

February 24 – March 2, 2006

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DOMESTIC

1. Third All-Belarus People's Congress Opens in Minsk

The 3rd All-Belarus People's Congress has opened in Minsk. Head of state Alexander Lukashenko takes part in the congress.

The congress will sum up results of implementing the 2001-2005 national social and economic development programme, talk over a draft social and economic development programme for the next five years as well as other important issues related to the state and public life.

The congress gathered representatives of all strata of the Belarusian society: industry workers and farmers, social and cultural workers, students, military, businessmen, members of the Council of the Republic and the Chamber of Representatives, heads of state administration bodies, Heroes of the Soviet Union and Social Labour Heroes.

Honorary guests and public figures of Russia and Ukraine, representatives of Belarusian diasporas in other countries, heads of foreign diplomatic missions in Belarus were invited to partake in the congress.

During the two-day congress participants and guests are expected to deliver their speeches.

On the whole, 2,500 people representing all Belarus regions take part in the national assembly.

The number of foreign guests, who arrived in Minsk to participate in the 3rd All-Belarus People's Congress, includes CSTO Secretary General Nikolai Bordyuzha, Union State Secretary Pavel Borodin, twice Soviet Union Hero, spaceman Piotr Klimuk, EurAsEC Secretary General Grigoriy Rapota, USSR People's Painter Alexander Shilov, First Secretary of the Ukraine Communist Party Piotr Simonenko.

Source: The National Centre of Legal Information of the Republic of Belarus; March 2, 2006; <http://law.by/work/Eng/>

2. Special Forces Find 72 Radical Organizations in Belarus - Lukashenko

Belarusian special forces have uncovered activity by 72 radical opposition organizations acting in the country, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko said at the third all-Belarusian people assembly on Thursday.

"The [Belarusian State Security Committee] KGB uncovered 72 organizations, confiscated mobile phones and protocols of elections falsifications," the president said.

"On March 19 [the day of the Belarusian presidential elections] they wanted to come up with these protocols and to declare a 'hell-raiser' to win the elections and to say that the authorities falsified the elections results," he said.

Source: Interfax; March 2, 2006; <http://www.interfax.ru/e>

3. Coup Prevented in Belarus - KGB

The Belarusian state security service (KGB) said Wednesday that it had forestalled a coup planned by the opposition, to take place on March 19-20.

KGB Chairman Stepan Sukhorenko said the opposition had intended to gather several thousands of people in the national capital Minsk after the announcement of presidential election results, and to blow up an explosive device during the rally.

Following this, the opposition planned to declare the election results false, seize administrative buildings and railway stations, and block railroads, the security chief said.

Sukhorenko said that representatives of some Belarusian NGOs, as well as militants from Ukraine, Georgia, and former Yugoslavia could have been brought into the coup.

"The unregistered [non-governmental] organizations have gone underground, and are acting with a strong level of professionalism, as most of their members have been trained abroad."

Around 100 mobile phones with Lithuanian SIM-cards and several tens of thousand dollars had been seized from one of these organizations, Partnership.

He said the organization was financed by a regional branch of the National Democratic Institute, and U.S. citizen David Hamilton. The KGB chief said the United States had allegedly allocated \$12 million to support these activities in 2006.

The official said the plotters would be unlikely to implement their plans now that they have been made public.

"However, we will monitor the situation, and if they risk doing this, we will find the explosive devices."

"We know both the organizers and perpetrators," he said, adding that they would be detained if they attempted to carry out their plan.

Alexander Milinkevich, the democratic opposition presidential candidate, said earlier that it would be announced that incumbent President Alexander Lukashenko had gained at least 75% of the vote in the elections.

He said Belarusians wanted change, and wanted to live in a different country.

"If we get rid of the information vacuum, the existing Belarusian regime will fall," he said.

He also said the opposition would not hold any rallies, even if they lose the elections.

According to Milinkevich, the situation in Belarus was alarming, as "the elections can already be considered non-democratic."

"The elections are being held under total falsification and persecution of the opposition. We are taking part in this political campaign in order to destroy the fear that reigns in our society."

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

Source: Olesya Luchaninova, RIA Novosti, March 1, 2006; <http://en.rian.ru>

4. Analysis: When Bread Is Dearer Than Freedom In Belarus

In the West, Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka is often portrayed as a deeply unpopular dictator. The truth is a little more complex than that. According to a January poll by the Vilnius-based Gallup/Baltic Surveys, Lukashenka enjoys support of some 55 percent of Belarusians, thus being practically able to win the 19 March presidential election in a free and fair vote. So why do so many people in Belarus support Lukashenka, apparently of their own free will?

One of the possible answers lies in the country's economy, which has officially enjoyed robust growth in the past four years. For many Belarusians Lukashenka's economic policies appear to outweigh his heavy hand in subduing political dissent and impinging on human rights and personal freedoms in the country.

Democracy, Yes; Hullabaloo, No

Speaking to workers of the Minsk Automotive Plant in 1998, Lukashenka gave a memorable definition of the democracy he claimed he was building in Belarus.

"We don't need democracy with hullabaloo," he said. "We do need the type of democracy where people work and get paid, even if not much, but enough to buy bread, milk, sour cream, cottage cheese, and sometimes a piece of meat in order to feed their children and so on." After a short pause, Lukashenka added: "Well, as regards meat, let's not eat too much of it in summer."

In Lukashenka's 12 years in power, he has remained largely true to his words. He has all but eliminated the possibility of any uncontrolled "hullabaloo" from the opposition on the streets. And he has ensured that the overwhelming majority of Belarusians have jobs and get paid regularly, "even if not much."

Low Unemployment

According to official data, registered unemployment in Belarus stands currently at 1.5 percent. By contrast, in neighboring Poland, the jobless amount to around 20 percent of the population. The average monthly wage in Belarus in 2005 was \$205, up from \$150 in 2004; the average monthly pension in 2005 was \$98, up from \$63 the previous year. The country's gross domestic product (GDP) doubled in U.S. dollar terms between 2002 and 2005, growing respectively by 4.7 percent, 6.8 percent, 11 percent, and 9.2 percent year-on-year in the past four years. However, it makes little sense comparing the above-mentioned figures with their equivalents in other countries, since the cost of living in Belarus is much lower. But it is instructive to look at how Belarusians themselves feel about their economic wellbeing.

A poll conducted in Belarus by two Slovak nongovernmental organizations in January found that 24 percent of Belarusians assessed their economic situation as "very good" or "good," 59 percent deemed it "fair," and just 13 percent declared it to be "bad" or "very bad." According to 70 percent of respondents, the economic situation in Belarus has not changed in the last month, 13 percent said it has improved, while 7 percent said it has worsened.

It is not surprising, perhaps, that the same poll found that there was a prevailing feeling of political stability among Belarusians. According to 65 percent of respondents, the political situation in Belarus was "calm," while 12 percent found it even "positive." On the other hand, for 15 percent of respondents the political situation was "tense" and for 1 percent "critical."

No less revealing were the findings of the Slovak pollsters regarding the preferred values and goals that Belarusians attribute to the ideal president. According to 97 percent of respondents, the president should put primary emphasis on decent living standards (81 percent fully and 16 percent partly subscribed to this view); 91 percent said the president should predominantly be concerned with the preservation of state sovereignty (60 percent fully and 31 percent partly); and 86 percent deemed the president should primarily develop democracy (51 percent fully and 36 percent partly).

Assessing the chance of mass protests against a potential fraudulent presidential election on 19 March, 17 percent of respondents said they were possible, while 70 percent were of the opposite opinion.

Sustainability

Quite a few independent Belarusian economic experts predict that the current political stability in the country, which was coupled in recent years with palpable economic growth, is unsustainable in the longer term. They basically argue that Belarus's economy has already exhausted its government-backed potential for growth and without deep restructuring and foreign investments may soon enter a phase of stagnation or even decline, thus triggering wider public discontent.

Lukashenka himself seems to be aware of the possibility of such an unpleasant scenario looming. "We have already squeezed practically everything out of what we have inherited from the Soviet era and what we have built in recent years," he said in a television interview in January. "Practically all of our production sector is working at 100 percent capacity, apart from some small- and medium-sized enterprises."

Another serious problem that Belarus will have to inevitably deal with in the future is the country's dependence on -- or as some put it, "addiction to" -- cheap Russian oil and gas supplies, which can be seen as indirect subsidies by the Kremlin to Lukashenka's "socially oriented" economy and are estimated at \$3 billion-\$4 billion annually.

The Russian energy-related subsidies have helped Lukashenka not only keep his economy afloat but also expand its existing production capacities. At the same time, however, they have done little to adapt Belarus's command economy to the conditions of genuine competition. When Belarus eventually moves to embrace some market-economy methods and give entrepreneurs more economic freedom, many Belarusians may find that their country's economic stability in the Lukashenka era was hardly a real asset.

Source: RFE/RL; March 1, 2006; <http://www.rferl.org>

5. Battle For Belarus

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, widely recognized as the fall of communism and the Soviet Empire, was only the first step in a long process. The stagnation of the Commonwealth of Independent States, built on the ruins of the USSR, constituted the second part. Now, as new elites, with few connections to the Soviet past, rise to power in Georgia and Ukraine, we are witnessing the final stage. What's missing from this picture? Belarus, one of the three founding countries of the USSR, which still finds itself under a Soviet-style dictatorship.

During his 12 years in office, President Aleksandr Lukashenka has managed to replicate the once mighty Soviet Union on a smaller scale -- complete with propaganda, censorship, political repression and a centrally managed economy. He has had considerable success in pacifying his political opponents and the Belarusian population in general. The secret of Lukashenka's unrestrained power is in the significant concentration of resources he has been able to achieve since he was elected in 1994. He consolidated the scope of presidential authority. State-owned mass-media, local authorities and the state economy were subordinated, bound by strict coordination and made to work towards the goals outlined by Lukashenka himself. The next in line were other sources of power, authority and wealth -- political opposition, criminals and private business. The first were marginalized, the second physically eliminated, and the third made to collaborate with the authorities. Those who did not were bankrupted, imprisoned or, if they were lucky enough, exiled.

For years the Belarusian democratic opposition was in disarray -- divided, frustrated and underfunded. It had almost no access to independent media nor any state-owned channels of information distribution. But Belarusians, although in complete isolation from independent information and from the democratic opposition, still managed to see the striking resemblance between Lukashenka's regime and those one of Brezhnev and Stalin. The obvious Soviet-style oppression, a significant discrepancy between information in the state media and reality, and the growing distance between the bureaucracy and the people have all damaged Lukashenka's popularity.

The opposition is starting to take advantage of this opportunity. In their Congress of Democratic Forces (UDF) in October 2005, the opposition overcame past personal ambitions and nominated Alaksandr Milinkievic as their single candidate for the elections, which will be held on March 19.

