

March 3 - March 8, 2006

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DOMESTIC

1. Belarus Election Campaign Turns Violent

Belarusian authorities have made some concessions to the opposition during the presidential election campaign, but they have also used violence and provocations to ensure that there are no surprises on March 19.

The violence began on February 17, registration day for presidential candidates. A scuffle broke out when guards refused to allow candidate Alexander Kazulin to enter the National Press Center building. One of the guards sprayed a liquid into the face of the main lawyer at Kazulin's headquarters, Aleh Volchak, who was temporarily blinded.

A series of dramatic events occurred in the early days of March. On the initiative of the government and in conformity with past practices, an all-Belarusian People's Assembly was held at the Palace of Sport and Culture of the railroad workers in Minsk on March 2. At 9 am, Kazulin tried to enter the building with a request that he be registered as a delegate to the assembly, which is essentially a forum for President Alexander Lukashenka to announce his policy for an anticipated third term in office. Belarusian Special Forces, headed by Dmitry Paulichenka, the commander believed to be responsible for the deaths of several opposition leaders, detained and severely beat the 50-year old Kazulin, who is a former rector of Belarusian State University.

On this same day, and in opposition to the official Assembly, opposition candidate Alexander Milinkevich called a meeting of his supporters in Freedom Square, which was subsequently blocked by OMON troops. According to Western accounts, between 1,500 and 3,000 people attended the meeting. Charter 97 maintains that the real figure was closer to 10,000. Clearly this was the largest public demonstration in Belarus for many years, and, perhaps because of the size of the crowd, the militia did not attempt to disperse it. Kazulin, released from detention, also addressed the gathered crowd, an indication that the two opposition candidates may be cooperating at crucial times.

Both opposition candidates have been permitted to air two television broadcasts of around 30 minutes -- in reality they were somewhat briefer because several items in the second speeches of both speakers were censored. Though these broadcasts were aired at inconvenient times, as people were returning home from work, they represent the first instances of public criticism of Lukashenka and his policies (and even his family and social life) since his first election in 1994.

Though giving way in some areas, the regime has struck back in others. Belarusian TV has several times cited fabricated exit poll bulletins that it alleges were issued by the Vilnius office of the Gallup sociological service. It claims that these bulletins were confiscated from the offices of the unregistered organization Partnerstvo and that they were dated March 19. They purported to show that, according to data in 107 election precincts, Milinkevich had gathered 53.7% of the vote, Lukashenka 41.3%, Kazulin 3.8%, and Syarhey Haidukevich, 1.2%. The director of the Gallup Baltic Bureau, Rasa Alisaukene, denied any knowledge of the bulletins. Aspects of their contents suggest that the government issued them to discredit the opposition, and, as one observer pointed out, no election poll would ever add up so neatly to 100%. Lukashenka has also maintained that Kazulin has tried to make a deal to attain the position of prime minister, and he has accused the Americans and Czechs in particular of overtly backing the opposition and trying to effect regime change.

Following the beating of Kazulin, the opposition newspaper *Narodnaya Volya* ran a special issue of 250,000 copies, including many photographs of the events (these have also appeared on the web pages of *Zubr* and *Charter-97*). The authorities confiscated the issues shortly after the truck transporting them crossed the border from Smolensk, Russia, into Belarus. Numerous criminal cases have been concocted against opposition activists, particularly those from youth organizations (principally *Zubr* and the Young Front) for daubing graffiti in various places (specifically "Dostal," which has been translated literally as "Fed up." In Hrodna, criminal cases have reached a mass scale, with investigations, searches, and the confiscation of computers and

various political literature. In one case Ivan Kruk of Hrodna Oblast destroyed his computer in order to avoid its confiscation by the militia.

The two opposition candidates meanwhile effectively complement each other. Kazulin infuriates the authorities with his direct actions and insults to the president (a criminal offence in itself), but the Central Election Commission has declined to force him to step down. Milinkevich has gradually become an effective candidate who is genuinely popular in his native Hrodna, and he is making inroads also in the city of Minsk. His blue jeans emblem now adorns many areas of the city and main universities. Milinkevich has called for a public meeting at 8 pm on March 19, which could serve as a protest action if the election results are manifestly false. His campaign "to win the hearts and minds of the people" has gained momentum. Yet the harsh and often brutal over-reaction of the regime to opposition activities is a sign of its nervousness. The "elegant victory" of 2001 will be succeeded by the ugly one of 2006.

(Belarusy i Rynok, February 20 and 27; Narodnaya Volya, February 24, March 4-5; Belarusian Television, February 22-23 and March 2; SB Belarus Segodnya, March 3, BBC Monitoring, March 3-6, Charter 97, March 3-6)

Source: David Marples, The Jamestown Foundation; March 8, 2006; <http://jamestown.org/>

2. Opposition Leader Detained In Belarus

March 7, 2006 -- A top member of the opposition in Belarus was briefly detained and fined today just over a week before President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's bid for re-election.

