

January 26 – January 31, 2006

Edited by Maria Kabalina and Olga Tarasov
International League for Human Rights

Table of Contents

I. Domestic

1. Four Presidential Candidates Register for Belarus Election (*Voice of America*)
2. Belarus Council of Ministers adopts Information Protection program (*AXIS*)
3. Belarus: Milinkevich Says He Wants A Country Without Fear (*RFE/RL*)
4. Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus Approves Information Protection Scheme (*E-Belarus.ORG*)
5. Initiative Groups Promote Six Presidential Candidates in Belarus (*RIA Novosti*)
6. Belarus Leader Orders Ban Against Protests (*WashingtonPost.Com*)
7. Opposition Candidate In Belarus Pulls Out Of Presidential Race (*RFE/RL*)
8. Lidziya Yarmoshyna: "Internet Abuse Is a Problem..." (*BAJ*)

II. Regional

9. Ukraine Protests Alleged Seizure of Journalists' Videotapes by Belarus Authorities (*Kyiv Post*)
10. Belarus President Says Union With Russia Based On Equality (*RFE/RL*)
11. Russia-Belarus Union To Have Common Currency Starting From 2008 (*Itar-Tass*)
12. Agreement on Equal Rights of Citizens of Belarus and Russia Is Evidence of Real Integration (*The National Centre of Legal Information of the Republic of Belarus*)
13. Putin's Nuclear Energy Proposals Promising – Lukashenko (*Itar-Tass*)
14. Russia Asks Belarus To Confirm Acceptability of New Ambassador (*Interfax*)

III. International

15. Media Sustainability Index 2005: Russia, Uzbekistan and Belarus Headline Backsliding in Eurasia (*News Agency AKIpress*)
16. Active and Cohesive. Tomorrow's EU Policy Towards Belarus (*EurActiv.Com*)
17. EU Warns Belarus Sanctions Could Follow Presidential Elections (*MosNews.Com*)
18. Belarus Opposition Leader Spells Out Goals in Brussels (*EurActiv.Com*)
19. EU: Ministers To Discuss Belarus, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq (*RFE/RL*)
20. President of Belarus Accuses Western Countries (*Bahrain News Agency*)
21. Russian Senators Blast PACE Resolution on Belarus (*Itar-Tass*)
22. EC To Launch Broadcasting Project in Belarus (*Digital Media News for Europe*)
23. Presidential Election in Belarus: Lukashenko Must Ensure a Free and Fair Electoral Campaign (*Noticias.info*)
24. PACE Proposes Isolating 'Lukashenko's Regime' – Resolution (*Interfax*)

IV. Human Rights & Independent Media

25. Valery Levaneuski On Hunger Strike In Isolation Ward (*Charter97*)
26. Special Services Using Telephone Harassment (*ZUBR*)
27. The Truth -Is a Prisoner of Conscience № 1 in Belarus (*United Civil Party*)
28. Daddy's Source (*The Guardian*)
29. Mass Hunger Strike of Prisoners in Belarus? (*Charter97*)

V. Business

30. Government To Examine Draft State Import Substituting Program for 2006-2010 (*BeITa*)

DOMESTIC

1. Four Presidential Candidates Register for Belarus Election

The signature-collecting campaign for presidential hopefuls in Belarus has come to an end, with four candidates expected to be officially confirmed soon. The pre-election campaign has been tense and there is no sign the remaining weeks leading up to the March 19 election will be any different.

The Central Election Commission in Belarus has until February 11 to publish the official list of candidates accepted to compete to become the next president of Belarus.

Few if any observers expect many surprises. Other than front-runner and incumbent, Alexander Lukashenko, only three other people are expected to be in the race. They are the candidate for the united Democratic opposition, Alexander Milinkevich, along with two other candidates who are described as being close to the government of Alexander Kozulin and Sergei Gaidukevich.

Within the past few weeks, two other opposition candidates, Alexander Voitovich and Zenon Pozniak, quit the race, saying they doubted it would be free and fair.

Dr. Oleg Maynayevev is an independent political analyst who heads Belarus first independent think-tank in Minsk. Dr. Maynayevev tells VOA that while he does not believe anyone other than President Lukashenko can realistically win the race, he says the opposition can still make important gains.

"If Milinkevich succeeds to get around 30 percent, people will get information that there is another politician who disagrees with the existing regime, who disagrees with President Lukashenko, who expresses their disagreement and [that] there is a person who concentrates their expectations, who expresses their wills, and this person has some grounds, some capacity, and he could after the election try to go further," he said. "So, people could get hope that there is light at the end of the tunnel."

Still, Maynayevev notes that any gains for the opposition must be looked at in a long-term sense. In other words, he says he sees no quick fix, such as a so-called color revolution for Belarus, like those that swept pro-reform leaders to power in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan over long-standing Soviet-style leaders.

"I don't see too much prospect for that [for] various reasons," he said. "Belarusian society is not ready for that and [a] secondly extremely important factor is that the existing regime in Belarus is much more harsh than in Georgia, or Ukraine, or even Kyrgyzstan. It means, it [the government] will respond much more brutally, including maybe orders if not to kill people, to arrest and beat them and for mass repressions. No doubts about that."

Maynayevev points to the harshness of the pre-election campaign, during which candidates and opposition media have been harassed and, in some cases, shut down or silenced as evidence of his concerns about the future.

The West shares those concerns, accusing the increasingly authoritarian leader of illegally extending his term through a series of rigged elections and referenda and of trying to stamp out domestic opposition, human rights groups, and critical media.

U.S. President George Bush routinely brands Belarus as the last dictatorship in Europe.

Late last week, the Council of Europe urged Mr. Lukashenko to take concrete measures to allow news broadcasts of various sources beyond just pro-government outlets. It also asked him to review the make-up of local election commissions in order to ensure fairness and balance.

President Lukashenko, who was first elected to office in 1994, has promised no major shifts in policy if he is re-elected as expected.

Source: Voice of America; January 30, 2006; <http://www.voanews.com/english/2006-01-30-voa49.cfm>

2. Belarus Council of Ministers adopts Information Protection program

The Belarus Council of Ministers has adopted a state scientific and technical program Information Protection. The program was designed to ensure information protection for the sake of the national security, representatives of the State Science and Technologies Committee told *BelTA*.

According to the source, scientists and specialists have to design and implement reliable instruments to prevent foreign secret services and organized crime from getting unauthorized access to information and to resolve problems of information system protection and counteraction of technical intelligence services. Tasks of the state scientific and technical program are meant to provide a comprehensive solution to problems related to the functioning of the state information protection system, to create information protection technologies and products in order to equip government bodies, state enterprises and organizations with the technologies and to provide technical support to the government's information systems, which are being developed.

The program also aims to render scientific support to the governmental program "Electronic Belarus". The information protection facilities developed within the framework of the program are 1.5-2.5 times cheaper than the analogues produced in the CIS and foreign countries.

New information protection facilities worth 1.5 million and import-substituting products worth \$2 million will be made within the framework of the program. The payback period makes three years. The expected effect from its implementation will depend on the damage prevented by the new protection facilities.

This volume can be qualitative (when payments are made in the bank sphere) and qualitative (in the systems where secret information circulates or in the systems of critical technologies – management of ecological and socially dangerous technological processes).

The State Information Security Center under the President of the Republic of Belarus is the customer of the program. Scientists and specialists of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus and leading establishments of higher education of this republic will implement the program.

Source: AXIS; January 30, 2006; <http://www.axisglobe.com/article.asp?article=633>

3. Belarus: Milinkevich Says He Wants A Country Without Fear

Alyaksandr Milinkevich, the united opposition forces' candidate for the 19 March presidential election in Belarus, held an online news conference hosted by RFE/RL's Belarus Service on 23 January. Below are translated excerpts.

Question:

Don't you think that the majority of Belarusians are all but satisfied with the current state of affairs, that they are afraid of possible changes, that they see no alternative to the system that takes care of them, guarantees jobs and bread for them, and provides them with the possibility to settle accounts with [local] officials?

Alyaksandr Milinkevich:

I see the opposite, and during my many trips to Belarusian regions I have become more and more convinced [of it]. A significant part of the people -- and their number is steadily increasing --

has become fed up with leading a life of indignity and of the uncertainty of the future. People have become fed up with the contract [employment] system that has made slaves out of them, that has made them dependent on the arbitrariness of brainless supervisors. [They have become] sick of the endless lies on television about the subsequent successes of the Belarusian [economic] "miracle," boorishness, and the everyday humiliation of an honest and decent people. [They have become] tired of being kept by the authorities on a short leash. They want to live, not to struggle to survive, they want justice and the rule of law. True, not everyone today can speak openly about this, but a breakthrough is under way.

Question:

If the united opposition suffers a failure -- and nobody doubts that this will be so -- and if street protests fail, what next? Will the opposition remain united, with you as the leader, and will it continue fighting?

Milinkevich:

You need to realize the significance and seriousness of what has happened. It is the first time during Belarus's independence that all healthy democratic forces, despite their [different] political views, have united to change the situation in Belarus for the better, to build a state that will respect its citizens and will be respected in the world. Everybody understands that squabbles between [democratic] parties and organizations play today only into the hands of the ruling regime. Our coalition is a significant achievement of Belarus's democratic forces. We understand perfectly well that the day of 19 March will perhaps not conclude anything. We have agreed to go forward together and, thank God, everybody understands this necessity.

Question:

Don't you want to join the "popular vote" campaign organized by supporters of Zyanon Paznyak? [Editor's note: Presidential contender Zyanon Paznyak, exiled leader of the Conservative Christian Party, has called on opponents of the incumbent president to cast fake ballots on election day and take away the originals, which will be counted later by an independent commission. The goal of this "popular vote" is to find out how many people actually voted against President Alyaksandr Lukashenka in order to substantiate possible claims of vote rigging.]

Milinkevich: I

It is important for us today not to lose people, to bolster their faith in victory. The "popular vote" aims not to activate the democratic-minded electorate but rather to discourage people. Just like a boycott. If we could be sure that we are able to explain the sense of the "popular-vote" idea to the overwhelming majority of Belarusians and tell them where they can take alternative ballots, we could count on some success. But we have no such possibilities today. It is much easier -- and we are calling on everybody to do this -- to rally around the campaign of a single contender who has the support of the united democratic forces.

Question:

How is it possible to raise the political awareness of the population? What are you planning to do to inform [people about your presidential bid], apart from meetings with voters and articles in the independent press?

Milinkevich:

We rely on the remaining independent newspapers, radio [programs] made by Belarusians, samizdat, and the initiatives of active and indifferent people in the regions.

Question: Are you planning to address the Belarusian people with the help of the Russian media?

Milinkevich: There are some projects.

Question: Could you identify the plusses in what has been done by the current authorities?

Milinkevich: As regards the plusses, the country has not been sold out. Second, the country has no extensive unemployment, even if there is some hidden unemployment. I do not consider the timely payment of pensions as the authorities' [plus] -- it is the authorities' duty [to pay pensions timely]. Cleanliness in the cities is a good thing but they are often Potemkin villages.

Question:

What will happen if everything goes according to the 2001 [presidential-election] scenario: Alyaksandr Lukashenka gets 75 percent of the vote, Milinkevich -- no more than 15 percent? There may be no more than 10,000 people on October Square [in Minsk]. They will stay there for several days and go home. And you will be arrested for organizing "mass unrest."

Milinkevich:

If the authorities stage a dishonest election, there will be more people [on the square]. I am sure that there will be no 2001 scenario. Belarus is different already today. And after 19 March it will be a totally different country.

Question:

What will happen after the announcement of the election results from a screen on October Square: Lukashenka 82 percent, Milinkevich 4 percent? Will the crowd roar and tear up the square in front of the presidential office? Or will [U.S. President] George W. Bush lose his temper and launch a missile?

Milinkevich:

We are not working [just] to hear from the mouth of [Central Election Commission Chairwoman Lidziya] Yarmoshyna that we have lost. All of us are realists. We have our feet on the ground. Our goal is to change the social mood, to prove that the current authorities cannot win a democratic election.

Source: RFE/RL; January 30, 2006; <http://www.rferl.org>

4. Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus Approves Information Protection Scheme

Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus has recently approved the Information protection scheme. The national programme is aimed at creation of statewide information security, development of new technologies for information protection.

It is expected, that information protection technologies developed in the framework of the programme will be 1,5-2,5 times cheaper than similar foreign products. The planned volume of production totals \$3,5 mln. The investments are to be repaid in 3 years.

State Information Security Center will coordinate implementation of the programme. National Academy of Science and other national higher educational institutions will participate in the scheme.

Source: Mikhail Doroshevich, E-Belarus.ORG; January 29, 2005; www.e-belarus.org

5. Initiative Groups Promote Six Presidential Candidates in Belarus

Belarusian territorial election commissions have received signatures collected by six voter initiative groups to promote candidates for the country's presidential elections in March, the Central Election Commission secretary said Friday.

Nikolai Lazovik said the deadline for submitting signatures was January 27.

Incumbent president Alexander Lukashenko's initiative group gathered 1.9 million signatures in support of his candidacy, the largest number of signatures.

Lukashenko, dubbed "Europe's last dictator" by the Western media, has ruled Belarus since 1994.

Opposition candidate Alexander Milinkevich's group gathered 198,559 signatures, social democrat party Gramada leader Alexander Kozulin's group gathered 156,618, and liberal democrat leader Sergei Gaidukevich's group submitted 150,319 signatures.

The groups of two other candidates, former deputy Valery Frolov and Belarusian People's Front leader Zenon Poznyak submitted 58,775 and 719 signatures respectively.

The Central Election Committee only registers candidates with 100,000 or more supporting signatures.

Source: Olesya Luchaninova, RIA Novosti; January 28, 2005; <http://en.rian.ru>

6. Belarus Leader Orders Ban Against Protests

Authoritarian Belarus leader Alexander Lukashenko warned activists late Friday that any protests over the country's upcoming presidential elections would meet a harsh government response. In an interview carried on all Belarusian TV channels, Lukashenko vowed that he would not allow the type of mass street protests that brought opposition leaders to power in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan.

"There will be no disturbances. No one will climb onto the barricades to fight Lukashenko," he said. "If there are provocations, we'll give them such a going-over they won't know what's hit them," Lukashenko threatened.

He has ruled the nation of 10 million since 1994, quashing opposition groups and independent media, leading Western nations to dub him "Europe's last dictator" and treat him as a pariah.

The Belarusian leader also turned on Western diplomats, saying he would not allow any interference in his ex-Soviet republic's internal affairs. "The embassies should know, that they can be out of here at 24 hours' notice and no one will help them," he said.

Lukashenko, who has forged increasingly close ties with Russia since the wave of revolutions in other post-Soviet states, said he was confident of Russian Vladimir Putin's support in the March 19 election.

"President Putin wants Lukashenko to stay, he wants to see Lukashenko in Belarus," he said. Lukashenko has extended his time in office and strengthened his powers through elections and plebiscites denounced by Western governments and his opponents as fraudulent.

Belarus' beleaguered opposition has united around Alexander Milinkevich, the founder of the country's largest network of non-governmental organizations, as its candidate for challenging Lukashenko, despite widespread doubts about the vote's legitimacy.

Source: Yuras Karmanau, *WashingtonPost.Com*; January 27, 2006;
<http://www.washingtonpost.com>

7. Opposition Candidate In Belarus Pulls Out Of Presidential Race

Opposition candidate Sergei Skrebets has withdrawn from Belarus' upcoming presidential election, saying a fair vote is impossible.

The Associated Press cites the candidate's campaign chief as the source of the report. Skrebets was one of several candidates trying to unseat President Alyaksandr Lukashenka in the 19 March vote. The candidates and outside observers say they doubt the vote will be free or fair. Skrebets has been charged with economic crimes and jailed since May. He says the charges are politically motivated to prevent him from campaigning.

Source: RFE/RL; January 26, 2006; <http://www.rferl.org>

8. Lidziya Yarmoshyna: "Internet Abuse Is a Problem..."

Nowadays the participants of the election campaign who "use the Internet as a means of propaganda cannot be punished", but "soon the situation will change", - claimed the head of Central Election Commission Lidziya Yarmoshyna in her interview to *Zvyazda* on January 26, 2006.

The head of CEC also warned that distribution of samizdat may cause problems for candidates. "Internet abuse is a problem typical of many countries where it is widely used. Those states have laws that prevent uncontrolled propaganda through the Internet. I think our country will take into account their experience in this field", - assured Yarmoshyna.

The head of CEC noted that all candidates will receive 2300 base amounts from the budget (about 30 thousand USD) for their advertisement campaign. "Moreover, candidates will be able to publish their programmes and make a speech on TV and on the radio. Of course it is not much. But it seems to me that in Western countries candidates are not given an hour of free airtime".

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

REGIONAL

9. Ukraine Protests Alleged Seizure of Journalists' Videotapes by Belarus Authorities

Ukraine lodged a protest Saturday over what it said was the seizure of journalists' videotapes by authorities in neighboring Belarus, whose authoritarian leader has warned there will be foreign attempts to influence the upcoming presidential election.

In a note delivered to Belarusian diplomats, the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry expressed concern and asked Belarus to return the tapes.

Belarusian border guards seized three videotapes containing reports about the election to be held March 19 from a crew from Ukraine's Inter television, according to one of the journalists, Oleksiy Ivanov. He said the journalists were told the tapes could contain evidence of anti-government activity.

The Ukrainian Foreign Ministry said Belarusian diplomats promised the incident would be investigated. Belarusian Embassy officials could not be reached for comment.

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, harshly criticized by Western critics for his intolerance of dissent, is running for re-election and has said he expects a wave of propaganda against himself and his government as the March vote approaches. Under a new law, any journalist found to have discredited Belarus or its leadership faces up to two years in prison.

Belarusian authorities are wary of events in neighboring Ukraine, where a Western-leaning leader came to power a year ago after massive opposition protests over a fraud-marred election. Lukashenko, in power for more than a decade after elections that were deemed illegitimate by Western governments, has vowed not to allow such a scenario to occur in Belarus.

Source: Kyiv Post; January 30, 2006; <http://www.kyivpost.com/>

10. Belarus President Says Union With Russia Based On Equality

Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka has said that a proposed union with Russia would be built on the principles of equality.

Speaking in an interview on Belarusian state television on 27 January, Lukashenka said the creation of a unified state would be "time- and effort-consuming."

The Belarusian president said that there are also unresolved issues to be considered, for example the approval of a single constitution and a shared currency.

Belarus and Russia have been speaking about a union since the mid-1990s, but integration efforts have often stagnated. // (ITAR-TASS)

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

11. Russia-Belarus Union To Have Common Currency Starting From 2008

The Union of Russia and Belarus will have a common currency starting from January 1, 2008, representatives of the Interbank Currency Council said on Friday. They were received by Tatarstan President Mintimer Shaimiyev.

"The agreement signed in 2000 says that the Russian ruble shall become the legal tender in Belarus starting from January 1, 2005, and the Union will have a common currency starting from January 1, 2008," Belarusian Central Bank Chairman Pyotr Prokopovich said.

"Equal terms in the economic and customs affairs are still to be ensured, so the two governments and banks have drafted a common action plan," he said. "Thirty important measures will be taken in the Belarusian banking sphere this year alone."

"We have discussed issues, which will promote the unification of the credit and monetary policy. We have defined principles, approaches, instruments and mechanisms, which will quickly level terms. Our clients should enjoy equal terms by the time the currency is endorsed," Russian Central Bank head Sergei Ignatyev said.

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

12. Agreement on Equal Rights of Citizens of Belarus and Russia Is Evidence of Real Integration

The important agreements on ensuring equal rights of citizens of Belarus and Russia, signed during the meeting of the Supreme State Council in St. Petersburg, is an evidence of the real integration between the two states, Foreign Minister of this republic Sergei Martynov told reporters.

He has reminded that the framework agreement on the equal rights of citizens of Belarus and Russia was signed in 1999. "Since that time experts have been working hard. Today the level of relations between both the leaders and the countries on the whole makes settlement of the problems concerning the equal rights a reality", Sergei Martynov said.

"The fact the agreement was signed is the best answer to those who think that the Belarusian-Russian integration is slowing down", Sergei Martynov added. "It proves progress in integration

between Belarus and Russia. Today the main task of the Foreign Ministry and our embassy is to do everything to make the agreements work in real life”, Sergei Martynov underlined.

When answering questions of reporters the Foreign Minister expressed confidence the agreements will start working in the current year.

Source: The National Centre of Legal Information of the Republic of Belarus; January 27, 2006; <http://law.by/work/Eng/>

13. Putin's Nuclear Energy Proposals Promising - Lukashenko

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko praised the nuclear power generation project proposed by Russian leader Vladimir Putin.

"It's an excellent project" by the Russian president, Lukashenko said at a joint news conference after the summit of the Eurasian Economic Community on Wednesday.

It is promising and can be fashioned as a plan of work within the EurAsEc framework, he said. Speaking at the summit, Putin stated Russia's resolve to develop cooperation within the scope of EurAsEc in the sphere of global energy security.

"Cooperation in this field opens real prospects for all. Concrete plans of expanding cooperation between companies in the nuclear sectors of our countries are being developed, while taking into account the accords with the Kazakh president," he said.

Uzbekistan's joining EurAsEc provides additional opportunities for building a reliable nuclear fuel element of the energy basis for a long-term perspective.

A wider use of the EurAsEc potential is particularly pressing, as the demand for quality energy supplies steadily grows. Shortages of organic fuels and environmental issues come to the forefront of the international agenda, the president underlined.

The head of the Russian state called for creating a prototype of a global infrastructure embracing the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEc) that all the countries interested in developing atomic energy for civilian purposes would have equal access to.

This prototype will be created under reliable guarantees for maintaining the nuclear nonproliferation regimes, Putin said.

"Its backbone element will include a network of centers providing services in nuclear fuel cycle, including uranium enrichment, and they will be controlled by the International Atomic Energy Agency and will operate on the basis of nondiscriminatory access," Putin said.

"Russia has already made public its initiative in that area and it's ready to set up a center of that kind on its territory. We'll offer exactly that approach to the G8 during our rotating presidency there and to all our partners in civilian nuclear projects," he said.

The Russian president is confident that the decisions made at the EurAsEc summit will influence the energy situation in the world, including in the sphere of nuclear power generation.

Answering reporters' questions, Putin urged them to pay more attention to summit results. "The accords reached in St. Petersburg will directly influence the energy policy within the EurAsEc framework and the energy situation in the world, including in the sphere of nuclear energy," the Russian president underlined.

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

14. Russia Asks Belarus To Confirm Acceptability of New Ambassador

Russia has asked Belarus to confirm the acceptability of its new ambassador Alexander Surikov, a Belarussian Foreign Ministry source told Interfax on Thursday.

"Surikov has received approval of the Russian parliament. The request was made to Belarus yesterday," he said.

A decision will be made "within a couple of days," the source said.

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

INTERNATIONAL

15. Media Sustainability Index 2005: Russia, Uzbekistan and Belarus Headline Backsliding in Eurasia

IREX announces the release of the Media Sustainability Index (MSI) 2005, which provides the only comprehensive qualitative and quantitative analysis of media development

January 30, 2006 – IREX announces the release of the Media Sustainability Index (MSI) 2005, which provides the only comprehensive qualitative and quantitative analysis of media development in twenty countries across Europe and Eurasia. Now in its fifth year, the new MSI highlights the gradual yet sustained improvements in the media environments of Croatia and other countries in Southeast Europe.

Meanwhile, analysis shows how Belarus, Uzbekistan, and Russia have increasingly repressed independent media within their borders. Despite the positive effects of the "color revolutions" in Georgia and Ukraine on their media sectors, the MSI indicates that post-revolutionary euphoria must be followed by further media improvements to ward off stagnation or backsliding.

Mark Pomar, President of IREX, noted: "The development of independent media is often a long process. However, this year's MSI clearly shows that countries, which embrace media reform and welcome a professional, pluralistic free press can show dramatic results leading to economic progress and democracy."

The MSI, funded by the US Agency for International Development (USAID), offers a valuable tool for media professionals, public officials, scholars and others concerned about media and its role in democratic and economic reform.

The Index analyzes freedom of speech, plurality of media available to citizens, professional journalism standards, business sustainability of media, and the efficacy of institutions that support independent media. The report features country-by-country rankings using a proven methodology and detailed input from local and international media professionals.

The annual study also highlights and compares trends from 2001 to 2005 to show where countries have improved, where backsliding has occurred, and what can be expected for the future of independent media in the region.

IREX is an international nonprofit organization providing leadership and innovative programs to improve the quality of education, strengthen independent media, and foster pluralistic civil society development.

*Source: News Agency AKIpress; January 30, 2005;
http://www.akipress.com/_en_news.php?id=15552*

16. Active and Cohesive. Tomorrow's EU Policy Towards Belarus

This new report by the Stefan Batory Foundation analyses the situation in and around Belarus on the eve of presidential elections in March 2006 and proposes a new EU strategy towards Belarus.

The question of Belarus has become one of the most important problems of EU policy towards its neighbours due to three fundamental circumstantial factors:

Firstly, the enlargement of the EU in 2004 has changed the position of Belarus in the EU perspective. From 2004, Belarus has bordered the EU. The border stretches more than 1000 km and three member countries (Latvia, Lithuania and Poland) are neighbours with Belarus. In this context, a lack of consistent EU strategy towards Belarus, both before and after the enlargement of 2004, becomes much more visible.

Secondly, the colour revolutions, especially the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, have changed the situation in post-Soviet space, including the space of Belarus. The democratization processes in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova impact both directly and indirectly the situation in Belarus. A section of Belarusian society is looking towards these three countries and is waiting to see what will happen. Their successful transformation would provide concrete proof that Belarus can also become a normal, European state.

Thirdly, last but not least, are the coming presidential elections in Belarus in March 2006. Belarus has been a self-isolated, authoritarian regime since 1996 and has remained outside the Council of Europe. But presidential elections in 2006 can create a crucial 'novelty' in the form of a third term of Lukashenko as president. This would be a unique example in Europe, similar to dictatorships in post-soviet Central Asian countries, and is not acceptable for Europeans. It is self-evident that the EU cannot ignore those three challenges and should respond adequately.

However, the above-mentioned circumstances cannot explain all concerns for Belarus held by the EU. In addition, there are at least four other reasons why the EU (both European institutions and Member States) should be interested in the issue of Belarus:

The human rights' abuses carried out by the autocratic regime of Lukashenko constitute the first reason. Belarusian society has a right to democracy. The majority of Belarusians, especially the young generation, is against a third term for Lukashenko and Belarusian society is also for co-operation with the EU. The EU has to answer to Belarusian aspirations. This is a test of the credibility of the EU as a provider of democracy in Europe.

The question of the EU's soft security forms the second reason for EU interest in Belarus. An undemocratic country like Belarus is not a credible partner for co-operation in the JHA (for example, the fight against organised crime, and the trafficking in human beings) and in ecology. Belarus under the Lukashenko regime cannot develop any cross-border co-operation, which helps build security between the EU and its neighbours. There is an increasingly visible gap between the positive development of cross-border co-operation between, on the one hand, EU Member States like Poland, Slovakia and Ukraine and, on the other, Member States (for example, Lithuania and Poland) and Belarus.

Thirdly, the unclear relations between the Lukashenko regime and countries such as Iran could present a threat to the security of the EU. The Belarusian authorities seek contacts with autocratic regimes across the world. The Lukashenko regime also co-operates with them on security/military issues and the sale of weapons and military equipment to rogue states and other autocratic regimes.

Fourthly, Belarus is a challenge to EU-Russia relations. The ruling Russian political elite looks at EU policy towards Belarus as an example of policy towards non-democratic regimes. This is important to the elite due to the problems to take place in 2008 (the next presidential elections in Russia) and the increasingly visible lack of democracy in Russia. For the Russian elite, the

presidential elections in Belarus in March 2006 will also be a test of EU determination in its policy towards autocratic regimes. Ambiguous EU policy towards Lukashenko could be a signal for the ruling elite in Moscow that the EU is unable to make consistent policy. A lack of determination towards Lukashenko would demonstrate a lack of objection to the deterioration of the situation in Russia in next few years.