Despite this new unity, Belarusian democrats face a tough challenge. Opposition activists are constantly arrested, fired from their jobs, expelled from universities, their apartments searched, property confiscated. Milinkievic and his 5,000-strong campaign team are traveling the country in

a door-to-door effort to make up for their lack of access to the media. The Belarusian KGB is close behind, following Milinkievic everywhere he goes, while local authorities, defending the status-quo, do everything possible to limit meetings of the opposition leader with voters.

External factors also play a significant role in Belarusian politics. The European Union and the United States see no other way of development for Belarus except through democratization. And that means Milinkievic. During his recent tour of EU countries Milinkievic met almost all important European leaders. But it's more complicated than just western countries trying to influence Belarusian politics. The Russian Federation has military bases deployed in Belarus, and the secret services of Belarus and Russia are almost merged; Lukashenka has no choice but to depend on the Kremlin. The \$3 billion in annual profits from the re-export of Russian oil and gas gives Lukashenka enough resources to appease Belarusians by paying pensions and salaries on time.

Milinkievic's goals are pure -- freedom, democracy, and the market economy. Implementing them is where things become difficult. Belarusian society has never experienced real democracy and is deeply locked in fear. The economy, which according to official Belarusian statistics is the fastest growing in Europe, according to the IMF could plunge into deep recession and even crisis at any moment. Recent opinion polls show 60 percent of the Belarusian population wants to see the changes in the country, yet nobody knows their willingness to tolerate meaningful reforms.

As the March 19 election approaches, the tension on all fronts is escalating. Repression is increasing and no one knows how far it will go. Both sides of the political conflict are willing to continue the political siege until the very day of victory. Lukashenka will certainly do his best not to allow any color of revolution to happen in Belarus. He will not hesitate to abuse the power he wields. The Belarusian opposition has serious reason to expect the worst, in which imprisonment would be the least danger. The greatest danger for the opposition, though, is in itself -- in case it fails to show the strength and determination -- and in its democratic supporters around the world if they turn their

Source: Jan Czurylowicz, TCS Daily; February 28, 2006; <http://www.tcsdaily.com/article.aspx?id=022806D>

6. Lukashenko Calls For Modernization of Belarusian Air Defense

It is important to modernize the Belarusian air defense system, President Alexander Lukashenko said on Friday.

"We need a modern air defense system, and we will invest a lot in its modernization," he said.

Belarus will soon acquire Su-30M jets, he said. "We will cover up certain areas of the frontier and reequip the air defense system. It is important for us to see what is happening at the height of up to 200 meters," he said.

Belarus will also modernize its armor, Lukashenko said.

The Belarusian army will soon be made up of 65,000 people, including 50,000 servicemen, he said.

He called for forming mobile forces. "No one will attack us. We are protecting our land and creating non-aggression prerequisites," he said.

Source: Itar-Tass; February 24, 2005; <http://www.tass.ru/eng>

7. Post-Soviet Belarus: A Timeline

RFE/RL presents an annotated timeline of major events in the post-Soviet experience of Belarus up to the 19 March presidential ballot.

19 March 2006: Presidential election.

21 February 2006: The Belarusian KGB stages a series of "preemptive" raids against opposition targets in the run-up to the March vote.

19 February 2006: The month-long official election campaign period begins.

1 February 2006: Uta Zapf, head of the Belarusian working group of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), tells a news conference in Minsk that it is "extremely important for the election to be fair, for results to be transparent." Zapf says the OSCE will send 400 observers to monitor the 19 March vote.

30 January 2006: Opposition candidate Alyaksandr Milinkevich tells RFE/RL: "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."

27 January 2006: Four candidates -- incumbent President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, united opposition candidate Milinkevich, Liberal Democratic Party leader Syarhey Haydukevich, and Social Democratic leader Alyaksandr Kozulin submit the necessary 100,000 signatures to qualify for the 19 March ballot. The four are officially registered on 17 February.

10 January 2006: The European Union announces it will fund radio broadcasts into Belarus in an effort to provide independent information about the election campaign.

November 2005: The state postal service refuses to deliver three leading opposition publications in what is widely viewed as an effort to restrict information in the run-up to the March election.

6 November 2005: A meeting of EU foreign ministers adopts a declaration saying that sanctions could be imposed if the Belarusian election fails to meet international standards.

4 November 2005: During a nationally televised visit to a small town in southeastern Belarus, Lukashenka tells voters what will happen in the March vote: "What can you do? You'll elect me."

1-2 October 2005: A congress of democratic-opposition forces in Minsk selects Milinkevich, a doctor in physics and mathematics and a civil-society activist, as their candidate to challenge Lukashenka in the 19 March 2006 presidential election.

7 May 2005: U.S. President George W. Bush describes Belarus as the last dictatorship in Europe.

19 April 2005: Lukashenka tells the National Assembly that he will seek another term as president. "We categorically oppose scenarios for a democratic change of political elites that are displeasing to the West," he said.

11 March 2005: The OSCE's special commissioner for the media, Miklos Haraszti, says restrictions in Belarus have effectively shut down many non-state media outlets.

3 December 2004: The International Monetary Fund (IMF) announces it is closing its Minsk office after Lukashenka said earlier in the year that the country does not want any assistance from the international lender.

17 October 2004: Lukashenka holds a referendum requesting Belarusians to lift the constitutional two-limit term on the presidency and allow him to run for the third consecutive term. According to the official results, 86 percent of voters taking part in the plebiscite (77 percent of all eligible voters) approved the initiative. International organizations condemn the referendum. The same

day Belarusians elected deputies to the Chamber of Representatives. An OSCE monitoring mission, which observed only the parliamentary elections, said they fell "significantly short" of democratic standards. The opposition did not win a single seat in the lower house.

October 2005: The U.S. Congress passes the Belarus Democracy Act, which Lukashenka denounces as "step of foolish pressure on our country."

7 September 2005: Lukashenka announces he will hold a national referendum that would allow him to run for a third term of office.

23 February 2003: The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly accepts the Chamber of Representatives, Belarus's lower house established after the controversial 1996 constitutional referendum, as a full member.

14 August 2002: Russian President Vladimir Putin proposes "ultimate unification" to Lukashenka -- the absorption of Belarus by the Russian Federation as an additional federation subject, following simultaneous referendums on the issue in both countries. Lukashenka rejects the proposal. "Even Lenin and Stalin did not go so far as to try to dissolve Belarus and make it a part of Russia or even of the Soviet Union," he comments.

9 September 2001: Lukashenka is reelected to a second term with 76 percent of the vote. His rival from the opposition, Uladzimir Hancharyk, officially polls 15 percent. An OSCE monitoring mission concludes the election was neither fair nor democratic.

June 2001: Two Belarusian investigators who fled to the United States accuse top Belarusian officials of running a death squad that kidnapped and killed former Interior Minister Yury Zakharanka, former Central Election Commission head Viktor Hanchar and his friend Anatol Krasouski, and ORT television camera operator Dzmitry Zavadzki. According to the investigators, the four were killed by the squad under the command of Interior Ministry officer Dzmitry Paulichenka, following orders from Security Council Secretary Viktor Sheyman and Interior Minister Yury Sivakou. The investigators' allegations were endorsed in 2003 by Christos Pourgourides, a Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe rapporteur on high-profile disappearances in Belarus.

7 July 2000: ORT cameraman Dzmitry Zavadzki disappears in Minsk.

8 December 1999: Lukashenka and Russian President Boris Yeltsin sign a treaty on the creation of the Union State of Belarus and Russia. The treaty, which calls for the creation of joint power bodies and a common currency, has so far remained mostly on paper.

16 September 1999: Former Central Election Commission head Hanchar and his friend, Anatol Krasouski, disappear in Minsk.

7 May 1999: Former Interior Minister Zakharanka, who switched to the opposition, disappears in Minsk.

May 1999: The opposition marks the end of Lukashenka's presidency under the 1994 constitution by conducting an alternative presidential election. The election -- supervised by former Central Election Commission head Viktor Hanchar whom Lukashenka fired after the 1996 referendum -- involves exiled Belarusian Popular Front leader Zyanon Paznyak and former Prime Minister Mikhail Chyhir as candidates and tens of thousands of opposition activists of different parties. However, it ends disastrously for the opposition, causing deep and lasting divisions.

August 1998: Financial turmoil in Russia severely hits the Belarusian currency. Inflation in Belarus in 1998 exceeds 180 percent.

June-July 1998: The Lukashenka administration wages the so-called "sewage war" against the U.S. and EU ambassadors, seeking to evict them from their residences at a government compound near Minsk under the pretext that a local sewage system required an overhaul. The EU and the United States retaliate by prohibiting some 30 ministers and senior officials in Lukashenka's government from entering their countries, thus inaugurating a longer series of travel ban on Belarusian officials in subsequent years.

2 April 1997: At a Moscow summit, Belarus and Russia sign an accord on transforming the Community of Belarus and Russia into the Union of Belarus and Russia.

24 November 1996: Lukashenka stages a referendum on a radically rewritten constitution that increases and consolidates presidential powers. The referendum also includes questions on moving a national holiday from 27 July (the day of the declaration of Belarus's sovereignty in 1990) to 3 July (the day of the liberation of Minsk from the Nazis in 1944); on the sale of land, and on the death penalty. The Supreme Soviet, following a Constitutional Court decision invalidating the referendum, begins the procedure to impeach Lukashenka. However, it is not able to conclude the process before the referendum is held because of a lack of a quorum. According to official results, more than 70 percent of voters support the constitutional amendments, and more than 80 percent agree with Lukashenka's proposals to change the date of the holiday, prohibit the free sale of land, and retain the death penalty. The opposition claims the plebiscite was heavily rigged. Lukashenka formally implements the referendum decisions by decree immediately after the vote. A majority of Supreme Soviet deputies join a bicameral National Assembly created by Lukashenka in accordance with the amended constitution, while some 80 of them remain loyal to the Supreme Soviet, which was recognized as the official Belarusian legislature at European parliamentary forums until 2001. The amended constitution restarts anew Lukashenka's presidency, thus prolonging his first term in office by two years, from 1999 to 2001.

2 April 1996: Meeting in Moscow, Lukashenka and Yeltsin sign an accord on the creation of the Community of Belarus and Russia. The same day a mass demonstration in front of the presidential office in Minsk protests Lukashenka's policy of integration with Russia. Another mass antigovernment rally takes place on 26 April, the 10th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. Shortly before this rally, Belarusian Popular Front leader Paznyak leaves the country, fearing he might be arrested. Paznyak subsequently obtains political asylum in the United States.

