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International League for Human Rights

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## HUMAN RIGHTS & INDEPENDENT MEDIA

### 1. *Narodnaja Vola* Will Create Its Internet Version Soon

*Narodnaja Vola* " is going to create its Internet version in a few weeks. BAJ representatives got to know about it from Josef Syaredzich (the edition's editor-in-chief) when they visited *Narodnaja Vola*'s office to congratulate their colleagues on World Press Freedom Day on May 3.

"I advise our colleagues not to be down in the dumps. Life goes on! No one can prevent us from doing our job. Belarus will witness the day that will be the real freedom day for the press", - noted J. Syaredzich. He added that the edition is still printed in Smolensk and said he hoped that the common sense would win and the newspaper would be able to be printed in Belarus. The last print run of *Narodnaja Vola* was about 11 thousand issues because of financial difficulties. Usually there are 27 thousand issues printed.

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

### 2. Belarus - 2006 Annual Report

The government keeps a tight grip on the state media in this former Soviet republic shunned by the international community and persecutes the few independent outlets that fight to survive.

Seventeen journalists from the country's Polish minority were arrested over three months in 2005 and two of them were given jail sentences for "taking part in an illegal demonstration" while covering a protest by small business owners for an opposition website.

The regime is increasing its pressure on the independent media as the July 2006 presidential election approaches.

The only independent daily, *Narodnaya Volya*, already crippled by fines from losing libel suits, had its accounts frozen on 20 September. Minsk city authorities seized all copies of the weekly *Den* in August and then forced it to close by striking its publishers, *Denpress*, off the official register of publications. The country's main independent paper, the twice-weekly *BG Delovaya Gazeta*, was being financially strangled with enormous fines imposed in libel cases.

With all opposition papers now forced to print in neighbouring Russia, the monopoly state post office, *Belposhta*, said it would stop handling subscriber copies of a dozen independent papers from 1 January 2006, ensuring their probable closure.

Vassili Grodnikov, of *Narodnaya Volya*, was found dead in his apartment in a Minsk suburb on 18 October with mysterious head injuries. He had been investigating gangs involved in swindling elderly apartment tenants.

Official investigators into the death of journalist Veronika Cherkasova, of the weekly *Solidarnost*, at her home on 20 October 2004, still insisted it was probably a love or family murder, even though just before she was killed, she was investigating arms sales by Belarusian officials to Iraqi President Saddam Hussein when he was in power.

The enquiry into the July 2000 disappearance of cameraman Dmitri Zavadski, of the Russian TV station *ORT*, possibly involving top government officials, is still making no progress.

Source: *Reporters Without Borders*; May 3, 2006; <http://www.rsf.org/>

### 3. CPJ: Belarus Is One of the 10 Countries That Have the Strictest Censorship

Belarus is one of the 10 countries that have the strictest censorship in the world, - thinks the international organization "Committee to Protect Journalists" (CPJ, New York).

On May 2 (on the eve of World Press Freedom Day) the CPJ published a special report about it at <http://www.cpj.org/censored/index.html>: North Korea takes the first position on the list. Besides

Belarus there are Burma, Turkmenistan, Equatorial Guinea, Libya, Eritrea, Cuba, Uzbekistan and Syria on the list.

"The majority of Belarusian media are controlled by the state and are constantly praising A. Lukashenka". "Nominally independent radio stations and TV-channels avoid touching upon political issues. The state has already closed dozens of independent editions and a number of independent newspapers suffer severe persecution at the moment", - noted the CPJ. The organization also recalls that a number of Belarusian and foreign journalists were arrested during the presidential election campaign.

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

#### **4. Court Opens Closure Suit Against Union of Belarusian Writers**

The Supreme Court on April 28 began hearings in the Justice Ministry's suit for the closure of the Union of Belarusian Writers (SBP), Belapan reported. The ministry accuses the SBP, which is seen by state-run media as politicized and nationalistic, of using the banned emblem Pahonya (an image of a knight in pursuit) on the plaque marking the entrance to the House of Writers in Minsk and of utilizing a stamp that features the union's name without inverted commas.

The ministry also claims the SBP lacks an original copy of its charter and accuses the organization of making available the House of Writers' cafeteria for a conference of the opposition Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Hramada) in 2005. SBP Chairman Ales Pashkevich said during the April 28 session that the accusations are not sufficient grounds to suspend the association, let alone to close it. He denied the SPB's involvement in the preparation and holding of the party conference. In November, more than 100 writers loyal to the government set up the Union of Writers of Belarus as an alternative to the SBP (see "RFE/RL Newsline," November 21, 2005).

*Source: RFE/RL; May 2, 2006; <http://www.rferl.org>*

#### **5. Shushkevych Called In for Questioning**

In Belarus, the former speaker of that country's parliament, Stanislav Shushkevych was ordered in for questioning by police, after the opposition's May Day demonstration in the capital city of Minsk.

Very little information from Belarus, except from the government, but opposition Internet sites are reporting that Lukashenka supporters tried to start a fight with the forces who oppose the Belarusian president. Four opposition leaders are spending 15 days in jail for organizing an unsanctioned political demonstration last week.

*Source: Channel 5; May 1, 2006; <http://5tv.com.ua/eng/newsline/186/0/24888/>*

#### **6. Belarus Opposition Leaders Being Held In Same Detention Cell**

Four Belarus opposition leaders arrested for taking part in a demonstration Wednesday are currently in the same detention cell at a police precinct in Minsk, an opposition spokesperson said Friday.

A Minsk court Thursday handed down a 15-day "administrative arrest" sentences to main opposition leader Alexander Milinkevich and fellow oppositionists Communist leader Sergei Kalyakin, Labor Party leader Alexander Bukhvostov, and Vintsuk Vyachorka, who heads opposition Belarusian People's Front.

Opposition groups Wednesday organized a 3,000-strong rally timed to coincide with the 20th anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster, the world's worst nuclear accident, which affected much of the country. Protesters held Ukrainian and EU flags, and chanted "Long Live Belarus!" and "Freedom!" and expressed support for Milinkevich.

Although the demonstration went ahead with official permission, police later said it deviated from the approved route and was therefore unauthorized.

Presidential elections held March 19 in the former Soviet republic that saw Alexander Lukashenko reelected to a third term with a massive 83% of the vote were condemned as undemocratic by international monitors. Milinkevich, the leading opposition candidate, trailed in a distant second with just over 6% of the vote.

The opposition said the poll was rigged, and pledged to continue protests.

*Source: RIA Novosti; April 28, 2006; <http://rian.ru>*

## **7. Belarusian Youth Leader Jailed**

A Minsk court today sentenced an opposition youth leader to 14 days of detention for joining an unauthorized protest march earlier this week, RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reports.

Youth Front leader Zmitser Dashkevich was found guilty of participating in an unsanctioned rally in Minsk on April 26. The march was called to coincide with the 20th anniversary of the Chornobyl nuclear disaster.

Four opposition leaders, including former presidential candidate Alyaksandr Milinkevich, were convicted on similar charges on April 27.

The European Union and the United States have condemned the detentions.

The Belarusian opposition continues to protest the outcome of the March 19 presidential election that gave incumbent Alyaksandr Lukashenka a landslide victory. Western organizations and individual countries say the vote failed to meet international electoral standards.

*Source: RFE/RL; April 28, 2006; <http://www.rferl.org>*

## **8. Amnesty International Ready to Recognize Mikita Sasim Prisoner of Conscience**

The human rights organization Amnesty International has called upon the human rights organizations and common citizens all over the world to take part in the campaign in support of Belarusian leader Mikita Sasim. The AI has stated that if he is sentenced AI will consider him a prisoner of conscience. Belarusian youth leader, Mikita Sasim, is currently being detained in Baranavichy pre-trial detention centre 6 in Belarus. On 4 May, he will be tried in the court of Baranavichy on charges of draft evasion, for which he faces up to three years' imprisonment. The status of the prisoner of conscience is granted to persons persecuted on political grounds. Hundreds of participants of protest actions suppressed by Belarusian authorities: the leader of Belarusian vendors Valery Levaneuski, former MP Andrei Klimau, the chairman of the Belarusian Social Democratic party (Narodnaya Hramada) Mikola Statkevich, sentenced to restriction of freedom, the leader of the Young Front Pavel Sevyarynets and many other Belarusians repressed for their fight for freedom have been recognized as prisoners of conscience.

The letter of the AI representative, campaigner for Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine Aisha Jung reads:

"Belarusian youth leader, Mikita Sasim, is currently being detained in Baranavichy pre-trial detention centre 6 in Belarus. On 4 May, he will be tried in the court of Baranavichy on charges of draft evasion, for which he faces up to three years' imprisonment. Mikita has expressed his willingness to do his military service and Amnesty International believes that his arrest is the latest incident in a series of actions by the Belarusian authorities aimed at intimidating Mikita Sasim because of his political activities. If he is sentenced AI will consider him a prisoner of conscience.

Mikita Sasim was arrested on 14 March, five days before the presidential elections in Belarus. He was reportedly seized by security forces in the street in Minsk and taken to a police station where, as a result of ill-health, an ambulance was called. That night, Mikita Sasim was operated on for appendicitis and the following day he was reportedly transferred, handcuffed, to Baranavichy prison, where he was chained to a bed which was guarded by a policeman. After a week, Mikita Sasim was reportedly transferred to the pre-trial detention centre, where he has been since.

At a peaceful demonstration in September 2005, Mikita Sasim tied his denim shirt to a flag pole after security forces had confiscated the banners and flags being used by the demonstrators. In response, Mikita Sasim was reportedly beaten by the security forces so badly that he spent a week in hospital recovering. He was subsequently granted a deferment of military service due to the brain injury that he had incurred as a result of the beating. Mikita Sasim's peaceful act of defiance, which led to his beating, inspired the adoption of denim blue as a symbol of freedom and liberation by Belarusian civil society. The same colour was subsequently adopted by the political opposition in the run up to the presidential elections to the extent that even the international media began to refer to 'the denim revolution'.

Action!

Please send cards and letters of support and solidarity to Mikita Sasim in the days leading up to his trial on 4 May. You can write in Belarusian, Russian, English or your own language. Your good wishes will be an invaluable source of support and strength for Mikita Sasim at this difficult time. Please send your greetings to:

Mikita Sasim  
Cell 8, Pre-trial detention centre No. 6  
Brestskaya Street, 258a  
Baranavichy  
Brest region 225320  
Belarus

*Source: Charter97; April 28, 2006; <http://www.charter97.org/eng/>*

## **9. CIS: Press Freedom In Former Soviet Union Under Assault**

Independent media in the countries of the former Soviet Union, already operating under extreme duress, came under further assault over the course of the last year. The political, legal, and economic environments in most of the non-Baltic former Soviet countries remain distinctly inhospitable to independent journalism.

This reality is reflected in "Freedom Of The Press 2006," the latest edition of Freedom House's annual global survey of media independence. Ten of the 12 Soviet countries are ranked "Not Free" in the new edition of the survey. Of the 10 Not Free countries, five saw a further erosion in their performance over the course of last year.

Of the 12 non-Baltic former Soviet states only Georgia and Ukraine, which are categorized as "Partly Free," escape the Not Free designation. No country in the region achieves the designation of "Free." The degree to which each country permits the free flow of information determines the classification of its media as "Free," "Partly Free," or "Not Free."

The downward trend was particularly evident in countries with regimes that place a premium on controlling the airwaves. Among the Not Free states, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan experienced declines. Uzbekistan and Russia suffered the most dramatic backslide.

### **Regulatory Tricks In Belarus**

In Belarus, the autocratic government of Alyaksandr Lukashenka intensified its control over the country's media, at least in part due to elections taking place this spring. Last year, among the measures taken by the Belarusian authorities was passage of broadly defined legislation that

makes it a crime punishable by up to two years in jail to "discredit Belarus" in the eyes of international organizations and foreign governments. The same prison terms apply to those convicted of distributing "false information" about Belarus' political, economic, social, or international situation.

Among the regulatory tricks relied upon by media-unfriendly regimes, the Belarus press-freedom report relates a May 2005 decree issued by Lukashenka that banned all privately owned, but not state, media from using the words "national" or "Belarus" in their names, forcing a number of publications to reregister.

*Excerpt from*

*Source: Christopher Walker, RFE/RL; April 28, 2006; <http://www.rferl.org>*

## **DOMESTIC**

### **10. Belarus: Opposition Seeks Direction After Presidential Election**

There are essentially two ideas among the Belarusian opposition about how to proceed after the presidential election in March, which led to the largest outburst of antigovernment protests in Belarus in the past decade. A younger generation of opposition activists wants former presidential candidate Alyaksandr Milinkevich, who has no party affiliation, to lead a broad movement focused on bringing about political change in Belarus. But some opposition parties appear wary of losing their political stature, and prefer to continue to make all strategic decisions pertaining to the opposition through a collective body or a national convention.

Despite the opposition's overwhelming loss to President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's in Belarus's presidential election in March, the organization that represents the major opposition parties in Belarus saw room for optimism in the election result.

The Political Council of Democratic Forces, which assisted opposition candidate Alyaksandr Milinkevich in his bid to prevent Lukashenka from winning a third term in office, has assessed the opposition election campaign as satisfactory.

Official results had Milinkevich winning just 6 percent of the vote in the March 19 election, which monitors from the Organization for Cooperation and Security in Europe (OSCE) said failed to meet democratic standards.

However, the Political Council has determined that Milinkevich actually achieved 20 percent support -- numbers that were confirmed last month by an independent post-election survey.

Those results, the Political Council believes, are strong enough for the entire democratic camp to build upon in posing a greater challenge to Lukashenka's authoritarian regime in the future. And here is where the problems begin.

#### Broad Movement

Last month, a group of younger and more radical opposition activists, who protested against the election result in a five-day tent camp on October Square in Minsk, proposed that Milinkevich lead a broad movement in Belarus with the aim of deposing President Lukashenka.

One of those activists is Ihar Lyalkou from the Belarusian Popular Front (BNF). The BNF proposed Milinkevich as a presidential candidate during an opposition convention in August 2005, which gave Milinkevich a narrow edge over Anatol Lyabedzka, leader of the United Civic Party (AHP).

"The main thing we want today in the country and the democratic movement is to create the situation in which this movement could come to real power. We have, in both the provinces and Minsk, teams of professionals who are ready even today to become Alyaksandr Milinkevich's closest aides in the leadership of the movement," Lyalkou said.

Lyalkou and his colleagues do not want to abolish the Political Council of Democratic Forces. But Lyalkou told RFE/RL that they want Milinkevich to be solely responsible for executive decisions in the new movement.

"The movement should have the Political Council composed of the leaders of political parties. The council should remain in order to define basic, strategic directions of the movement's activity. And there must be some executive body -- which should be staffed not according to party quotas but according to exclusively professional qualities [of the staff]. This national committee should be formed by Mr. Milinkevich personally," Lyalkou said.

### Chornobyl Anniversary

On April 26, during an opposition rally in Minsk to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the Chornobyl disaster, Milinkevich announced the creation of a Movement for Freedom. Milinkevich predicted that the opposition, if united, could depose Lukashenka in the next two years through actions of civil disobedience.

But some are skeptical of the idea of making Milinkevich the primary voice of the opposition, including AHP deputy head Yaraslau Ramanchuk.

"The movement makes sense if it is built on the currently existing coalition and includes both [opposition candidate Alyaksandr] Kazulin's party [Social Democratic Party] and the youth that does not belong to any party or youth groups. I think this initiative is disastrous for Milinkevich as a politician," Ramanchuk said.

Ramanchuk said that the Political Council of Democratic Forces should continue to coordinate opposition actions in the future, with strategic political decisions being made at national conventions.

Ramanchuk told RFE/RL that the people who want Milinkevich to be a national opposition leader represent only one political party and do not speak for the majority of the demonstrators -- mostly young people with no party affiliation -- who came to October Square in March to protest the election.

"The people who promote the movement led by Milinkevich belong to one group -- the BNF. They have been, are, and will continue to be in politics and the BNF. What, are they essentially going to run this movement? Therefore, I don't want Alyaksandr Milinkevich's electoral potential to be lost because of such initiatives," Ramanchuk said.

But Lyalkou argues that from now on Milinkevich should be promoted in Belarus as an icon of the anti-Lukashenka opposition: "The situation is such that for the first time in the past 12 years we have had a real, generally accepted -- both within our country and abroad -- leader who is an alternative to Lukashenka. Therefore, the starting conditions for a real change of the situation in the country are very good."

Judging by Ukraine's example, Lyalkou may be right. The opposition to Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma's regime began to score significant political successes only after Viktor Yushchenko united it under the banner of the Our Ukraine bloc in 2002 and became its clear leader. By the beginning of 2005, Yushchenko was heading the country.

*Source: Yury Drakakhrust, RFE/RL; May 3, 2006; <http://www.rferl.org>*

## **11. Electronic Belarus Programme To Be Enlarged By 51 Projects**

On April 27, Belarusian Minister of Informatization and communications Vladimir Goncharenko informed the Board of Ministers that it is planned to enlarge Electronic Belarus programme by 51 new projects). The number of Electronic Belarus projects will total 109. Br 54bln are to be invested into the new projects including Br 29,9 bln for research and development and Br. 24,2bln for capital investments.

The State Electronic Belarus programme for 2005 -2010 was adopted in 2002. Within the framework of the programme Br.16bln has been invested into infrastructure development and into e-government related projects in 2005. In 2006, Br. 13,7 bln has been allocated from the state budget for the programme. In 2005-2006, 40 projects were started, and 12 of the accomplished in 2006. The major projects are aimed at automatisisation of the state administration bodies.

Mr. Goncharenko has also said that the Ministry is working on the draft law on Information, Informatization and protection of Information.

*Source: Mikhail Doroshevich, E-Belarus.ORG; May 3, 2006; www.e-belarus.org*

## **12. 2,000 Defiantly Rally in Minsk on May Day**

About 2,000 opposition supporters rallied in Minsk in a show of defiance Monday, days after the government tried to stop an unprecedented series of protests by jailing opposition leaders.

The May Day rally began with an unauthorized march by 800 activists, who walked about two kilometers from the Academy of Sciences to the square in northeast Minsk, where authorities had given permission for the meeting. There, the numbers swelled to 2,000.

Police officers stood on either side of the opposition demonstrators as they made their way to the square, warning them that they were breaking the law, but did not intervene.

However, police later stopped a vehicle carrying an opposition figure who had organized the march, Stanislav Shushkevich, and summoned him to appear in two days' time at a police station on charges of staging an unauthorized rally. He was expected to appear in court Wednesday, and could face a fine or up to 15 days in jail.

Shushkevich was parliament speaker at the time Belarus became independent in 1991 and led the nation until 1994.

"Political repression is continuing. The authorities are acting more and more harshly and this means that they are afraid of us. I have no doubts that on May 3 that I will join the Belarusian leaders who are already in jail," he said.

Last week, the opposition rallied 10,000 people, the largest such gathering since opposition leader Alexander Milinkevich spearheaded a March 19 demonstration to protest elections that handed President Alexander Lukashenko a third term but were widely denounced as fraudulent.

The government a day later jailed Milinkevich and three of his deputies for 15 days for taking part in an unsanctioned rally, a move that drew widespread condemnation in the West.

Milinkevich's wife, Inna Kulei, told the crowd she had visited him in prison, where the jail authorities had moved all the opposition leaders to separate cells, and refused to answer her inquiries about his health.

"You can't smother freedom, you can't kill it. These senseless repressions by the authorities only bring the day of freedom closer," she said.

The opposition supporters -- who held up posters reading "Free Milinkevich," and "Free the political prisoners" -- said they were determined to keep up protests against the government.

"I came here to support the opposition leaders who are now in prison," said Marina Labor, a 21-year-old student wrapped in the opposition's red and white flag.

"All those who have suffered from this regime should show solidarity," she said.

Alexander Barushka, 39, a businessman, said that future generations deserved a democratic future.

"I came here to this rally for my two children's future. I don't want them to live in Europe's last dictatorship," he said.

One of the speakers, Yury Khadyka, deputy chairman of Belarus People's Front, expressed hope that the opposition would maintain the momentum of its campaign to unseat Lukashenko -- despite the much smaller numbers on Monday compared with last week.

"Belarus did not have free elections, but there are more and more people who don't want to live under dictatorship. We demand free elections and the release of political prisoners, and we are counting on the support of Western countries," he said.

President Vladimir Putin on Friday urged the opposition in Belarus to abandon resistance to Lukashenko and help him build up the country, Reuters reported.

"I was pleased to hear that you intend to work constructively with all political forces," Putin told Lukashenko at the sumptuous Konstantinovsky Palace near St. Petersburg. "I hope that after emotions calm, everyone who took part in the election campaign will focus their efforts on developing their own country, on positive work in that direction."

Lukashenko said he hoped his opponents would reconcile themselves to defeat and stop challenging his authority.

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

### **13. Belarus Rally Demands Release of Opposition Chiefs**

More than 1,000 protesters carrying banned flags marched through Belarus's capital on Monday to demand the release of jailed opposition leaders who had pledged to work for the removal of President Alexander Lukashenko.

Marchers were nominally marking the May Day holiday and among their slogans was a call to end short-term labor contracts they say allow employers to intimidate workers.

But the thrust of the protest, authorized by city officials, was to press for the release of Alexander Milinkevich, the opposition's main leader, and other activists jailed for up to 15 days after a rally last week.

Milinkevich had challenged Lukashenko's landslide re-election victory in March, denounced by the opposition and in the West as blatantly rigged.

"Freedom for Milinkevich!" marchers shouted as they passed along the approved route. Many carried the red-and-white national flag banned by Lukashenko in his 1990s drive to restore Soviet-style symbols.

"Not all our friends are here today. Many are behind bars," Alexander Dobrovolsky of the United Civic Party told protesters from a wooden rostrum in an outlying square surrounded by parkland. "We need solidarity to keep us together every day."

Milinkevich was summoned by police and taken to a courtroom after telling 7,000 protesters last Wednesday that the opposition intended to use civil disobedience to turf Lukashenko out of the office he has held since 1994 in two years or less.

Last Wednesday's campaign coincided with the 20th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster over the border in Ukraine, traditionally the biggest opposition rally of the year. Also jailed on public order charges were veteran activist Vintsuk Vechorko, Communist opposition campaigner Sergei Kalyakin and trade unionist Alexander Bukhvostov.

Stanislav Shushkevich, Belarus's first post-Soviet leader and now a prominent opposition figure, told Reuters after the May Day protest that he had already been summoned to appear before police on Wednesday.

Milinkevich's wife, Inna Kulei, told Monday's marchers that the jailed opposition figures had now been placed in separate cells after being initially confined together.

"The authorities are afraid of us. They are afraid of our leaders even when they are in jail," she said. "Now they've separated them because they are afraid they will prepare a coup if they serve their time together in one cell."

Lukashenko, who won 83 percent of the vote to 6 percent for Milinkevich according to official tallies, has made clear he will stick to his policies. He is supported by many voters, particularly outside Minsk, who say he has provided a measure of stability and prosperity absent in other ex-Soviet states.

*Source: Andrei Makhovsky, Reuters; May 1, 2006; <http://today.reuters.com/>*

#### **14. Hundreds of People Came to Defend *Nasha Niva***

250-300 persons have met today at 6 p.m. on October Square in Minsk, simultaneously opened newspapers *Nasha Niva*, which is to be closed today by the Belarusian authorities. They marched to Victory Square reading the newspaper.

The silence was broken by policemen, who warned about the responsibility via sound amplifying equipment.

As said by eyewitnesses, the flash mob was spectacular and successful.

*Source: Charter97; April 28, 2006; <http://www.charter97.org/eng/>*

## **REGIONAL**

#### **15. Russia May Triple Gas Price For Belarus**

Russia's state-controlled natural-gas giant Gazprom is considering tripling prices for Belarus next year.

Gazprom spokesman Sergei Kupriyanov said today Gazprom may in 2007 ask for a minimum of \$145 dollars per thousand cubic meters of gas.

Belarus, a close ally of Russia, currently pays about \$47 per thousand cubic meters. It is the only former Soviet for whom the price of Russian gas has not risen in the past year.

Kupriyanov said the decision to keep the gas price for Belarus unchanged was based solely on economic considerations.

He said Gazprom was still waiting for proposals by Minsk before settling on a new price.

Many analysts believe Russia is seeking control over Beltransgaz, the state-run operator of the Belarusian pipeline network that transports Russian gas to European markets.

*Source: RFE/RL; May 2, 2006; <http://www.rferl.org>*

#### **16. Putin Voices Optimism on Russia-Belarus Union**

Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed confidence on Friday that problems arising in the course of building the planned Russia-Belarus union would be "easier to solve" now that the Belarusian presidential election is over.

"I am sure that work will start to put into practice all those plans that we made earlier - building a special relationship of alliance," Putin said at a meeting with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko.

"Very many problems have arisen in the course of implementing what we agreed on," but, "since there is a chance that the political situation will stabilize, those problems will be easier to solve," Putin said.

*Source: Interfax; April 28, 2006; <http://www.interfax.ru/e>*

#### **17. Putin Tells Belarus Opposition To Cool It**

Russian president Vladimir Putin has held talks with his Belarus counterpart Alexandre Lukashenko in St. Petersburg, and has called on the opposition movement there to stop bashing their president and help build the former Soviet state. Putin is one of only a handful of world leaders to have endorsed Lukashenko's re-election.

"I hope that after emotions calm everyone who took part in the election campaign will focus their efforts on developing their own country in a positive direction", Putin said, adding Lukashenko told him he intended to work constructively with all political forces. Many in Belarus and abroad claim the election was rigged.

That has not prevented the authorities for jailing opposition leader Alexander Milinkevich for 15 days, allegedly for taking part in an illegal political demonstration.

This was on the 26th, for the annual march to commemorate the Chernobyl disaster. In the past this has been used by the opposition to voice their concerns, but without incident or arrests. The opposition has promised it will take to the streets again on May Day, nominally to protest at the imposition of short-term contracts for workers.

*Source: EuroNews; April 28, 2006; <http://euronews.net/>*

#### **18. Russia-Belarus Single Currency To Simplify Gas Payments - Source**

Introducing a single currency in Russia and Belarus will simplify mutual payments for natural gas supplies, a Russian delegation said Friday at the talks with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko.

"[Belarus] should back social programs out of its own funds rather than Russia's economy," a source in the delegation said.

A source said Belarus was technically ready to introduce the Russian ruble as a single means of payment, but that this was an issue of the Belarusian leadership's political will.

"Lukashenko was elected for five years," the source said. "He has a confidence mandate, and can make any decisions, including unpopular ones, if he wants to."

*Source: RIA Novosti; April 28, 2006; <http://rian.ru>*

## 19. Another Belarus Opposition Leader Jailed

Belarusian authorities kept up their pressure on government adversaries Friday, sentencing a youth movement leader to 15 days in jail a day after opposition leader Alexander Milinkevich and three of his deputies were handed similar sentences.

Meanwhile, Moscow exerted a different kind of pressure on Belarus, reportedly demanding the country increase what it pays Russia for natural gas by threefold. Cheap Russian gas is a key to the economic growth that is one of authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko's strong suits and a sharp increase in prices could undermine his support.

A Minsk court sentenced Zmicer Dashkevich, head of the youth organization Malady Front, for taking part in an unauthorized demonstration.

The charges against Dashkevich and the other jailed opposition figures stemmed from a Wednesday opposition rally that attracted around 10,000 people. It was the largest opposition gathering since Milinkevich spearheaded a March 19 demonstration to protest elections that handed Lukashenko a third term but were widely denounced as fraudulent.

That rally set off a week of protests unprecedented in a country where opposition forces and independent media are repressed and where unauthorized demonstrations are frequently put down violently by police.

Wednesday's rally, marking the 20th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear accident and opposition claims that Lukashenko's government is lying about how it is coping with the disaster's consequences, had received official approval. But officials later said it was illegal.

Western countries on Thursday condemned the jailing of Milinkevich. State Department spokesman Adam Ereli called it "outrageous and reprehensible."

The sentences put almost all of the opposition's top figures behind bars, leaving in doubt the prospects for a planned demonstration Monday marking the May Day holiday. If that rally is able to attract a similar crowd to Wednesday's, it would be a significant indicator that the opposition has a solid, sizable core.

The true core of support for Lukashenko, often described by Western countries as "Europe's last dictator," is difficult to gauge given the pressure on the opposition and the near-absence of free media. But his advocates point to Belarus' post-Soviet economic recovery - annual growth of 6 percent to 9 percent in recent years - as central to his appeal.

However, Russia's natural gas monopoly Gazprom has told Belarus it must begin paying "market prices" for gas in 2007. Exact details of the demand, to which Belarus has to respond by Monday, have not been made public.

But the *Interfax* news agency reported Friday that Russia is demanding \$145 per 35,000 cubic feet; Belarus now pays \$46.68. The report, citing a source close to Gazprom, came as Lukashenko met Russian President Vladimir Putin in St. Petersburg. Gazprom declined to comment on it.

Lukashenko has dismissed the possibility of paying higher prices, but his alternatives appear limited.

News reports have suggested Russia is preparing to exercise a clause in the agreement forming a loose union of Belarus and Russia under which Belarus would have to return to Moscow some of the profits it makes from refining Russian oil.

The prospect of economic troubles brought on by Lukashenko's Kremlin patrons has raised hopes among the opposition that this could weaken the president's grip on power.

"In 2007, the economic situation will get significantly worse ... and people will turn to the opposition," Vintsuk Vyachorka, leader of the opposition Belarusian People's Front, told The Associated Press this week.

Just a few hours after Vyachorka made his comments, he was arrested for taking part in Wednesday's rally. There were no reports of progress on the gas question from the Putin-Lukashenko meeting.

However, Putin appeared to encourage Lukashenko to ease pressure on the opposition.

"It was pleasant for me to hear that you're in a mood for constructive work with all forces," Putin said, according to the *ITAR-Tass* news agency.

Although the Kremlin has supported Lukashenko and Russian officials have stated they regarded the March elections as valid, Russia and Belarus have frequently bickered over terms of their union agreement.

Russia's support of Lukashenko is likely to be a top issue of discussion at this summer's summit in St. Petersburg of leaders of the Group of Eight, which includes the United States, Germany and other countries that have harshly criticized the Belarusian leader.

*Source: Yuras Karmanau, Forbes.Com; April 28, 2006; <http://www.forbes.com/>*

## **20. Putin, Lukashenko Meeting Outside St. Petersburg**

Russian President Vladimir Putin and Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko are having a meeting at the Constantine Palace outside St. Petersburg.

The two leaders met last time at the same place on January 24, 2006, just before a session of the Supreme State Council of the Union of Belarus and Russia.

Last year, Putin and Lukashenko met eight times.

The two countries are placing the emphasis on setting up a common economic space, one of the elements of which is a plan that the two governments and the two central banks are implementing to introduce a common currency.

*Source: Interfax; April 28, 2006; <http://www.interfax.ru/e>*

## **21. Belarusians Want Lukashenko To Rule Russia Too**

Nearly half the people in Belarus regard Alexander Lukashenko a perfect politician. According to the results of a survey published by the well-known sociologist Professor Oleg Manayev, the Belarusian president tops the list of most popular political figures. Lukashenko is idolized by 44.7% of the respondents while 27.1% of them favor President Putin of Russia.

U.S. President Bush has 4.6%; French President Chirac has 4.4%; Cuban leader Castro has 3.9%; German Chancellor Merkel has 3.7%; Tony Blair has 3.5%, and Yulia Tymoshenko – 3.2%, the Belarusian newspaper *Belorusskiye Noviny* reports.

It is noteworthy that it is the first time in the last 6 years that Lukashenko's latest popularity ratings became higher by 1.7 times than those of Putin's. Sociologists point to the recent election campaign as a possible reason behind the surge in popularity of the Belarusian president. By the way, 44% of Belarusian would like to see Lukashenko as president of the union of Belarus and Russia should such a position be created. 22% of the respondents would rather see Putin as head of a new state.

One of the questions put to the respondents read: "Would you rather approve the integration of Belarus into the European Union or favor the union of Belarus and Russia into one state?"

56.1% of the polled are in favor of the union with Russia while 31.9% would rather see Belarus as a part of the EU. Almost the same percentage of the poll participants (52%) see themselves as the Soviet people while 36% consider themselves Europeans.

94% of Belarusians who regard Lukashenko as an ideal politician voted for him in the recent presidential election. However, the supporters of Vladimir Putin (53.5%) also cast their ballots for Lukashenko. Those who preferred Western politicians to domestic personalities, voted for Milinkevich, one of the opposition leaders.

The figures published by Manayev show a more accurate scale of Lukashenko's popularity in Belarus. By the way, Manayev is a director of Vilnius-based Independent Institute of Socioeconomic and Political Studies. Recently the institute has called the results of Belarus's presidential election into question. According to the official Central Election Committee, Lukashenko scored a landslide victory getting 83% of the votes. However, the figures produced by independent opinion polls conducted by the above institute on March 27 and April 6 differ from the official data. The poll figures show that 63.6% of the Belarusians voted for Lukashenko. In other words, Lukashenko was given 20% or 1.2 votes "aside from" the original number of votes cast for him during the election. Western observers shared the viewpoint, they were unanimous in using the adjective "undemocratic" in their comments on the election. Following the outcome of the election, the EU imposed entry visa ban on Lukashenko and 30 high-ranking Belarusian officials who were accused of rigging the presidential election.

According to officially released figures, the opposition candidate Alexander Milinkevich received a piddling 6% of the votes. Meantime, independent sociologists say Mlinkevich received 20.6% of the votes. In light of the above, Oleg Manayev said that the public opinion result are in contradiction to the official statements with regard to Lukashenko's widespread popular appeal with his fellow citizens. Despite a social basis for starting up changes, the authorities should not underestimate readiness of the Belarusian society to changes. At the same time, the opposition should not overestimate it either. "The growing public discontent in Belarus is largely caused by the activity of the authorities while the opposition and external factors play second fiddle under the circumstances," said Manayev. There was a noticeable increase in the number of those who consider themselves mistreated by the regime. During the last year alone it increased by a third and currently stands at 36.5%.

The Independent Institute of Socioeconomic and Political Studies said earlier that Lukashenko had lost the 2004 referendum, and therefore had no right to run for the third term in office.

Meanwhile, the Belarusian opposition is not going to give up the fight. During his overseas trips Milinkevich predicts that the regime would fall in the near future. His comrades in arms say that toppling the dictatorial rule should take only a few hours. "Lukashenko is losing his grip on the electorate. No 'velvet' revolution lies in store for Belarus. On the contrary, Belarus is going to witness an instant revolution which should happen within several hours. I'm talking about the 21st century revolution, it can make all the people change their ways of thinking in a matter of hours. Then the people will start living in a brand-new state. They view the dictator as a piece of trash that needs to be thrown into a trash bin," said Andrei Klimov, a former political prisoner and deputy of the Supreme Soviet of the 13th calling, in an interview to a press service.

According to him, the opposition has been quite impressed by the activity of young people during the standoff in Minsk after the election. "Our successors are getting ready to play a key role in the fight for a new democratic Belarus and a new government that will be oriented to the integration into the EU. In fact, the young will come to power in this country to ensure civilized governance. The boys and girls who put up tents in Oktyabrskaya Square in Minsk a month ago do hate that bumpkin dictatorship. They really want to make it history," said Klimov.

Source: *Pravda.Ru*; April 28, 2006; <http://newsfromrussia.com/>

## INTERNATIONAL

### **22. Tenth International Exhibition “Mass Media in Belarus” Opens in Minsk**

Tenth international exhibition “Mass Media in Belarus” has opened today in the national exposition center Belexpo in Minsk

Showcasing in the jubilee 10th international exhibition “Mass Media in Belarus” will be more than 400 mass media outlets from Belarus, Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, Latvia, Lithuania, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Poland, Israel, the PRC and USA. The media forum will widely present Belarusian regional and departmental newspapers and journals, mass media outlets of the Russian Federation and editions of the Belarusian diaspora. This year the exposition area is more than 1000 sq.m., or two times as big as last year.

The exhibition aims to popularize printed and electronic mass media, to contribute to Belarus' integration into the world information space and also to strengthen and develop international cooperation in information and press.

During the official opening ceremony the awards will be presented to the winners of the nationwide contest for the best report on the Union State formation in 2005. The media forum will also feature presentations of printed and electronic mass media, seminars, roundtable discussions and the events to mark the Day of Press, Day of Radio, TV and Communications. On May 6, the closing day of the event, diplomas will be awarded for best exposition.

The annual media forum is organized by the information ministry of the Republic of Belarus with assistance of the foreign ministry, National State TV and Radio Company, Minsk city council, Belarusian union of journalists, the company “International center of integrated information. The public press center House of Press” and also the national exhibition center Belexpo.

Source: *The National Centre of Legal Information of the Republic of Belarus*; May 3, 2006; <http://law.by/work/Eng/>

### **23. U.N. Rights Experts Seeks Belarus Action**

A U.N. human rights expert is demanding immediate release of political prisoners in Belarus, calling on the government to cease human rights violations.

In a prepared statement released Tuesday in Geneva, Switzerland, Adrian Severin, the United Nations' special rapporteur on human rights in Belarus, also called for the government to allow him to conduct a fact-finding mission to the country as soon as possible.