Anatol Lyabedzka, a veteran activist of Belarus' small liberal and nationalist opposition, is a senior figure in independent candidate Alyaksandr Milinkevich's bid to unseat the president after 12 years in office.

Lyabedzka told Reuters by telephone that he had been taken in for questioning in Mahilyou, a town in eastern Belarus, on allegations of staging an illegal rally.

He said he was meeting voters in the street since local authorities refused to give the group a hall. He said between 200 and 250 people attended the meeting.

Lyabedzka said that after the meeting, police came up and ordered him to go to the station where he was accused of holding an illegal rally.

Lyabedzka's spokeswoman, Katsyaryna Tkachenka, later said a court had imposed a fine equivalent to \$700 and released him. // (Reuters)

Source: RFE/RL; March 7, 2006; <http://www.rferl.org>

3. A Dictator's Elections

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko claims to be far ahead in his campaign for reelection this month. And he should be: Mr. Lukashenko, widely known as Europe's last dictator, has deprived his opposition of funding, media, and the opportunity to demonstrate and organize. He has stacked the election commission with his party hacks to ensure that the vote count can be manipulated. He has passed legislation that makes it a crime to "slander" the president, so that his challengers can't criticize him without risking imprisonment.

And yet, with the election in Belarus just two weeks away, Mr. Lukashenko seems to be getting worried. On Thursday he delivered a three-hour rant to a captive party audience, denouncing "dark forces" that he said were plotting against him, as well as Western democracies, which he said were "soaked in blood." Even as he spoke, the president's security forces outside the hall were soaking one of the two opposition candidates in his own blood: Alexander Kozulin, a former academic who heads the Social Democratic Party, was beaten up and then arrested. A local human rights group said 60 other opposition activists had been rounded up.

What's Mr. Lukashenko worried about? Maybe that the principal opposition candidate, Alexander Milinkevich, has been rapidly picking up support: Several thousand people attended a rally he staged in Minsk on Thursday, and he says that his polls show him leading the race in the capital. Or maybe that Mr. Milinkevich, who says that he fully expects the election to be stolen, has called on Belarusians to gather in Minsk on election night, March 19, to learn the real results. If he loses, he says, he will admit defeat then and there. But if the evidence is that he has won, Mr. Milinkevich will demand a transfer of power -- and hope for a repeat of the post-election "color revolutions" in Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine. In Belarus, the opposition already has its color: denim blue.

Mr. Lukashenko is loudly threatening to suppress any such opposition demonstrations by force, which means there is a real risk of bloodshed. To their credit, Western governments have been trying to show support for the opposition: Last Monday President Bush met with the widows of two Belarusian leaders who were abducted and murdered by Mr. Lukashenko's government. The West should now prepare to take action in the event that international monitors report electoral fraud or the regime again resorts to violence. At a minimum the Belarusian president and his family and all senior members of his government should be targeted by financial sanctions aimed at their Western bank accounts and other assets. And Mr. Bush should ask for accountability from Mr. Lukashenko's chief economic and political sponsor. That would be Russian President Vladimir Putin, the only leader besides Mr. Lukashenko himself who still supports dictatorship in Europe.

Source: The Washington Post; March 6, 2006; <http://www.washingtonpost.com>

4. Analysis: The Peculiarities Of Political Discourse In Belarus

Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka made a nearly four-hour-long televised speech to some 2,500 handpicked loyalists at a gathering called the All-Belarusian People's Assembly in Minsk on March 2. The speech was very distinctive of Lukashenka's oratorical skills and fully reflected the authoritarian character of official political discourse in Belarus, where only one individual -- the incumbent president -- is allowed to know and proclaim answers to any imaginable question from every possible person. Here, a look at Lukashenka's typical oratorical techniques.

Lukashenka's speechmaking is based to a considerable extent on the Soviet-era tradition of Communist Party congresses, when first secretaries delivered lengthy reports on virtually all aspects of life over which the party extended its control. Lukashenka's presidential addresses are similarly protracted, all-embracing, overloaded with statistical data, and indigestible to listeners after the first 30 minutes -- as were those by his antecedents from the politburo.

Here is a typical example of this style:

"With satisfaction, I report to this high assembly," Lukashenka said at the beginning of his speech. "The country has achieved major indicators of the Program of Socioeconomic Development of the Republic in the years 2001-2005 of the 21st century. The development course we worked out has proven correct. The confirmation of this can be found in high rates of economic development demonstrated by our economy in the past 10 years. Compare: our average annual economic growth in the past five years was 7.5 percent, versus 3.5 percent in the world as a whole."

In another passage -- some 60 minutes after his "dung-ocratic" comparison -- he portrayed the West as "the developed countries toward which we are getting orientated."