14 May 1995: Simultaneously with elections to the Supreme Soviet, Lukashenka organizes a referendum asking Belarusians to approve his policy of close integration with Russia, to give Russian the status of a state language along with Belarusian, to replace the state symbols of independent Belarus with new ones resembling those of the Soviet era, and to give him the right to dissolve the parliament if it is deemed to have violated the constitution. Some 75 percent of voters vote "yes" on all four questions, according to official results. Meanwhile, a new Supreme Soviet becomes operational only after two additional rounds of voting in November and December. The Belarusian Popular Front did not win a single legislative mandate. Lukashenka, who in 1995 called on Belarusians to ignore elections to the Supreme Soviet, gradually begins to run the country by presidential decrees.

10 July 1994: Lukashenka beats Prime Minister Vyacheslau Kebich in the second round of the country's presidential election, garnering 80 percent of the vote.

19 June 1994: Belarus holds its first presidential election. Lukashenka receives 45 percent of the vote, qualifying for a second round against Kebich, who polled 17 percent in the first round. Democratic candidates Zyanon Paznyak and Stanislau Shushkevich got 13 percent and 10 percent of the vote, respectively.

15 March 1994: The Supreme Soviet adopts a new constitution that introduces the post of president with extensive powers.

14 December 1993: Supreme Soviet Deputy Alyaksandr Lukashenka, chairman of an ad hoc parliamentary commission, delivers a report on corruption in the government that is broadcast live and makes him suddenly extremely popular.

4 February 1993: The Supreme Soviet ratifies the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) and approves adherence to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

23 May 1992: Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine agree to destroy or turn over to Russia all strategic nuclear warheads.

8 December 1991: In the Belavezha Forest in Belarus, Belarusian Supreme Soviet speaker Stanislau Shushkevich, Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk, and Russian President Yeltsin sign an agreement on the creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States, effectively dissolving the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

17-19 September 1991: The Supreme Soviet elects Shushkevich as speaker, replaces the Soviet flag and coat of arms with national symbols (the white-red-white flag and the Knight-in-Pursuit emblem), and changes the name of the state to the Republic of Belarus.

25 August 1991: Following the failed putsch attempt against Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev a week earlier, the Supreme Soviet declares the independence of Belarus.

27 July 1990: The Supreme Soviet adopts a declaration of the state sovereignty of the Belarusian SSR.

3 March 1990: Belarus holds its first competitive elections to the Supreme Soviet, and the Communists win a majority of seats. The Belarusian Popular Front gains 27 mandates and, with seven other democratic deputies, formalizes itself as the Democratic Opposition faction. The faction becomes a champion of political and economic reforms within the Supreme Soviet.

26 January 1990: The Supreme Soviet passes a law on the languages in the Belarusian SSR, making Belarusian the official language of the republic.

24-25 June 1989: The Belarusian Popular Front Revival is formally established with Paznyak as chairman.

30 October 1988: Riot police in Minsk violently disperse a mass demonstration to commemorate the victims of Stalinism at Kurapaty.

19 October 1988: A gathering of intelligentsia in Minsk establishes the Martyrology of Belarus to commemorate the victims of communism, and an organizational committee for the creation of the Belarusian Popular Front, which subsequently becomes an ardent advocate of Belarus's independence from the Soviet Union.

3 June 1988: The Minsk-based weekly "Litaratura i mastatstva" ("Literature And Art") publishes an article by archeologists Paznyak and Yauhen Shmyhalyou about the unearthing of 500 mass graves of victims of Stalinist repression at Kurapaty, on the outskirts of the Belarusian capital. The article was the first publication in Belarus about crimes of the Soviet-era authorities.

Source: RFE/RL; February 24, 2006; <http://www.rferl.org>

8. Lukashenko Pledges To Protect Army From Opposition Campaigns

The armed forces guarantee sovereignty of the Belarusian state, President Alexander Lukashenko said on Friday.

He said he would not allow any opposition campaigns against the armed forces.

“Nationalists, who grabbed power in the early 1990s, claimed that Belarus allegedly does not need the armed forces that cost a pretty penny. They claimed that it would be better to ask Europe and the United States for protection and let in NATO troops,” he said.

They were trying to destroy the armed forces materially and morally, Lukashenko said. “The campaign against the armed forces was not accidental. It had a far-reaching goal of making this country dependent, weak and unprotected,” he said.

Belarus does not threaten anyone, it is a peace loving country that does not interfere in internal affairs of other states, but peace loving does not mean weak, Lukashenko said. “Our army keeps the gunpowder dry and is ready to protect fatherland whenever this is necessary,” he said.

Source: Itar-Tass; February 24, 2005; <http://www.tass.ru/eng>

REGIONAL

9. Russia Remains Belarus' Key Trade Partner

Russia remains Belarus' key foreign trade partner, through sales declined last year. This idea was expressed at the meeting of Belarus' Foreign Ministry yesterday, where the results of the country's foreign economic activities were discussed. The meeting was chaired by Belarusian Prime Minister Sergei Sidorsky.

Belarus' main trade partners were Russia, which accounted for 48.4 percent of Belarus' foreign trade, the Netherlands (7.9 percent), Germany (5.6 percent), Ukraine (5.5 percent), Poland (4.4 percent), Britain (3.9 percent), China (2.2 percent), Italy (1.7 percent), the United States and Lithuania (each 1.5 percent) and France (1.4 percent).

Belarus' exports to Russia amounted to \$5.714 billion, which is 11.9 percent less than in 2004, and imports dropped 10 percent to \$10.094 billion. Exports to the Netherlands increased 2.6-fold to more than \$2.4 billion.

Belarus had trade operations with 175 countries last year, exporting its products to 137 countries and importing products from 161 countries.

Source: RosBusinessConsulting; March 2, 2006; <http://www.rbcnews.com/>

10. Kyiv: Democracy Activists Protest Belarus Embassy

Democracy activists protested before the Belarusian embassy in Kyiv on Wednesday. The small group of demonstrators voiced their solidarity with democracy activists and protested against what they claim to be the violation of human and political rights in Belarus, as that country prepares for presidential elections on March 19th.

In a related story, on Wednesday, Belarusian officials claimed to have revealed an exit poll plot prepared by Belarus president Aleksandr Lukashenko's opponents. The plotters have allegedly prepared exit poll results beforehand that would give the election edge to an opposition politician.

Source: 5 Kanal; March 2, 2006; <http://5tv.com.ua/eng/newsline/184/0/21908/>

11. Belarus and Russia To Fence Off Attempts to Interfere With Their Interior Affairs

On his working visit to Moscow, Belarusian Foreign Minister Sergei Martynov held a face-to-face meeting with his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov. The parties discussed the Belarusian-Russian cooperation and interaction in the international arena, the Belarusian foreign ministry told BelTA.

On February 27 at a joint collegium of the foreign ministries of Belarus and Russia chaired by Sergei Martynov and Sergei Lavrov, the sides have highlighted that bearing in mind diversity of

progressive ways for human development and in recognition of every nation's right for self-determination in social and economic spheres and following the principles of the UN Charter, Belarus and Russia have decided to jointly ward off attempts to interfere with their interior affairs, come the attempts from other states or international organizations including attempts hidden under the veneer of human rights issues. The Belarusian delegation has expressed gratitude to the leadership of the Russian Federation for support in parrying unfriendly actions of the West aimed against Belarus.

The parties have reached an agreement to continue intensive interaction at different levels focusing on the issues of European security. The foreign ministries will keep taking coordinated measures to reform OSCE.

The members of the sitting have emphasized that in support of the joint statement of the presidents of Belarus and Russia made in January 2006 on mutual understanding in regard to the WTO-accession issues, the Belarusian and Russian delegations will abide by coordinated approaches at the WTO-accession negotiations.

The sitting has adopted a program of the Union State coordinated efforts in foreign policy for 2006-2007. The document envisages measures to strengthen relations between Belarus and Russia, to secure and promote interests of both the states in the international arena and ensure a wholesome environment to bring about sustainable socio-economic development of the two countries.

The parties have also adopted the schedule of consultations between the Belarusian and Russian foreign ministries for 2006.

Source: The National Centre of Legal Information of the Republic of Belarus; February 28, 2006; <http://law.by/work/Eng/>

12. Russian Foreign Minister Warns Against Putting Pressure on Belarus

The Russian foreign minister cautioned Monday against putting pressure on Belarus in advance of the country's March 19 presidential elections.

"We are against putting pressure on anyone, and bringing about regime changes," Sergei Lavrov told a joint session of senior Russian and Belarusian diplomats in Moscow.

Russian officials have repeatedly criticized the approach of international organizations in their monitoring of elections in former Soviet republics, after mass protests against election fraud swept new pro-Western leaders into power in Ukraine and Georgia.

Lavrov also said that Russia was aware of disagreements between countries on how to manage certain issues, but advocated constructive dialogue as the best approach.

Belarusian Foreign Minister Sergei Martynov, leading the Belarusian delegation in Moscow, said that Minsk was under increasing pressure from the West. "Most problems we face come from the West, including attempts to influence processes inside the country," he said.

Martynov thanked the Russian leadership for its political support. "Such cooperation is only possible between close allies," he said.

The country's current President Alexander Lukashenko, dubbed "Europe's last dictator" by the Western media, has ruled Belarus since 1994.

The top-level diplomatic session of the two countries has already yielded a joint action plan in foreign policy for 2006-2007 as part of the Russia-Belarus Union State Treaty and the schedule of consultations between foreign ministries for this year.

Source: RIA Novosti, February 27, 2006; <http://rian.ru>

13. Belarus, Russia: Agreement Signed

Belarus and Russia have signed a bilateral agreement to promote cooperation, emphasizing contacts with the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Feb. 27 after meeting with Belarusian Foreign Minister Sergei Martynov. The ministers also discussed deepening cooperation within the Commonwealth of Independent States and stated their opposition to Western interference in Belarus' March 19 presidential elections.

Source: Stratfor.Com; February 27, 2006;
http://www.stratfor.com/products/premium/read_article.php?id=262772"

INTERNATIONAL

14. OSCE's Election Watchdog Body Concerned at Further Election-Related Arrests in Belarus

The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) is concerned about recent election-related events in Belarus, where a presidential candidate, his supporters and four civic activists have been detained.

Several people witnessed the arrest this morning of presidential candidate Alexander Kazulin. According to reports, excessive force was used against him at the Railway Workers Palace, where registration for the government-organized All-Belarusian People's Assembly was taking place.

ODIHR observers witnessed some of his supporters being detained by police when they gathered in front of the district police station where he was being held. They also witnessed force being used against these supporters, who were transferred to another police station. ODIHR observers were not permitted entry to either police station, and were denied information about the incidents and the condition of the detainees.

"Any arrest of a candidate during an election campaign raises concerns and needs immediate clarification by the authorities", said Ambassador Christian Strohal, Director of the ODIHR.

The ODIHR is concerned that this marks a serious deterioration in the campaign atmosphere. The Office is currently observing the run-up to the 19 March presidential election.

The arrest of Mr. Kazulin and his supporters follows the arrest on 21 February of four civic activists, including those involved in domestic election observation. According to a statement by the state security apparatus, the KGB, they are charged with "unlawful management of an unregistered organization" under the new criminal code provisions.

On 1 March, the KGB issued a statement to the media accusing the political opposition of planning a violent takeover of power, to be co-ordinated by the domestic observer group to which the four detained activists belong, based on falsified exit poll results and with the support of foreign "revolutionaries".

A spokesperson said the ODIHR would continue to follow up on these events.

The ODIHR election observation mission is deployed in the Republic of Belarus at the invitation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It currently has 46 experts and long-term observers deployed in Minsk and around the country. The mission plans to deploy around 400 observers to cover election day.

Source: OSCE; March 2, 2006; <http://www.osce.org/item/18239.html>

15. Senate To Support Lukashenko's Opponents

The Senate will keep supporting the opponents of the authoritarian regime of Belarussian President Aleksandr Lukashenko, even if a change in the local situation does not occur soon, Senate chairman Premysl Sobotka told CTK today.

Sobotka met Belarussian human rights activist Ales Bialacki, who will accept the prize Homo homini in Prague in the evening.

The prize is awarded by the group People in Need to the personalities who have largely contributed to the human rights, democracy and non-violent solution to political conflicts in the world.

Sobotka said it was a good thing that the Belarussian opposition had united itself before the forthcoming presidential elections in Belarus.

Sobotka said that Bialacki "believes that the opposition will remain united and will continue with a joint course even after the elections which Lukashenko seems to dominate this time again."

Sobotka said that the Ukrainian Orange Revolution did not seem to repeat in Belarus soon. Bialacki mentioned the existence of Russian military bases in Belarus and the fears of intervention.

The Senate will support the Belarussian opposition as Czech dissidents had been backed by Western Europe during the Communist era, Sobotka said.

Senators will try and visit Belarus again, Sobotka said.

Sobotka said that this year, senators Karel Schwarzenberg (the Freedom Union-DEU) and Jaromir Stetina (the Greens) tried to visit Belarus in connection with the presidential elections, but although they held diplomatic passports, they did not receive the visa.

In the past, former senators Jan Ruml and Michael Zantovsky had visited Belarussian dissidents. Last year, the Czech Foreign Ministry donated roughly four million crowns on the support to democracy in Belarus.

The money was mostly spent on study stays of Belarussian activists in the Czech Republic, support to Belarussian independent press and radio broadcasts and brochures dealing with the state of human rights in Belarus.

Source: Prague Daily Monitor; March 1, 2006; <http://www.praguemonitor.com>

16. Another Round of Talks on Belarus Accession to WTO Over in Geneva

Another round of negotiations on Belarus accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) has been held in Geneva. The Belarussian delegation led by deputy foreign minister Alexander Mikhnevich included representatives of ministries of economy, communication and information technology, finance, as well as representatives of the National Bank, Belarus permanent representative office at international organisations in Geneva.

The Belarussian foreign ministry told BelTA, the Belarussian delegation held bilateral talks on access to goods and services markets with Brazil, India, Canada, Switzerland, Norway, Bulgaria, Japan and Panama. Belarus has been able to essentially reduce the number of heated issues in negotiations with most countries and create preconditions for the negotiation to reach the final stage.

Alexander Mikhnevich met with WTO Deputy Director General Alejandro Jara, the WTO General Council Chairman, WTO's Accession Division Arif Hussein. During the talks the sides considered

the negotiation progress and marked further steps to prepare final documents on conditions of Belarus accession to the WTO.

Source: The National Centre of Legal Information of the Republic of Belarus; March 1, 2006; <http://law.by/work/Eng/>

17. Bush To See Widows of Belarus Disappeared

US President George W. Bush was to highlight US concern about political repression in Belarus by meeting the widows of a pro-democracy businessman and a journalist, the White House said. "The president intends to underscore his personal support for their efforts to seek justice for the disappeared, as well as for all those who seek to return freedom to Belarus," said spokesman Scott McClellan.

With 20 days to go before Belarus holds a presidential election, Bush was to drop by a meeting of his national security adviser, Stephen Hadley, with Irina Krasovskaya and Svetlana Zavadskaya, said McClellan.

The meeting was "intended to underscore our concern about the Belarussian government's conduct leading up to the election, harassment of civil society and the political opposition and failure to investigate seriously the cases of the disappeared," said the spokesman. "We continue to stand with the people of Belarus in their effort to determine their own future," he told reporters.

Observers fear any protest in Belarus could be brutally repressed. The government in Belarus systematically accuses the opposition of being manipulated by the West, and particularly the United States, which has called Belarus the "last dictatorship in Europe."

Anatoly Krasovsky, a businessman who had criticized Belarus authoritarian leader Alexander Lukashenko, vanished without trace in September 1999.

Dmitry Zavadsky, a cameraman in Minsk for Russian broadcaster ORT, disappeared on his way to pick up his colleague Pavel Cheremet from Minsk airport on July 7 2000. His car was later found empty.

The journalists had become embroiled in tensions between Minsk and Moscow in 1997 after a report they made on illegal traffic at the Lithuanian border led to their arrests by the Belarussian KGB. //AFP

Source: BelaPan; March 1, 2006; <http://www.naviny.by/>

18. Favoring A Hands Off Approach

Not Coming Out For or Against Lukashenko

Presidential elections in Belarus are less than a month away, and what they lack in the form of suspense is made up by strong rhetoric from the contestants and a generous amount of attention from international officials and organizations. Moscow has emerged as a critical crossroads for all of the parties involved in the process, with Belarussian opposition leaders vying to provide assurances of their constructive stance toward Russia.

A number of high-profile meetings have been held in Moscow in recent weeks. These included a visit by Alexander Milinkevich, the chief opponent to Belarus's longtime president Alexander Lukashenko. Protesters held a small, officially sanctioned rally in front of Russia's Foreign Ministry building two weeks ago and, last week, a seminar brought key Milinkevich advisors together with a number of European envoys and prominent Russian liberal politicians.

The vote was originally scheduled to take place in July, but in December the election was moved forward to March 19, reportedly to avoid overlapping with this summer's G8 meeting in St.

Petersburg. The contest has a familiar cast of characters, a worn-out political plotline and an almost certain finale. Yet, following the events that brought down the regimes in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan over the past two years, the air of inevitability that hung over electoral outcomes in post-Soviet countries is now tinged with the possibility of popular unrest.

In their statements in Moscow, Belarussian opposition leaders disclaimed any revolutionary plans, calling for a fair vote count and repudiating the prospect of violent protests. At the same time, they seemed resigned to the likelihood of some popular response that could spin out of their control.

The last gripping moment in the campaign passed on Feb. 17, after the Central Election Committee registered all four remaining presidential candidates, despite worries that one or more of the opposition's nominees would be disqualified. Besides Lukashenko and Milinkevich, who was chosen at a congress in October as presumed representative of the united opposition, the final lineup includes Sergey Gaidukevich of the Liberal Democratic Party and Alexander Kozulin, the former dean of the Belarussian State University and present leader of the Social Democratic Party.

Despite the opposition's months-long effort to contend the elections with a unified representative, Milinkevich and Kozulin have been unable to reconcile their political ambitions. Neither has been willing to cooperate with Gaidukevich, known for his close ties to the Lukashenko regime. Among the hurdles to clear in unseating an incumbent president, a rift among the challengers is among the most glaring shortcomings of their campaign. While Kozulin's support is thought to be a mere 3 percent, a split in the opposition's platform is likely to limit the effectiveness of Lukashenko's rivals.

Differing public opinion surveys make it nearly impossible to assess the electoral outlook. Sergey Kalyakin, leader of the Communist Party and the manager of Milinkevich's campaign headquarters, has stated that the united opposition candidate can be expected to receive from 35 to 40 percent of the vote, while official polling agencies in Belarus predict a figure in single digits. The only lingering intrigue is whether Lukashenko will poll less than 50 percent, forcing a second round of voting. The president's supporters, meanwhile, are predicting a convincing victory, with upward of 70 percent of the vote.

Milinkevich was in Moscow after earlier meetings with high-placed European officials, including German Chancellor Angela Merkel and President of the European Commission Jos? Manuel Barroso. At a press conference in the headquarters of the Union of Right Forces (SPS) party in Moscow on Feb. 16, Milinkevich characterized his campaign as a door-to-door drive against the fear he says pervades Belarussian society.

"More and more people are beginning to believe that life can be better and that fear can be overcome," he said. "Belarus is not split along political lines. It's subdivided much more simply between those who don't want to continue to live this way and those who favor the status quo."

Despite all his overtures to Europe, Milinkevich is still intent on appealing to Belarus's overwhelmingly pro-Russian electorate, calling for increased economic cooperation to foster broader integration.

"Our coalition is completely devoid of anti-Russian feeling," he said. "If we come to power, we will build better relations with Russia than those that exist today. We envision good neighborly ties, founded on mutual respect and dependability. Ten years of creating a union state have produced minimal results. We would put forth economic issues as the basis for further integration."

With the exception of several statements issued by Russia's Foreign Ministry criticizing

Western meddling in Belarus, the Russian government appears to have little interest in becoming entangled in the electoral proceedings. In contrast, the CIS observer mission in Belarus has been

functioning as a mouthpiece for discontent over outside interference. During Russian President Vladimir Putin's January press conference, however, he made a surprising distinction, stating that he supports "not the regime, but the fraternal people of Belarus." Lukashenko has, indeed, been an awkward and unpredictable ally for Russia, but Moscow continues to back him by providing political cover in the international arena and delivering subsidized gas imports.

However, the information war between Belarus on the one hand and Europe and the United States on the other continues to escalate. The European Commission has announced funding of over 2 million euros (\$2.4 million) from the European Union budget to finance a two-year program of independent media broadcasts to Belarus. Run by a consortium of German, Polish, Russian, Lithuanian, and Belarussian companies, the programming was launched on Feb. 26 and involves news and other coverage made available over radio waves, television, internet and podcasts. The EU project envisions financial assistance for media and journalists in Belarus as well.

On Feb. 22, the revived Polish-backed Radio Racja went on air, more than three years after financial difficulties forced it to shut down. In addition, German broadcaster Deutsche Welle has been operating since fall of last year. Poland's Radio Polonia and U.S.-funded Radio Free Europe have long been transmitting Belarussian-language broadcasts.

A conference on Belarus was held in Prague between Feb. 22 and 24 under the auspices of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE). European officials and Belarussian opposition leaders were in attendance, although representatives of the Belarus government declined an invitation. Rene van der Linden, president of the Parliamentary Assembly, signaled a subtle change in tactics by calling for engagement with the Lukashenko administration, instead of continuing a policy of isolation.

"We have to work together with all international organizations, like the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, on a new strategy of how to support civil society, citizens, and democratic forces," he said. Earlier in January, PACE adopted a resolution condemning abuses in Belarus.

The U.S. Congress has provided \$21 million for pro-democracy initiatives in Belarus, according to Dan Fried, the assistant secretary of state for Europe. Speaking in Minsk on Feb. 24, David Kramer, the U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs, reiterated America's concerns over the situation in the country.

"I have also had the opportunity to impress upon the officials here in Minsk that we're watching the election very carefully, that the United States expects there to be a free and fair election, but that the United States is also very concerned by current trends that seem to be moving in a different direction," he said.

The Belarussian government has played its part well, imposing controls on television coverage and the activities of the opposition. No candidate debates are planned, and Lukashenko's opponents in the election have each been limited to two half-hour, pre-recorded televised speeches. On Feb. 21, a series of security raids in Minsk netted high-profile opposition activists, resulting in detention and arrests. In a report broadcast on state television last Sunday and repeated throughout the week, the country's KGB announced a discovery of falsified exit polls in the Minsk office of an opposition group, predicting a 53.7 percent tally for Milinkevich. Lukashenko has publicly promised to take cautionary "preemptive" measures to guarantee national security during the election.

An assortment of diplomatic incidents has also punctuated the campaign. In early February, Belarus expelled several Polish diplomats and the country's state security service declared the Polish Embassy to be a center for foreign espionage. On Feb. 22, Belarussian police halted a Czech embassy car that was on its way to the German embassy to deliver copies of a United Nations report documenting human rights abuses in Belarus. Earlier, the authorities declined to issue entry visas to prominent foreign envoys and journalists.

The increasing convergence of the American and the European positions on Belarus marks the most notable current trend. The growing influence of Poland and the Baltic states inside the EU accounts for Belarus's mounting prominence on Europe's agenda. But Lukashenko has long been adept at running a self-sufficient regime built around the practice of ideological and economic autarchy. The only outside levers of influence are still in the Kremlin, and it has not budged in its acquiescence to Lukashenko's rule.

Source: Paul Abelsky, Russia Profile.ORG; March 1, 2006; <http://www.russiaprofile.org/>

19. EU Starts Radio Broadcasting on Belarus to Help Topple Lukashenko's Regime

Lithuania has joined neighboring Poland in broadcasting radio programs into Belarus, as part of EU efforts to break President Alexander Lukashenko's stranglehold on the country's media before crucial elections, the Irish Times reported.

The first program beamed from Lithuania's Baltic Waves station included a call from Belarusian opposition leader Alexander Milinkevich for Lukashenko to step down after leading his country of 10 million people into isolation over the last decade.

The U.S. has called Lukashenko "Europe's last dictator" and accuses him of rigging elections and crushing political opposition and free media to retain power.

Both Washington and Brussels have targeted the presidential elections scheduled for March, 19, as a chance to put pressure on the former collective farm boss, and the EU has earmarked 2 million for programs aimed at boosting independent media in Belarus.

"Tight controls on the media in Belarus make it hard for Belarusians to find independent sources of information," said Benita Ferrero-Waldner, the EU's external relations commissioner.

"I look forward to the day when Belarus will have its own free media."

Earlier this month, Poland relaunched Radio Racja broadcasts into Belarus, where most critical publications have been shut down and journalists are regularly harassed.

"We want to offer Belarusian people two hours of normal life, free choice and no propaganda," said Radio Racja chief Eugeniusz Wappa.

The presidents of Poland and Lithuania helped broker a peaceful end to Ukraine's so-called Orange Revolution, which ousted a pro-Moscow old guard in favor of West-leaning opponents.

Lukashenko has warned the EU and Washington not to expect a similar outcome in Belarus, and has told the security services to be alert to any civil unrest. Russia, his closest ally, is watching events very closely.

Source: MosNews.Com, February 28, 2006; www.mosnews.com

20. European Newspapers Lampoon Belarus President

Newspapers in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, and Poland today published Belarusian cartoons lampooning President Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

The papers said they were publishing the cartoons as a show of solidarity with satirists in Belarus who have been banned and harassed by the authorities.

Poland's "Gazeta Wyborcza," the Czech Republic's "Lidove Noviny," Hungary's "Magyar Hirlap," and Slovakia's "Sme" published the cartoons together with articles detailing restrictions on freedom of expression and the press in Belarus.

Lukashenka is running for a third term in the 19 March election. He has been widely accused of harassing the opposition and limiting its access to the media.

Source: RFE/RL; February 27, 2006; <http://www.rferl.org>

21. Bringing Down Europe's Last Ex-Soviet Dictator

On March 19, Aleksandr Milinkevich will not be elected the next president of Belarus. He campaigns anyway, but with something else in mind. Through the winter he has traveled from city to city in clattering rented vans, meeting would-be voters in the bleak cold, gathering signatures and speaking about the social, economic and, above all, political neuroses that afflict this small nation at the eastern edge of a new Europe. "I am Aleksandr Milinkevich," he recently assured a worker outside an auto-parts factory in Borisov, a gritty industrial city northeast of the capital, Minsk. The man seemed genuinely stunned to find this stranger greeting him.

"It is impossible to win at the elections, because there are no elections," Milinkevich told me the first time I met him in a dim, three-room apartment in Minsk in October. "Nobody counts the votes." It was my first realization that a presidential campaign in Belarus, a former republic of the Soviet Union, operates with a logic outside any traditional notion of democracy.

Milinkevich had just been selected, narrowly, during a congress of democratic opposition leaders to serve as a unified candidate against the country's authoritarian president Aleksandr G. Lukashenko, a former collective-farm boss who, over nearly 12 years in power, has defined democracy to mean not the people's choice but the people's acclamation — orchestrated by his government, including the ubiquitous security services, and enforced by a pervasive sense of fear.

"We go into these elections not because we believe in their fairness, but because this is a chance to go to the people, to conduct a campaign door to door," Milinkevich explained through an interpreter. "I will not say that at every door people will become less fearful immediately. But very many people, when they see others who are not afraid, who dare to tell the truth, they will start to have more courage." For now, many people react uneasily when they encounter him, as if he were an apparition. In the consciousness of a people saturated with state propaganda and ideology, he appears as the shadowy leader of a revolutionary cadre financed by big powers abroad and committed to the overthrow of the government.

Belarus, with about 10 million people in a landlocked mass not quite the size of Kansas, is a new nation and, even in the European mind, an obscure one. (A Belarussian acquaintance told me recently that a border guard at Stockholm's airport did not recognize his passport.) The country's fate has rarely been more than an afterthought in the larger struggles of competing European empires. At best it is considered the western appendage of Russia, which is what it has been historically. Its modern borders date only to the end of World War II, and except for a brief period between World War I and the consolidation of the Bolshevik revolution, it has known independence only since 1991, when the demise of the Soviet Union was officially declared — in Belarus, in fact.

With the presidential election scheduled for next month, though, Belarus is now the battleground for a new struggle, not between empires exactly, but over competing notions of how democracy should work in the nations that emerged from the Soviet wreckage. Following popular uprisings against authoritarian leaders in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, those who would like to break Lukashenko's iron grip, from President Bush to leaders across Europe, have thrown their support — and money — behind Milinkevich and an array of democratically minded activists determined to wake up a populace considered too passive, or too afraid, to challenge the state.

The activists are headed for a confrontation. Milinkevich, a 58-year-old physics professor and the unlikeliest of revolutionaries, is campaigning not for the presidency but for an uprising. "If our campaign is successful, then we will get people out into the street," he told me last December in

Brest, a city of about 200,000 near the border with Poland. "This is the last chance, the last battle. If we shall not stand out in the streets, the long polar night will descend on Belarus."

Lukashenko is prepared for unrest. Last year he eliminated a legal provision that allowed members of the police force and security services to disobey what they considered an unlawful order. A new law pushed through Parliament late last year makes organizing a public protest — or making statements that discredit the state — punishable by three to five years in prison. Lukashenko's interior minister recently ordered new measures to increase security before the election. A European diplomat told me that if Milinkevich's supporters gather in numbers in Minsk to protest an electoral result that is already a foregone conclusion, Lukashenko will not hesitate to disperse them forcefully. "There is no doubt Lukashenko will issue the order," he said.

Lukashenko himself said as much in a TV interview on Jan. 27: "Any attempt to destabilize the situation will be met with drastic action. We will wring the necks of those who are actually doing it and those who are instigating these acts. Embassies of certain states should be aware of this. They should know that we know what they are up to. They will be thrown out of here within 24 hours."

Lukashenko, first elected in 1994 as a corruption-busting reformer in the country's last truly free election, acts as if the world were plotting to overthrow him. It is central to his cultivation of popular support and is a regular theme of the steady stream of propaganda on state television, which reports extensively on nefarious American and European — even Russian — schemes to subordinate Belarus. Lukashenko's speech last September to the United Nations General Assembly was a jeremiad against a unipolar world dominated by the United States and included defenses of Slobodan Milosevic and Saddam Hussein. "If there are no pretexts for intervention, imaginary ones are created," he said in remarks shown repeatedly in Belarus. "To this end a very convenient banner was chosen — democracy and human rights. And not in their original sense of the rule of people and personal dignity, but solely and exclusively in the interpretation of the U.S. leadership."

In a sense, Lukashenko is right. The policies of the European Union and the United States — supporting free news media, sponsoring civic organizations and providing assistance to the country's democratic opposition — all seek to undermine his hold on power. With the election approaching, foreign aid has jumped in ways reminiscent of the cold war. In January the European Union awarded a two-year, \$2.4 million contract to a German organization, Media Consulta, to coordinate the broadcasting of news into Belarus, hoping to break an information blockade that has left most Belarussians isolated from, and ignorant about, even neighboring countries.

The Bush administration, which has labeled Belarus the only "outpost of tyranny" left in Europe, spent \$11.8 million last year on democracy promotion and plans to spend \$12 million in 2006. The National Endowment for Democracy, the Congressionally financed nonprofit organization that promotes freedom overseas, is spending \$2.2 million more on 49 grants related to the Belarus election.

For some time the United States spent this money openly in Belarus, as it has and still does in other countries of the former Soviet Union, including Russia. Lukashenko's government, however, has tightened controls over organizations that received American and European funds, closing many of them down. When 70 Belarussians met in a Minsk movie theater in October to hold a founding congress of an American-supported election-monitoring group called Partnership, the police arrived and arrested them all. Three organizers were sentenced to 15 days in jail; a fourth was fined.

The money, like the organizations themselves, has now gone underground or abroad. In December, 50 representatives of foreign ministries and international groups that support democracy gathered in Vilnius, the capital of neighboring Lithuania, to try to coordinate — and divide up — millions of dollars of aid. Thomas C. Adams, the State Department's aid coordinator

for Europe and Eurasia, described the meeting to me as a gathering of "the Belarussian freedom industry." In a long day of discussions and presentations, the slickest appeal came from four young men belonging to a group calling itself Khopits, or "enough" in Belarussian. Using a computer and a projector, they proposed launching a secret information war, distributing leaflets, stickers and newspapers — mostly satirical — as well as ribbons and scarves emblazoned with the colors of the European Union.

Khopits does not, officially, exist. In Belarus, a month after the meeting in Vilnius, I met one of those who made the presentation, who described the group and its work on condition I identify neither him nor the city he is from. He is 23 and baby-faced. "It would be better if you described me as a woman," he said. Three days before our meeting, three Khopits members were arrested and jailed.

Khopits, according to its members and sponsors, is a network of cells with dozens of activists in 60 cities and villages. It has no vertical structure or leadership. On a clear, icy day, the unnamed 23-year-old and I met at a bustling restaurant named 0.5, meaning half-liter, the size of the typical glass of beer. As we sat down, he disassembled his two cellphones, taking out the cards and the batteries as a precaution against surveillance, said to be possible even with a phone switched off. "They listen to us, 100 percent," he told me, underscoring a fear of eavesdropping that is widely shared in Belarus.

Khopits's information war is well under way. The National Endowment for Democracy, the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (the N.E.D.'s British counterpart) and the Foreign Ministry of Germany are paying for it — with cash smuggled into Belarus in small amounts in ways he asked me not to disclose. (Representatives of Westminster and the German ministry declined to discuss their support for Khopits; the N.E.D. asked that I not disclose the amount of the assistance.)

It is hard to gauge how effective this furtive campaign is, but the 23-year-old activist explained that even a trickle of oppositional information would seep into the cracks in Lukashenko's rule, weakening it, if not by the election, then sometime later. "This country is not Cuba, surrounded by water," he told me. "It is surrounded by civilized countries." Unless the borders are sealed entirely, information will still get through. "Sooner or later we will open people's eyes, and this regime will crash."

The cloak-and-dagger precautions undertaken by the Belarus opposition are necessary because Lukashenko has rebuilt the security apparatus that existed in Soviet times — the Komitet Gosudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti, or K.G.B. Fear in Belarus is pervasive: fear of the police, fear of the secret service, fear of the bureaucracy at work or school that punishes any sign of antigovernment activity. This fear extends even beyond Belarus's borders. While I was in Vilnius, a dozen young students gathered in front of the Belarussian Embassy to protest the expulsion a week earlier of Tatsiana Khoma, a fourth-year student at the Belarussian State University of Economics. Khoma was expelled for having attended a meeting in France of the National Unions of Students in Europe.

Among the demonstrators was a young Belarussian who introduced herself, improbably, as Jane. After a while she confided her real name but begged me not to disclose it or the university she attends. She was there, she said, to try to draw public attention to Lukashenko's assault on higher education, including limiting study-abroad programs and even trips, which now must be approved by the Ministry of Education. But for her to speak openly would be to risk the fate that befell Khoma. "It is difficult for us to do anything," she said, warily eyeing the embassy before rushing off.

Later that night I received an e-mail message from her, imploring me in the subject line, "Please, don't mention my name." "Because of the law we have in Belarus, we can't say anything we think about Belorussian politics," she wrote in earnest, imperfect English. "I saw you anderstant this, but I'm a little afraid."

That week, Milinkevich's senior campaign aides gathered in a basement office in Vilnius. They included Milinkevich's rival as the democratic opposition leader, Anatoly Lebedko, who narrowly lost in the opposition's congress in October. The office — modern and sleek, with projectors and equipment for video conferences — was unlike anything the opposition had in Minsk. (In fact, by January, Milinkevich's campaign still did not have an official headquarters.) The meeting took place on the day Belarus's lower house of Parliament adopted the amendments to the criminal code lengthening jail terms for those convicted of fomenting protest or criticizing the government. Lebedko, a former school director and parliamentary deputy, has been one of Lukashenko's fiercest critics and has paid the price. In October 2004, as protesters rallied in Minsk after the fraudulent referendum extending Lukashenko's terms, secret service officers chased him into a pizza restaurant and beat him so badly that he nearly died. Outside the restaurant several elderly women on the sidewalk chanted: "Fascists! Fascists!"

Lebedko, who barely conceals his disappointment at having lost to Milinkevich as the opposition candidate, has nevertheless become the campaign's chief strategist. He denounced the new amendments as an effort to instill fear and called them a sign of Lukashenko's desperation. "Despite propaganda reminiscent of Hitler's, half the population still wants change," he told me, citing polls, as he and the others loaded paper plates with Chinese food provided for the meeting. "Fifteen percent say they are willing to take to the streets. That is one and a half million people. This is our chance."

The meeting began. The leaders of the democratic opposition of Belarus were there to discuss politics with Terry Nelson, the national political director of Bush-Cheney 2004. In that campaign, Nelson oversaw the president's strategy of creating a vast get-out-the-vote network by organizing volunteers. "We have neighbors talking to neighbors, and that's the way to win a close race," he said at the time.

The office in Vilnius belonged to the International Republican Institute, which is partly financed by the National Endowment for Democracy. The institute's director for Belarus is Trygve Olson, a bearish campaign operative from Wisconsin who previously worked in Poland and Serbia. He went to Belarus in January 2001 and was denied a visa by April. He has worked in Vilnius ever since. On Belarussian state television, Olson has been singled out for organizing seminars like these. As the narrator of one 2004 documentary put it, "We found out that these technologies of educating provocateurs in Nazi schools and educating the opposition leaders in Belarus are very similar."

Terry Nelson's presence in Vilnius underscored the depth of American support for Belarus's beleaguered opposition, but that support is not limited to Republicans. The National Democratic Institute operates from Kiev, the Ukrainian capital, its workers having also been barred from Belarus. The two American organizations, with a bipartisanship that is increasingly rare at home, have divided their labors: the N.D.I. works with regional groups, the I.R.I. with the national campaign.

Nelson listened as Lebedko, Sergei Kalyakin (leader of the Communist Party of Belarus) and Aleksandr Dobrovolsky (a Milinkevich advisor) discussed the results of a poll, paid for by the I.R.I., that showed the ratings of Milinkevich and other opposition leaders all in single digits. "You need to reach those people to reach your goals," Nelson said.

The question was — and remains — whether an American-style campaign can work in a place like Belarus. Nelson and Olson discussed, then ruled out, such highly refined campaign tactics as microtargeting of voters based on databases with precision information about income and habits. Still, they went over the categories of likely supporters — students, small-business men and Protestants (who face restrictions on worship in an overwhelmingly Eastern Orthodox country) — that Milinkevich had, somehow, to reach. Kalyakin said that a majority in Belarus favored a new president, but faced with almost daily warnings on television, feared the instability or economic chaos that could follow.

Dobrovolsky predicted that the campaign was prepared to mass 15,000 to 25,000 young people to protest the results on March 19 — or possibly a move to disqualify Milinkevich even before the vote. He said that gathering 50,000 could prove sufficient to inspire more people to mass.

"Is that enough?" Nelson asked.

"We will see," Dobrovolsky replied.

"Only dictators fear revolutions," said Vladimir Kobets, who is essentially a political fugitive in his own country. He is a leader of Zubr, a youth group whose name means "bison," a symbol of the country, though not one the government embraces. Lukashenko has instead revived those of the Soviet era, including the green-and-red flag of the Belarus Soviet Socialist Republic.

If people are going to protest the election results, Zubr will provide most of the early protesters. It claims 5,000 active members and 10,000 more "volunteers." Forty young people founded Zubr in a secret meeting in a national park in January 2001. Its protests — often antigovernment antics like street performances in Lukashenko masks or graffiti campaigns — have landed dozens of the group's members in jail. According to Kobets, nearly 100 have been beaten.

Meeting Kobets was not difficult, but it required certain precautions. We would meet in front of a green wooden house on the banks of the Svislach River, which wends through Minsk. The house, now a museum, is where the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party, a precursor of the Bolsheviks, held its illegal founding congress in 1898. From there we wandered aimlessly along the wide esplanades beside the river in Gorky Park before heading into a cafe, presumably safe from any unwanted listeners.

Kobets is round-faced and wears glasses. He is no longer so young. He has a wife and two children. He has no regular job. He was arrested last August when he met two activists from Georgia, though he was released within hours. The Georgians, part of the Kmara youth group that has provided inspiration and training to Zubr, were released 10 days later, after Georgia's president, Mikheil Saakashvili, and Viktor A. Yushchenko of Ukraine intervened personally with Lukashenko.

Kobets, like Milinkevich, doubts the possibility of having a legitimate election, largely because Lukashenko's apparatchiks control every part of it, most important the election commissions that will count the votes and report what the federal election chief in October 2004 called "an elegant victory." That was when Lukashenko announced a snap referendum amending constitutional term limits and allowing him to seek re-election indefinitely. The vote was widely denounced in Europe, and an independent exit poll suggested that the referendum actually received the support of less than half the voters. But it stands anyway.

Kobets, over coffee, said that Lukashenko's power was not as formidable as it seemed. As evidence he gave the steps the government has taken to suppress dissent: arresting protesters, expelling students from universities, banning the distribution of independent newspapers, requiring state workers to sign yearly contracts, which can be revoked after any sign of disloyalty.

"The problem is not Lukashenko," he said. "It is the fear."

Zubr's newest project is to organize protests on the 16th of each month. The date commemorates the night — Sept. 16, 1999 — that Viktor Gonchar, once a deputy prime minister and election commissioner who became a popular opposition leader poised to challenge Lukashenko, disappeared along with a businessman who financed the opposition. On that night the two men went to a banya, the public bathhouse that is a ritual part of Slavic life. They were evidently abducted and probably murdered. The idea is to remind Belarussians of the darker episodes in Lukashenko's rule.

On Jan. 16, several dozen young people gathered on Independence Street in the center of Minsk, which used to be named after Francis Skaryna, a Renaissance-era scholar and printer who is an important figure in Belarussian identity. (Lukashenko changed the name last year.) A kind of flash mob gathered, though unlike those stunts elsewhere the organizers refuse to use text messages. "The K.G.B. reads them," a young woman named Marina said.

They rely on word of mouth instead. Marina came to Minsk from Mogilev in the east. On the way, the police stopped the minibus she and her companions were riding in, ostensibly for a traffic violation. Two members of the group were detained. Marina and four others bolted into the forest, she told me, where officers searched for them with dogs. They avoided capture, hitched a ride and made it to the protest. She refused to give her last name.

Marina passed out torn shreds of blue jeans; denim is now the color of this revolution in the making. (It was settled on after a Zubr activist, Nikita Sasim, waved his jeans jacket as the police broke up another 16th protest.) After 15 minutes, the Minsk protest was over, and the crowd drifted into the dark, snowy night.

Kobets told me that Belarus's democratic activists took their inspiration from the unlikeliest of sources: a Kevin Costner film. "The Postman," adapted from a novel by David Brin in 1997 and critically panned, depicts an apocalyptic America where the remnants of civilization live in terror of a brutal army headed by a sadistic general. Costner's character, a drifter, delivers a bag of old mail — information — and becomes a symbol of hope for those hoping to restore their American democracy.

In this improbable metaphor, the postman would be Aleksandr Milinkevich.

It is midafternoon in January and minus-4 degrees Fahrenheit when Milinkevich drove up to the Soviet-era auto factory in Borisov, one still owned, like most everything else in Belarus, by the state. The wan winter light was already fading as the day shift filed out. Milinkevich's campaign workers unfolded a small table, adorned with his portraits, outside the factory's entrance. Going inside, of course, was out of the question, despite the weather. A few workers sidled closer, forming around him a broken circle of overcoats and hats — fur for the older men, knitted caps for the younger ones.

Hatless and gloveless, his bearded face reddening from the cold, Milinkevich tried to draw out these would-be voters with the mild, inquisitive manner of a professor, which is what he was until the state fired him in 2000 for joining the campaign of a Lukashenko challenger. What followed was what passes for a public discussion of politics in Belarus today.

"Many people want changes," he said, refuting what these people are told when they watch television.

"Yes," a voice in the circle agreed, "very many people want changes."

"Something has to be done about it," came a second.

In conversations like these, Milinkevich is asked about his policies, his prescription for jobs and wages, relations with Russia and the rest of Europe. Mostly, though, he is asked about the electoral process itself.

No one signed the petitions on the table. A portly woman on the factory steps, smartly bundled, murmured that she would. "No, don't do it," her companion said, tugging at the fur of her coat as she led her down the steps and away from the candidate. "They will take down your name."

"They," like the president, went unspoken, because they, like the president, are omnipresent and, at least in the public perception, which is what counts, all powerful. Two cars — one red, one white — followed Milinkevich's vans wherever they went, as they always do. At each stop one or

more of the men inside would emerge with a hand-held video camera and record the candidate and anyone with him — sometimes only steps away. They are — or at least they are presumed to be — officers of the K.G.B.

"Yes, I know they are watching," Milinkevich said earlier in another town, Zhodino, when a passer-by nodded in the direction of the stone-faced men.

In Borisov, the shift change ended, and the pool of potential voters shuffled into the city, dispersing without having ever really assembled. A uniformed officer of the Interior Ministry kept repeating into his telephone: "Everything is calm."

To travel with the Milinkevich campaign is to experience an Orwellian version of democracy. In Brest, in December, he took phone calls on a fax machine from voters who had learned he would be at that number for one hour that evening; they discovered this from reading fliers that had been distributed furtively in apartment blocks.

Once, after Milinkevich met with students in front of Brest State University, I lingered to talk with a student, who gave his name as Pavel Dailid. Within minutes two officers arrived and demanded my documents and those of an interpreter. "This is the usual thing for us," Dailid said when they left after taking down our names and passport and visa numbers. "I want to come out onto the street and say what I want." Minutes after we parted, Dailid was stopped when he re-entered the university and threatened with expulsion. When Milinkevich tried to deliver a gift of books to an orphanage, a sign declared that it was closed. The director, Valentina Kratsova, said sheepishly that a quarantine had been declared.

Milinkevich tried to meet local activists in a community center, but that, too, was closed. They met instead in the old wooden house where he took calls the night before. The police came and threatened to call inspectors, saying an unsanctioned meeting was taking place and warning of violations of the building code.

As a result of all this, Milinkevich often meets no more than a few dozen people in an entire day. Deprived of access to the state media, unable to assemble large crowds of supporters, he says he hopes that he can spread a message of change almost voter by voter.

"Democracy is not only counting votes and not only the freedom of the press," he told those who gathered in the old house. "It is what is in the minds of people."

The meeting broke up early after the police warning. Irina Lavrovskaya, one of Milinkevich's aides, asked everyone to leave in small groups of one or two people — "calmly, quietly" — and to head in different directions.

In January, in Borisov, Milinkevich received some parting advice from a worker at the auto plant. "Remember what happened to Gonchar," the man told him. "Don't walk alone."

Milinkevich is running exactly the sort of campaign that Terry Nelson suggested in the meeting in Vilnius — the one that the International Republican Institute and the National Democratic Institute have supported with their training programs. A recent poll by the Gallup Organization/Baltic Surveys showed that three out of four Belarussians now know of him — compared with one out of four in September — and almost all of them have learned about Milinkevich by word of mouth. Trygve Olson said it was extraordinary that a little-known politician — a bearded, soft-spoken professor who once served as a deputy mayor in Grodno and was the president of a basketball team there — had made such inroads, given the pressures he faces on the campaign trail and the blackout in state media.

Of course, Lukashenko will win — with 75 percent of the vote, according to Milinkevich. "He does not like figures below 75 percent," he said. Lukashenko, whose information apparatus portrays

him as the last defense against chaos, might win in a free vote anyway. "What can you do?" Lukashenko told a gathering of voters late last year. "You will elect me."

The secretary of the country's election commission, Nikolai I. Lozovik, told me in an interview, "There is no basis for a mass protest vote in Belarus today." He also excoriated foreign meddling. "The United States and Europe have already rejected the policy of exporting revolution," he said. "I mean Lenin, Trotsky. I do not understand why these countries are now exporting democratic revolutions. What is the difference?"

Meanwhile, Milinkevich speaks of a victory over passivity and fear. "Our victory is more important," he told a sparse audience outside a factory in Zhodino. "We want to have a victory in people's minds. If we can manage to achieve this victory, then we can go out into the streets. We will not go out with guns or stones. We will go out and show how many we are."

The historic model Milinkevich has in mind, which he and others repeat often, is Poland and Solidarity — not in 1989 when the Communist government crumbled under its own weight, but in the dark days of 1980, when Lech Walesa was only beginning his campaign of dissent.

"There was a powerful public protest," Milinkevich told me in January. "The authorities could do nothing. Martial law was imposed. And that was the beginning of the end."

Source: Steven Lee Myers; The New York Times: February 26, 2006; <http://www.nytimes.com>

22. The United States Doubts Democracy of Belarus Elections

The U.S. State Department condemned Thursday oppression, detention and dismissal of Belarus citizens on the threshold of presidential elections slated in that country for March 19.

Of special concern are the actions taken on February 21 against Partnership Group, which stands for the civil society in Belarus, the State Department said. On that day, the leader of Partnership and his deputy were detained, its office was searched and documents and equipment were taken away.

All these actions have intensified doubts about readiness of Belarus authorities to hold elections in line with the world standards and commitments to OSCE, according to the State Department.

Agitated by the situation in Belarus, the State Department called on the government of that country to set free the detained and stop chasing those advocating democratic elections in Belarus. The State Department urged the world community to pay close attention to Belarus officials, who are to be blamed for trampling upon the rights of their fellow citizens.

Source: Kommersant; February 24, 2006; <http://www.kommersant.com>

23. U.S. Warns Belarus Over Vote

A senior U.S. diplomat warned Belarus not to manipulate results in next month's tense presidential election, in which Alexander Lukashenko is seeking a third term.

Lukashenko's main challenger, Alexander Milinkevich, has said opposition backers will hold demonstrations if the March 19 election is tallied fraudulently — and concerns are high that any such large gathering would be swiftly and harshly put down by police and troops.

U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State David Kramer called on all sides to avoid violence, but "there is a bigger responsibility on the part of the government — since they are the ones with security forces, they are the ones with guns, batons and other means, tear gas — to avoid use of force and to make sure that the election is free and fair."

"A fraudulent election will obviously not help relations, and those who would engage in that kind of activity I hope will not underestimate the resolve of the European and U.S. communities," Kramer said at a news conference at the end of a two-day visit.

The Belarussian Foreign Ministry responded Saturday by urging Washington to help keep the election free of violence.

"One can only express surprise at the State Department representative's insistence on possible violent protest actions in Belarus during the election campaign," Foreign Ministry spokesman Andrei Popov said in a statement. "Just what is meant here is totally incomprehensible."

Popov said the United States should share any information it might have on possible violence.

Kramer said Friday: "I'm not here pushing people to go into the streets. But if it's what people choose to do, they have a right to do it in a peaceful way."

In a speech to students at a military institute on Friday, Lukashenko portrayed himself as defending the nation's youth against foreign influences.

"Our Western opponents very well understand that the most important thing is to take ownership of the minds of the young people in order to then manipulate them and lure them into illegal activities," he said.

"They are trying to inspire them with the idea that the most important thing in life is their own advantage and pleasure."

Lukashenko has accused the United States and other Western countries of backing the mass demonstrations in the former Soviet republics of Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan over the past two years. Those demonstrations, which all broke out after disputed elections, drove longtime leaders from power in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan and forced an election rerun in Ukraine that was won by pro-West reformer Viktor Yushchenko.

European Union-funded independent television and radio broadcast programs for Belarus will begin on Sunday, the EU executive said, as the continent's leading human rights watchdog said what it called "isolation" of the Belarussian people must end.

The news and current affairs broadcasts in Russian and Belarussian are designed to provide independent news to Belarussians ahead of the election.

The Czech Republic's foreign minister and a senior official of the Council of Europe on Thursday called on all member states of the council to support democratic forces and civil society in Belarus.

"We encourage the member states of the Council of Europe to strengthen their support for the further development of democratic forces and civil society in Belarus and to break the isolation of the Belarussian people," said a joint statement by Czech Foreign Minister Cyril Svoboda and president of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Rene Van der Linden, adopted at the end of a conference in Prague.

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

HUMAN RIGHTS & INDEPENDENT MEDIA

24. The Site of Charter-97 Is Attacked

Today the site of "Charter-97" was disabled as a result of a Dos attack. It happened after the information about the assault and battery of the candidate A. Kazulin had been placed there.

According to the administrator of "Charter-97" the attack came from more than 2,500 unique IP's. He also noted that someone is trying to hack the site at the moment".

Source: *Belarusian Association of Journalists*; March 2, 2006; <http://www.baj.ru/>

25. Belarus Opposition Candidate Beaten And Detained

Belarusian security forces on Thursday beat and detained an opposition candidate who is challenging a new bid for re-election by President Alexander Lukashenko, accused in the west of crushing dissent.

A second candidate representing Belarus's small liberal and nationalist opposition planned an evening street rally without securing official permission and vowed to take "appropriate measures" if authorities resorted to force.

The West accuses Lukashenko, in office since 1994, of curbing freedoms, muzzling the press, systematically rigging elections and clinging to Soviet-style economics. He is heavily favoured to defeat three challengers in the March 19 race.

