

April 20 – April 27, 2006

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HUMAN RIGHTS & INDEPENDENT MEDIA

1. Belarusian Opposition Leader Detained

Belarusian opposition leader Alexander Milinkevich was arrested Thursday on charges of participating in an unauthorized march, a day after he led an anti-government demonstration that attracted 10,000 people.

The protest rally Wednesday was one of the largest turnouts in demonstrations over the past six weeks against authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko. Although the rally itself had official approval, police declared a march to the rally site to be unauthorized.

Milinkevich's arrest appeared to signal an escalation of attempts by authorities to repress the opposition. Several opposition figures have been arrested in recent weeks but most do not have Milinkevich's visibility at home or abroad.

Milinkevich, who ran unsuccessfully against Lukashenko in the March 19 presidential elections, has made several trips to Western countries to seek support for the opposition. He organized an unprecedented week of protests after the elections, which the opposition alleged were fraudulent.

"This is Lukashenko's revenge," Milinkevich said as he waited at the court.

At least three other prominent opposition leaders were detained after Wednesday's demonstration against the government's handling of the consequences of the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear power plant explosion, which covered about a quarter of Belarus' territory with radioactive fallout.

Vintsuk Vyachorka, leader of the Belarusian People's Front organization, was detained shortly after the rally and was sentenced Thursday to 15 days in prison for participating in an unauthorized procession. The charge was apparently similar to the one Milinkevich faces.

Alexander Bukhvostov, leader of the opposition Trud Party, and Sergei Kalyakin, Milinkevich's campaign manager, were arrested earlier Thursday, said Pavel Mazheika, Milinkevich's spokesman.

Last month's protests against the elections ended when police violently dispersed a crowd trying to march to a jail to demand the release of detained demonstrators. Another opposition presidential candidate, Alexander Kozulin, was arrested in that clash and remains in jail.

Since then, Milinkevich and his supporters have pushed to keep up the momentum of their drive against Lukashenko, who won a third term in the vote and whom Western countries have characterized as "Europe's last dictator."

The opposition was denied permission to use public halls in the city of Gomel this week for a planned conference challenging the government's policy of resettling people in zones affected by the Chernobyl fallout. Milinkevich was also denied permission to hold a public meeting with supporters in that city.

Source: Jim Heintz; Forbes.Com; April 27, 2006; <http://www.forbes.com/>

2. Leader of Opposition Party Valentin Vecherka Detained in Belarus

Police detained leader of the opposition party Belarussian People's Front Valentin Vecherka, press service of former presidential candidate and opposition leader Alexander Milinkevich said on Thursday. Vecherka was detained after the opposition march devoted to the 20th anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster on Wednesday. About ten partakers of the action were also detained.

Police do not provide information on the detention of the oppositionists.

Meanwhile, the fate of leader of the opposition United Civil Party Anatoly Lebedko who disappeared on Wednesday was found out. According to the press service of the United Civil Party, unidentified hooligans beat him up on April 26. Then Lebedko was brought to the State Security Committee and released later. Now Lebedko is staying at home.

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

3. Two Babrujsk Journalists Detained Before Charnobylski Shliah

On April 26 no journalists were detained during Charnobylski Shliah - 2006 in Minsk.

Nevertheless, BAJ was informed that two journalists from an independent newspaper *Bobrujskij Kurjer* had been detained in Babrujsk before the meeting. They are accused of violating art 156 of the Administrative Code and they will stand trial today.

The editor-in-chief of *Bobrujskij Kurjer* Mikhalai Sanatsenka informed BAJ that the edition's freelance reporters Mikita Bytsenka and Yury Sveliakov had been stopped by the police in the street on April 25. Their documents were checked and then the journalists were allowed to go. But a bit later the policemen received a phone call and detained the journalists.

Mikita Bytsenka and Yury Sveliakov stayed at the police office till April 26 and were released at 1 p.m. During the hearing of their case (on the evening of April 26) they found out that they were accused of misdemeanor (bad language during the detention). Neither Mikita Bytsenka nor Yury Sveliakov pled guilty. The trial was postponed till April 27 because witnesses for the prosecution did not appear before the court. The sentence is expected to be pronounced today.

Source: *Belarusian Association of Journalists*; April 27, 2006; <http://www.baj.ru/>

4. Belarusian Opposition Leader Called In For Questioning

Belarusian opposition leader Alexander Milinkevich has been called in for questioning at Minsk Prosecutor's Office, his press secretary said Wednesday.

"Police officers in civilian clothes came to Milinkevich's office and said he had been summoned to the Minsk Prosecutor's Office," Pavel Mazheika.

He said the summons was related to an upcoming protest action timed to coincide with the 20th anniversary of the Chernobyl catastrophe, the world's worst civilian nuclear disaster.

Milinkevich was one of three opposition candidates against President Alexander Lukashenko in presidential elections March 19. Lukashenko, dubbed "Europe's last dictator" by Washington won a landslide victory with 83% of the vote in a ballot the opposition and international observers said was fraudulent.

Opposition activists subsequently staged a five-day sit-in in Minsk's central Oktyabrskaya Square. A demonstration March 25 was broken up by police, and opposition representatives say at least one person died as a result.

Tuesday, a lawyer acting for another opposition candidate was charged with hooliganism. Igor Rynkevich said the trial is politically motivated and is an attempt to exert pressure on the defense team for Alexander Kozulin, himself facing up to five years in prison if convicted on public order charges.

Source: *RIA Novosti*; April 26, 2006; <http://rian.ru>

5. Belarus Opposition Warned About Planned March

Authorities in Minsk have told Belarusian opposition parties they will not be allowed to use party symbols during a planned protest march to mark the 20th anniversary of the Chornobyl (Chernobyl) nuclear disaster.

The authorities have sanctioned a march on April 25, but changed its route away from the city center, the site of unprecedented protests against President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's reelection last month.

Lukashenka himself today traveled to a region of Belarus close to the Ukrainian border contaminated by radiation released during the disaster.

Belarus lay in the immediate path of the radioactive cloud caused by the April 26, 1986 disaster in neighboring Ukraine.

Source: RFE/RL; April 25, 2006; <http://www.rferl.org>

6. Belarusian Opposition Leader's Lawyer Charged With Hooliganism

A lawyer acting for a Belarusian opposition leader arrested during protests in Minsk last month is now himself facing trial on charges of hooliganism.

Igor Rynkevich said the trial is politically motivated and is an attempt to exert pressure on the defense team for Alexander Kozulin, one of three defeated candidates in the March 19 presidential elections that saw incumbent President Alexander Lukashenko gain a third term in office.

"If lawyers are being summoned to court on minor infractions, what does this say about Belarus' judicial system as a whole?" Igor Rynkevich said, adding that he would ask the court to postpone hearings.

Social Democratic Party leader Kozuli faces five years in prison if convicted of serious public order offenses and hooliganism following his arrest March 25 in a rally in the country's capital.

Lukashenko, who Washington has dubbed "Europe's last dictator", was reelected to a third term with a massive 83% of the vote. Although he has support in his homeland for maintaining relative stability in comparison with some other former Soviet republics, his human rights record has been fiercely criticized by international organizations.

The March elections were denounced by the opposition and international monitors as fraudulent, and opposition activists staged a five-day sit-in in Minsk's central Oktyabrskaya Square. A demonstration March 25 was broken up by police, and opposition representatives say at least one person died as a result.

Source: RIA Novosti; April 25, 2006; <http://rian.ru>

7. When There Are No More Arguments the Fight Starts. The Oldest Belarusian Newspaper Is Under the Threat of Closure

The Belarusian authorities continue persecution of the independent press. Independent editions are excluded from the subscription catalogue, they cannot be distributed through state news stalls, they are printed at much higher prices in comparison with state editions and they have to look for printing houses abroad. The oldest Belarusian-language newspaper *Nasha Niva* newspaper has never violated any law, nor received a single warning from the Ministry of Information.

It turned out that on March 22 *Nasha Niva's* editor-in-chief Andrej Dynko was sentenced to a 10-days' detention for trying to get off a route bus in Kastychnitskaja Square during the after-the-election civil protests there. After the incident the Ideological Work Department at Minsk State Executive Committee forbade the newspaper to have an office in Minsk.

No legal explanation of the fact has been given yet. Why? It is because no explanation can really be given in such a situation.

What is the newspaper accused of? Is it to be blamed for trying to help Belarusians remember their identity, their language and their ancestors?

It will not be easy to close the edition down. There going to be a great scandal about it.

The incident with *Nasha Niva* is unexampled. The Belarusian society is in an absurd situation now. On the one hand there are laws that guarantee the right to create, print and distribute newspapers, magazines and other mass media, and on the other hand, it appears that any Belarusian official can change the Constitution if it is necessary.

Source: Mikhail Pastuhou, Yury Tapashasheu, Lawyers of the Law Center for Media Protection at the Belarusian Association of Journalists; April 21, 2006; <http://www.baj.ru/>

DOMESTIC

8. Belarus Might Build Nuclear Power Plant In Future - Lukashenko

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko has suggested that, eventually, Belarus could face the need to build its own nuclear power plant.

"Sooner or later, but we will come to the development of our own nuclear power industry. And believe me, this is a most serious issue for this country's security," Lukashenko told journalists in Bragin in the Gomel region on Wednesday.

Source: Interfax; April 26, 2006; <http://www.interfax.ru/e>

9. Belarus Bars Residence Permit Marriages

Belarusian police will be able to file a suit for annulling a marriage with a foreigner or a stateless person if the marriage was contracted in order to receive a permanent residence permit. The Marriage and Family Code amendments, which enable such suits, were entered a bill, which the Chamber of Representatives' international affairs and CIS relations commission recommended for the agenda of the spring session of the Belarusian parliament.

Belarus deputy interior ministry Viktor Filistovich told a sitting of the commission, the bill was brought about by the necessity to bring Belarusian laws in compliance with the law "Legal status of foreign persons and stateless persons in the Republic of Belarus", which had come into force on February 5, 2006, as well as Belarusian president decree #352 "Prevention of slave trade consequences" of August 8, 2005.

The bill has 10 clauses, with 8 of them listing proposals to amend certain laws – "Health care", "Refugees", "State dactyloscopic registration". Besides, the Criminal Code, the Administrative Violations Code, and the Marriage and Family Code will be expanded.

In particular, an article of the Criminal Code, which provides for punishment for foreigners or stateless persons, who trespass the state border, will be expanded to introduce criminal responsibility for exiled foreigners and stateless persons. Viktor Filistovich explained, the article is expanded in line with the law "Legal status of foreign persons and stateless persons in the Republic of Belarus", which introduced two mechanisms for expulsion of foreigners and stateless persons from Belarus, namely deportation and expulsion. Earlier Belarus had deportation only.

Besides, the commission sitting tabled bills on ratifying a Belarusian-Indian agreement on mutual legal aid in criminal cases and a Belarus-Thailand agreement on evasion of double taxation and prevention of income tax and property tax evasion. The commission recommended including these bills into the spring session agenda to the Council of the Chamber of Representatives.

Source: *The National Centre of Legal Information of the Republic of Belarus*; April 26, 2006; <http://law.by/work/Eng/>

10. Belarus Opposition Head To Defy Ban, Attend Rally

Belarus's main opposition leader, summoned by prosecutors hours before a rally to denounce President Alexander Lukashenko, said on Wednesday he intended to defy an order to stay away from a central Minsk square.

The rally coincides with the 20th anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster, the world's worst civil nuclear accident, which took place in neighbouring Ukraine but affected Belarus more than any other country.

Alexander Milinkevich, who challenged Lukashenko's bid for re-election last month, was told to report to prosecutors by two men who intercepted him on his way to a news conference.

"I was warned I could be fined or even held criminally responsible. I was also warned not to go to October Square," Milinkevich told reporters after spending about an hour in the prosecutors' office.

"I will definitely go there even under the threat of arrest. I have moral obligations to people we asked to come to the rally."

Belarus's liberal and nationalist opposition traditionally holds its biggest rally of the year on the Chernobyl anniversary.

Authorities have given permission for the rally, but want it held far from October Square -- site of several days of mass rallies against Lukashenko's re-election in March, denounced as rigged in the West.

Police were already massing on Wednesday in central Minsk.

Belarus, a country of 10 million wedged between Russia and three European Union members, is kept under tight control by Lukashenko, whose rule since 1994 has been described by U.S. officials as "Europe's last dictatorship".

The EU and the United States accuse Lukashenko of hounding political rivals, silencing the media and rigging elections since the mid-1990s.

Officials passed tough legislation last year against illegal assembly, laws that opponents say are intended to prevent any sort of peaceful revolution like those which toppled unpopular governments in ex-Soviet Ukraine and Georgia.

Those accused of organising street rallies can face up to three years in prison.

The opposition staged several days of unprecedented protests against Lukashenko's re-election in March. Police tolerated the rallies for a time but eventually dispersed them.

About 600 people were jailed for up to 15 days on public order offences. Another opposition leader, Alexander Kozulin, faces up to six years on more serious charges.

The Chernobyl reactor explosion blew a radioactive cloud over much of Europe, but contaminated two-thirds of Belarussian territory, downwind from the blast in Ukraine.

Lukashenko has spent the last two days touring the 30-km (19-mile) exclusion zone around Chernobyl, which extends into Belarus.

Source: *Olena Horodetska, Reuters AlertNet*; April 26, 2006; <http://www.alertnet.org>

11. Lukashenko Equates Material Losses From Chernobyl, World War II

Chernobyl nuclear accident that occurred exactly on this day twenty years ago compares in terms of material losses, which Belarus had to sustain, to the impact of World War II, President Alexander Lukashenko said Wednesday as he addressed a public meeting in the town of Bragin. "Some quarters in the West rushed to oracle a disappearance of the Belarusian people and Belarus as such," Lukashenko said. "Belarusian oppositionists, too, propagate pessimistic moods that paralyze people's will."

He referred to the oppositionists' claims that the regions affected by Chernobyl are unlivable and there is no sense in spending money for their rehabilitation.

Over the past twenty years, the authorities have spent over 17 billion U.S. dollars to eliminate Chernobyl's aftereffects. The efforts included re-settling of more than 140,000 people from the areas of radioactive contamination to new townships built on unaffected lands.

The government plans expending about 2 billion U.S. dollars for the fourth program of decontamination and rehabilitation slated for the next five years, Lukashenko said.

"Chernobyl is a thing that will last long, and that's why we mustn't succumb to panic," he said. "We must live and work intensively and use new scientific achievements. Japan furnishes a good example of it as it's struggling with the impact of U.S. nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki for more than six decades."

Lukashenko stated that, regrettably, far from everyone seems to draw correct conclusions from lessons of the past, since voices calling for the use of nuclear weapons are heard again.

Source: Itar-Tass; April 26, 2005; <http://www.tass.ru/eng>

12. The Department of Justice Regulates Contacts Between Courts and Mass Media

The Department of Justice has approved a special instruction that regulates the procedure of providing mass media with information concerning court activities. Not long ago this regulation ("On providing mass media with information about court activities") has been introduced. The document imposes more limitations in comparison with the old rules.

According to the new instruction, judges can refuse to be shown on TV or to publish their photos "in order to protect themselves and avoid interference in court activities"; judges can forbid using cameras in court if it "impedes their work" etc. If judges fell pressure from mass media they should immediately inform the Department of Justice about it.

A comment of the BAJ deputy chairperson Andrej Bastunets: "The instruction of the Department of Justice concerns judges and officers of the court; it has nothing to do with limiting the work of mass media. But we have to pay attention to the fact that the regulation concerns journalists by implication. Moreover, it paves the way for limiting the work of mass media in courts.

Source: Belarusian Association of Journalists; April 26, 2006; <http://www.baj.ru/>

13. Political Confrontation Detracts From Acute Chernobyl Problems in Belarus

As the 20th anniversary of Chernobyl approaches in Belarus, and the opposition forces plan a final protest march on April 26 in the aftermath of the presidential elections, there is no sign that the country has come close to overcoming the profound health, social, and environmental problems caused by the 1986 nuclear accident.

The issue has been clouded by two factors. First, there is the politicization of the Chernobyl event as a symbol of the confrontation between the president and the opposition, particularly the united democratic forces behind candidate Alexander Milinkevich. Second, there has been a rather

unseemly international dispute as to the health effects of Chernobyl, and particularly the long-term mortality rates from radiation-induced cancers.

President Alexander Lukashenka marked the last two anniversaries with visits to the Chernobyl zone, which were marked with intensive TV publicity and the overall message that if the area was dangerous, then the president of the country would not be visiting there. Though parts of the zone -- especially Homel region -- have been depopulated, students and migrants are being used to cultivate land that remains contaminated with radio-nuclides, particularly Cesium-137 and Strontium-90. Lukashenka has detained several scientists whose findings contradict the official position that the accident in Belarus has been largely overcome, and using the forces of the government without outside assistance.

The government of Belarus did not agree with some of the findings of the Chernobyl Forum Report, issued in September 2005. That report, the most comprehensive to date, demonstrated the enormous health and psychological impact of the accident in Belarus. About 90% of the republic was irradiated with short-lived radio-nuclides, deposited by the "radiation cloud" that was formed after the two steam explosions at the fourth reactor unit of the Chernobyl nuclear plant in the early morning of April 26, 1986. The reaction of the republican authorities was delayed by the lack of information about what had happened from both the Soviet authorities in Moscow and the Ukrainian party leadership in Kyiv.

The radioactive iodine (Iodine-131 with a half-life of eight days) was to take a serious toll and has resulted in some 4,000 cases of thyroid cancer to date, almost a quarter of them in young children, and in most instances contracted after 1989. Long-term effects are equally serious. Over the 17-year period 1986-2003, surgery had been carried out on almost 2,000 young adults and children, and 19 have died as a result of the progression of the tumors. About 23% of Belarus was contaminated with Cesium and Strontium, and about 2% of the territory affected with Plutonium radio-nuclides (half-life 24,000 years). Many of the affected regions did not take any preventive action until 1989, when it was revealed officially that they formed part of the contaminated zone. Belarus lost a quarter of its valuable forests.

Today about 1.5 million residents of Belarus are provided with medical assistance as a result of the 1986 disaster. Among those Belarusians who took part in the cleanup operations -- they are referred to today as "liquidators," a term reminiscent of the Stalin era -- there were registered more than 2,800 first-time cases of cancer, and in 73% of these incidences it occurred among those working in the zone in 1986-88. Over 300,000 children continue to reside in the most affected regions of Homel and Mahileu. They suffer from a rise in frequency of sicknesses of all types, but particularly respiratory diseases, digestive problems, and childhood diabetes. Among the age group 10-14, for example, newly formed cancers in the Chernobyl zones exceed those in the "clean" region of Vitsebsk by 1.5 times, and the incidence of endocrinal pathology is double the average in clean areas.

This disturbing picture has been partly concealed by an international dispute over the "true" health effects of Chernobyl, and the number of long-term mortalities. Two reports are now extant: the Chernobyl Forum Report (CFR) and the Greenpeace Report. The latter raises the number of long-term victims to over 90,000, and reports some 34,000 deaths to date among liquidators. However, the dispute is largely contrived. It derives from the unfortunate and misleading press releases issued by representatives of the Chernobyl Forum, which do not reflect accurately the contents of the CFR. The issue of 4,000 long-term deaths is even belied by the CFR itself, which includes a table indicating some 9,000 long-term deaths.

Even that figure pertains only to a small fraction of the lands contaminated by Chernobyl, namely the republics of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. Neither report really disputes that the Chernobyl-linked cancer deaths will be in the tens of thousands. The Belarusian government, which is listed as one of the authors of the CFR, would have been content with the misleading press release (less than 60 current casualties and under 4,000 long-term), but not with the figures within or in the heated Greenpeace Report, comprised mainly from the research of Ukrainian scientists.

For the 1.5 million individuals still requiring medical attention from the disaster, such arguments are largely irrelevant. Most of them have lived off contaminated land for the past 20 years, their benefits now reduced, and their concerns dismissed as "psychological stress" and "dependency." The impact of Chernobyl has not dissipated after two decades.

Source: David Marples, The Jamestown Foundation; April 25, 2006; <http://jamestown.org/>

14. Lukashenko Accuses Those Who 'Seek World Domination' In Attempt To Make Byelorussians Reject Their Spiritual Roots

Byelorussian President Alexander Lukashenko stated 'those who seek world domination try to trample down our country and make the Byelorussians reject their religious roots, traditions and culture'.

'We are not going to blindly copy an alien experience and way of life, especially today when it is evident that many principles imposed on us do not fortify but rather destroy our moral and religious values', Lukashenko said at the Easter celebration in the Cathedral of the Holy Spirit in Minsk.

He also gave a high appraisal to the role of the Orthodox Church, 'which in all times has always been with her people, sharing with them the joy of gains and the bitterness of losses, always defended the interests of the Fatherland and served the cause of unity and consolidation of society'.

'Today, twenty years after the Chernobyl tragedy, we can look to the future with confidence in the awareness that when we are a strong people, when faith is with us, everything is in our hands', he added.

Stressing the Byelorussia is following her own path, he explained that first of all it is the way of 'the faith of our ancestors, Fatherland, morality, Slavic unity, social justice', which make up 'a solid foundation of our ideology'.

Source: Interfax; April 24, 2006; <http://www.interfax.ru/e>

15. Villagers Return to Chernobyl's Shadow

The map says Bartolomeyevka is off-limits. A sign at the outskirts displays the international radiation symbol and says "Do Not Enter." But smoke rises from the chimneys of wooden houses, dogs bark and villagers go about their business.

Bartolomeyevka is one of scores of contaminated villages in Belarus that are being revived 20 years after the Chernobyl nuclear reactor explosion, nudged back to life by a government that says the farmland is badly needed, that the radiation threat is overblown, and that people claiming radiation-related diseases may simply be seeking a government handout.

Bartolomeyevka suffered such high radiation levels that its several dozen inhabitants were evacuated. However, over the past decade 10 villagers have moved back, disregarding the radiation warnings. In neighboring villages _ labeled contaminated but still suitable for living _ many others are returning, along with job-seeking migrants from impoverished ex-Soviet republics.

On Bartolomeyevka's surface, it looks like renewal _ but resignation is at the core. "You cannot escape your death," said 70-year-old Ivan Muzychenko. "It's better to die of radiation than of hunger."

As evacuees, he and his wife, Yelena, lived hand-to-mouth. Here, along with a combined monthly pension worth about \$200, their vegetable garden, 10 geese, a cow and a pig add desperately needed nutrition.

Muzychenko dismisses warnings that the vegetables and animals are probably contaminated, and gathers berries and mushrooms in the nearby woods.

A fifth of Belarus' area was evacuated after the April 26, 1986, explosion in neighboring Ukraine, and health officials say about 20 percent of the country's 10 million people suffer from radiation-linked ailments including thyroid and circulation problems.

Official figures say 1,100 square miles, less than 1.5 percent of Belarus' territory, remains too irradiated for human habitation.

The government of authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko _ the same government that put up the warning signs at Bartolomeyevka is encouraging resettlement.

Activists and doctors complain that it is ignoring radiation dangers, cheating on illness statistics and refusing to care for ailing children and adults.

Bartolomeyevka's neighboring village, Belyayevka, was recently taken off the list of highly contaminated population centers, stripping its villagers of a \$20 monthly supplement for living there. Mothers say the payment is still justified because most of the village's 58 children have health problems and need healthy food and vitamins.

Belarusian workers who participated in the cleanup at Chernobyl have also seen their benefits sharply reduced.

Nineteen collective farms in the region have been revived to grow crops which officials say can be rendered safe with special fertilizers; another 39 farms are awaiting their turn.

Vladimir Tsalko, head of the State Chernobyl Committee, the official agency for dealing with Chernobyl's consequences, says the goal is "to teach people to earn money and invest it into the region."

When asked if economics are more important than health, he is frank: "Yes. We need those lands. ... Who will feed them?"

Activists say their independent studies find people in contaminated areas still displaying high radiation doses from locally made food. They say more should be done to warn returnees of the dangers.

"To take advantage of people's lack of information and lull them into believing that it is safe there is the biggest crime there can be," said Valentina Smolnikova, of the Children of Chernobyl group.

Smolnikova said the radiation effects have been devastating. She said her group's study of one district in the contamination zone showed cases of congenital anomalies have increased fourfold, the number of cancers have doubled and the number of heart attacks is seven times higher than before the accident.

She said she is struggling to get foreign funding to monitor and treat children's contamination levels because the state shows little interest and minimizes the numbers. The government denies it.

Victims also complain the government is reluctant to link radiation to health problems such as heart disease, cancerous growths and diabetes. Yakov Kenigsberg, the Chernobyl State

Committee's top medical expert, says only thyroid cancer is internationally recognized as directly caused by radiation contamination and calls attempts to link other diseases with the Chernobyl accident "stupidity," suggesting the motive often is monetary compensation.

But, Tamara Kurbatova, a 40-year-old unemployed mother of three in the town of Buda-Koshelevo, sharply disagrees. Her 4-year-old son, Pavel, is being treated for eye cancer, and after years of struggle, she has won official recognition that it's the result of his mother's radiation levels while he was in the womb. That entitles the boy to financial aid.

"It is a miracle he is still alive," Kurbatova said. "But what awaits him I don't know."

Source: Maria Danilova, Washington Post; April 23, 2006; <http://www.washingtonpost.com>

16. Belarus: Pollster Questions Size Of Lukashenka's Victory

A recent survey in Belarus has challenged the official results of the March 19 presidential election, where the incumbent, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, cruised to an easy victory. It gives more credence to the theory that the authorities may have cheated -- a suspicion that many in the international community have already voiced.

PRAGUE, April 21, 2006 (RFE/RL) –

The world will probably never know the real results of the March 19 vote in Belarus. Neither domestic nor foreign monitors were allowed to check the vote counting at any polling station.

Officially, at least, it was a resounding victory for the incumbent, Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

On March 20, the Central Election Commission announced that Lukashenka won a "stunning" victory, trouncing his rivals with nearly 83 percent of the vote.

But a recent independent survey held by the Vilnius-based Independent Institute of Socioeconomic and Political Studies (NISEPI) among nearly 1,500 adult Belarusians from March 27 to April 6 provides a different perspective.

A 20 Percent Boost?

According to the survey, 63.6 percent of those who came to the presidential poll voted for Lukashenka. This means that the Central Election Commission may have revised the real results in Lukashenka's favor by some 20 percent, or 1.2 million votes.

That wouldn't be a surprise to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Its election-observation mission in Belarus concluded that the vote failed to meet its standards for democratic elections.

And in the wake of the poll, the EU imposed a travel ban on Lukashenka and 30 other Belarusian officials for their alleged involvement in rigging the vote.

The pollster also found that the Central Election Commission may have deprived opposition candidate Alyaksandr Milinkevich of some 960,000 votes. The poll gave Milinkevich 20.6 percent of the vote. Officially, he received just 6 percent.

The opposition reacted to the official results with a week of protests in Minsk, which ended in a police crackdown and mass arrests.

'Less Support'

At a news conference at the British Embassy in Minsk on April 20, NISEPI Director Aleh Manayeu said that the survey contradicts the official assertion that Lukashenka enjoys overwhelming support among his compatriots.

But Manayeu also advised caution in overestimating the influence of the opposition on Belarusian society.

"The main reason for the increasing discontent in society is not so much the opposition and external forces as the very activity of the Belarusian authorities. During the past year alone the number of those wronged by the authorities increased by one-third and now stands at 36.5 percent. A social base for change does exist. However, the readiness of Belarusian society for change must not be underestimated, which is done by the authorities, or overestimated, which is a sin of the opposition," Manayeu said.

Manayeu also said there is a discrepancy between the official data and his survey's result regarding how many people cast ballots during the early-voting period from March 14 to March 18.

However, Manayeu countered the charges often heard from the opposition that the government compelled Belarusians to participate in the early voting. The early voting was effectively outside independent monitoring.

"The official and real data on the early voting noticeably differ. [Central Election Commission Chairwoman Lidziya] Yarmoshyna said [the early-voting turnout] was 31 percent, while we found it was 25 percent. However, the opposition's assertion that people were forced to take part in the early voting on a mass scale is not true," Manayeu said. "This was confirmed by 17 percent of those who voted ahead of March 19, while 89 percent said they did it on their own initiative."

NISEPI was forced to move to Lithuania after the Belarusian authorities closed down the polling agency in April 2005. The agency participated in conducting an independent exit poll during the October 2004 constitutional referendum. NISEPI suggested that Lukashenka actually lost the plebiscite and therefore should not be able to run for a third term in 2006.

So has this loss of status affected the pollster's activities in Belarus?

According to Manayeu, NISEPI still has its former network of some 100 interviewers in Minsk and the provinces. The most important difference, he said, is that now people working for NISEPI cannot use the organization's name and must act as private individuals.

"All the people who worked for NISEPI when it had legal status have remained in the country. We continue to work, but as a group of private citizens," Manayeu said. "Thank God, there has so far been no legislation that would regulate private activities in the country, so every citizen, including us, may conduct such polls."

Even with more surveys, it will be difficult to ascertain the truth -- especially as all of the election ballots will be destroyed later this year.

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

REGIONAL

17. Vadzim Dounar Awaits Trial

Today a reporter from a Russian newspaper *Kommersant* (a Belarusian journalist Vadzim Dounar) will stand trial. In the morning he came to the Leninski District Department of the Interior. He was told that all the materials of his case had already been sent to the Leninski District Court of Minsk. He was asked to wait for the car that would take him there. The journalist is accused of misdemeanor (art. #156 of the Administrative Code).

Vadzim Dounar was detained in Minsk on April 21 at about 1 p.m. He and his acquaintance were heading for an Internet-cafe in Karl Marx Street (which is not far from the President's Residence). They were passing by a group of people in mufti when one of them asked them to stop. V.

Dounar and his acquaintance were detained and delivered to the Leninski District of Minsk Department of the Interior.

Vadzim Dounar spent several hours in the police office. At about 6 p.m. he was called to the investigator and a protocol was drawn up.

It was written that he had insulted A. Lukasenka. After that V. Dounar was sent to a cell (his belt and shoe laces had been taken away). But later another protocol was drawn up. He was accused of misdemeanor. Then the journalist was released and told to return on April 24. But when he arrived the necessary documents were not ready, so he was asked to come on April 26.

Source: Belarusian Association of Journalists; April 26, 2006; <http://www.baj.ru/>

18. Belarus, Russia in Bilateral Talks

Belarus and Russia have been discussing gas supplies and trade, Belarusian news agency Belapan reported Monday.

Aleksander Surikov, Russia's ambassador to Belarus, met with Uladzimir Kanaplyow, chairman of the Belarusian National Assembly's House of Representatives (the lower house of parliament) for energy-related talks.

Surikov warned that Beltransgaz, Belarus' state-controlled gas supply and transit company, may face difficulties in its gas transport capabilities to Europe once Russia implements its new gas transportation systems.

So, he said, Russia and Belarus need to "sit at the negotiating table and discuss this matter in a calm manner."

According to Surikov, deliveries of Russian natural gas to Belarus are "a strategic but not the main subject" of bilateral relations between the two countries. In order to boost trade, he said, the two countries must first strengthen their cooperation in the fields of industry, science and education.

His country -- and more specifically his embassy -- "would push for closer economic integration" in a range of fields, with a particular focus on agricultural engineering, electronics, petrochemicals and light industry.

Following the meeting Kanaplyow said that "objective and subjective preconditions" exist between Russia and Belarus that will boost bilateral trade by "up to \$20 billion, and should not cease to strive for further achievements."

He too emphasized the need for stronger ties between the two countries, and said that Belarusian parliamentarians would endeavor to build a legal framework designed to strengthen bilateral relations.

Source: United Press International; April 25, 2006; <http://www.upi.com/>

19. CIS Air Defense Conducts Command-and-Staff Exercises

The integrated air defense network of a group of former Soviet republics Tuesday started large-scale training exercises, a senior air force officer said.

Chief of Staff of the Russian Air Force, Colonel General Boris Cheltsov said air force and air defense units from eight CIS-member states - Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan - were participating in the exercises.

"The exercises will focus on coordinating the joint efforts to intercept enemy aircraft that have violated national airspace," he said.

More than 80 aircraft, as well as a variety of air defense systems, will be involved. He also said the Russian-made S-300 Almaz (SA-10 Grumble) would be the main air defense system tested during the exercises.

NATO reconnaissance aircraft are monitoring the exercises, the general said.

The integrated air defense network was set up by 10 member countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States on February 10, 1995. Georgia recently pulled out of the CIS Defense Ministers Council, but is still formally part of the air-defense system.

Source: RIA Novosti; April 25, 2006; <http://rian.ru>

20. Russia Starts Delivering Missiles to Belarus

Russia has begun delivering advanced anti-aircraft missiles to Belarus, the Associated Press quoted the country's defense minister as saying.

Russia and Belarus signed an agreement last year on the delivery of the latest and most advanced version of Russia's S-300SP surface-to-air missile system, capable of shooting down targets some 90 miles away.

Belarusian Defense Minister Leonid Maltsev denied a report in the British defense journal Jane's Intelligence Digest that Belarus agreed to transfer the S-300SP missiles to Iran to defend against any possible U.S. or Israeli air strikes designed to derail what many in the West allege are its efforts to develop nuclear weapons.

Russia has already agreed to supply sophisticated Tor-M1 air defense missile systems to Iran.

"I have no intention of commenting on this nonsense," Maltsev said. "Under the contract for the delivery of the S-300s from Russia, Belarus does not have the right to transfer these systems anywhere else."

Iranian Commerce Minister Masud Mir-Kazemi, who headed a trade delegation that traveled to Minsk, also denied that Tehran wanted to acquire the Russian S-300 missiles.

"From the viewpoint of military technology, we are self-sufficient and there is no need for us to consider buying weapons abroad," he said.

The Iranian minister said he had not met with Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov, who on Friday was also in the Belarusian capital for talks with President Alexander Lukashenko.

The missile shipment is the latest move expanding military ties between the two ex-Soviet republics. In 1996, the two nations signed a union agreement providing for close political, economic and military ties and their armed forces have held frequent joint drills.

In February, Russian air force chief Gen. Vladimir Mikhailov said Russia planned to set up a permanent military air base in Belarus.

Russia has watched warily as former Soviet bloc countries bordering Belarus — Poland, Latvia Lithuania - have joined NATO.

Belarus, whose regime is increasingly isolated by the West, has developed close ties with Iran.

Source: MosNews.Com, April 22, 2006; www.mosnews.com

INTERNATIONAL

21. Finnish Parliamentary Delegation Meets Opposition Figures in Belarus

A group of Finnish parliamentarians have visited the Belarus capital Minsk. The visit is the first by parliamentarians of a European Union country since the EU imposed a ban on travel to the EU on a number of leading figures in the country. The ban was imposed in reaction to perceived irregularities in the recent elections in the country.

In addition to the opposition figures, the group also met with one of those banned from traveling to the EU – MP Mikalai Charhinets.

On Wednesday, Liisa Jaakonsaari (SDP), who chairs the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Finnish Parliament, as well as MPs Eero Lankia (Centre), and Suvi-Anne Siimes (Left Alliance), met Alyaksandr Milinekevich, the best-known Presidential candidate of the opposition, as well as Tatyana Protko and Garri Pogonyailo leaders of the country's Helsinki Committee, which is under the threat of being disbanded.

On Tuesday the group held discussions with Deputy Foreign Minister Alyaksandr Mikhnevich as well as Mikali Charhinets, who is also the chairman of the Parliament's committee of foreign affairs and national security. Charhinets is one of the 31 leading figures in Belarus who, on the tenth of this month, were banned by European Union foreign ministers from entering the EU.

According to the EU, those on the list of banned Belarus politicians had violated electoral and human rights norms, and suppressing the civic society.

Jaakonsaari said that the Finnish delegation was aware that the country's leaders might try to use their visit to promote their own purposes.

With this in mind, Jaakonsaari said that the members of the group made a point at all of their meetings of underscoring the importance of the release of political prisoners.

Jaakonsaari said that the official meetings had two goals: first, the aim was to assure the country's leaders that the tougher line taken by the EU has the support of the parliaments of the member states. Second, the leaders were promised that if Belarus changes its policy on human rights and democracy, the EU would be willing to cooperate.

Jaakonsaari also said that the opposition figures that they met did not object to the group's meetings with the country's leaders, provided that they would convey a clear pro-democracy message.

The Finnish Parliamentary visit is linked with the upcoming Finnish Presidency of the European Union, which begins in July.

According to the web site of the Parliament of Belarus the Finnish guests had "taken up the observance of human rights in Belarus with respect to opposition leaders". According to the item, Charhinets had said that the country abides by its own laws and punishes those who violate them.

Before moving on to Minsk, the Finnish MPs took part in a seminar in the Lithuanian capital Vilnius, where researchers and opposition politicians from Belarus explained the situation of their country.

At the seminar, Aleh Manayeu, head of the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS), said that a survey held after the recent elections in Belarus suggests that the official 83 percent of the vote won by President Alyaksandr Lukashenko was exaggerated by about 20 percentage points.

Source: Helsingin Sanomat; April 27, 2006; <http://www.hs.fi/english>

22. Polish Journalists Not Allowed To Enter Belarus

On April 25 Polish journalists were not allowed to enter Belarus. They were from Polish TV. Jack Gasinski and a cameraman Ryszard Szmitkowski were deported from the airport, Jaroslaw Kaminski was not allowed to pass the border at Kuznitsa Belastotskaja – Bruzhi. The journalists were heading for Minsk to cover the annual opposition meeting "Charnobylski Shliah" dedicated to the 20th anniversary of Chernobyl disaster, - informs www.tvp.pl.

Mr. Gasinski, a journalist from *Telewizyjna Agencja Informacyjna* has a visa and accreditation in Belarus. At the airport he was shown the order according to which he had to be deported. The reason is unknown: the order contains only one explanation - "other reasons". (According to the TVP web site, Gasinski's passport was taken away and customs officers promised to let him meet the head of the customs police.

After that he was told that he would be deported and would have to return to Warsaw.

Jaroslaw Kaminski, a commentator from TVP *Bialorus*, *Bialorus* also had a visa and accreditation. At Kuznitsa Belastotskaja – Bruzhi he was told that he was a "persona non grata" in Belarus and his visa was cancelled.

TVP reminds that in the middle of December 2005 the Belarusian authorities deported Agnieszka Romaszewska who was to become a resident correspondent of Telewizja Polska in Belarus. She was also deported from the airport for "other reasons".

Source: Belarusian Association of Journalists; April 26, 2006; <http://www.baj.ru/>

23. Milinkevich: Belarus Obstructs Aid

Opposition leader Alexander Milinkevich accused Belarussian authorities on Tuesday of obstructing foreign countries' offers to help Belarus overcome the consequences of the Chernobyl disaster.

Milinkevich made the comments Wednesday at a clandestine, opposition-organized conference in Gomel, the nearest Belarussian city to the nuclear reactor that exploded 20 years ago. The conference, attended by about 40 people, was held in a small house that also serves as a makeshift office for the opposition. In the backyard, netting was strung between trees to block what the opposition says is a KGB surveillance camera in a black box on a neighboring rooftop.

Milinkevich, who has made several visits to Western countries since being defeated in last month's presidential election, said officials he met overseas often asked about Chernobyl's consequences. "Democratic countries are able to help, they are interested in helping us," he said. "But it is difficult to work with us," he said. All foreign aid must be channeled through the government's Department of Humanitarian Aid.

Excerpt from

Source: The Moscow Times; April 26, 2006; <http://www.themoscowtimes.com>

24. Helsinki Commission Reviews Long-term Health and Safety Issues From Chornobyl Disaster

Health Effects, Potential Cures, Governmental and Non-Governmental Responses Examined

The Helsinki Commission held a hearing on "The Legacy of Chernobyl: Health and Safety 20 Years Later", commemorating the 20th anniversary of the world's worst nuclear accident at the Chernobyl power plant in Ukraine.

The health, environmental, and socio-economic costs of the disaster at Chernobyl continue to have a profound impact on people in the region, especially in Ukraine and Belarus which bore the brunt of Chernobyl's radioactive fallout.

"The bitter legacy of Chernobyl continues to be felt twenty years later, and its consequences will remain for the people of the region and beyond for a long time to come," said Co-Chairman Rep. Christopher H. Smith (R-NJ) who chaired the hearing. "We need to be vigilant of the latent health effects that still are expected to emerge and ensure that there is public awareness about the health threat."

Smith stressed the importance of the completion of the Chernobyl Shelter Implementation Plan to cover the rapidly deteriorating sarcophagus covering the damaged reactor: "We need to do everything possible to protect people and the environment from the large quantity of radioactive remains of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant even as we persist in our assistance to the victims."

"An important lesson from Chernobyl - one that remains relevant today - is in the importance of transparency in governance," said Ranking Member Rep. Benjamin L. Cardin (D-MD). "The nature of the Soviet system did not lead to a humane or rational response to the tragedy. The consequences of this secrecy remain with us to this day. They are a vivid reminder of the value of open, democratic and accountable governments which respect the human rights and dignity of the individual."

Testifying at the hearing were: Stephen G. Rademaker, Acting Assistant Secretary of State, Bureau of International Security and Nonproliferation; Oleh Shamshur, Ukrainian Ambassador to the United States; David Marples, Professor of History at the University of Alberta and author of three books on Chernobyl; Pablo Rubenstein, M.D., Director, National Cord Blood Program at the New York Blood Center; and Kathleen Ryan, Executive Director, USA, Chernobyl Children's Project International.

Source: Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe; April 25, 2006; <http://www.csce.gov/>

25. Belarus: A Dangerous Place for Politics

This week Belarus begins yet enter another tumultuous spell. On April 26, the opposition will commemorate the 20th anniversary of the Chernobyl tragedy by organizing a massive public rally ("Chernobyl March"). This will be similar to or even bigger than the ones that shook the country after the rigged presidential elections of March 19, in which the incumbent Alexander Lukashenko took almost 83 percent of the vote.

On the eve of the "Chernobyl March", TCS contributor Evgeny Morozov talks to Belarusian opposition leader Alexander Milinkevich about the effectiveness of EU's policies in the country, the next steps of the Belarusian opposition, and the future of the country's relations with Russia.

TCS: Are you satisfied with Europe's reaction to the presidential elections of March 19th?

Alexander Milinkevich: Yes, I am fully satisfied. The EU has delivered on all of the declarations it has made. These declarations are finally decisive and firm, unlike the ones in the past that were soft, diplomatic, and consensus-seeking. I think that this is right, because the dictatorship understands only the language of force. The moment you start talking diplomacy to them, they interpret it as a weakness, and start abusing their partners. These people never value compromise as an option. So, I am quite satisfied that the reaction from the European institutions -- the Parliament, the Commission, and the Council of Europe -- has been quite strict and homogeneous.

However, the Commission should urgently develop a strategy on how to deal with the civil society in Belarus. This is not a typical country. Unlike Lithuania, Poland, or Slovakia, here one cannot work openly and transparently. The EU efforts should address this shortfall.

TCS: During one of your visits to the EU, you suggested that it should create a special fund for promoting democracy. At the same time, last week many in the EU got shocked to find out that 5 out of 7 billion Euros spent in the CIS have been wasted. How will this new fund you are talking about be more effective?

AM: Fortunately, when it comes to evaluating the effectiveness of development aid, Belarus has a very good reputation. It has never been shaken by scandals akin to those in Russia or Ukraine. And I hope this will continue to be the case. Secondly, even when compared to Ukraine, Belarus has received relatively little development funds from other democratic nations. In my opinion, Belarus has a solid track-record, and quite a bright future when it comes to aid.

The fund we are advocating will be under public control. Civil society and NGOs will be more effective than any bureaucrat from Brussels at monitoring how this aid is being spent.

TCS: Could you comment on the relatively weak reaction from the Old Europe (as opposed to that of the New Europe) to the post-election situation in Belarus? What about very little or no willingness from the Old Europe to provide free places at their universities for Belarusian students who were expelled after the protests?

AM: I had meetings both with the French minister of foreign affairs and the chancellor of Germany about this. I would not say that these countries are more passive today. True, this passivity was very common in the past, however, today things changed. Countries of the Old Europe are trying to follow everything that's happening in Belarus and volunteer to join all possible initiatives.

Secondly, after Poland decided to finance studies of 300 Belarusian students, there is not much demand for scholarships in other countries. It is much easier for Belarusians to master Polish, and the majority of people actually want to go there.

However, for us it is also very important that at least 5-10 students are studying in other countries. There is a language barrier though, which eliminates most of the competition at the very beginning. So, whenever I meet representatives of those countries, I always make it clear that they should, of course, help our students as much as they can, but I also remind them that there are other opportunities to help the country.

TCS: The oldest Belarusian newspaper, *Nasha Niva*, might soon disappear due to the state pressure. Do you think that the EU could offer any help in terms of supporting media projects? Could you also comment on the accusations of bias in the reporting of the Russian-language version of Euronews?

AM: As for Euronews, we are, indeed, very sad about the stark differences between the comments in the English/French and the Russian versions of the same broadcast. For us, it is extremely important that truth reaches our people, and Euronews offers the only window through which Belarusian can peep at unbiased information. I think that the performance of the Russian language Euronews has marginally improved though.

As for newspapers, it is true that there are practically none left. If four years ago we had about 60 independent newspapers that covered politics and social affairs, right now we have three -- and one more faces extinction. These newspapers are already printed abroad and transported into the country. We hope that *Nasha Niva* will be able to register in Vilnius (where it was already published once), and then be brought into Belarus and distributed through our network of activists. In this case, we, of course, need better sponsors, since the newspapers will be given

away for free, not sold. So we would be looking for sponsors to cover the printing and distribution costs for printing newspapers.