However, there is one feature that makes Lukashenka's lengthy orations lively for his listeners even after two or three hours -- the Belarusian president often strays from the text prepared by his speechwriters and inserts impromptu passages, sometimes pages-long and usually emotionally loaded. Take, for example, the following phrase in which the Belarusian president,

beginning the third hour of his address with criticism of the United States and Western democracies in general, expressed in passing his displeasure with the "colored revolutions" in the CIS.

"There has been a sequence of various revolutions of various colors in the former republics of the Soviet Union, including with support from those democratic -- I would rather say -- dung-ocratic states," Lukashenka said.

Word Play

The play on the sound similarity between the word "demokraticheskii" (democratic) and the neologism "dermokraticheskii" (dung-ocratic) is hardly an ingenious oratorical device, but his listeners usually are not lovers of a lofty or subtle literary style. The people listening to the president on March 2 woke up at this point, preparing for more. And Lukashenka did not fail to meet their expectations. He immediately delivered a 30-minute impromptu diatribe, in which he branded Western democracies as being "covered in blood."

But Lukashenka is not consistent in his vision of the West. In another passage -- some 60 minutes after his "dung-ocratic" comparison -- he portrayed the West as "the developed countries toward which we are getting orientated."

Finding a generally accepted socioeconomic measure under which Belarus could compare favorably with Western states is still an unachievable task for Lukashenka, so he occasionally proposes indicators that are not immediately verifiable or perhaps unknown in the West. This time the Belarusian president claimed that Belarus is the only country in the world that created a system of "social standards" for the population and asserted that his government would observe no fewer than 44 such standards.

"Who else, which other country has taken such responsibility upon itself?" Lukashenka asked rhetorically. "Name it! There are no such countries! And we, I do not doubt it, will make this system work!"

Lukashenka's Advice

Apart from publicizing plans for the future, Lukashenka also likes to touch upon a broad variety of topics either serving as illustrations of his economic theses or emphasizing his self-imposed stature as considerate "father of the nation."

During the All-Belarusian People's Assembly on March 2, the Belarusian president in particular gave Belarusian sportsmen advice on how to fight for Olympic medals, briefed publicly his ministers on how to sell Belarusian fertilizers abroad with profit, and instructed Belarusian men and women in general on how to keep a good physical and sexual form and overcome a demographic crisis in the country.

"The average life expectancy of our men is 10 years lower than that in developed countries," Lukashenka said. "Soon [our] women will bear children of Western men, my dear ones.... There are several reasons for this [situation], but two of them are the most important. First, this is nonobservance of the healthy style of life: lack of physical exertion and overeating, particularly late at night. This is the main thing. And then we groan and moan and cannot breathe, weigh 130-150 kilograms and cannot walk, while women applaud Western men."

Lukashenka is also known for using highly offensive language with regard to his opponents, be it specific people or political organizations. This time was no different. He referred to his political opponents in Belarus as "otmorozki" (which can be translated as "bastards" or "thugs") and "soplivye" ("the snotty ones"). And he publicly advised the defense minister to draft opposition politicians and their children into the army, in order to "clean out [their] brains."

Taken as a whole, Lukashenka's address on March 2 was rather typical for him, in both content and style. But it was evidently more emotive than on other occasions, which can be explained by his stress connected with the upcoming presidential election on March 19 and the political stake involved in it. This, incidentally, was admitted by Lukashenka himself.

"This election campaign costs our armed forces, our security forces a lot of nerves and health," he noted at the end of his speech. "The tension is so high, you cannot even imagine."

Source: Jan Maksymiuk, RFE/RL; March 6, 2006; <http://www.rferl.org>

5. Belarus Candidate Charged with Hooliganism

Prosecutors in Belarus have opened a criminal investigation against an opposition candidate who is challenging President Aleksandar Lukashenko in 19 March elections, charging him with "malicious hooliganism".

Aleksandar Kozulin, who was allegedly beaten and briefly detained by security forces last Thursday, has been charged with smashing a portrait of Lukashenka while in detention at a police station.

He is also accused of trying to stage an unsanctioned news conference.

In a Sunday statement, the prosecution said Kozulin could face a maximum sentence of six years in prison for "malicious hooliganism".

The international community and human rights groups have condemned Kozulin's arrest and urged the government to guarantee the personal safety of all presidential candidates.

Kozulin, the leader of the Social Democratic Party, was detained along with three other party members, when he was attempting to register for a meeting of delegates to be addressed by the president. He reportedly was assaulted by plain-clothed police who dragged him from the hall and forced him into an unmarked vehicle.

Reporters Without Borders, the international non-governmental media rights organization, said on Sunday that police had beaten at least nine reporters who were covering Kozulin's arrest.

