergei Kupriyanov said when commenting on the harsh statement by Belarusian politicians. The gas price for Belarus is based not only on the Union State Treaty, he said, but also on other documents regarding gas pricing and the creation of a JV on the basis of Beltransgaz. Kupriyanov said the JV was to be created in 2003.

But some Belarusian politicians view the situation differently. Roman Vnuchko, head of the lower house's commission on the monetary and credit policy and banking, said Gazprom exposed itself to blackmail by selling gas to Belarus at Russia's domestic prices.

"Belarus is a headache for Gazprom; it is a precedent that prevents the gas holding from raising prices for other partners," Vnuchko said.

Settling price relations with friendly Armenia was another difficulty. As if on prompting, Gazprom's top managers made their statement about leveling off prices for all consumers during the visit by the Armenian president.

Gazprom (and the state as its beneficiary) are often accused of a selective approach. Though gas prices were rapidly raised for other ex-Soviet states, Belarus continued to get the fuel at Russia's domestic prices. Therefore, the latest decision of Gazprom looks like a political win for the gas holding and the Russian authorities.

However, the level at which information is made public is also important. The holding's management is not in a position to set prices for Belarus. Politics is too closely connected with the economy in the case of Belarus. Belarussian experts claim that Vladimir Putin had once offered Alexander Lukashenko to give economic entities, both state and private ones, a free hand in solving their economic problems. Presidents should discuss purely political matters, Putin allegedly said.

This is exactly what Gazexport head Ryazanov meant: Gas prices and the issue of ownership of the gas transportation infrastructure are purely economic matters.

Gazprom will hardly triple gas prices for Belarus next year because the republican economy would not survive even a double price. The issue is to be discussed by politicians, and the results of playing the "gas card" may surprise even Gazprom. This may accelerate the merger of Belarus and Russia or transition to the common currency.

However, the current situation has again put the finger on Moscow's resolve to throw around its energy weight in foreign policy.

Igor Tomberg is a leading researcher of the Institute of Economics at the Russian Academy of Sciences.

The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and may not necessarily represent the opinions of the editorial board.

Source: RIA Novosti; April 10, 2006; <http://rian.ru>

15. Putin: Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan ready to create CES

President Vladimir Putin has said that Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan were ready to form a common economic space (CES).

"Our Ukrainian partners know well both at an expert level and at the level of the country's political leadership that we shall consider as the joining of the CEC not the signing of a part of documents, but of the whole package," Putin said at a government meeting on Monday.

Putin criticized Minister of Industry and Energy Viktor Khristenko for delaying the establishment of the Common Economic Space and demanded that this work be expedited. "You have failed to meet the deadline which was agreed upon earlier - not later than the end of March, it's April already, but the package of 38 documents has not been signed yet," Putin said.

And, as Viktor Khristenko informed Putin, the high-level group for creating the Common Economic Space will meet in session in Minsk on Friday for coordinating a package of 38 documents.

Source: Itar-Tass; April 10, 2005; <http://www.tass.ru/eng>

16. Russian Ambassador Blasts Sanctions Against Belarus Officials

Banning Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko and other senior officials from entering the European Union is an insult to the dignity of the Belarusian people, Russia's ambassador in Minsk said Monday.

"I do not understand this measure, which produces no effect but insults the dignity of the state and its people," Alexander Surikov said.

The foreign ministers of the EU's 25 member states decided Monday to impose sanctions against Belarusian leaders over the March 19 presidential election they condemned as flawed. Lukashenko, who Washington has dubbed "Europe's last dictator," was reelected to a third term with a massive 83% of the vote and now tops a blacklist of 31 Belarusian officials denied the right to enter the EU. The head of the State Security Committee, the justice minister, the prosecutor general, the speaker of parliament's lower house and the head of the presidential staff are also included on the list.

The ambassador said contacts between the two countries' economic and parliamentary structures and ministries would continue.

"Demonstrating hostility to a man who hold this or that post has nothing to do with promoting democratic principles," Surikov said.

Source: RIA Novosti; April 10, 2006; <http://rian.ru>

17. Lukashenko, Putin Discuss Bilateral Relations

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko had a telephone conversation with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin on Saturday to discuss relations between the two countries.

The conversation was held on the initiative of the Russian president, the Belarusian president's press service reported. During the conversation, "Vladimir Putin congratulated Alexander Lukashenko on his victory in the presidential elections and the inauguration," the press service said.

Source: Itar-Tass; April 8, 2005; <http://www.tass.ru/eng>

18. Russia, Belarus To Decide On Joint Air-defense Network April 21

Russia and Belarus will make a final decision on creating a single regional air defense command on April 21, the head of Russia's air force said Friday.

"We will make a final decision on the issue on April 21," Army General Vladimir Mikhailov said. "The structure of this network is very simple and it will work."

Mikhailov said in March that Belarus would deploy Russian S-300 PMU2 Favorite air defense systems in summer of this year.

Source: RIA Novosti; April 7, 2006; <http://rian.ru>

INTERNATIONAL

19. Belarus Depicts Syria as Strategic Partner

Belarus described on Wednesday Syria as a strategic partner showing interest to develop ties with her and Syria voiced readiness to progress economic ties as to be up to political ones.

Co Chairing the third session of the Joint Syria-Belarus Committee for Technical and Economic Cooperation, Belarus Minister of Economy Nicolai Zaichenko said "Syria is a strategic partner in the region" noting to historical ties linking the two peoples in the two friendly countries and hoping

the joint committee meetings would contribute to push the economic ties between the two sides forward.

Zaichenko expressed his country's interest to develop tie and common cooperation with Syria by increasing trade exchange average and building investment projects saying that Belarus is providing Syrian commodities with big customs facilities to ease cooperation.

For his part, Minister of Economy Dr. Amer Hosni Lutfi noted "the ministry is ready to cooperate with its Belarus counterpart to contribute to develop cooperation as to boost economic ties to upgrade them to the distinguished political ties existing between them."

Lutfi said the government is working to follow up program of economic and administrative reform and the gradual moving to the social economic market.

" Syria is establishing for the proper new economic laws and legislations, parallel; she is building private establishments by reforming the finance and banking system that she passed a good pace over," he said noting to the importance of holding joint expositions and being acquainted with investment opportunities in Syria and Belarus to boost the joint economic work.

Source: Syrian Arab News Agency; April 12, 2006; <http://www.sana.org/>

20. Switzerland Joins EU In Banning Lukashenka

Switzerland has imposed a travel ban on Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka and 30 other Belarusian officials, two days after the European Union made the same move.

Both the 25-nation bloc and Switzerland, which is not a member of the EU, are responding to what they consider to have been rigged presidential elections in Belarus last month and Minsk's failure to respect basic freedoms.

Source: RFE/RL; April 12, 2006; <http://www.rferl.org>

21. Belarus Representatives Invited to PACE Debate

The president of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), Rene van der Linden, sent on Tuesday an invitation to representatives of Belarus to take part in the discussion at the spring session of the PACE.

Belarusian opposition leader Alexander Milinkevich and an official representative of Belarusian parliament have been invited among others.

Van der Linden asked parliament chairman Vladimir Konoplev, who was put on the list of Belarusian officials banned from visits to European Union countries after the Belarus' recent presidential elections, asked him to send instead of himself one of parliamentarians.

The debate on Belarus after the Presidential Election is to be held next Thursday.

The chief of the Russian delegation to the PACE session, chairman of the State Duma's committee on international affairs Konstantin Kosachyov told reporters that the formulation of the debate had been changed at the request of the Russian side.

Source: Itar-Tass; April 11, 2005; <http://www.tass.ru/eng>

22. EU Has Window of Opportunity in Belarus, Experts Say

The European Union imposed a travel ban on members of the current Belarusian regime Monday. Some argue that the bloc should try to lure Minsk with offers.

Two days after Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko celebrated taking office for the third time, EU foreign ministers banned him and 30 other top officials from entering the 25-member states.

It was a symbolic measure intended to show the EU's distaste for "Europe's last dictator" as Lukashenko has come to be called, particularly after the March 19 election -- in which he was re-elected with 83 percent of the vote. The poll was widely condemned as rigged and was accompanied by a harsh crackdown on the opposition.

The ban will also apply to the head of the KGB state security agency, the justice, education and information ministers, the prosecutor general and judges, the speaker of parliament's lower house and the head of the state's radio and TV programming.

"We should have banned more of them," one European minister told reporters after the meeting.

So far, the ministers have taken no action on trade sanctions but promised to consider such measures including freezing Belarusian accounts in the EU in the near future. But many say such measures are inappropriate.

"Any sanctions must target those who work against the establishment and development of a civil society and not against the general population," said Angelika Nussberger, a professor at Cologne University who specializes in the former Soviet bloc.

Lukashenko lashes out at west

At Saturday's swearing in, the 51-year-old Lukashenko told spectators that the EU, and particularly new EU member states such as Poland and Latvia, were trying to destabilize Belarus.

"They have a crusade against us, but voters here don't want a colored revolution," he said, referring to peaceful regime change in Ukraine last year.

Belarusian officials scoffed at the travel ban.

"Short-sighted actions of this sort are clearly ineffective and serve only to complicate problems in our relations rather than trying to solve them," said Foreign Ministry spokesman Andrei Popov in a prepared statement.

Doing more but what?

While the travel ban is considered symbolic at best, particularly in light of a trip last week by opposition leader Alexander Milinkevich to the EU, should the EU consider stiffer sanctions?

Milinkevich urged EU officials during his trip not to punish the people of Belarus with sanctions because it would affect them more than the leadership.

But some member states say the EU needs to punish the dictator with more than statements. Trade sanctions against the country would hurt Belarus because about 40 percent of its trade is with the EU, worth about 2.6 billion euros (\$3.2 billion) annually, according to Eurostat.

Another measure could be to withdraw Belarus' privileges under the Generalized System of Preferences, which grants Belarus and other countries duty-free or reduced tariffs on exports. Already, it has cut off some aid to the country through its "neighborhood policy."

One factor that might help the EU is Russia, say experts. Although Belarus is even more dependent on Russia than the EU because of cheap Russian gas, this week Russia set a deadline of April 30 for Belarus to either turn over the controlling stake in state-owned Beltransgaz or begin paying market prices for gas -- three to five times the price it currently pays.

That would cripple the Belarusian economy, currently growing at 8 to 10 percent annually -- and weaken Lukashenko's support base.

Meanwhile, vulnerability and dependence on Russia scares Lukashenko, say experts, which might make Lukashenko more responsive to EU overtures.

"There is a real opportunity right now to reach out and engage with Belarus because it is being bullied by Russia," said Charles Grant, director of the London-based Center for European Reform. "(EU foreign policy chief Javier) Solana should visit Minsk and say, 'Hey, if you take steps to free the media, political prisoners and so on, we can give you lots of goodies' such as more help with Chernobyl, security and Council of Europe membership."

That is why Nussberger agreed that travel restrictions are not a good idea but more active engagement and support of students and civil rights organizations are.

"Travel bans will just cut off the opportunity for dialogue and we should always leave that door open," she said. "And we should have no illusions: if there is regime change in Belarus, they will still have a long and painful road ahead of them -- particularly as so many don't want change."

Source: Jabeen Bhatti, Deutsche Welle; April 11, 2006; <http://www.dw-world.de/>

23. Estonia Applauds As EU Bans Entry To Belarus President

Estonia expressed support for a European Union travel ban on Monday on top Belarusian officials, including President Alexander Lukashenko.

The Estonian Foreign Ministry cited Foreign Minister Urmas Paet as expressing satisfaction during a European Union Council meeting in Luxembourg on Monday that Lukashenko is among those to whom the ban applies.

Paet demanded that the Belarusian government release Alexander Kozulin, one of the opposition leaders, and the others arrested for taking part in street protests against the official results of the March 19 presidential election, the Estonian ministry's press service told Interfax.

Paet also called on EU countries to find resources to support civil society and democratic development in Belarus.

Source: Interfax; April 10, 2006; <http://www.interfax.ru/e>

24. EU Imposes Visa Ban On Lukashenka, 30 Other Top Officials

EU foreign ministers today imposed a visa ban on 31 top Belarusian officials considered responsible for the conduct of the country's March 19 presidential poll, which the EU condemned as neither free nor fair. The number of those targeted by the EU falls short of what the Belarusian opposition and its more enthusiastic supporters within the EU had hoped for. However, EU officials made clear that new names can be added to the list and that further sanctions have not been ruled out.

The EU decision underscores the hope among the mainstream of the union's member states that it is possible simultaneously to get tough with the regime of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka -- and still keep some lines of communication open.

Ursula Plassnik, foreign minister of the current EU chair Austria, announced the decision today, confirming the EU had decided to limit itself to targeting only a few dozen Belarusian leaders. "Today, we have decided to impose a visa ban against members of the Belarus leadership responsible for violation of the international electoral standards during the presidential elections, and [those] responsible as well for the crackdown on civil society and democratic opposition," Plassnik said.

Clear Message

The fact that the list of 31 officials is headed by Lukashenka represents the EU's intention to make it clear that its patience with the Belarusian regime has run out.

Among the 31, there are three prominent members of the presidential administration, three ministers (but not the foreign minister), the head of the country's KGB, a number of judges, and the heads of local electoral commissions.

The length of the list was proposed last week by EU ambassadors in Brussels, and marked a victory for those EU states that advocated a more cautious approach regarding Belarus.

However, it was clear there were divisions among the foreign ministers making the decision. Cyril Svoboda, the Czech foreign minister and one of the spokesmen within the EU for a tough line against Minsk, was visibly disappointed. He told journalists on the sidelines of today's meeting that he was not "completely satisfied" with the list.

"We did agree all, we did agree on the measures we imposed today," Svoboda said. "But I'm repeating again that I am not completely satisfied because the ban list is very short and in my view we need to put some other people on the ban list."

In particular, Svoboda said the EU should target many prominent figures working for the state-run television and radio establishment.

Svoboda accuses them of "deforming democracy in Belarus," but the visa blacklist features only Alyaksandr Zimouski, head of the National State Television and Radio Company.

Svoboda's sentiments also broadly reflect those of Poland, Lithuania, Slovakia, and some others. The length of the list was proposed last week by EU ambassadors in Brussels, and marked a victory for those EU states that advocated a more cautious approach regarding Belarus.

Estonian Foreign Minister Urmas Paet, who supported today's decision, explained the reasoning behind it to RFE/RL. He said it sends a message while leaving the door open for future discussion.

"[It reflects] possibly a certain conservativeness on the one hand and on the other a calculation that in order to change things in Belarus for the better, communication remains necessary," Paet said. "To impose a complete ban on movement would make it hard to take [the EU's] message equally well to governmental circles."

But the EU also says in an accompanying statement that the blacklist will be under constant review -- meaning it could be expanded. The statement also makes it plain that the EU's main concern currently lies with what it calls "political detainees" -- the many opposition activists and their supporters arrested in the course of the manifestations that followed the elections. The clear assumption is that the length of the visa-ban list depends on what the regime in Minsk will do next.

Mindful Of Russia

However, EU officials and diplomats admit privately that for a number of the bloc's member states, their reaction to events in Belarus is partly shaped by a wish not to complicate relations with Russia.

Among the 31, there are three prominent members of the presidential administration, three ministers, the head of the country's KGB, a number of judges, and the heads of local electoral commissions.

The limelight afforded to opposition leader Alyaksandr Milinkevich is widely held to constitute an important litmus test of how far the European Union is willing to go in actively undermining Lukashenka's regime. Milinkevich was not invited to attend today's foreign ministers' meeting -- as he was in February.

This was something Czech foreign minister Svoboda openly noted afterward.

"Yesterday [April 9] Mr. Milinkevich, he called me and he said that he was slightly disappointed not to be present today in Luxembourg, because he wanted to sit at the very same table with us, and to discuss the situation in Belarus," Svoboda said.

The foreign ministers also did not heed calls by the European Parliament to declare Lukashenka's presidential victory illegal and to demand new elections.

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

25. Canadian Reporter Released in Belarus After 2 Weeks in Jail

A Canadian reporter arrested while covering a demonstration in Belarus has been released after two weeks in jail, UPI reported Sunday.

Frederick Lavoie was on his way to Kiev in Ukraine on Saturday and was expected to fly to Montreal Monday, the Canadian Broadcasting Corp. reported.

He was being escorted by the Canadian consul general from Poland.

Lavoie was one of 13 reporters arrested in Minsk on the night of March 23, the advocacy group Reporters Without Borders said. About 1,000 people protesting the recent election were also rounded up by police.

President Alexander Lukashenko claimed victory with more than 80 percent of the vote, but opponents said the election was fraudulently conducted. Lukashenko was sworn in to a new term Saturday.

Source: MosNews.Com, April 9, 2006; www.mosnews.com

26. Lukashenko condemns foreign interference in Belarus

During his inauguration ceremony in Minsk, reelected president Alexander Lukashenko pledged to provide security to Belarusians, and condemned foreign interference in the country's politics.

Lukashenko said, "Recent events have shown that there are people who want to humiliate our country and turn it into another testing ground for 'color revolutions'."

The European Union announced that it would impose sanctions against the country's leaders on March 24 over a presidential election it condemned as flawed.

The president said the country's neighbors who have recently joined the EU are on a crusade against Belarus. However, neither the authorities or the population are looking for a revolution.

Belarus is ready to hold even-sided dialogue with all countries, Lukashenko said. He also thanked Russia for its support of Belarus in the international arena.

Alexander Lukashenko, who Washington has dubbed "Europe's last dictator", was reelected to a third term in the March 19 election with a massive 83% of the vote.

The Belarusian opposition denounced the elections as fraudulent, and staged a sit-in protest on central Oktyabrskaya Square in the capital, Minsk. The rally was broken up after a few days, as

was a demonstration March 25 that saw hundreds arrested and, the opposition alleges, left at least one protestor dead.

Source: RIA Novosti; April 8, 2006; <http://rian.ru>

27. Belarus Opposition Leader Urges Pressure, Not Sanctions

Belarus' opposition says EU support not sanctions will help

One day before Alexander Lukashenko's third inauguration as president of Belarus, opposition leader Alexander Milinkevich once again urged the west to step up the pressure on "the last dictatorship in Europe."

Belarus opposition leader Alexander Milinkevich met with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and other political leaders in Berlin on Friday, urging the EU to forgo sanctions against his country.

"We are taking a very cautious stance on any plans to impose economic sanctions against Belarus," he said. "Experience has shown that economic sanctions more often than not hurt the poorest in society and affect the leadership to a far lesser degree."

Ending a week-long tour of the EU, Milinkevich said he was grateful for the overwhelming support he had received over the past few days from the European Parliament and Commission as well as from individual EU member states. But he warned that if sanctions are imposed, the regime in Minsk might effectively be able to portray itself as a martyr.

"We wouldn't like to provide a dictator with such an opportunity," he said. "This is why we are in favor of limited sanctions which target only those who violate democratic laws by discriminating against whole groups of the population and subjecting them to reprisals."

Travel restrictions likely

Germany's Christian Democratic Union Secretary General Ronald Pofalla said he understood the opposition's concerns, adding that travel restrictions for Lukashenko and his ministers are a far more likely EU measure than economic sanctions. Pofalla also came out in favor of easier and less bureaucratic exchange of scientists and NGO representatives from both countries.

"People in Belarus can rest assured that Germany will support democratically-minded forces in their country and stand up for human rights there," he said. "We have also reiterated our demand to immediately release all those who were arrested by Lukashenko's regime during the peaceful protests before and after the parliamentary elections."

Lukashenko's inauguration Saturday would not be accompanied by yet another round of protests in Minsk because "we don't want to see more people jailed," Milinkevich said. "We'll rather have to fight for the speedy release of those already in Lukashenko's prisons."

Follows Russian visit

The opposition leader's stop followed a two-day visit by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, who held talks with German Defense Minister Franz Joseph Jung. The two ministers disagreed over Belarus with Russia expressing support for the current regime.

On this trip, Milinkevich was hesitant to openly criticize Russia for its unambiguous support for Lukashenko. But he hoped that President Vladimir Putin would change his mind as protests against the regime in Minsk were continuing unabated throughout Europe.

"Basing the opposition's strategy on an equation which doesn't include Russia just wouldn't work," he says. "It's important to realize that without Moscow's support, the current Belarusian regime wouldn't be able to survive for long. Besides, our coalition of opposition forces is by no means anti-Russian. We endorse good relations with our big neighbor."

Meanwhile, the Belarusian foreign ministry has poked fun at Milinkevich's tour of Europe, saying that his post-election campaign against Lukashenko is a joke.

"It's time that the opposition woke up to the realities in Belarus," a spokesman said.

Source: Hardy Graupner, Deutsche Welle; April 7, 2006; <http://www.dw-world.de/>

28. Freed Polish Diplomat Says He Was Beaten In Belarusian Prison

A former Polish ambassador jailed in Belarus for protesting against the reelection of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka has been released.

Mariusz Maszkiewicz, who was hospitalized with heart problems soon after his arrest, says he was beaten in detention.

Maszkiewicz was arrested on March 24 and sentenced to 15 days in prison. He was one of hundreds of people detained for taking part in protests against Lukashenka's reelection in elections held on March 19. The Belarusian opposition and Western observers said the vote was fraudulent.

Poland openly backed Alyaksandr Milinkevich, the main opposition candidate against Lukashenka in the election.

Lukashenka said Poland joined other Western nations in stirring up unrest in Belarus. // Reuters, AFP

Source: RFE/RL; April 7, 2006; <http://www.rferl.org>

29. Belarus Shrugs Off Opposition Leader's Europe Tour

The Belarus Foreign Ministry on Thursday belittled a European tour by an opposition leader who lost a presidential election last month, but said Minsk was ready for a gesture of good will in its stand-off with the West.

The European Union branded the March 19 poll as neither free nor fair and is considering new sanctions against the government of authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko, who was announced the winner and is due to be inaugurated on Saturday.

In a sign of mounting pressure on Minsk, key opposition candidate Alexander Milinkevich received a warm welcome during visits to Poland, Austria, the European Parliament and European Union headquarters.

"The Foreign ministry does not comment on visits by individuals," said the ministry's chief spokesman, Andrei Popov. "We assume that there is even less point in such meetings after the polls than there was ahead of the election."

Popov said Minsk was not alarmed by a resolution denouncing the polls that is likely to be adopted by the European Parliament later on Thursday.

"We are sure that yet again such a document cannot expect serious consideration in Minsk," he said.

According to official election figures Milinkevich trailed far behind Lukashenko, who is genuinely popular despite a tough Soviet style of government that has made his 10-million-strong country a pariah in Europe.

Milinkevich's supporters staged unprecedented protests against what they called rigged polls, including a four-day non-stop vigil at a central Minsk square. They plan to hold another rally on Saturday to coincide with the inauguration.

More than 600 protesters, including opposition leader Alexander Kozulin and the former Polish ambassador in Belarus, Mariusz Maszkiewicz, were detained after the polls. Most of them were sentenced to short prison terms of up to two weeks.