I believe that newspapers -- national or local -- should be the main media vehicle for our informational campaigns. If we have money left from the newspaper projects, then of course, we should invest that into other media projects.

TCS: How strong is the involvement of the United States into the political processes that are currently happening in Belarus? Are you planning to pay a visit there anytime soon?

AM: No, I am not planning to go there soon. Nevertheless, we are enjoying very close cooperation with many American organizations. What I find particularly good about working with Americans is that they have much more flexible, less formalized, ways and means of support than many Europeans. Their help has always been swift and effective. I hope that EU's aid programs will also move in that direction.

On the other hand, all American NGOs and foundations that are active in Belarus have been removed from the country. So they have to work without an office in the country, based in Ukraine or Russia. This is a great impediment.

TCS: What do you think of recent proposals by your colleagues in the Belarusian opposition to hold public trials over Lukashenko? And how this can be realized in practice?

AM: Arranging Lukashenko 's trials does not top my Belarusian agenda at the moment. By the way, neither do the visa sanctions imposed by the EU. What tops my agenda is delivering information to the people, who are lacking it badly. So, beyond punishing Lukashenko's regime for its crimes, this trial process might be extremely important to us as a means to inform the masses.

If we don't do anything, the regime's propaganda will hit back saying that all of this is part of a great conspiracy of the capitalist West. So, if we don't reply with our own wave of information, most of our other activities will be undermined through Lukashenko 's media.

TCS: What do you expect from the Chernobyl March? How is your strategy going to change after it?

AM: First of all, this is going to be a traditional rally. We have been holding political and social actions on this day ever since the first anniversary. So, it is not directly connected to the elections. Nevertheless, we will surely talk about the elections there.

Our main objective is to show that our Chernobyl is not only radioactive; it is also political, cultural, and social. It is equally important that people again pour out in the streets to prove that they are not afraid of the authorities, that they are able to say "No", that they are able to protest.

As for street protests in general, for us it is definitely not an end in itself. We do recognize that street action is very important for us as a mode of change and this dictatorship can fall only as a result of street protests. However, we would continue organizing them only if more and more people show up at each of them. So while I do see that the street actions give us a certain voice, I am in favor of putting the main emphasis on creating better communication and public education campaigns throughout the country.

We simply have to go and talk to people. This is what we have been doing for two years; we have already achieved a result that few have expected. But we have to go beyond and win new supporters. So far we have won the support of only one-third of the population.

TCS: As for Chernobyl, how are you going to protest against Lukashenko's plans to repopulate it? Especially given that in the report published last year, some of the UN agencies expressed views

that gave Lukashenko's moves certain legitimacy. Do you enjoy full support of the EU and the US on this issue?

AM: Unfortunately, there is no unity in the West regarding Chernobyl. The democratic opposition of Belarus, on the other hand, are strongly against Lukashenko's plans.

Yes, we strongly believe that one cannot give birth and rear children in those areas. Nor can one grow any fruit or vegetables. Nor can one force university graduates to work there. We are quite intransigent on this issue. We understand that there is very little we can change in the country until we come to power. But we should always be talking about it, appealing to the facts and the truth.

A united Western position on this issue is of particular importance to us. Unfortunately, International Atomic Energy Agency is, of course, often supporting Lukashenko, closing eyes to the obvious facts. Even the UN sometimes has a dubious position on the subject. So what we want is for the West to have a very unified and homogeneous position on the subject like the solid position that the European Union has right now on many of the Belarusian policy issues.

TCS: Now that you mentioned unity, are you still in touch with the other anti-Lukashenko presidential candidate, Alexander Kozulin, who is in jail now? Do you have a joint strategy and how do you coordinate your actions?

AM: We are in dialogue with his party. For us, the most important thing is not uniting the two leaders, but uniting the two party structures. Our current coalition has a very broad assortment of parties and social groups, and we would, of course, only welcome Kozulin's party among us.

However, sometimes it just happens that full cooperation is impossible. I think that such flawless cooperation is possible only if the two parties share the same aims and goals. If they are different, then full cooperation is not possible, but limited cooperation is, in fact, possible and even required.

TCS: Is the other opposition leader -- Michail Marinich, who just has been released from jail -- involved in the opposition campaigns?

AM: Marinich said he would like to take some time off to recover his ill health. He's made a public statement that he is not going to enter public politics, but would rather become very active in the field of human rights.

TCS: What concrete steps can the Western countries make to pressure Russia, especially on the eve of the G8 meeting in St. Petersburg?

AM: I know that Putin's attitude towards Lukashenko is not a very good one. One can talk to him about it, and he senses the problem (he himself has big problems with Lukashenko). Of course, if the West manages to come up with a unified position on the subject and starts buzzing about it every time they meet with Russia, it would be much easier to foment a regime change in Belarus. Naturally, this regime sustains itself only through Russia's assistance. As soon as even economic assistance disappears, the regime will be gone quickly.

The West should give a clear indication to Russia that without a real change in Belarus, it will be extremely hard for Russia to cooperate with other democratic countries. I think that this is extremely important that this question is raised at the G8 meeting; we fully endorse this initiative.

But let me underline once again: our coalition is not anti-Russian. Our coalition is able to build better relations with Russia than Lukashenko. However, we would never trade in our sovereignty.

TCS: How exactly you are going to build your relations with Russia, primarily in the energy field, in the current environment of rising energy prices?

AM: I believe that the prices we pay for oil and gas will increase up to the market levels, regardless of who will be the president, Lukashenko or Milinkevich. It is no longer about giving presents to friends within a coalition. Today Russia is entering WTO, and it just has to do increase prices. So we have no illusions -- we will be paying as much as all other countries in the world.

Lukashenko has not prepared the country for these changes. We have prepared a plan on how to gradually get out of this predicament. We want to publish this strategy of ours soon, so that people can read it and the government can follow it. There are many ways for us to avoid big problems. Energy conservation is one; here we need more investment support. And of course we need alternative means of energy generation -- and we have a program for that.

The Belarusian economy will be in a deep crisis soon, and we fully understand that.

TCS: Could you comment on the recent statements by the Russian television about an assassination attempt on yourself, planned by politicians from Georgia and Lithuania?

AM: I know the people that were mentioned in that TV program. I had met them, and we know each other. I do not consider myself an enemy of those people. I fully exclude the possibility of terrorist acts. Of course, I am already used to this, since before every significant protest of the Belarusian opposition, there always appear some beneficiaries who tell me that I am about to get shot. It happened on the eve of March 19, it happened on the eve of March 25, and the same thing happens all over again now. Doing politics in Belarus is a dangerous activity.

TCS: How strong is the human resources potential of your team? Especially considering that many of them had already worked for Lukashenko in his early years, who do you think will be the new people that you will bring into power?

AM: Our team consists of people with rather diverse backgrounds, from science to very practical experiences. However, one should not think that once Milinkevich gets to power, all of the previous managers will be gone. Of course, we are going to get rid of all "ideologists", we do not need any ideology in the workplace or public life. Those who work in the economy, the social sector, medicine are likely to retain their posts. Some of the key people will need to be changed for the reforms to be effective. Perhaps, even some of the current ministers might be able to stay.

However, I don't think that we are likely to run into a big HR problem. I assure you that there is a very strong restive mood all through Lukashenko 's nomenclature. Many of them have excellent schooling and potential. It is just that due to today's situation -- where everything is decided by one man -- they cannot really express themselves in politics or economics. There are many talented people in Belarus, capable of carrying the reforms.

TCS: Thank you very much.