The group said at least two of the journalists needed hospitalization and that some of the journalists were temporarily detained by police.

The main opposition leader, Alexander Milinkevich, is also challenging Lukashenko in the polls, along with Liberal Democratic Party leader Sergei Gaidukevich.

So far, several opposition figures have been arrested and jailed on various charges. In the last couple of months, hundreds of opposition supporters have been arrested for participating in anti-Lukashenko protests.

Ahead of the elections, Lukashenka has ordered agencies boost security to prevent a "color revolution" such as the ones in recent years that succeeded in ousting long-time leaders in Ukraine and Georgia.

Lukashenko, who has ruled what the US has called "Europe's last dictatorship" since 1994, is widely expected to win the poll.

*Source: ISN Security Watch; March 6, 2006;
<http://www.isn.ethz.ch/news/sw/details.cfm?ID=14983>*

6. Fraud Predicted in Belarus Elections

The main opposition candidate in Belarus's presidential elections has said that fraud was likely and called on his supporters to prepare to "defend your choice in the streets".

With tension mounting ahead of the vote on 19 March, Alexander Milinkevich told hundreds of voters in Baranovich that the incumbent, Alexander Lukashenko, would officially receive 80 per cent of the vote, "without even counting, not even waiting until the end of voting. They are already preparing for this."

He called on voters to "defend your choice in the streets. How you vote has no meaning for the regime. Only people taking to the streets can disappoint them."

Meanwhile, police beat up at least nine journalists who covered the temporary detention of another opposition presidential candidate, Alexander Kozulin, the leader of the Social Democratic party, in the capital, Minsk, on 2 March, the media watchdog Reporters Without Borders said.

Witnesses said Mr Kozulin, a former dean of Minsk university, was beaten up after organisers refused to register him when he arrived at the Congress of People's Deputies.

Prosecutors said Mr Kozulin was under investigation for "hooliganism".

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*Source: Simon Osborne, The Independent; March 6, 2006;
<http://news.independent.co.uk/europe/article349536.ece>*

7. The last dictator of Europe

There will be a presidential election in Belarus on March 19, and it will be a farce. Lest anyone had any doubt, Alexander Lukashenko, Europe's last dictator, on Thursday had his thugs brutally pummel one of his challengers, Alexander Kazulin, outside the All-Belarusian People's Congress, where Lukashenko was making dire threats against anyone who tries to start a "color revolution."

The reference, of course, is to the "orange revolution" that overturned a fraudulent election in neighboring Ukraine, and Lukashenko's display of brute force was doubtlessly intended to show his opponents that if they go into the streets, blood will flow. Kazulin, a former education minister and rector of the Belarus State University who has previously provoked confrontations at official events, was detained for eight hours and returned badly bruised but unbowed, declaring that the president had shown only that he is "extremely afraid of his own people."

Lukashenko is right to be afraid. Since he was elected president in 1994, he has flagrantly shoved Belarus back into the worst of Soviet times, restoring limitless powers - and its old name - to the KGB and crushing any opposition. The crowds that gathered at the police station to which Kazulin was taken indicate that more and more Belarussians are getting fed up with this tin-horn despot. The March 19 election could well become the moment at which they say, no more.

So it is imperative for the West to make it exceedingly clear, both to Lukashenko and to anyone in Russia who might be propping him up, that the world is watching closely. The U.S. national security adviser, Stephen Hadley, was right when he said that "there is not enough outrage and international attention on Belarus." A lot more outrage now could well prevent a lot more bloodletting later.

Source: The International Herald Tribune; March 5, 2006; <http://www.iht.com>

8. Secretary of Byelorussian Central Electoral Committee: Attitude Towards Candidates Is Loyal and Democratic

Secretary of Byelorussian Central Electoral Committee Nikolai Lozovik told a *Regnum* correspondent that attitude towards all four candidates is loyal and democratic. He said that some candidates falsified the information during the check of collected signatures. He also said that Alexander Kazulin "clearly violates the law", because "he was taken into custody, and two criminal cases has been initiated against him because of hooliganism", and "his statements often contain elements of insults and slander, that is a violation of electoral codex", said Lozovik. Commenting the actions of Kozulin on March 2 in Zheleznodorozhnik Palace, Lozovik said, that it is a "well-planned PR-action of the candidate". He explained, that as against Lukashenko and Gaydukevich, who participated in previous electoral campaign, Kozulin and Milinkevich are unknown to the masses, to they use the elections to manifest themselves.

Lozovik said that CEC does not want to impose repression measures towards "rampaging" candidates, because it does not want elections to take place in severe conditions.

One must note, that head of political and economical department of US Embassy in Byelorussia Derek Hogan was interested in Kozulin's fate. On March 3, early in the morning he called Lozovik.

Source: Regnum, March 3, 2006; <http://www.regnum.ru/english/600259.html>

9. