

April 13 – April 19, 2006

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HUMAN RIGHTS & INDEPENDENT MEDIA

1. Political Prisoners In Jails of Belarus

An activist of youth pro-democracy movement Artur Finkevich is charged with a graver crime. Finkevich was detained in Minsk on the night of January 30 this year on a charge of making graffiti "We want a new one!" It has become known that he is presented accusation for violation of two articles of the Criminal Code, Article 339 Part 2 (malicious hooliganism) and Article 218 Part 3 (intentional destruction or damaging of property). Artur Finkevich faces a prison term from 7 to 12 years for violation of the latter article; moreover, this article does not envisage postponement of execution of judgment.

The materials of the criminal case have been submitted to the court already. The trial is to take place within the next month. Human rights watchdogs believe that Artur Finkevich's arrest is politically motivated and connected to his political activism.

In today's Belarus criminal prosecution is used as a method of struggle of Lukashenka's regime against its political opponents and dissenters.

At the moment 10 persons stay in prisons of Belarus for political reasons. About 20 persons are suspects and accused in criminal cases brought up during and after the presidential election campaign. Among the arrested are the former candidate for presidency Alyksandr Kazulin, an activist of Kazulin's campaign headquarters Yury Radzivil, activists of the Milinkevich's campaign headquarters Syarhei Lyashkevich and Mikalay Razumau, activists of the civil initiative "Partnerstva" Alyksandr Shalajka, Tsimafei Dranchuk, Enira Branitskaya and Mikalay Astrejka; youth leaders Mikita Sasim and Artur Finkevich.

The leader of the Strike Committee of vendor Uladzimir Levaneuski stays in prison. The chairman of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Narodnaya Hramada) Mikola Statkevich, youth leader Paval Sevyarynets, a deputy of the 13th Supreme Soviet Andrei Klimov are sentenced to restriction of freedom.

Youth activists Alyksandr Kazakou and Dzmitry Zubro are sentenced to two years of corrective labour.

Taking in consideration a serious character of charges against activists of civil associations, youth and political organizations, human rights watchdogs call upon:

Citizens of Belarus - to express solidarity with political prisoners;

Representatives of non-governmental organizations and political parties of Belarus to use all possible means to prevent accusing Belarusian citizens on political grounds;

Representatives of the international community - to use all mechanisms with the aim to exert international pressure on the Belarusian regime in order to prevent politically motivated reprisal over opponents of the regime in Belarus.

Source: Charter97; April 19, 2006; <http://www.charter97.org/eng/>

2. Persecution of Hrodna Journalists Continues

A Hrodna journalist from *Glos znad Niemna Na Uchodzstwie* Ines Todryk is accused of violating art. 172 of the Administrative Code ("Violation of terms of usage, purchasing and selling of office equipment. Illegal distribution of printed editions"). The journalist was informed about it on April 18. People working at the Leninski District Department of the Interior (Hrodna) came to her office and gave her a protocol about an administrative infraction. A notice of appointment will be sent to her soon.

Ines Todryk was detained on March 24, when she and one more activist of the Union of poles in Belarus (Andrzej Lisouski) came to meet Andrej Pachobut that was to be released after 10 days of detention. Their car was stopped; Andrej Pachobut managed to get out and run away. The police searched the car and found 400 issues of "Glos znad Niemna na uchodzstwie" and 80 issues of *Magazyn Polski Na Uchodzstwie* there. Ines was detained for several hours and then released; A. Lisouski was sentenced to 10 days of detention for "misdemeanor".

Source: Belarusian Association of Journalists; April 19, 2006; <http://www.baj.ru/>

3. Human Rights Activist Ales Byalatski Warned By Prosecutor's Office

On April 17 a human rights watchdog Ales Byalatski was summoned to the prosecutor's office of Savetski district. He was issued a warning for violation of the Article 400 of the Criminal Code of Belarus ("intentionally false denunciation"). The warning was issued in line with a comment of Ales Byalatski to the internet source www.charter97.org <http://www.charter97.org> after a forcible dispersal of a peaceful protest on March 25: "It's an obvious provocation of the authorities. They have declared that even before the elections. Interior Minister Navumau said at a press conference that explosions and victims are expected among demonstrators. Now we have seen that. The Belarusian authorities, and namely Lukashenka and his power ministers bear the blame for all today's events. Today the regime has used unprecedented cruelty against peaceful people," the human rights activist said then.

It is worth mentioning that the same warning has been issued to a well-known human rights activist, a deputy head of the UCP Ludmila Hraznova by the prosecutor's office of Savetski district on April 12. The warning was issued for the comment on the events of the Freedom Day to the Charter'97 press center as well.

Source: Charter97; April 19, 2006; <http://www.charter97.org/eng/>

4. Belarus "The state does not interfere in the activity of religious organisations"

A Pentecostal leader in Belarus, Gennady Akhrimovich, is facing a fine for organising a Bible study group within his congregation, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. However, Tatyana Zhitko, head of the local Ideology Department has refused to say why this is happening. "Why are you calling me?" she complained. "I don't know your publication and I'm not prepared to give you any information." Akhrimovich's New Generation Church is facing state threats to its place of worship, like the Minsk-based New Life Church which is now facing a forced sale of its worship building to Minsk City Property Department. Meanwhile, two Protestants jailed for illegal religious activity have been freed. And despite the expulsion of Catholic priest Fr Robert Krzywicki, Vladimir Lameko of the state Religious affairs Committee has told Fr Robert's parishioners that "the state does not interfere in the activity of religious organisations."

The administration of the town of Baranovichi [Baranavichy] in western Belarus, is trying to fine a local Pentecostal leader for organising a Bible study group within his congregation, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Tatyana Zhitko, head of the Ideology Department of the town administration has refused to tell Forum 18 why the Administrative Commission is doing this. "Why are you calling me?" she complained on 12 April. "I don't know your publication and I'm not prepared to give you any information." Protestant churches have borne the brunt of increased use in recent months of the Administrative Violations Code to restrict the activity of religious communities.

In the wake of a police raid on New Generation Church at the beginning of 2006, local officials accused Gennady Akhrimovich, who chairs the church's council, of organising a study group of eleven church members without registering its statutes. In a report dated 22 February, officials said this violated Article 193 of the Administrative Violations Code - a Soviet-era provision punishing the foundation and leadership of an unregistered religious congregation or a group within a religious community not connected with the performance of religious rituals with a fine of up to five times the minimum monthly wage (i.e. up to 120,000 Belarusian Roubles, 357 Norwegian Kroner, 45 Euros or 53 US Dollars).

However, at its hearing on 6 April at which Akhrimovich set out his position, the Administrative Commission postponed further consideration of the case for another two weeks, complaining that it had not had time to prepare properly.

Akhrimovich argues that the study group was not a separate organisation but an integral part of the church's work, since its aim was "in-depth Bible study, in particular such issues as Biblical foundations of the family and marriage, the nature of faith, prayer, the Holy Spirit, the Church." He maintains that organising such study groups is within the competence of his church as outlined in its statutes and as a registered religious community under the country's 2002 Religion Law. Under Belarus' tight web of restrictions on all religious activity – and in defiance of the country's international human rights commitments - the government maintains that all religious activity without official approval is illegal.

While New Generation Church has managed to re-register under the 2002 Law, it has encountered difficulties acquiring a place of worship. Last year Pastor Leonid Voronenko told Forum 18 that, although his 150-strong congregation bought a 443-square-metre [530-square-yard] warehouse in 1997 with the intention of converting it into a church, the town authorities have refused to allow the designated purpose of the building to be changed or to give the church full rights over the land beneath it.

In long-running correspondence on the issue between the church and Baranovich Municipal Executive Committee seen by Forum 18, the latter's chairman Mikhail Pavlov explains in July 1997 that conversion of the warehouse is "inexpedient". His successor Viktor Dichkovsky wrote to Pastor Voronenko in August 2004 that there was "no basis" to alter the building and warned that if the designated usage of the plot of land was not complied with - in this case, storage of goods and products - then the church's right to use it would be terminated in accordance with the Land Code. With the help of public pressure, New Generation Church has so far managed to resist state threats to seal and demolish the building.

A fellow Full Gospel Association congregation in a similar predicament is the Minsk-based charismatic New Life Church. On 18 April its administrator Vasily Yurevich told Forum 18 that the church has just received a court summons from Minsk City Economic Court to attend a 24 April preliminary hearing on the forced sale of the church's worship building to Minsk City Property Department. Currently, he remarked, the church is still considering its response, but is resolved "not to sell our church building at any price." A copy of the summons has been seen by Forum 18.

In late October 2005 New Life Church lost its challenge in the same court against Minsk City Executive Committee's 17 August instruction curtailing the church's land rights and ordering the sale of its worship building, a disused cowshed it purchased in 2002. The Executive Committee's decision was based on the church's alleged violation of Article 49, Part 4 of the Land Code, which states that rights to land may be curtailed if it is not used in accordance with its designation.

The 2002 Religion Law requires state permission for religious gatherings in premises not specially designed for worship, but the Minsk municipal authorities have consistently refused to grant both this - on the grounds that the building is a cowshed - as well as permission to change the designated usage of the building and reconstruct it as a church.

Two Protestants have recently been freed after each serving ten days in prison for religious activity the government regards – against international human rights standards - as illegal. Sergei Shavtsov, a religious rights lawyer who was imprisoned for ten days on charges of organising an unapproved Christian seminar in a private cafe, was freed at the end of his sentence on 3 April (see F18News 27 March 2006. "Conditions in prison were not too bad," he told Forum 18 from Minsk on 12 April, "though of course it was not up to the standard of foreign prisons."

On 5 April Vladimir Bukanov, a Reformed Baptist pastor based in Gatovo (Minsk region), told Forum 18 that neither his congregation nor that of Pastor Georgi Vyazovsky had encountered any restriction since Vyazovsky's release from prison on 13 March.

Also facing charges for leading unsanctioned home worship is the Pentecostal bishop of Minsk region, Sergei Tsvor, but as he told Forum 18, he knows of no further development since the 9 March postponement of a court hearing to consider his case. "They told me to wait for a summons," he remarked to Forum 18 on 12 April, "but all has gone quiet."

Meanwhile, Christians and political opponents of President Aleksandr Lukashenko, detained by police during election demonstrations in Minsk and elsewhere, are now gradually being released from prison. Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) observers found that the 19 March presidential election "failed to meet OSCE commitments for democratic elections" and that "arbitrary abuse of state power, obviously designed to protect the incumbent President, went far beyond acceptable practice."

Freed on 28 March, Kristina Shatikova from the town of Mogilev [Mahilyow], told the opposition news website Charter 97 that members of the OMON special riot police confiscated Bibles from some female demonstrators as they arrested them. She claimed that when they asked for their Bibles back, the OMON members laughed and threatened to rape them. Members of some Christian churches took part in the demonstrations and a number were detained for up to two weeks.

In the wake of the expulsion from Belarus last December of the Catholic parish priest of Borisov, Polish citizen Fr Robert Krzywicki, a group of his parishioners wrote to the government's Religious Affairs Committee demanding that he be allowed to return. In his 22 March response, however, Committee deputy chairman Vladimir Lameko said the complaint had been sent on to the Minsk regional executive committee as this body had originally given Fr Krzywicki permission to serve in the parish. At the same time, Lameko pointed out that, as the Catholic leadership holds the exclusive right to name priests to parishes, Cardinal Kazimierz Swiatek appointed Fr Zbigniew Grigorzewicz to the Borisov parish. "The state does not interfere in the activity of religious organisations."

Local journalist Viktoriya Ravinskaya wrote on a Borisov website borisov-e.info on 28 March that the parishioners said the response had been as they had predicted. Maintaining that Lameko had confused the consequence of Fr Robert's departure – Fr Zbigniew's appointment – with its cause, they pointed out that the cardinal was forced to name another priest as Fr Robert was "no longer able to fulfil his duties because of his expulsion from Belarus".

Source: Felix Corley, Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18; April 18, 2006; <http://www.forum18.org>

5. The Ideological Department Is Closing Down *Nasha Niva*. The Periodical Has to Survive

The *Nasha Niva* editorial's appeal to its readers from all around the world

On the eve of Easter holidays, the *Nasha Niva* weekly received a letter from Minsk City Executive Committee that stated that "the location of *Nasha Niva* editorial in the city of Minsk is inexpedient." This decision was motivated by the fact that "...on March 22... the *Nasha Niva* Editor-in-Chief was sentenced to 10 days of administrative arrest."

It should be reminded that the Editor-in-chief Andrei Dynko was detained by the riot police, as he was leaving a route bus #100 in Kastychnitskaya Square during the after-the-election civil protests in Minsk on March 21, 2006. As a result, he was groundlessly accused of "cursing" and sued.

The state authorities are trying to do away completely with *Nasha Niva*. On January 01, 2006, the state monopolist Belsayuzdruk, Minharsayuzdruk, and Minabsayuzdruk terminated their

agreements with *Nasha Niva* on different pretexts. At the same time, the Belposhta Unitary Enterprise excluded the weekly from its Subscription Catalogues 2006.

On April 10, after a long delay with reply, the Ministry of Communication rejected the *Nasha Niva* editorial's claim for getting a license that permits holding subscription on its own. On the same day, M. Tsitsiankou, the Deputy Head of Ideological Department at Minsk City Executive Committee sent a letter that informed the newspaper editorial about the "inexpediency" of its location on the territory of Minsk. In fact, it means that the *Nasha Niva* enterprise cannot carry on its existence.

The *Nasha Niva* is being cynically closed down on the eve of its 100th anniversary. In 1915, the *Nasha Niva* newspaper was closed down during the occupation of Vilnius by Kaiser's troops. In 2006, the same repressive actions, aimed at the periodical closure are carried out by Lukashenka's administration.

Formerly, the Belarusian state authorities intended to keep to some legal procedures. Newspapers were closed down or suspended from publishing following certain court verdicts or orders, issued by the Ministry of Information. Nowadays, it appears to be enough to get a decision from "the Ideological Department." It is a mere absurd from the legal point of view. The current Belarusian Press Law does not preview getting any permits for the location of editorials by some Ideological Departments. Moreover, the activity of enterprises cannot be placed in dependence from the administrative punishment of its head.

Nasha Niva hasn't broken the law. It is indicative that the newspaper hasn't had any official notifications from the Ministry of Information of Belarus.

The state authorities are closing down the first Belarusian newspaper that is a symbol of the Belarusian national identity.

The state authorities are closing down the last independent newspaper, published in Belarusian. The closure of *Nasha Niva* is a symbolic beginning of the third Presidential term of Alexander Lukashenka.

The last Belarusian-speaking lyceum is closed. Belarusian-speaking rock-groups are banned from the radio and TV. The process of closing up the Union of writers has been launched. Dozens of newspapers are banned, starting up own radio and TV in Belarusian language is illegal. The extermination of cultural alternatives is elevated to the rank of state policy. Single-level Soviet identity is imposed to people. Today it is a question of not saving *Nasha Niva* or independent press only. Salvation of Belarusian cultural identity as such is at issue now.

Age-old cultural tradition of a whole people mustn't become extinct in the Europe of the 21st century.

In such conditions we ask the Lithuanian Ministry of Culture to apply to UNESCO for including the newspaper *Nasha Niva* into the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Lithuania has the moral right to do it, since *Nasha Niva* was issued in Vilnius in 1906—1915 and 1991—1996. 100th anniversary of the paper which had set up Belarusian literary language, Belarusian classic literature, Belarusian state idea is a good occasion for that. We ask the governments of other countries, international and non-government institutions, which have such a right, to support this application with UNESCO. This symbolic step may be the last thing the world can do for the Belarusian press.

We also appeal to international community to immediately intensify their support of all independent Belarusian mass media ever existing.

We appeal to our readers to be self-possessed and optimistic.

Legal proceedings, appeal of City executive council letter etc. can last from months to years. In spite of such uncertainties the paper will be published in its today's format until there is a possibility. It is impossible to forecast how long it will be. E.g. we don't know for how long the printing house will print the paper. Later on we'll have something else.

Firstly, the Internet. Even the closing of the enterprise *Nasha Niva* does not mean closing the web-site of the paper.

It is important to preserve the edition in paper for the national cultural tradition.

Since publishing *Nasha Niva* in Belarus "is not appropriate", that would be logical to consider the matter of transferring the newspaper abroad. However that would entail legal and financial perplexities. In the situation of the ban on distribution, *Nasha Niva* is published at the cost of donations from private persons. We have received some 4000 of them from all over Belarus since the beginning of the year. Nevertheless if the paper is closed and then transferred and registered abroad, the reader will have no direct opportunity to make a money order for the paper. Until the paper is issued as it used to, please, keep on donating — but in lesser amounts. We will be looking for a way out considering the developments.

It's worth while reminding that in case the enterprise is closed, the money on its account doesn't disappear but is used for statute purposes.

Nasha Niva is being closed, but *Nasha Niva* has to go on. As an edition read by thousands of people, as a national symbol.

Source: Belarusian Association of Journalists; April 18, 2006; <http://www.baj.ru/>

6. Minsk Office of Public Prosecutor Does Not Think That Journalists Rights Got Violated

Minsk State Executive Committee did not find any violations of the rights of journalists detained at the end of March. It was said in the letter received by BAJ last week. It was signed by the Public Prosecutor's senior aide Mr. Siamyonau.

It was said that on March 21-24 the police detained people only if they had all the necessary documents allowing them to do it. He also said that the relatives of the detained had been informed about everything. "The detained were given good food, beds, newspapers and magazines. They could wear their own clothes and take all the necessary medicine". The whole text can be found in the letter sent to BAJ by Minsk State Executive Committee (<http://www.baj.ru/2006/Apr/1204nav3.asp>).

Let us remind you that on March 24 the Belarusian Association of Journalists submitted a claim to the Head of the Special Police Prison in Minsk, the Head of Minsk City Department of Internal Affairs and the Official Prosecutor of Minsk Among other, BAJ urged the officials:

to stop violating the rights of journalists, kept behind the bars in the Special Police Prison of Minsk; to inform a.s.a.p. the detained journalists' relatives about the location of their arrested family members; to pass food and warm clothes from the relatives to the arrested people; to sue the officials, who are responsible for breaking the arrested people's rights etc.

BAJ is drawing the officials' attention to the numerous facts of legal abuse in the process of detaining journalists and common people during the recent protest actions.

Source: Belarusian Association of Journalists; April 17, 2006; <http://www.baj.ru/>

7. Belarusian Police Arrest Participants In Attempted Flash-Mob Demonstration

Plainclothes riot police on April 12 arrested 12 young people who gathered in downtown Minsk for a spontaneous flash-mob demonstration devoted to Cosmonauts Day, RFE/RL's Belarus Service

reported. The gathering had been announced via the Internet, and police officers were already waiting for participants at their gathering place, with "all the police leadership of Minsk" in attendance, an RFE/RL correspondent reported.

The participants were arrested in the act of blowing up small balloons, onto which they intended to put portraits of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

Source: RFE/RL; April 13, 2006; <http://www.rferl.org>

DOMESTIC

8. Belarus Re-appoints Prime Minister

Belarusian parliament on Tuesday re-appointed Syarhey Sidorski as prime minister after he had stepped down in accordance with the constitution when President Aleksandar Lukashenko was re-elected for a third term last month.

Lukashenko nominated Sidorski for the post and 103 deputies from the 110-seat parliament approved the nomination in a secret vote on Tuesday, Russia's Itar-Tass news agency reported.

Sidorski had replaced Gennady Novitskiy in December 2003.

Lukashenko won a third term in controversial 19 March elections that saw thousands of protesters hit the streets but fail to prompt a "color revolution" such as those that brought down long-time rulers in Ukraine and Georgia.

International observers condemned the vote as fraudulent.

Itar-Tass quoted Sidorski as saying on Tuesday that the new government would "accurately follow the course announced by President Alexander Lukashenko: to make a state for [the] people".

Sidorski is expected to report to Lukashenko later this week concerning the composition of his government.

Source: International Relations and Security Network (ISN); April 18, 2006; <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/>

9. Candles of Solidarity in Minsk

Hundreds of people came out to central streets of Minsk on April 16 to express solidarity with Belarusian political prisoners, disappeared people, independent journalists with everyone who fights for freedom and democracy in Belarus. People with candles were standing near Russian embassy, along Independence avenue, on Niamiha street, walking with candles. We offer you pictures from the events.

Source: ZUBR; April 17, 2006; <http://www.zubr-belarus.com/>

10. Rally Protests Belarus Alliance

Some 100 young people staged a brief rally by Russia's embassy in Minsk overnight to protest Moscow's support of President Alexander Lukashenko.

The protesters stood for a silent half hour holding candles before the embassy, then put the candles down and dispersed.

"By this we show our protest against Russia's support of Europe's last dictator and show solidarity with those whom the Belarusian regime keeps jailed," one protester said.

Some of the protesters covered their faces with scarves, but no one was detained, though the police took down some of their names.

Mr Lukashenko was elected to a third term March 19 in a vote that the main Western election monitoring organisation described as neither free nor fair.