"The special rapporteur demands the immediate and unconditional release of Aleksandr Milinkevich, Vintsuk Vyachorka, Aleksandr Buchvostau and Sergei Kalyakin as well as of all other political prisoners of Belarus," the statement said, highlighting Severin's "grave concern" over the detention of these opposition leaders.

He demanded the government "give a clear and immediate sign of its readiness to cease ongoing human rights violations and bring their perpetrators to justice," and that he be invited to conduct a fact-finding mission to Belarus at the earliest possible opportunity.

Severin also expressed "serious concern" at reports indicating another opposition member, Anatoly Lebedko, had been detained for several hours by KGB officers April 25, during which "he would have been the victim of threats and ill-treatments."

He also urged the government to "promptly engage in dialogue with all sectors of the Belarusian civil society, including the political opposition," as a way of defining a road map for implementing recommendations of U.N. human rights experts.

The statement is the latest condemnation of rights violations in Belarus by Severin, after he voiced similar concerns surrounding the March presidential elections, when on one occasion he was joined by six other rights experts in calling for investigations into what was termed the deteriorating human rights situation

*Source: United Press International; May 2, 2006; <http://www.upi.com/>*

#### **24. EU Condemns Belarus Crackdown On Opposition**

Top EU and international leaders have expressed criticism and concern over the recent arrest and imprisonment of Alexander Milinkevich, the main opposition leader in Belarus.

Milinkevich, along with three other opposition politicians, was sentenced to 15 days in prison on 27 April for leading a recent rally that was declared illegal by the government. In a statement, EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana said that "I urge the Belarussian authorities to release and rehabilitate [Milinkevich] immediately. I also reiterate the EU's call to the Belarussian authorities to swiftly liberate all the political prisoners previously detained, including Mr. Alexander Kozulin."

External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner said that "I call for the immediate release of all those arrested and detained because of their opinions."

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said that Washington "roundly condemns" Milinkevich's imprisonment "and sincerely hopes that the Belarussian government will accept the will of the international community."

NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer has called on the "regime in Minsk to release [Milinkevich] immediately [...] The Euro-Atlantic community cannot accept this," he said. The EU has imposed a travel ban on Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenka and 30 of his key ministers following the presidential elections in March, which was widely considered rigged.

*Source: EurActive.Com; May 2, 2006; <http://www.euractiv.com/>*

#### **25. EU Devising Long-Term Strategy of Relations With Belarus**

The European Union (EU) is currently devising a long-term strategy of relations with Belarus, said an official with EU Council Policy Unit.

The strategy, which is to be completed within several weeks, will propose a soft and tough approach to Belarus, the official said at a meeting with Belarussian journalists who stayed in Brussels between April 24 and 28. The document may be closed to the public.

The EU is also working on an expanded list of Belarussian officials prohibited from traveling to EU countries.

Emma Udwin, spokesperson for External Relations of the European Commission, said at another meeting that the EU provided EUR17 million in assistance to Belarus' civic society in 2005. She stressed that the EU may consider further restrictive measures against Belarussian authorities, noting that it follows closely developments in the country.

*Source: BelaPan; April 30, 2006; [http://www.naviny.by/ru/content/rubriki/2-ya\\_gruppa/inter/30-04-06-1/](http://www.naviny.by/ru/content/rubriki/2-ya_gruppa/inter/30-04-06-1/)*

## **26. NATO and Russia Fall Out Over Belarus**

Convenient friends: Putin offers Lukashenko support in return for antagonizing the West  
Russia and NATO clashed Friday in a heated exchange over the jailing of Belarusian opposition leader Alexander Milinkevich for attending a political demonstration.

"Belarus was one of the issues discussed where Russia and the alliance are quite far apart," NATO chief Jaap de Hoop Scheffer said after talks with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in the Bulgarian capital Sofia.

"We did not see eye to eye," he added, a day after calling Milinkevich's arrest a sign of "anti-democratic behavior".

De Hoop Scheffer said Belarus had failed to live up to NATO values enshrined in the Partnership for Peace agreements signed between the alliance and many ex-communist states after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991.

But Lavrov responded by saying: "These issues have to be decided through engagement and dialogue, not through isolation."

Belarus' authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko won a landslide victory in March 19 presidential elections that sparked protests at home and condemnation abroad.

The European Union and the United States slapped diplomatic sanctions in the wake of the vote and a crackdown against opposition activists protesting Lukashenko's victory.

Milinkevich, who came a distant second in the election, was sentenced on Thursday to 15 days in jail along with three other opposition figures for attending a demonstration declared illegal.

Opposition leader declares imprisonment a "political sentence"

Milinkevich said Wednesday's protest, coinciding with the 20th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, was not illegal because the crowd of about 6,000 had gathered at a place allocated to them by the city authorities.

"We had asked for permission to demonstrate in two places. We were authorized to demonstrate in one of them, and that is where we went," he told reporters before his trial.

Moscow has offered its backing to Lukashenko, who has ruled Belarus with an iron fist since 1994, and Russia has criticized what it sees as Western interference.

A Russia-led election monitoring group said Lukashenko won in a free and fair vote, while the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) said the vote was fraudulent.

Russian President Vladimir Putin also offered rare international support Lukashenko, whom he said had reached out to opponents following his contested re-election last month.

"It was nice to hear that you intend to work constructively with all sides," Putin told Lukashenko, a pariah in the West, during a televised meeting in a Saint Petersburg palace.

Putin praises Belarus elections; calls for end of opposition

Putin appeared to call on opposition activists -- about 1,000 of whom have been briefly jailed since election day for attending anti-Lukashenko protests -- to end their fight.

"Once all emotions have subsided, I count on all who took part in the campaign to concentrate on development of the state," Putin was quoted as saying by the ITAR-TASS news agency.

Lukashenko claimed that "almost the entire population and part of the opposition voted" for him, RIA Novosti reported.

Russia, together with China, Cuba and a handful of ex-Soviet republics, has bucked the Western outcry over the Belarusian election.

Moscow props up Belarus' Soviet-style economy with vital export markets and cheap natural gas supplies, although the state-controlled Gazprom giant says the price is due to rise.

Russia and the small ex-Soviet country of 10 million people, which borders EU-members Poland, Latvia and Lithuania, have also been engaged in talks on a possible unification for years.

US fuming over Putins support for pariah Lukashenko

The relationship between Russia and Belarus, and the treatment of the Belarusian opposition has particularly rankled with the US. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice slammed Milinkevich's jailing as "reprehensible" in comments to reporters on the sidelines of a two-day NATO foreign ministers' meeting in Sofia.

"The United States roundly condemns this act and sincerely hopes that the Belarusian government will accept the will of the international community," Rice said.

Another key opposition leader, Alexander Kozulin, has been in jail since March 25, when he was arrested during the break-up of an opposition rally and accused of "hooliganism". He could face several years in prison, lawyers say.

*Source: Deutsche Welle; April 29, 2006; <http://www.dw-world.de/>*

### **27. Online-Petition: Freedom for Alyaksandr Milinkevich, Vintsuk Viacorca, Sergey Kalyakin and Alyaksandr Bukhvostau**

On 27 April 2006 Alyaksandr Milinkevich, the leader of the Belarusian movement for democracy together with the chairpersons of three allied oppositional parties, Vintsuk Viacorca, Sergey Kalyakin and Alyaksandr Bukhvostau, were arrested and- in a summary procedure- each sentenced to up to 15 days of imprisonment. They were detained after having headed a march in remembrance of the Chernobyl disaster on 26 April, attendend by 10 000 participants, and having called on a democratisation of Belarus.

Amnesty International demands the immediate release of the four oppostion leaders and all other prisoners of conscience in Belarus. The human rights organisation calls on the Belarusian government and Alyaksandr Lukashenka to guarantee all citizens of Belarus their freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and freedom of association. They must be able to exercise their basic rights without facing the threat of state repression, harassment or punishment.

Visit our campaign website [www.belarus-actions.org](http://www.belarus-actions.org) and support amnesty international in aiding prisoners of conscience in Belarus:

- sign our online petition
- send a letter of appeal via fax, email or air mail to the Belarusian government (you will find sample letters on our website)
- link your website to [www.belarus-actions.org](http://www.belarus-actions.org) (banners are available as JPG or GIF)
- spread information about the actions of amnesty international on Belarus by forwarding this press release by newsletter or website posting
- please inform us in case your organisation is interested in offically supporting the human rights concerns of belarus-actions and we will announce it on our website

- inform us about your own actions on improving the human rights situation in Belarus, we will be happy to publish your press releases and pictures on our website.

*Source: BelarusActions.Org; April 28, 2006; -<http://www.belarus-actions.org/>*

### **28. Foreign Ministry Demands Immediate Release of Milinkevich**

The Czech Foreign Ministry condemned the arrest of Belarussian opposition leader Alyksandar Milinkevich and three other representatives of the opposition who were sentenced to 15 days in prison for the participation in an unauthorised demonstration, its press department said.

The ministry demanded the immediate release of the representatives of the democratic opposition and other political prisoners who are serving their sentences across Belarus.

Police detained the unsuccessful presidential candidate Milinkevich on Thursday in the editorial office of a local magazine where he came to give the planned interview.

According to Czech Foreign Minister Cyril Svoboda, the detention is an "absolutely unacceptable act" from the regime of president Alexander Lukashenko.

The European Union and the NATO foreign ministers denounced the incident on Thursday.

"We consider it unacceptable that the representatives of the Belarussian democratic forces were sentenced to administrative sentences for taking part in the allowed by the state commemorative ceremony to mark the 20th anniversary of the Chernobyl tragedy the scale and the consequences of which had marked the entire world for many decades," the Foreign Ministry press section says.

The statement stresses that given the nature of the Belarussian regime the incident was not surprising since it only confirmed that although the Belarussian leadership cites the valid laws it is political reasons that are the real motivation of its acts that have nothing in common with a law-abiding state.

"It has been confirmed that the official Minsk continues to grossly violate the legitimate rights of its own citizens and that it is leading the country to the deadlock of international isolation with its uncivilised policy. It provokes the feeling of tension and fear among its own citizens. Its outrageous trampling on international standards can in its consequences only provoke a tougher approach by international community towards the political leadership of Belarus," the Foreign Ministry says in its statement.

On Wednesday, Milinkevich attended in Minsk the meeting to mark the 20th anniversary of the nuclear catastrophe in the Ukrainian town of Chernobyl.

Police did not allow the opposition demonstrators to gather on the October Revolution square that became in March the venue of mass protests against the re-election of Lukashenko as Belarussian president.

The demonstrators, whose number is estimated to reach 10,000, gathered therefore in front of the Academy of Sciences building where Milinkevich addressed them with a speech, in the violation of the authorities' warning against taking part in the ceremony.

He said that he would launch the process aimed at ousting Lukashenko, and called for the participation in other meeting to mark May Day.

The meeting was authorised, but the police banned the march.

*Source: Czech News Agency; April 28, 2006; <http://www.ctk.cz/english>*

## **BUSINESS**

### **29. Belarus State Debt Reaches Two and Half Billion Dollars**

The foreign and domestic debt of Belarus reached 2.5 billion dollars on April 1. The increment of the foreign debt was 0.1 per cent a month, and of the domestic debt – 0.3 per cent a month, a representative of the Belarusian finance ministry told *PRIME-Tass*.

Foreign state debt accounts for some 30 per cent of the sum total (769.2 million dollars), while the domestic debt accounts for 70 per cent (3.717 trillion Belarusian rubles, with one dollar equal to 2,149 Belarusian rubles).

On the whole, the foreign debt was reduced by 1.9 per cent since January 1, and the domestic debt was reduced by 0.7 per cent.

In the state budget the limit of the foreign debt was set at two billion dollars by the end of 2006. Germany, the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the United States and Russia are the main creditors of Belarus.

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

### **30. Pensions in Belarus Grow Seven Percent**

Pensions in Belarus will grow seven percent starting from May 1. President Alexander Lukashenko signed a decree on pensions “in order to raise the level of material security of the pensioners and maintain a tendency towards pensions growth comparable with the growth of incomes in the economic sector,” the press service of the Belarusian president reported on Saturday.

Old age pensions will reach on the average an equivalent of 120 dollars. Pensions will depend on pensioners’ salaries, occupational life and on whether they are entitled to benefits.

Last time pensions were increased on January 1, 2006, when they grew nine percent on the average. There are almost 2.5 million pensioners in the country, which is over one fourth of the population.

*Source: Itar-Tass; May 1 2005; <http://www.tass.ru/eng>*

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The Belarus Update is a weekly news bulletin of the International League for Human Rights ([www.ilhr.org](http://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](mailto: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.

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