Alexander Kozulin was attempting to register for a mass gathering of delegates to be addressed by the president when plain-clothed officers knocked him to the ground, took him out of a hall in central Minsk and drove him away.

Officers tried to stop journalists from filming the incident and scuffles broke out. A Reuters television correspondent was beaten and injured.

A spokeswoman for Kozulin, former rector of Belarussian State University, said the 50-year-old candidate was being held in a Minsk police station.

"He has been beaten up quite badly. We don't know what his status is at the moment," Nina Shidlovskaya said by telephone.

Dozens of Kozulin supporters later gathered outside the police station to demand his release. Police also bundled about 20 protesters into a bus and took them away.

Several journalists, including a Reuters photographer, were briefly forced inside the station.

The main opposition candidate, Alexander Milinkevich, issued a statement denouncing the police action against Kozulin, saying the elections had now degenerated into a "farce".

"The authorities are panicked and afraid of democratic elections," he said. "They clearly understand that they are unable to win a democratic contest and are therefore resorting to breaking the law and repression of their opponents."

Milinkevich was due to hold an illegal rally in central Minsk later on Thursday. He has said he will not incite Belarusians to unrest but has not ruled out protests if the election is proved to be rigged.

Lukashenko Undeterred

Lukashenko, undeterred by opposition activities, told the Belarussian National Congress that under his rule, Belarus had shunned "destructive privatisation and shock therapy" and developed into a "stable, prosperous, civilised country".

"We have hauled our country out of poverty... Our policies have proved to be correct," he said in the lengthy televised address. "The secret of our success is strong central state power, a strong social policy and reliance on our people."

Salaries and pensions had risen, the gap between rich and poor kept to a minimum and organised crime eliminated, he told 2,500 delegates.

Lukashenko remains highly popular, particularly in the provinces, where he is widely seen as a guarantor against the instability of other ex-Soviet states.

An independent opinion poll published this week gave him about 59 percent of support, compared to 17 percent for Milinkevich. Kozulin trails along with a fourth candidate Sergei Gaidukevich, Lukashenko's ally.

Lukashenko has vowed to cut short any electoral turmoil like the mass protests that helped unseat unpopular governments in ex-Soviet Georgia and Ukraine.

The ranks of opposition demonstrators have been further thinned by recent legislation providing for long jail terms for illegal assembly.

The head of the country's security service, still known by its Soviet-era acronym KGB, said on Wednesday opposition groups had been thwarted in their plans to seize power by force.

The United States and European Union have expressed concern about the March 19 contest and say they will consider toughening sanctions against Belarus if the election is not free and fair.

Source: Ron Popeski, Reuters; March 2, 2006; <http://today.reuters.co.uk>

26. Journalists Got Detained and Beaten Hard

Some representatives of Belarusian and foreign media were beaten hard by the special police force in Minsk today in the morning. Among other, a *Komsomolskaya Pravda in Belarus* correspondent Aleh Ulevich was hospitalized with a serious injury to his nose.

The journalists came to the Railway Workers' House of Culture together with the initiative group of a candidate for Presidency A. Kazulin. The later was going to get registered as a delegate to the All-Belarusian Congress, organized by A. Lukashenka in Minsk today.

Siarhei Hryts, a photo-correspondent of *Associated Press News Agency* informed the BAJ Press-Service that A. Kazulin was knocked off his feet by the special police in the House of Culture. Then he was beaten hard and pushed off the building.

Later on, there were beaten and detained the journalists inside the building. They were banned to use their photo and video cameras.

Among the policemen, who beat A. Kazulin, there was a colonel Dzmitry Paulichenka. The officer is suspected in kidnapping an independent journalist Dzmitry Zavadski as well as some political opponents of A. Lukashenka.

The incident was witnessed by the journalists from the *Nasha Niva* weekly, *Komsomolskaya Pravda in Belarus*, the *Interfax News Agency*, the *BelaPAN News Agency*, *Radio Liberty* and other mass media.

The detained journalists were convoyed to the Leninsky District Police Station of Minsk.

Source: Belarusian Association of Journalists; March 2, 2006; <http://www.baj.ru/>

27. Political Graffiti Become Mass Phenomenon

Recently many graffiti of political character appear on facades of buildings in the capital of Belarus and in other towns. More thorough patrolling of the streets by police started. Policemen managed to detain several activists of different youth movements. Criminal actions were brought up as a result. However, political graffiti have become a mass phenomenon.

Political graffiti are made every day. An activist of unregistered organization Young Front Artur Finkevich was placed to a pre-trial detention center for writings "We Want a New One!" and "Fed Up With Him!" He was detained together with Alyaksei Yanusheuski. Alyaksei was demanded to give a written undertaking not to leave the place. Activists were charged with malicious hooliganism.

Arrest is not provided for under this article. Artur and Alyaksei's friends say that the authorities do not use political articles against young oppositionists deliberately, so that the society considered them usual hooligans.

On March 9 a trial over Zubr activists from Barysau Alyksandr Kazakou and Zmitser Zubro starts in the Central court. The activists were detained on December 28 in the night after they painted graffiti on the building of the Central court. They were charged with insubordination to policemen.

Despite of the persecution, more and more people are eager to make graffiti.

"Despite of all criminal cases, members of different youth movements will continue making graffiti, spread information, put up streamers. They will continue their struggle for free democratic Belarus," a Zubr activist Katsyaryna Lyaskavets told to the Radio Svaboda.

"The authorities see that young people are enthusiastic about changes now. It cannot be stopped by criminal actions," told Zubr press secretary Alyksandr Atroshchankau. // Radio "Liberty"

Source: ZUBR; February 28, 2006; <http://www.zubr-belarus.com/>

28. Pahodnia's Editor-in-chief Detained For the Second Time in the Past Two Weeks

On February 28 Barys Vyrvich (the editor-in-chief of an unregistered newspaper *Pahodnia*) was detained for the second time in the past two weeks.

In the morning a protocol was drawn up against Barys Vyrvich. It was said that he "was using bad language and threatening". Nevertheless, the judge (Uladzimir Huz) refused to try the case and B. Vyrvich was released.

Two weeks ago B. Vyrvich had a cautionary talk with the head of the District Executive Committee Aliksandar Ilianau. Mr. Ilianau was sure that "Pahodnia" (that started being published after a very long break) "was a threat in the period of the election campaign".

Source: Belarusian Association of Journalists; February 28, 2006; <http://www.baj.ru/>

29. In Belazyorsk Policemen Beaten Up Zubr Activist Brutally

On February 26 in Belazyorsk policemen have detained an activist of the youth resistance movement Artsyom Hovin. Policemen accused Zubr activist of graffiti making. The guy was cruelly beaten up in a district police department. Artsyom Hovin was placed to a surgery department of Belazyorsk town hospital and diagnosed a brain concussion.

As Artsyom Hovin said to the Charter'97 press center, two policemen were beating him. He does not know their ranks. Artsyom said: "Policemen were screwing my arms, punching me in the head, demanding to confess that I had made graffiti".

Having got nothing out of the activist, policemen released Artsyom home until morning, ordering to come in the police department in the morning. But in the morning Hovin was unwell, and parents called in an ambulance. The activist was taken to a hospital with a diagnosis "brain concussion".

An authorized operations officer of Belazyorsk district police department has visited Artsyom in the hospital. Policeman demands a guy to confess of graffiti painting, and threatens to invite a school counsellor.

As said by Artsyom Hovin, policemen are trying to put pressure on doctors of the hospital, demanding to change the diagnosis to the Zubr activist.

Artsyom Hovin is going to lodge a complaint for illegal actions of policemen in a prosecutor's office. // Charter`97

Source: ZUBR; February 27, 2006; <http://www.zubr-belarus.com/>

30. Belarus KGB Arrests NGO Leaders

The Belarusian secret service has arrested four leaders of the nongovernmental Initiative Partnership (CIP), news agencies reported.

Mikalay Astreyka, Alyaksandr Shalayka, Tsimafey Dranchuk, and Enira Branitskaya were arrested in their apartments by Belarus KGB agents.

The secret service says the group was being financed by the Washington-based National Democratic Institute and that the group's leaders had violated a law on political gatherings.

If convicted, they could be sentenced to up to five years in prison.

According to the Belarus KGB, the government outlawed the group two years ago, but its leaders defied the ban and were planning protests to coincide with the 19 March presidential election.

Astreyka was also a coordinator for a group of independent election monitors observing next month's poll.

The KGB recently has staged a series of raids targeting members of the political opposition. There have been numerous reports of the political activists' homes being raided.

Ahead of the elections, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka has ordered agencies to step up security measures to avoid a "color revolution", such as that in recent years that succeeded in ousting long-time leaders in Ukraine and Georgia.

Lukashenka told a national security conference this week that opposition forces inside and outside the country would stop at nothing to disrupt the elections and bring "lies and violence" to the Belarus people.

"You know what pressure has been exerted on Belarus, from open blackmail to attempts by the West to interfere in internal affairs, and from small provocations to threats of extremism on the part of the opposition," Lukashenka was quoted as saying.

Western countries and human rights groups have expressed concern that the March elections will not be free and fair. Lukashenka, who is seeking a third term, is expected to win in a landslide and has made it clear he will not tolerate any political dissent.

Source: ISN Security Watch; Friday 24, 2006;
<http://www.isn.ethz.ch/news/sw/details.cfm?id=14890>

BUSINESS

31. This Year About USD 700 Million To Be Allocated To Implement Energy-Saving Projects in Belarus

This year about USD 700 million will be allocated to implement energy-saving projects in Belarus, chairman of the committee for energy effectiveness under the Council of Ministers of Belarus Lev Dubovik told a press conference today.

In particular, the funds will be spent on the projects on intensifying the use of local fuels and waste energy, introducing new energy-saving technologies and optimizing heat supply networks.

According to Lev Dubovik, at present the main sources of financing the projects are own funds of enterprises, local budgets, the innovation fund of the energy ministry and branch-wise funds, loans of the Belarusian banks and money of international financial organizations.

The head of the committee has underlined that within the last five-year term the volume of financing energy-saving actions in Belarus has grown fourfold and made USD 438,9 million in 2005.

Source: Belarusian Telegraph Agency; March 2, 2006; <http://www.belta.by/engnews.nsf>

32. Belarus Boosts Ferrous Output 18.3% in Jan

Belarus increased ferrous metals output 18.3% year-on-year in constant prices in January to 252.5 billion Belarusian rubles (2,151 Bel. rubles/\$1 on Feb 26), the Statistics and Analysis Ministry told Interfax.

Production grew 7% to 198,100 tonnes of crude steel, 22.3% to 234,200 tonnes of finished roll, 32.7% to 12,300 tonnes of ordinary-grade wire, 20.8% to 6,800 tonnes of steel wire, 6% to 8,200 tonnes of steel cord and 16.3% to 9,300 tonnes of steel pipes.

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

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.