It should be underlined that the development of the situation in Belarus is unpredictable. Whilst on the one hand, Lukashenko can continue to be president for many years, political changes may also take place in the next few years or even in the next few months. The success of the congress of opposition forces in October 2005 and the choice of a common opposition candidate can be seen as a signal of the opposition's rejuvenation. Therefore, the EU should be prepared for several scenarios and rethink its policy towards Belarus in the next few months.

This paper is divided into two parts. The first part is not a comprehensive description of different aspects of the situation in and around Belarus, but rather an indispensable diagnosis for how best to build EU strategy towards Belarus, and includes four key elements: the internal situation in Belarus, the Russia factor, US policy towards Belarus and EU policy towards Belarus. The second part of the paper, concentrating on EU strategy towards Belarus, is focused on three aspects of future EU policy towards Belarus: a new philosophy, activities and tools needed for the implementation of EU activities.

It should be added that several papers on EU–Belarus relations have appeared in recent months. The Pontis Foundation in Slovakia presented a policy brief in March 2005, the Association of International Affairs in Prague and the Stefan Batory Foundation in Warsaw published a policy brief in April 2005, the Chaillot paper concerning Belarus, prepared by the Institute for Security Studies in Paris, also appeared in November 2005, and the Centre for European Reform in London devoted an article to EU–Belarus relations in December 2005. These articles are evidence of the growing importance of the Belarusian issue in 2006.

Source: EurActiv.Com; January 31, 2006; <http://www.euractiv.com>

17. EU Warns Belarus Sanctions Could Follow Presidential Elections

European Union foreign ministers say they are ready to impose sanctions on Belarus if the March presidential election is seen as being rigged.

In a statement issued in Brussels Monday, the 25 ministers said they are prepared to act if Belarus fails to uphold international standards in the electoral process, Radio Free Europe said Monday.

EU External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner said the measures could include visa restrictions and economic sanctions.

Hardline President Aleksandr Lukashenko is standing for a third term, and opposition politicians say they are coming under increased pressure in the run-up to the March 19 poll.

Belarusian opposition leader Aleksandr Milinkevich has said he has faced serious obstacles while campaigning.

Milinkevich met with Ferrero-Waldner and some EU foreign ministers on the sidelines of the EU ministerial meeting in Brussels.

Source: MosNews.Com, January 31, 2006; www.mosnews.com

18. Belarus Opposition Leader Spells Out Goals in Brussels

The leader of Belarus's main opposition coalition, Alexander Milinkevich, is holding a series of high-level but low-key meetings in Brussels. He has widespread political backing from the EU institutions.

The leader of the unified democratic opposition forces of Belarus, Alexander Milinkevich, believes that bringing democracy to his country after the scheduled presidential elections on 19 March is an absolute priority for Belarus, which currently "is a country in trouble". Milinkevich, 58, is in Brussels for a series of high-level meetings ahead of the elections, where he and two other opposition candidates will challenge the 12-year-old autocratic rule of incumbent President Alexander Lukashenka.

On 30 January, Milinkevich met with EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana, External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner and European Parliament President Josep Borrell. He also attended the meeting of the EU-25 foreign ministers and met with leading NGO representatives.

However, the meetings generally received only modest publicity as the EU aims to avoid being directly associated with any individual candidates or parties.

"We have never wanted a revolution, but many will go out in the streets [in Belarus] if the authorities are not intelligent enough," Milinkevich said, stressing that this in itself will bring the demise of Lukashenka's regime closer. Milinkevich has reiterated his firm belief that his opposition coalition of the country's communist, green and social-democrat forces will stay together in what promises to be a prolonged process of political transition.

In a statement, the EU-25 foreign ministers reiterated their "deep concern at the deteriorating situation" in Belarus and urged the Belarusian authorities to ensure that the 19 March elections are conducted in a free and fair manner. Failure to "uphold international standards [...] in particular those of the OSCE [Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe]" will result in sanctions, the ministers warned. EP President Borrell also assured Milinkevich of the MEPs' "full backing" to this cause.

Source: EurActiv.Com; January 31, 2006; <http://www.euractiv.com>

19. EU: Ministers To Discuss Belarus, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq

The agenda of the monthly EU foreign ministers' meeting in Brussels today is topped by discussions on the pre-electoral situation in Belarus, the future of Afghanistan, the nuclear standoff with Iran, and the EU's future ties with Iraq.

The EU foreign ministers' debate on Belarus will be accompanied by an appearance at the meeting by the joint opposition candidate Alyaksandr Milinkevich.

Milinkevich will also meet today with European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso, EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana, EU External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner, and European Parliament President Josep Borrell.

Free And Fair Poll

An EU diplomat who asked not to be named said on 27 January that Milinkevich's high-level reception is "not unusual" for the EU. The official said the EU regularly meets opposition representatives from other countries, but said that does not mean the EU endorses them personally. "We don't back political parties; we back principles," noted the diplomat.

European Commission spokeswoman Emma Udwin told RFE/RL on 27 January that the foreign ministers' discussion of Belarus will be held in the context of grave concerns about the situation in the country.

"The EU remains deeply concerned about the deteriorating situation in Belarus as regards democracy, political freedoms, and respect for human rights," Udwin said. "We're watching the run-up to the [19 March presidential] election very, very closely, and as we have said at the end of the last year the EU has not ruled out taking further restrictive measures if international standards are not upheld."

In November, EU foreign ministers threatened to take unspecified "restrictive measures" against Belarus if President Alyaksandr Lukashenka does not ensure the March polls are free and fair.

The EU ministers are expected to adopt a statement today that will reiterate the threat.

For a few years now, the EU has enforced a travel ban on a number of leading Belarusian officials who are held to be personally responsible for repressive measures against specific opposition figures and pro-democracy protesters.

Carrot-And-Stick Approach

EU member states also keep to a minimum bilateral political contacts with the Belarusian regime, leaving them to the rotating presidency and Solana's office.

Udwin on 27 January highlighted one rare bit of "good news," however.

"In the meantime there has been one piece of good news, which is that the Belarusian authorities have agreed to allow an OSCE observer mission to operate," Udwin said. "That is something we welcome very much; it's something we've pushed for. And what we now want to be certain [of] is that mission will be allowed to do its work without being impeded and that all eligible candidates are allowed to register, are allowed to campaign, that reporters are allowed to operate freely. These are things we'll be watching very closely."

Today's EU statement is also likely to note that should the Belarusian authorities show goodwill and allow free and democratic elections to take place, then the EU would seek to improve relations with the country.

Officials on 27 January said "some member states" -- widely believed to be headed by Poland -- will argue for travel facilitation for Belarusian citizens. However, officials in Brussels said that while improving contacts with the Belarusian society is an important objective, the EU cannot offer easier visa rules to Belarus while it denies them to countries with which it is on much better terms.

One official said the European Commission today will "remind" member states that under current common visa rules they can already do more. For example, they may waive or reduce visa fees.

Excerpt from

Source: Ahto Lobjakas, RFE/RL; January 30, 2006; <http://www.rferl.org>

20. President of Belarus Accuses Western Countries

President of Belarus, Aleksandr Lukashenko, affirmed that the parties in opposition received funds from a number of western countries, to shake the stability of the country, after the forthcoming presidential elections, due on March 19, 2006.

In an interview given to Belarus TV, Lukashenko, said the half Million fund was provided by western countries and the United States and representatives of the parties in opposition were

operating from Brussels and Paris, given wages and encouraged not acknowledge the results of the forthcoming elections. " The situation in Belarus will not develop in the way Ukraine wishes as authorities here are determined to confront any acts targeting the country's stability", Lukashenko explained, threatening to take immediate action against the embassies of the countries dealing with the opposition in case unrest erupts after elections.

Source: Bahrain News Agency; January 28, 2006; <http://english.bna.bh/?ID=40505>

21. Russian Senators Blast PACE Resolution on Belarus

Members of the Federation Council upper house of the Russian parliament on Friday criticized the PACE resolution on the situation in Belarus.

The document, adopted by the PACE session in Strasbourg, is not only aimed at international isolation of Belarus, but also hurts Russian interests, senators said.

Deputy Chairman of the FC committee on international affairs Vasily Likhachyov said "the authors of the resolution will obtain unproductive results in the long run."

In effect, the document is about "a regime of isolation and dictates with respect to the country that never distanced itself from the European civilization or values," Likhachyov said.

PACE came up with similar statements before, although disputed issues should be resolved only through dialogue and civilized talks.

Chairman of the house committee on CIS affairs Vadim Gustov said the PACE resolution is a blow not only at Minsk, but also at Moscow. Many western countries resent Belarus going its own way, unlike Georgia, Gustov said.

The Belarusian economy is closely linked with Russia's, and "it seems that the West does not want our countries to be strong," he said.

Deputy Chairman of the committee on economic policy Igor Ivanov elaborated on this point. "Russia and Belarus are closely integrated; we are moving towards unified governance of the Union State, which should strengthen both countries," he underlined.

PACE's unfriendly move with respect to Minsk is of no use to Moscow, Ivanov noted, adding that economic interests underlie such moves.

"Competitors on the world market don't want large players; it's far easier to deal with small ones. The PACE resolution therefore is aimed against Russia, too," he said.

Valery Fyodorov, deputy chairman of the committee on constitutional legislation, said the PACE resolution was "a big folly and the way to nowhere."

You cannot strike out a whole country from the world history, whose people fought heroically during World War II and suffered great losses, said Fyodorov, a member of the PACE committee for human rights and legal issues.

One cannot carry out an irresponsible isolating attack against this nation. These measures will not yield construction results, the senator said.

Lawmakers from the State Duma lower house of the Russian parliament who were present at the session in Strasbourg, also criticized the PACE resolution on Belarus.

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

22. EC To Launch Broadcasting Project in Belarus

The European Commission (EC) has selected a media consortium to undertake a €2m broadcasting project in Belarus. The goal of the project is to increase access in Belarus to independent sources of news and information.

The consortium is led by Media Consulta of Germany and includes implementing partners from Poland (European Radio for Belarus), Lithuania (Radio Baltic Wave), Belarus (journalists and NGOs) and Russia (RTVI). Content from these partners will be broadcast via satellite from Germany into Belarus.

The two-year project will cover radio and TV broadcasts, internet, support to the Belarusian written press and training of journalists.

Broadcasting will be half in Belarusian and half in Russian. The first TV broadcasts are scheduled to begin in February. The EC wants to have the programme in full force before the presidential election on 19 March. Special live programming will be broadcast on radio and TV before and after the elections.

Independent journalists in Belarus have reportedly faced increasing difficulties in recent years. The state-owned electronic and print media are under tight administrative control by the federal government. Directors of TV and radio stations and editors-in-chief of state-run newspapers are appointed directly by the President of Belarus.

The EU project follows on a smaller broadcasting project currently underway, which was implemented by Deutsche Welle with an investment of €138,000. In 2005, the EU earmarked €8.7m for support of democracy and human rights in Belarus.

*Source: Ben Tanner, Digital Media News for Europe; January 27, 2006;
<http://www.dmeurope.com/default.asp?ArticleID=12971>*

23. Presidential Election in Belarus: Lukashenko Must Ensure a Free and Fair Electoral Campaign

In the run-up to the presidential election in Belarus on March 2006, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) today called on the Lukashenko regime to refrain from “obstructing the free and fair running of the electoral campaign”, and take “positive action to ensure that pluralist information can be provided”.

At the end of an urgent debate, the Assembly deplored that freedom of expression is blatantly flouted, and noted that in the last two years “the situation has not improved but worsened”. It called on member states to give “immediate financial and if necessary logistical support to independent broadcasting to Belarus from abroad”.

The Assembly regretted that to date there could be no change in its policy towards the Belarusian regime. In order to renew dialogue, the parliamentarians said they expected “clear and conclusive signs” such as the possibility for all candidates to have the same freedom to campaign.

The adopted text welcomes the recent election of the single candidate of the Unified Democratic Forces, Alexander Milinkevich, who took part in the debate. The members encouraged these forces to maintain their unity, irrespective of ideological differences, in the aftermath of the election, irrespective of its results.

The parliamentarians asked for the immediate release of political prisoners, the repeal of the anti-revolution law, and the conduct of an independent investigation into the fate of disappeared persons.

Vladimir Konoplev, Chairman of the Chamber of Representatives of the National Assembly of the Republic of Belarus, took also part in the debate.

Source: Noticias.info; January 27, 2006; <http://www.noticias.info/>

24. PACE Proposes Isolating 'Lukashenko's Regime' - Resolution

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) has spoken in favor of isolating 'Lukashenko's regime,' while supporting the democratic opposition.

The adopted PACE resolution stresses the fact that should the Belarusian authorities give clear and obvious signs of their readiness to move closer to European standards in the area of democracy, supremacy of the law and human rights, the Assembly will then be ready to reopen appropriate channels of cooperation.

The Assembly spoke in favor of supporting more actively democratic forces.

The resolution was adopted after the Assembly discussed the situation in Belarus in the wake of the parliamentary elections.

A total of 81 MPs voted for the resolution, with 15 against and four abstaining.

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

HUMAN RIGHTS & INDEPENDENT MEDIA

25. Valery Levaneuski On Hunger Strike In Isolation Ward

A political prisoner, leader of the Strike Committee of Vendors Valery Levaneuski went on hunger strike in a secure lock-up. The Charter'97 press center was informed about that by the son of the political prisoner, Uladzimir Levaneuski.

As said by Uladzimir Levaneuski, he was informed about the hunger strike of his father by a former prisoner released from Ivatsevichy colony number 22, where Valery Levaneuski is serving a sentence.

The prisoner told that Valery Levaneuski was on hunger strike since January 7 for more than two weeks. After that the hunger strike was stopped, and resumed after incarceration into an isolation ward.

Valery Levaneuski was placed to an isolation ward for an attempt to send out of prison a complaint against the colony administration.

Yesterday, as we have informed, former prisoners told that about 30 prisoners went on hunger strike in the colony number 22 of Ivatsevichy, Brest region. They protest against violations of their rights, and against unjustified penalties and provocations by workers and administration of the colony.

The administration and the Internal Affairs Ministry do not comment on this reports.

Source: Charter97; January 31, 2006; <http://www.charter97.org/eng/>

26. Special Services Using Telephone Harassment

Pressure on Zubr activists continues in Vileyka (Minsk region). Special services use different methods. Unidentified persons call to Zubr activists and demand to stop their public activities or just say nothing.

Zubr activists also notice different situations that show interest of special services to them.

“Our activists notice that some people follow them. Sometimes you suddenly lose connection while using home or mobile phone. Internet connection is lost every 5 minutes. I wonder if our special forces have no more important work than telephone harassment or spying on youth”, said Zubr activist.

Source: ZUBR; January 31, 2005; <http://www.zubr-belarus.com/>

27. The Truth -Is a Prisoner of Conscience № 1 in Belarus

The opponents of the ruling power are not allowed to show up on TV. The same banning sign is in Belarusian radio. They are not interviewed and asked for comments by journalists of the official newspapers and magazines. For 12 years the same face and the same moustache have been on air. For 12 years on the papers of governmental press one can find the same position and the same point of view.

Why is the power afraid of public discussion in Mass Media? Who is it afraid of? Milinkevich? Kalyakin? Lebedko? The power is afraid of the truth! And it's true.

This article – is a discussion with Lukashenko and his surrounding of a number of topical questions (in absentia, of course, because they are scared of the open and true one). The questions, that don't have political context, the questions, which are the power's pride. Let's try to look from all the points of view at them. This means in comparison: how do others deal with them? The ones, with whom we have had common starting conditions in 80-th. And let's try to analyze and comprehend its “achievements”.

“We don't have unemployment”.

Why isn't it a thing to be proud of? Statistics say that its level is 1.6%. But the truth is that it is not the number of unemployed, but the percent of people, who have been registered in the employment service. It appears that people, that don't have any job, are not motivated to be in a hurry to the labor registry office. It's because the dole is... 17 USD. But even this trifling sum will be yours only after spending some days in doing social work. But if unemployed would have been paid 240 USD, as in Poland is, I assure you, the numbers would be completely different. But it is not the whole truth. The official statistics have missed 900 thousand people. Where are they? What are they doing? Not finding an adequate job in their Motherland, 400 of our fellow countryman have gone abroad to search a better life. The role of government in their employment is zero. Moreover, these citizens, that have been pulled out from the country, bring to Belarus about billion of dollars annually, that makes 5% of gross domestic product. So, when the official statistics faces the truth, the feeling of pride for the government turns into ashes. And it doesn't warm.

“The average payment is 200 USD.”

According to Belarusian TV version – it is a big government's achievement. Judging by our neighbor's numbers – it is quite a moderate result. In Lithuania this number is 460, in Poland – 780 USD. The far we go the more interesting everything becomes. For the last 5 years dollar has reduced its value for almost a half. This means, that today's 200 – are equivalent to 120 USD in 2000. According to the Ministry of Statistic's data in the middle of 2005 56% of workers have been earning less than 400 thousand rubles. It practically means that after subtraction of taxes and rates most part of population has the income, that is more then poverty index, but less, than a survival minimum.

If you don't find two 100 USD bills in your pocket – that means, that somebody else has them. It's true. Beginning from 1999, the difference between the payments of some groups of population is becoming more and more evident. The leadership belongs not to those, whose labor is most effective and useful for the country, but to those who is directly responsible for the holding of

power by Shklov-Mogilev clan. The words are harsh, but true. This means that instead of economical, political criteria of labor praising are in use. For example, in Lithuania this difference is 1.1 times. In the rank tables the most highly-paid workers – are Central Election Committee's officials. Their payment is 4.85 times bigger, than the average for Belarus.

"We have the best social security."

It has been said very noted, but is it true? The average pension in Belarus is 100 USD. In this field the gap between us and our neighbors is not that big, as it is in payment, but still it exists. In Baltic – 150 dollars, in Poland – 400. But even such a number is impossible for Belarusian economy. The liabilities of our enterprises to the Fund of social security have increased for 60 billion of rubles for the last half of the year.

We have a lot of social help, but it is very little. It is big in the number of different bonuses, but it is almost nothing in money. Social pension is 33 USD. It is not a life, it is a school of survival. The help to the families, whose income is less than survival minimum is 12-13 USD. It is a price of document package and the time of visiting different services. Only 3 % of citizens, having the income less than survival minimum, are using this privilege.

How many noted words have been said about our health care accessibility and advancement? But in actual fact, spending for healthcare, counting on a single man, in Lithuania is 1.6 and in Estonia 2.7 times bigger, than in Belarus.

"We almost don't have any corruption."

These brave statements remind us about public speeches of soviet people, that there is no sex in USSR. One can remember that Lukashenko has got the power in 1994, using the fight with corruption slogan. 12 years have passed. So is there a corruption in Belarus? The answer is given by the heads of private enterprises. During the social pole, 85% of them have claimed, that they have to give bribes regularly.

"What has the power, brother?" – has asked a hero of a popular movie. It is in truth! What do I, my family, my neighbors, most of the Belarusian citizens want? To live in truth. But the deal is that the truth is persecuted. Some like to speak about it, without using it. It is ashamed of. That's why they prefer not to show it on TV. It has no place in the governmental structures. It is in an exile. It is a prisoner of conscience № 1 in Belarus. What shall we do? Release it! And let us do it on the 19-th of March 2006.

Source: Anatoly Lebedko, United Civil Party: January 30, 2006; <http://www.ucpb.org/eng>

28. Daddy's Source

The Ukrainian gas crisis threw light upon Russia's fuelling of Alexander Lukashenko's despotic Belarusian regime, writes Tom Parfitt

A crust of blood had already formed on Vassily Grodnikov's crushed skull by the time his brother broke down the door of his cottage and found his corpse.

The 67-year old writer had got drunk and fallen on his head, prosecutors in Belarus later concluded. "It's absurd," says Mr. Grodnikov's brother, Nikolai, who shakes with fear at speaking openly for the first time about the death. "The postmortem showed there wasn't a drop of alcohol in his body."

As Europe wakes up to the Kremlin's stranglehold on its natural gas supplies, a stark light has been shone on how the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, does business with the other independent states that once made up the Soviet Union.

Moscow's demand for Ukraine to pay a fivefold increase for deliveries of Russian gas earlier this month was widely seen as punishment for Kiev's push to join the European Union and Nato since its "orange revolution" last winter.

What is less known is the flip side to this gritty political game: the Kremlin is propping up a despotic pro-Moscow regime on the edge of Europe that only survives because it gets extremely cheap gas from Russia.

Belarus - wedged between its giant neighbour and Poland - looks and feels like a microcosm of the old Soviet Union, complete with bad suits, big squares and ruthless KGB oppression. It is run by President Alexander Lukashenko, a paternalistic hardliner who brooks no dissent.

"Lukashenko has put fear into this country in a way that hasn't been seen since Stalin," says the Belarussian opposition leader, Alexander Milinkevich, a physicist who plots strategy against his nemesis in a mouldering apartment in the suburbs of the capital, Minsk. "He wouldn't last a month without Putin giving him cheap energy."