Source: The Daily Telegraph; April 17, 2006; <http://dailytelegraph.news.com.au>

11. New Five-Year Plan in Belarus

Indicators of development to rise by 50%

The presidium of the council of ministers of Belarus yesterday approved a program a plan for the social development of the country for 2006-2010. According to Prime Minister Sergey Sidorsky, after its implementation, "every resident of our country will feel real care, and personally be convinced that he lives in a socially just state." Under the program, the real income of the public, production volume and imports are to go up by about 50 percent, with income for agrarian workers to rise to \$320-360 per month and workers paid from the state budget to receive \$500.

The ministers were obviously inspired by the success of their last five-year plan, during which average monthly inflation was lowered to 0.6 percent and average monthly salaries were raised to \$261 and "a working economy of the socially-oriented type was created." They admit, however, that the government will have to work hard. The prime minister pointed out at the meeting increasing expenditure on education and health care and expected growth of small business, industry and tourism. Deputy Prime Minister Andrey Kobaykov noted the presence of unprofitable industries, material- and energy-inefficient production and dependence on imported energy and raw materials as well, however.

Finance Minister Nikolay Korbut warned the health and education ministers not to expect the money for the new expenditures to come from the budget. "The attainment of those parameters is realistic if they both think about how to reach those indicators," he said. An additional 5.7-6.2 million sq. m. of housing is also to be built by 2010. Minister of Architecture and Construction Gennady Kurochkin said, however, that the Belarusian construction industry must be further developed to reach that goal.

The modernization of heavy industry and livestock raising are also planned. Expenditures on science will increase by 150 percent. Sidorsky called on regional leaders to develop socio-economic programs that take local specifics into consideration. "Through the implementation of those programs, we will evaluate the work of the authorities on site," he said. Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko is expected to sign the program in the near future.

Source: Darya Nikolaeva, Vadim Dovnar, Kommersant; April 14, 2006; <http://www.kommersant.com>

12. Belarusian Authorities Are In Control – Lukashenko

Belarusian authorities were in control of the national situation during the presidential elections and they are in control now, President Alexander Lukashenko said on Friday.

"Nothing was done without authorization by the president. I was and I am in control of the situation," he said. "We are forming a new government."

As for rumors on his allegedly poor health, Lukashenko said, "I have not had to see a doctor. The attempts to make a sensation are vain."

Source: Itar-Tass; April 14, 2005; <http://www.tass.ru/eng>

13. Belarusian Opposition Leader Released From Prison

A prominent Belarusian opposition leader was freed from prison Friday after nearly two years in custody. Mikhail Marinich, 66, the former foreign economic relations minister, was released following a court decision earlier this week that approved a request for his early release.

Marinich, who suffered a stroke in prison and is officially considered an invalid, was arrested in April 2004 and later convicted of theft in a case widely dismissed as fabricated. He was sentenced to five years in prison, but later had the sentence shortened to 2 1/2 years.

Marinich told The Associated Press in a telephone interview after his release that he was feeling fine, but his son, Igor, said he was concerned about his father, who looked frail.

The same central district court in the Belarusian capital that sanctioned Marinich's release has refused a request to free another opposition leader, Alexander Kozulin, who was jailed during protests over the disputed re-election of authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko last month.

Kozulin was detained six days after the March 19 election as he led a protest march that was broken up by riot police, who beat demonstrators with truncheons. Kozulin, whose wife says he was among those beaten, considers his arrest politically motivated and illegal.

Western nations have imposed travel sanctions on Belarusian officials over what they called a deeply undemocratic election and have called for the release of Kozulin, one of two opposition candidates who ran against Lukashenko. According to official figures, Lukashenko won a third term with 83 percent of the vote, although the opposition claims the vote was rigged. Lukashenko has ruled the nation of 10 million since 1994, quashing dissent and extending his time in office through votes widely considered illegitimate, reports the AP.

Source: Pravda.Ru; April 14, 2006; <http://english.pravda.ru/>

14. Belarus's Lukashenko Proposes Same PM in New Term

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko proposed retaining his prime minister on Thursday, evidence that he has no intention of altering policies that have spawned protests at home and fierce criticism in the West.

Lukashenko was inaugurated amid great pomp last week following his re-election to a third term. Western countries have long accused him of crushing all dissent and dismissed the election as blatantly rigged.

"The head of state has submitted to the chamber of representatives a proposal to appoint Sergei Sidorsky as Belarussian prime minister," Lukashenko's press service said.

Under Belarus's constitution, the government in office must submit its resignation following the election of a president, who is empowered to dissolve the chamber if it rejects his proposed prime minister twice in a row.

But a senior member of Belarus's parliament, where the opposition has no seats, made clear that would not happen.

"I have no doubt that parliament will confirm him. There is no better candidate than Sergei Sidorsky," said Vasily Khrol.

"Results of recent years show that no one can manage the economy as well as he does. He knows what must be done for Belarus to prosper."

"The government is a purely technical body carrying out the president's orders," said economist Valery Dashkevich.

"Sidorsky is exactly the man Lukashenko wants as a good manager. He doesn't get involved in politics and displays no independence. The economy has developed in normal fashion."

An official in the government office, however, said changes in Sidorsky's cabinet line-up could not be ruled out.

Parliament's speaker, quoted by Belarussian media, said the chamber would consider Sidorsky's candidature next Tuesday.

Official election results gave Lukashenko 83 percent of the vote to 6 percent for liberal Alexander Milinkevich.

President in control

Belarus's liberal and nationalist opposition, long cowed by tough police action and laws against illegal assembly, staged four days of unprecedented protests in a Minsk square.

Police eventually broke up a march outside the city center. More than 600 protesters received jail terms of up to 15 days.

Lukashenko disappeared from view for a week, prompting speculation that he had been rattled, but appeared in firm control in upholding his policies at his inauguration.

"As newly elected president I want to assure you that we will not back away from the country's development strategy which has been elaborated over the past 10 years," he said.

The United States and European Union have made plain they will not let the result stand unchallenged. The EU this week slapped a visa ban on Lukashenko and 30 top officials.

Lukashenko has built up genuine popularity by persuading older and provincial voters that he has provided a measure of stability and prosperity absent in ex-Soviet states.

Belarus's economy is run along Soviet lines, with authorities telling industry what and how much to produce.

Lukashenko has barred privatization and stressed his commitment to improving social standards. Statistics put gross domestic product growth last year at 9.2 percent.

"All this makes clear yet again that the authorities intend to stick to trusted policies in economic and social issues," said independent analyst Oleg Manayev.

"But it is also clear that given events in Belarus and elsewhere after the election, these policies cannot be maintained indefinitely."

Source: Andrei Makhovsky, Reuters; April 13, 2006; <http://today.reuters.com/>

15. Belarus To Spend \$1.5 Billion On Chornobyl Aftermath During Next Five Years

Belarusian Prime Minister Syarhey Sidorski said in the Chamber of Representatives, Belarus's lower house, on April 12 that the government is planning to spend 3.3 trillion rubles (\$1.5 billion) in 2006-2010 for its Chornobyl relief program, Belapan reported.