Poland, Belarus' EU neighbour and the most vociferous of Lukashenko's critics, has said it does not recognise the polls and has demanded that Maszkiewicz, sentenced to 15 days in jail, be freed.

Popov said the Foreign Ministry was considering the case and indicated the ex-ambassador could be freed.

"The Polish note is indeed in the Belarus Foreign Ministry," he said. "I want to stress that we do not consider it as any kind of a demand.

"It may be considered by the Belarus authorities on the basis of principles of good will," he added.

However, Popov said Belarus was not ready to return its ambassador to Poland, recalled after the polls in protest against Warsaw's tough criticism.

Lukashenko, who according to the official tally won 83 percent of vote, starts a new five-year term on Saturday. He first came to power in 1994.

Source: Andrei Makhovsky, Reuters; April 6, 2006; <http://today.reuters.co.uk/>

30. European Parliament Calls for New Belarusian Elections

The European Parliament has termed the recent presidential elections in Belarus "fundamentally flawed" and "fraudulent," and called for new elections.

In the strongly worded resolution, the lawmakers called Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko the last dictator in Europe and said his regime lacks legitimacy. They also said they were appalled by the Russian government's positive reactions to the Belarusian vote.

The resolution calls on European Union members to ban entry to all Belarusian officials believed to be involved in human rights violations. It also asks the bloc's foreign ministers to freeze the assets of Mr. Lukashenko and his advisers.

Mr. Lukashenko's spokesman dismissed the resolution.

Mr. Lukashenko won an overwhelming majority in the March 19 presidential elections, and is to be sworn in to a new term Saturday, April 8.

The announcement by Belarus authorities of Mr. Lukashenko's victory sparked protests by opposition activists who considered the vote fraudulent.

Belarusian police broke up the protests after five days, confirming about 500 arrests. Opposition activists have put the number closer to 1,000.

Source: Voice of America; April 6, 2006; <http://www.voanews.com/>

31. Polish Diplomat in Belarus Dies in Hospital

Poland's vice consul in the Belarusian city of Grodno Ryszard Badon-Lehr has died in hospital in Bialystok. He was transported from a Grodno hospital back to Poland last week with a suspected brain tumor, after being found unconscious in his apartment. Despite surgery he never regained consciousness.

The prosecutor's office in Bialystok is conducting an investigation into an alleged beating of Ryszard Badon-Lehr in Belarus. Prosecutor Janusz Kordulski has confirmed the Polish diplomat had burns in the kidney area suggesting the use of an electric paralysers.

Source: Polskie Radio, April 6, 2006; <http://www.polskieradio.pl/polonia/>

BUSINESS

32. Belarus to allot more than Br3,3 trillion to mitigate Chernobyl consequences in 2006-2010

The fourth program to minimize the consequences of the Chernobyl disaster aims to ensure real economic revival of the affected regions and to sustain their development. The national budget is expected to allocate Br3,174 trillion for these purposes, local budgets – Br160 billion, prime minister of Belarus Sergei Sidorskiy has stated at the parliamentary hearings today.

As Sergei Sidorskiy stated, the program is socially oriented. In particular, 63 per cent of the program's means will be allocated to finance benefits and compensations to the affected population, 20 per cent – to purchase mineral fertilizers to lime acid soils in the contaminated regions, 13 per cent are capital investment to extend gas supply networks and to finance the community development programs, consumer, social and culture services.

In comparison with the previous program (2001-2005) this document is aimed at socioeconomic revival of the regions, while the previous program targeted the resettlement of people and radiation control over the food products.

About Br600 billion (in 2001-2005 – Br346 billion) will be allocated to finance the production of ecologically "clean" food products, more than Br100 billion (in 2001-2005) – medical services.

Source: *Belarusian Telegraph Agency*; April 12, 2006; <http://www.belta.by/engnews.nsf>

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.