Lukashenko uses the crushing weight of an 80% state-run economy to exert almost total control, says Milinkevich. Gas supplies from Russia at \$47 per 1,000 cubic metres (compared to the \$230 market price that Moscow demanded from Ukraine) keep Soviet-era factories creaking along. And there are no inconvenient oligarchs to fund the opposition.

But while Belarus's GDP is on the rise, the eerily spotless streets and facades of Minsk conceal a dirty underworld of persecution, killings and disappearances.

Mr Grodnikov's alleged murder comes as Lukashenko's hardline regime twists a tourniquet on the slightest sign of dissent in the run up to presidential elections on March 19.

The writer's body was discovered recently at the cottage outside Minsk where he wrote articles about state corruption for Belarus's last surviving daily independent newspaper, Narodnaya Volya (People's Will).

His brother, Nikolai, thinks he knows why he died. "They killed him because they are terrified of a revolution, and he found out about their plans to squash any protest," he said.

Guardian Unlimited has learned Mr. Grodnikov was investigating rumours of police plans to secretly detain opposition activists at a dacha settlement for senior interior ministry officials near the capital. He died on the day he planned to go to the settlement. State prosecutors refused to investigate.

Since Lukashenko - who is known as Batka (Daddy) - came to power in 1994, a series of politicians and journalists have been imprisoned, killed, or simply disappeared. As a result, the United States and European Union countries are trying to crank up pressure on Lukashenko ahead of the presidential poll in March.

The US secretary of state, Condoleezza Rice, has called for Belarus "to throw off the yoke of tyranny" and Britain is taking a confrontational stance, with ambassador Brian Bennett accusing Lukashenko of leading "a slide into dictatorship".

One senior western diplomat in Minsk confirmed that foreign experts are being drafted in to "help [opposition] parties with their organisation, and showing them how democracy works, how to get in touch with the people".

It is a tricky pursuit, as paranoia grows in Russia and Belarus about western "meddling" in their internal affairs. The two countries have a union with each other, military cooperation is strong and

their peoples are practically inseparable in terms of national identity. Moscow supports the Minsk regime because it wants to preserve it as a buffer zone against Nato encroachment.

Lukashenko, meanwhile, has warned foreign states to keep their noses out of the election.

Last month, his simpering "parliament" made it a crime to discredit the country by passing "false information" to a foreign state or organisation about its political, economic or legal situation. The popular uprisings in other former Soviet states were "simple banditry, deftly carried out with western money", Lukashenko claims.

Observers say the president was rattled by the rose revolution in Georgia in 2003 and the orange revolution in Ukraine in 2004. "He's worried," said the diplomat. "He knows he can engineer 80% of the vote in his favour, but he's forming special police units to break up crowds, just in case." The opposition faces a huge task to oust Europe's pariah. Anti-Lukashenko parties have not a single seat in parliament and most have been denied registration. Independent press is being hounded out of existence. And because of his grip on the state-run economy, Lukashenko's opponents can be cowed with threats of being sacked and never working again.

Milinkevich, the opposition leader who is due to meet senior EU officials today, is seen as the only hope for change, but his profile is low because he is denied exposure in state media.

"I'm placing my hopes in the younger generation," says the scientist, who heads a loose coalition of democratic forces and will stand for the presidency. Underground youth movements like Zubr (Bison) are small, but their numbers are swelling as increasing numbers of students are expelled from university for dabbling in politics.

"If the presidential election is falsified, we will go the streets to protect our rights," says Nikita Sasim, 21, a Zubr leader who says he was hospitalised with concussion after police beat him at a recent protest.

Yet the opposition know its chances are slim. Lukashenko dominates television broadcasts and is riding high in official polls with an almost trance-like power over many of his compatriots. "He is an excellent example in all areas," says Sergei Yuran, 45, an engineer, shuffling through snow in central Minsk. Ludmila Yolkina, a music teacher, says: "We don't want all that civil unrest like in Ukraine. Look at our ordered city and nice clean streets."

The gas crisis made Western Europe question President Putin's democratic credentials as he took over the presidency of the G8. His support for Batka could be the next big point of confrontation.

Source: Tom Parfitt, The Guardian; January 30, 2006; http://www.guardian.co.uk/elsewhere/journalist/story/0,,1698153,00.html#article_continue

29. Mass Hunger Strike of Prisoners in Belarus?

According to preliminary information, in a corrective colony number 22 (Ivatsevichy, Brest region) about 30 prisoners announced a hunger strike of protest against violations of their rights, and against unjustified penalties and provocations by workers and administration of the colony. Uladzimir Levaneuski, a son of the political prisoner, a leader of the Strike Committee of Vendors Valery Levaneuski, who is serving a sentence in Ivatsevichy prison, was informed about that by a former prisoner, released recently.

At the moment the Charter'97 press center checks the reliability of this information.

Source: Charter97; January 30, 2006; <http://www.charter97.org/eng/>

BUSINESS

30. Government To Examine Draft State Import Substituting Program for 2006-2010

The draft state import substituting program for 2006-2010 will be considered on January 31 at a sitting of the Council of Ministers Presidium of Belarus.

As BelTA has been told in the Council of Ministers Office, the draft aims to satisfy the national demand with competitive domestic goods. The measures envisaged in the document are aimed at tapping deeper into production potential, creating new working places, increasing the economic security of the country.

To achieve the goals the technical level of producers who ensure competitiveness of national producers in price and quality will be increased. Selective investment support will be rendered to the producers of high technology goods which are much in demand on the home and foreign markets.

The draft lists the following priorities: import substituting of the demand (encouragement of the consumption of home-grown goods), consumer goods, production resources and services.

In line with the draft program, 87 projects will be implemented in 2006 including 26 new programs. A special attention will be given to the projects in the real economy sector: machinery construction and metal working, agricultural, pharmaceutical and construction industries.

For example, the Belarusian industrial companies plan to master production of new sophisticated goods such as new models of TV-sets, refrigerators, radio cassette players and conditioners. The agro-industrial sector will focus on substituting import of foodstuffs and food raw materials. The construction branch plans to modernize and reconstruct productions of gypsum plasterboards, ceramic tile, asbestos-cement sheets and other goods.

A comprehensive system to ensure implementation of the state import- substituting policy will be created in line with the draft. The program will be carried out simultaneously with the program on socio-economic development of Belarus for 2006-2010, the program on development of the industrial sector for 1998-2015, the national program on export development for 2006-2010.

Within the framework of the import-substituting program for 2001-2005 some 109 projects were implemented, import-substituting products worth of USD 1,5 billion were produced, goods to the amount of USD 640 million were exported. More than 2,6 thousand new jobs were created.

Source: Belarusian Telegraph Agency; January 30, 2006; <http://www.belta.by/engnews.nsf>

The Belarus Update is a weekly news bulletin of the International League for Human Rights (www.ilhr.org). The League, now in its 63rd year, is a New York-based human rights NGO in consultative status with the United Nations and the International Labor Organization. To send letters to the Editor or to subscribe/unsubscribe please contact Maria Kabalina at cis@ilhr.org or Olga Tarasov at otarasov@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.