Sidorski noted that the main objective of the program is to achieve the "real economic revival and sustainable development" of the contaminated areas. Sixty-three percent of the planned funds are to go toward allowances for Chornobyl victims. Sidorski said that 11,242 persons disabled by the disaster and some 115,000 veterans of Chornobyl cleanup operations are entitled to these allowances.

Source: RFE/RL; April 13, 2006; <http://www.rferl.org>

REGIONAL

16. Belarusian Premier Calls For Gradual Increase in Russian Gas Prices

Belarus' prime minister on Monday called for a gradual increase in prices for Russian natural gas imports, as the former Soviet republic sought to stave off a significant and sudden price hike by its strongest ally.

Sergei Sidorsky told parliament that the nation was prepared to pay higher prices "but at a gradual tempo."

"We think that the price of gas is already at market rates and exceeds the price in the Russian city of Smolensk," near the Belarusian border, Sidorovsky said.

Russia's state-controlled gas monopoly OAO Gazprom has long maintained prices of roughly \$47 per 1,000 cubic meters for its ally Belarus, while it has raised prices in recent months for other former Soviet republics.

Following last month's presidential election in Belarus, however, Gazprom officials announced that Belarus should pay European rates beginning next year, and a deputy chairman called for at least a threefold increase.

Many analysts interpreted the move as a ploy by Moscow to acquire control over Belarusian pipeline operator Beltransgaz, which transports Russian gas to lucrative Western markets.

Gazprom has said Belarus has until the end of April to put forward counterproposals.

Sidorsky also accused Gazprom of violating an 1996 agreement that envisaged close political, economic and military ties between Russian and Gazprom.

President Alexander Lukashenko depends heavily on cheap Russian gas and oil to buoy his nation's fragile, mostly centrally controlled economy and maintain popularity in the nation of 10 million. Anger over last month's widely disputed election which extended his iron-fisted 12-year rule sparked unprecedented street protests and further isolated his government from the West.

Source: *Kyiv Post*; April 17, 2006; <http://www.kyivpost.com/>

17. Russia, Belarus To Discuss Joint Military Exercises April 21

Russian and Belarusian defense officials will hold talks April 21 on holding joint military exercises in June of this year, the defense minister said Monday.

Sergei Ivanov said the exercises would form part of the two countries' plans to create combined air-defense systems.

He said the exercises would be held under the auspices of Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) - a regional security body that also includes the former Soviet republics of Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan - but would involve only Russian and Belarusian troops.

The CSTO was founded in 2002 to ensure peace in the post-Soviet space and preserve member-countries' territorial integrity, as well as to fight terrorism, drug traffic, and international organized crime. Some experts say the organization was created to prevent NATO's further eastward expansion and keep some former Soviet republics under Russia's military protection.

Source: RIA Novosti; April 17, 2006; <http://rian.ru>

18. Lukashenko Appeals To Russia's Common Sense Over Gas Prices

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko said Friday that Russia was unlikely to dramatically increase the price of its natural gas supplies to Belarus.

Russian energy giant Gazprom said on Monday it planned to triple the gas price to Belarus from the current level.

Alexander Ryazanov, deputy CEO of Gazprom, said that gas prices for Belarus "should be at least three times higher." The move is expected to tear a hole of around \$2 billion in the Belarusian budget.

"I do not think that Russia's officials will take measures to significantly increase the gas price," Lukashenko said. "I have already said that the price will grow, but it must be equal to Russia's domestic price. If the price is not equal, and conditions are correspondingly unequal, what talk can there be of a creating a union?"

Belarusian authorities have repeatedly pointed out that gas prices for Belarus were stipulated in the Union State Treaty signed with Russia, and the agreement on creating equal conditions for economic entities.

According to a contract between Gazprom and Beltransgaz, the Belarusian state-owned gas company whose pipelines carry Russian gas to Europe, this year the Gazprom will deliver 21 billion cu m of gas at \$46.68 per 1,000 cu m.

In return, Minsk has promised to assist Gazprom's operations in the republic, notably not to change gas transit tariffs.

Western European buyers of Russian gas now pay an average of \$230 per 1,000 cu m.

Lukashenko said the gas price had never been used by Russia as blackmail to push Belarus toward the union state in exchange for gas.

"Nobody has told me 'come on, join Russia,' and there won't ever be such a proposal," he said.

Source: RIA Novosti; April 14, 2006; <http://rian.ru>

19. Belarus Asks Russia To Increase Gas Price Gradually

A sharp rise of the price of Russia's gas would cause a reduction of currency revenues and problems with the exchange rate of the Belarusian currency, the first deputy chief of the National Bank of Belarus, Yury Alymov, has said.

He said in the parliament on Thursday that Russia's company Gazprom had earlier declared a plan of increasing prices of gas delivered to Belarus in 2007 to a European level. Belarus pays 46 dollars for 1,000 cubic meters of gas at present.

"If the price is 95 dollars, it will negatively affect the Belarusian economy. I think, reason will prevail, and there will be not an abrupt but gradual increase of the price in the framework of the union state that we are building with Russia/ If the price is increased by 10 percent, this will be normal," PRIME-TASS quoted Alymov as saying.

Source: Itar-Tass; April 13, 2005; <http://www.tass.ru/eng>

20. How to Handle Belarus

Russian natural gas colossus Gazprom plans to charge its ally Belarus market rates for natural gas when new contracts are negotiated in 2007. At current prices, such a move would more than

triple the \$47 per thousand cubic meters the former Soviet republic pays, effectively swinging a wrecking ball into the Belarusian economy.

Just don't expect Russia to follow through on Gazprom's threat. Putin wants to gain operating control of gas pipelines in Belarus, as he has gotten in neighboring countries. But yanking subsidies completely would trigger economic collapse in Belarus and breathe life into a democracy movement that had been badly defeated in the country's rigged March 19 presidential elections.

Belarusian strongman Alexander Lukashenko, known as "Europe's last dictator," has bet the farm politically on his belief that Belarusians prefer sclerotic stability to the roller coaster capitalism in neighboring countries. In his 12 years of rule, the former collective farm director has implemented "market socialism," a fancy name for dodging badly needed structural reform at every turn.

This policy has spared his subjects the painful transition to democracy but left the economy mostly government-owned, uncompetitive, and money-losing. A quarter of the population is mired in poverty, an economic voucher system has failed, and inflation is brewing. Meanwhile, trade deficits and a lack of foreign investment foretell a grim future.

Despite this, a vote for Lukashenko has been a vote for subsidized decrepitude, whereas a vote for reform has carried the threat of freezing in the dark. It's a ratchet effect: the weaker the economy, the greater the threat. Yet Putin knows that threat goes away if Belarusians actually are freezing in the dark.

If Russia keeps gas subsidies in some reduced form in exchange for control of the gas pipeline network in Belarus, Lukashenko will retain power but come under increased economic pressure. This will not be good for the democracy movement in Belarus or for democracy movements around the world.

Belarus has a Soviet-era arms industry that earns hard currency selling to shady regimes that don't want to pay a lot to fix their civilian or rebel problems. They also sell more advanced weaponry to rogue states that Putin would just as soon not be linked to. With increased economic pressure, Lukashenko would certainly test the industry's surge capacity, raising the ability of rogue regimes to crush budding democracy movements around the world.

The United States, E.U., and many of Belarus's neighbors have reacted angrily to blatantly rigged March elections in which Lukashenko awarded himself nearly 83 percent of the vote (while leaving his nearest opposition candidate in single digits). Yet with Belarus isolated -- and insulated -- from the West, Lukashenko's future lies squarely in the geo-strategic calculations in the Kremlin, not in any privileges or memberships the West can remove.

The free world can best help the democracy movement in Belarus -- as well as others around the world -- by going beyond mere visa bans and asset freezes. The focus should be on imposing costs on the rogue regimes that source weaponry from the increasingly proliferation-minded Lukashenko.

*Source: Nat Moffat, Human Events Online; April 13, 2006;
<http://www.humaneventsonline.com/blog-detail.php?id=14031>*

INTERNATIONAL

21. Belarus Wants Dialogue With Poland Despite Rows - Ambassador

The Belarusian ambassador in Warsaw said Wednesday his country would not bow to outside pressure but wanted normal relations with neighboring Poland.

Pavel Latushko said Belarus had proposed easing visa regulations and signing bilateral border and customs agreements with Poland, which has been one of the most vociferous critics of President Alexander Lukashenk's regime.

But he added: "Belarus will not bend under pressure of any external factors and conditions, wherever they come from".

Relations between the two countries worsened after Lukashenko's victory in the March 19 presidential elections.

Mariusz Maszkiewicz, a former Polish ambassador to Belarus, was detained in Minsk on March 28. He was among more than 150 detained opposition protesters who regarded election results as fraudulent. He was sentenced to 15 days in jail, but was later taken to hospital with heart problems and released April 7.

Earlier this month, foreign ministers of the 25 European Union member states included Lukashenko along with 30 other Belarusian officials on a blacklist that bans them from entering the union.

Source: RIA Novosti; April 19, 2006; <http://rian.ru>

22. Belarus Opposition Leader To Travel Norway This Week

Belarus opposition leader Alexander Milinkevich was planning to visit Oslo this week to discuss the political situation in his country with Norwegian officials, a human rights group said Tuesday. Berit Lindeman, of the Norwegian Helsinki Committee, said Milinkevich was arriving Wednesday evening for meetings with Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg and other top officials.

The Belarusian opposition and Western governments have criticized last month's presidential election in the former Soviet republic as flawed. Milinkevich came in second with 6.1 percent of the vote, behind President Alexander Lukashenko, who was re-elected with 83 percent. Last week, the 25-nation European Union imposed a visa ban on Lukashenko and 30 other top Belarus officials.

Lindeman said Milinkevich was scheduled to meet Stoltenberg and the Norwegian Parliament's foreign affairs committee, and also planned to join a seminar. On Friday, he was set to meet Norwegian Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Stoere. The Helsinki Committee said the high levels of the meetings were a strong indication of Norway 's support for the Belarus opposition. Before entering politics, Milinkevich, 58, was a frequent visitor to Norway as guest of the Helsinki Committee, which backed his human rights efforts, reports the AP.

Source: Pravda.Ru; April 18, 2006; <http://newsfromrussia.com/>

23. Belarus Prime Minister to Pay Official Visit to Cuba

Havana, April 18 (ACN) Belarus Prime Minister Serguei Sergueievich Sidorski will pay an official visit to Cuba on Thursday at the invitation of Cuban President Fidel Castro.

Sidorski's visit to Havana takes place in the context of excellent political, friendship and cooperation relations between the two countries, Granma newspaper reports on Tuesday.

During his stay on the island the Belarusian PM will meet with Cuban President Fidel Castro and other top Cuban government officials. Sidorski and his delegation are also scheduled to visit places of historic interest.

Belarus, with a population of nearly 9,8 millions established diplomatic relations with Cuba on April 16, 1992.

Source: Cuban News Agency; April 18, 2006;
<http://www.ain.cubaweb.cu/idioma/ingles/2006/abr18ministro-belarus.htm>

24. Russia Denies Belarus-Iran Missile Transfer

The Russian Defense Ministry has denied reports circulating in the US media that Belarus could transfer Russian-supplied S-300 anti-aircraft missile systems to Iran.

The Russian Defense Ministry on Monday said four battalions of S-300 PMU2 Favorite missile systems would be supplied to Belarus this year in accordance with an agreement to merge the two countries' air defenses, but denied that the missile systems could be transferred to Iran, Russia's RIA Novosti reported.

"Under the current [Joint Air Defense Group of the Union State] agreement, missile systems cannot be supplied to third countries," the news agency quoted the defense ministry as saying.

"The information published in certain US media alleging that the S-300 anti-aircraft missile systems which Russia supplies to Belarus will be re-exported to Iran in the future does not correspond to reality," news agencies quoted the Russian Defense Ministry as saying in a statement on Monday.

Earlier this month, Russia began supplying the anti-aircraft missile systems to Belarus in accordance with that agreement.

The S-300 system can hit targets at a range of 20 meters to 45 kilometers. It can engage six targets simultaneously and is expected to be deployed in June.

Source: *International Relations and Security Network (ISN)*; April 18, 2006;
<http://www.isn.ethz.ch/>

25. Belarus Opposition Wants International Public Trial of Lukashenko

Opposition groups in Belarus are proposing an international public trial of the regime of President Alexander Lukashenko, an opposition leader said Tuesday.

Anatoly Lebedko said the first session of such court could be possibly held in September this year in Warsaw, Vilnius, Kiev, Moscow, or Minsk.

"We need to dispel illusions and myths about Belarusian authorities," Lebedko said. "We need to show the [real] nature of the Belarusian regime."

Lukashenko, whom Washington has dubbed 'Europe's last dictator', was reelected to a third term as president in the March 19 poll with a massive 83% of the vote. The opposition said the vote was rigged.

Lebedko said the trial judges should be 10-15 people well known in Europe and the world. He said the prosecution would present hundreds of cases involving violation of Belarusian laws and the constitution.

Lebedko said the main issues in the trial would be the events of 1996, when Lukashenko dismissed a parliament that intended to impeach him, and the 2006 presidential election. He added the issue of the court should be also raised at the Council of Europe.

Belarus is the only European nation not to be a member of the Council of Europe.

Earlier this month, foreign ministers of the 25 European Union member states included Lukashenko along with 30 other Belarusian officials on a blacklist that bans them from entering the union.

Source: RIA Novosti; April 18, 2006; <http://rian.ru>

26. OSCE 50 Military Officers Arrived in Minsk

About 50 military officers from 26 member states of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) arrived in Minsk on Monday evening to take a look at the Belarusian Armed Forces' combat training, hardware and daily routine.

"This visit has been organised in accordance with the Vienna agreements on confidence and security building measures," the Belarusian Defence Ministry told Itar-Tass.

The OSCE officials will visit the 206th Assault Air Base and the 120th Detached Mechanised Brigade. They will meet with their commanders and personnel, visit combat training sites and take a look at weapons and hardware, including the MiG-29BM aircraft, the BM-21A Belgrade multiple rocket launchers, and the Mi-8MTKO combat support helicopter.

Source: Itar-Tass; April 17, 2005; <http://www.tass.ru/eng>

27. Pressuring Belarus

Democracy's uphill battle against the Soviet-style regime of President Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus received a boost Monday from the European Union, which blocked Mr. Lukashenko and 30 officials from his regime from traveling to the EU. This travel ban groups the Belarusian leadership with the likes of Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe. Enacting this visa restriction is laudable and should be accompanied by greater sanctions on Mr. Lukashenko's ability to keep himself in power, including actions to freeze his personal assets and a serious effort to curtail his sale of arms to other states, which include Iran and Sudan.

The Lukashenko government jeered the sanctions, calling them "uncivilized... shortsighted and ineffective" -- the same way it bluntly dismissed the conclusions of election monitors that the March 19 presidential election was neither free nor fair by international standards. After "winning" more than 80 percent of the vote, far above what pre-election polling predicted, Mr. Lukashenko lashed out at the Western countries, claiming there had been an external effort to bring about a "colored revolution," like the Orange Revolution in neighboring Ukraine and the Rose Revolution in Georgia, to topple his government. In response to the widespread protesting led by presidential candidate Alexander Milinkevich and civil society groups, Belarusian police and security forces (appropriately still known by their Soviet moniker, the K.G.B.) cleared demonstrators from the central October Square in Minsk, arresting hundreds of the protestors.

The sanctions against the dictator are being somewhat offset by the disconcerting support for the Lukashenko regime coming from Belarus' eastern neighbor. Congratulating Mr. Lukashenko on his election victory, Russian President Vladimir Putin went so far as to make the absurd claim that "the results of the elections point to voters' trust in [Mr. Lukashenko's] policies." Russia, which will tout global energy security as host of the Group of Eight summit this summer, subsidized the Lukashenko regime by offering cheap natural gas and oil. That practice should be coming to an end, however, as officials at the Russian gas monopoly Gazprom have indicated they support the three-fold price increase needed to bring oil and gas prices in Belarus to market level. Whether Russia will actually increase the price has yet to be seen.

While the March election did not unseat Mr. Lukashenko, the democratic opposition gained unprecedented traction and support. The United States and the EU should work together and bring greater pressure on the European dictator while continuing to support democratic opposition and civil society groups in the country. For democracy to prevail in Eastern Europe, a united front from the Western powers is paramount.

Source: The Washington Times; April 16, 2006; <http://washingtontimes.com>

28. Aleksandr Lukashenko: If Europeans Are Realist, They Should Establish Diplomatic And Political Relations With Belarus

Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko called on the European Union member states to be realist in respect to relations with Belarus. The Eastern Europe bureau of APA reports that Lukashenko said most of statements should not be taken serious.

"If one wants to see a hot spot in the center of Europe he must know that Europe is already "hot". O if one wants an image and popularity this is not a successful variant," Lukashenko stressed.

The Belarusian President thinks that if Europeans are realist, they should establish diplomatic and political relations with Belarus, "As coming to economy, it does not depend on politics in most cases," he underlined.

Source: Azeri-Press Information Agency; April 15, 2006; <http://en.apa.az/news.php?id=8538>

29. Radio Polonia Expands Broadcasts To Belarus

Radio Polonia has launched a dedicated Polish language service for the ethnic Polish community in neighbouring Belarus. It will be available on medium wave and FM in the south and north of he country. The station's Belarussian language service has also been expanded.

The European Union, the United States, as well as international human rights organizations have repeatedly voiced their concern over human rights abuses and disrespect for democratic principles by the Belarussian authorities. Poland has long urged its western allies to do more to promote democracy in Belarus, not least following the recent presidential elections, whose results were described by observers as dubious.

Interviewed on Radio Polonia, Speaker of the Polish Senate Bogdan Borusewicz said that the sizeable ethnic Polish minority in Belarus, just like all the citizens of Belarus, are entitled to free access to information. Radio Polonia broadcasts intend to offer such information on a more extensive basis than until now.

Polish language transmissions can be heard 20.00-21.00 Belarussian time on 105.3 FM in the south and 19.00-20.00 on 1557 kHz AM in the north of Belarus.

Source: Polskie Radio, April 14, 2006; <http://www.polskieradio.pl/polonia/>

30. Belarus May Disregard PACE Appeal, Not Being Its Member

Belarus is not a member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE). So, it may disregard the PACE resolution, adopted in Strasbourg on Thursday. This is the opinion of members of the Federation Council, who commented on the resolution of the European legislators. The PACE resolution says that the presidential elections, held in Belarus in March, were at variance with democratic norms, and for that reason repeated elections should be held there "in conditions of democracy."

"Belarus may regard the PACE recommendations as nothing but declarations. There have always been declarations like that," Yuri Sharandin, head of the FC committee for constitutional legislation, told Itar-Tass. He reminded that "PACE has its own criteria for holding democratic elections, while every country has criteria of its own. This is especially true, because Belarus is not a PACE member."

So far as Russia's stand on the problem is concerned, Sharandin believes Moscow should not interfere in this situation, "because this is a matter of relationship between Belarus and PACE."

Vasily Likhachev, deputy head of the FC committee for international affairs, described the PACE resolution as "an example of double, and extremely biased, standards," which had been evident in the evaluations, given by that organisation, long before the elections in Belarus. In his opinion, "it is clear both from the legal and political points of view that the presidential elections in Belarus

were held within the framework of law.” One should take into account the fact that the overwhelming majority of electors voted for Alexander Lukashenko, Likhachev added.

Leonid Bindar, deputy head of the FC committee for constitutional legislation and representative of the Federation Council at the Public Chamber, regards the PACE resolution as “purely political.” He is sure that “the European legislators just do not like the people, who are in power in Belarus.” Bindar reminded that “Belarus is a sovereign country, not bound in any way with PACE.”

Belarus was given the status of a specially invited guest of PACE in 1993. In 1996, however, after the referendum, which expanded the presidential powers at the expense of the powers of the parliament, Belarus application for joining PACE was “frozen.” The Belarusian delegation was stripped of its status of a specially invited guest at PACE sessions in 1997.

Source: Itar-Tass; April 14, 2005; <http://www.tass.ru/eng>

31. Birds of Two Feathers

The price of the question

They say that migrating birds sometimes mistake small airplanes for a flock of birds at a distance and follow them. They can be drawn far off course that way. Yesterday, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and Russia almost came to an unexpected agreement on the Alexander Lukashenko regime. The Russian delegation, of course, did not join in their European colleagues' chorus of disapproval of the regime. It preferred to abstain. But it did not defend its loyal ally.

Suddenly Europe and Russia both are unhappy with Minsk. It is easy to see who is the most ardent. The Europeans have not imposed economic sanctions on Belarus or even frozen the bank accounts of Lukashenko's cronies. They only prohibited the Belarusian top leadership to enter the European Union.

Russia is threatening to deprive Belarusian officials of their ability to go anywhere at all. If the price of Russian natural gas doubles, Belarusian leaders will be too broke to travel the world. Moscow's announcement of a doubling of the price of gas has the same effect as the economic sanctions the Europeans are still hesitant to impose.