Source: Evgeny Morozov; TCS Daily; April 25, 2006; <http://www.tcsdaily.com>

26. Cuba, Belarus Strengthen Bilateral Ties

Before leaving Cuba on Sunday, the Belarusian Prime Minister, Serguei Sidorski, confirmed relations between the island and his nation are stronger than ever as bilateral agreements sealed in Havana illustrate, he said.

Sidorski arrived here at an invitation from Cuban President Fidel Castro, whom he met on Saturday.

The official and his accompanying delegation wrapped up their three-day visit with a tour of Matanzas province's tourist resorts to learn on the development of this industry.

Havana and Minsk signed five deals on transport, air services, politics, legal matters and information exchange.

In addition, both nations clinched accords in town services and the supply of powdered milk and beans to the Caribbean island.

Source: Prensa Latina; April 23, 2006; <http://www.plenglish.com/article.asp?ID=%7BA46C371D-6290-41A3-9B72-04D493C8B2F4%7D>&language=EN

27. Belarusian President Calls For Promoting Bilateral Ties With Iran

Belarusian president in a meeting with Iran's Commerce Minister Masoud Mirkazemi on Friday called for promoting bilateral relations in all fields.

Alyaksandr R. Lukashenko said, the current level of trade exchanges between the two countries are not corresponding to existing potentials and keeping the current level is not acceptable.

The current level of trade exchange between Iran and Belarus is around 40 million dollars.

Referring to Iran as one of the main exporters of oil and the existing of advanced oil and petrochemical industries in Belarus, the president said the two countries have potentials for more trade between each other.

He told the Iranian minister to convey his message to the Iranian president that the Belarusian side is ready to implement all existing agreements.

Mir-Kazemi, for his part, said the Iranian president considers relations with Belarus "Important" and follows the cooperation development trend carefully.

He also submitted President Ahmadinejad's written message to the President Lukashenko. The commerce minister told reporters President Ahmadinejad, in his message, emphasized the importance of consolidating bilateral ties and to common approaches of both countries, not only in political field, but in economic, scientific and technological areas, too.

The 7th joint economic cooperation commission of Iran-Belarus was convened in Minsk Thursday and Mir-Kazemi from Iran and Anatol Rosteskoy, Industry minister of Belarus, co-chaired the meeting.

Source: Islamic Republic News Agency; April 21, 2006; <http://www.irna.ir/en/news/view/menu-237/0604217576195421.htm>

28. U.S. Wants Belarus, Karabakh On St. Petersburg G-8 Summit Agenda

U.S. Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns says the United States will press for Belarus and the conflicts in Georgia, Moldova, and Nagorno-Karabakh to be on the agenda of this year's Group of Eight (G-8) summit, Reuters news agency reported.

The G-8 summit will be hosted by Russia in St. Petersburg in July.

Burns said it would be the first time that the G-8 would discuss the problems in these former Soviet territories.

He said most G-8 members agree that the Belarus elections, which returned authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko to power, were "antidemocratic."

He said they also agree that the G-8 should help the governments of Georgia and Moldova resolve conflicts with their separatist provinces.

Russia and the United States are already working together to find a resolution to the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, an ethnic Armenian-inhabited enclave in Azerbaijan.

Source: MosNews.Com, April 20, 2006; www.mosnews.com

BUSINESS

29. Belarus Doubles Its GDP

Fleeting and hard won, this exclusive with Sergei Sergueievich Sidorskiy, prime minister of Belarus, was a fruitful one. We were able to confirm at first hand and with authority information that not even the most arrogant and polarized press could conceal in its campaign against the Belarusian authorities before and after the recently concluded electoral process that led once again to the win by Alexander Lukashenko and his working team. The premier first responded to Granma International's question:

With all the ferocious pressure from the United States and the European Union, how was Lukashenko's reelection achieved?

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, each one of the states in that space chose their own form of development. The Republic of Belarus, which has no oil or gas, experienced a notable drop in its economy, something similar to the situation in Cuba at that time.

"We were obliged to take on a new economic policy to stand up to the loss of the production volumes that we had within the Soviet framework. When the disintegration happened, almost all the enterprises dedicated to manufacturing machines with complex technology – for example, the car industry – agriculture, transport, descended to almost zero. Even companies well known internationally, such as that of potassic fertilizer were literally at the point of bankruptcy in the 90s."

The drop was 11%-plus. The GDP fell to 15% and inflation went up to 25%. Moreover, it should be recalled that in January 1994 the Soviet Union dismissed those in power because corruption had escalated, while there was a severe drop in the living conditions of the population. Power was assumed by the conservative Mechislav Hirb, who did not achieve the urgently needed balances. The presidential elections in the summer of 1994 were convincingly won by Alexander Lukashenko who, after various years of work, reconfirmed his popular acceptance in the 2000 elections, with which he acquired a broad parliamentary support. He was reelected in the presidential elections of 2001.

That political sequence illustrates what Sidorskiy told us in Havana, a few minutes after signing various trade protocols with Cuba. He continued explaining:

"In early 1994 with his electoral victory, President Lukashenko proposed a very precise economic development action program, clearly accepted by the majority of citizens without whose participation no goal would be possible.

"We selected the route of an economy oriented toward social development. The state took it upon itself to help every enterprise and, step by step, production levels began to be restored. The plan was successful because by 2000 they were supplying the open market with their products. Those enterprises already have a place in the national budget because in that year many of them attained the production levels they had before the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

"That could be considered as the initial jump. Since then and up to 2005 that program originally proposed 12 years ago by President Lukashenko has had great success, as we have doubled the gross domestic product with an annual increase of no less than 10%, industrial growth has stabilized and, most importantly, we can guarantee our own self-sufficiency in food."

Other indicators?

When the reforms were initiated, the average wage was 70 rubels and now it is 250. As a regulation, when wages are increased, pensions grow. We have preserved free medical attention and education and social programs related to different sectors of the economy – particularly agriculture – support for youth, and scientific development are being progressively reinforced.

In other words, virtually every sector of the economy in Belarus is running at the expense of the execution of those formulated development projects that are continuing to advance as each proposition is won.

The country is maintaining its stability. We can virtually affirm that there is no organized crime on our streets, thus our children and citizens feel safe. These are the bases of the 83% obtained in democratic elections that gave the Belarusian people their state and their president."

Immediate plans?

Over the next five years our president proposes to emphasize works aimed at fortifying the construction of a state directed to the wellbeing of our citizens. The necessary regulations are in place and the people are aware of them, and support the internal political policy previously carried out and the improvements proposed by Lukashenko.

In 1996 an economic union was created between Minsk and Moscow that includes political aspects and is open to other states. Currently, there is an attempt to fortify that idea which has the full and signed support of Belarus and Kazakhstan. The group should be joined by Ukraine, albeit with some doubts over certain sections of the integrationist agreement. The rest have decided to initiate this activity.

Based on that antecedent we would like to know how that experience is going?

We have been working on the structure of a federal state with Russia for 10 years. The heads of state of the two nations have signed the required commitments and each one of the governments has its own detailed program in relation to the development of that alliance directed at economic development.

There is a very clear idea on the joint annual budget and cooperation between enterprises in Russia and Belarus, linked in terms of the most important sectors of machine building. Up to 80% of exports made are cooperative ones; hence our successes depend on those of the Russian Federation and vice versa. The overall project benefits from unrestricted customs agreements. To date, everything is going forward as planned.

On your visit to Cuba?

We have once again confirmed that for us Cuba is a significant and solid ally, as has been seen in various international forums where we have likewise defended sovereign independence as a right.

Sidorskiy said that he was highly satisfied and impressed at the warm reception that Fidel gave him in the six hours during which he and his delegation discussed various issues, including mutually beneficial bilateral trade, with the Cuban president.

*Source: Elsa Claro, Granma International; April 25, 2006;
<http://www.granma.cu/ingles/2006/abril/mar25/18belint-i.html>*

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.