The discussion of the Belarusian elections came by strange coincidence at the same time as the latest statement by Belarusian Energy Minister Alexander Ageev, who said that Minsk does not intend to form a joint enterprise with Gazprom based around Beltransgaz. In other words, Lukashenko is being stubborn. He doesn't want to give Russian authorities the most valuable thing he has – control of the country's gas transport.

“So!” Russian leaders thought. “Take that then. Come on Europeans, do your worst!” And the Council of European, with the silent consent of the Russian parliamentarians, passed a threatening resolution against Lukashenko.

It is a truly historical event. The Kremlin always had one dependable instrument of pressure on its partners. That was Gazprom. Now it has two. The second one is the PACE.

Neither Moscow nor Strasbourg likes Lukashenko. The European parliamentarians see that Russia is beginning to put pressure on Belarus, and is succeeding in its efforts very nicely. They are encouraging Russia. They sincerely believe that they will make Belarus more democratic by fighting Lukashenko along with Russia.

Do the Russian parliamentarians, who only recently served as observers at the Belarusian elections and enthusiastically approved them, think the same thing?

Birds can follow a plane until it disappears over the horizon. The plane flies on regardless of the birds. It doesn't care about birds. Its only concern is fuel.

Source: Mikhail Zygar, Kommersant; April 14, 2006; <http://www.kommersant.com>

32. Minsk To Host UNESCO-Sponsored International Conference in July 2009

An international scientific conference "World Folklore Legacy: Past, Present, Future" under the auspices of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization will take place in Minsk in July 2009. The information was released by Alexander Morozov, Slavonic studies department head of the National Science Academy's art history, ethnography, and folklore institute at today's press conference dedicated to the International Day for Monuments and Sites. The decision was taken by the UNESCO's folk song commission.

According to the source, applications to host the conference were filed by Belarus, Holland, and England. Belarus proposal turned out to be the most interesting one. "If our application was turned down, Belarus would be able to host such a conference as early as 2011 at the outside", said Alexander Morozov.

Directors of research institutes, leading scientists take part in this international conference under the auspices of UNESCO.

In July 2009 representatives of Romania, Great Britain, Germany, France, Belgium, the USA, Australia, Japan and several other countries are expected to come to Belarus.

Source: The National Centre of Legal Information of the Republic of Belarus; April 14, 2006; <http://law.by/work/Eng/>

33. Different Paths for Former Soviet Neighbors

Recent votes in Ukraine and neighboring Belarus have underlined the divergent paths taken by the two former Soviet republics, one moving toward forming a representative government after democratic legislative elections while the other finds itself increasingly isolated after a controversial presidential poll.

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In Belarus, by contrast, critics of President Alexander Lukashenko refused to accept the results of March 19 elections that handed the leader known as "Europe's last dictator" a third term in office, with official results giving him 83 percent of the vote.

The European Union announced that the elections did not meet international electoral standards and said it would take measures against those authorities responsible for employing force against the opposition.

This week, the E.U. agreed to impose a visa ban on Lukashenko and several dozen other senior officials, preventing them from entering the 25-nation bloc.

Before the vote, the E.U. had imposed a travel ban on six Belarus officials, but this is the first time Lukashenko himself has been targeted.

Belarus responded to the announcement by vowing to reciprocate.

"Today's decision showed the inability of Washington and Brussels to deal respectfully with the clear will of an independent people," the foreign ministry said in a statement.

When he took the oath of office, Lukashenko told the West that his country would not succumb to what he called the "revolutionary virus."

Belarus voters, he said, wanted no part of the revolutions that brought pro-Western leaders to power in Ukraine as well as Georgia.

He accused Belarus' neighbors Poland, Lithuania and Latvia - all former communist states now members of the E.U. - of provoking unrest in his country and spearheading a "crusade" against Belarus.

In contrast with vocal Western criticism, Moscow backed its ally. President Vladimir Putin sent a congratulatory telegram and observers from the Moscow-led Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) declared the vote free and fair.

Russia and Belarus have been aiming at creating a "union state" since 1996. Belarus is the last remaining "buffer" between Russia and the E.U.

Excerpt from

Source: Sergei Blagov, CNSNews.Com; April 14, 2006; <http://www.cnsnews.com/>

34. Minsk Accuses Lithuania Of Violating Rights of Belarusian Minority

The decision of the Lithuanian authorities to stop Belarusian state television broadcasts in Lithuania violates the principles of neighborliness and restricts the rights of the Belarusian ethnic minority in Lithuania, the Belarusian Foreign Ministry said.

It dismissed Lithuania's reference to its national laws as justification for the step as groundless and artificial and stated that the decision "directly violates a bilateral agreement between Belarus and Lithuania."

The Friday statement also points to an apparent contradiction of the Helsinki documents of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

Source: Interfax; April 14, 2006; <http://www.interfax.ru/e>

35. PACE Rapporteur Calls for New Vote in Belarus

A rapporteur on Belarus from the Council of Europe's statutory body said Thursday the former Soviet republic should hold fresh presidential elections, the RIA-Novosti news agency reported.

Andres Herkel, rapporteur on Belarus and Chairman of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe's (PACE) Belarus subcommittee, said elections should be held again, since the previous ballot, won by incumbent President Alexander Lukashenko, was problematic and non-transparent for observers.

Lukashenko, dubbed "Europe's last dictator" by Washington was re-elected for a third presidential term on March 19 with 83% of the vote. Lukashenko this week topped a blacklist drawn up by the European Union and was banned from entering the union.

Herkel said that, in addition to limited rights for observers, the opposition did not have the same opportunities as the ruling political group in Belarus.

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.

Herkel said Belarus first applied for membership in the Council of Europe in 1992 and its status of specially invited guest was frozen in 1997. He added that the country still had this status, and that PACE pities Belarus for failing to meet the Council of Europe's standards.

Source: MosNews.Com, April 13, 2006; www.mosnews.com

BUSINESS

36. Belarus To Spend \$1.6 Bln On Elimination of Chernobyl Fallout

intends to spend \$1.6 billion on social and economic rehabilitation of its territories affected by the 1986 Chernobyl disaster, the country's prime minister said Wednesday.

"Belarus carries a heavy burden of problems as a result of the last century's largest nuclear disaster," Sergei Sidorsky said.

"Twenty three percent of Belarusian territory became a zone of radioactive contamination, where one fifth of the population continues to live. Twenty two percent of forests and one fifth of agricultural lands were damaged."

Some 70% of the radiation released from the explosion of a reactor at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in neighboring Ukraine in April 1986 fell on Belarus.

The premier said Belarus had already implemented three state programs to eliminate the consequences of the catastrophe, spending \$18 billion from its budget. This year the country plans to spend \$1.6 billion to implement a fourth state program aimed to restore the social and economic state of the region.

Last week the speaker of Belarusian parliament's lower house, Vladimir Konoplev, said radioactive fallout from the disaster had 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.

On Tuesday environmental organization Greenpeace said the estimated by the UN number of victims that would die from the tragedy was greatly downsized. Greenpeace said the actual number of deaths would reach 93,000 instead of 9,000 predicted by the UN.

Source: RIA Novosti; April 19, 2006; <http://rian.ru>

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.
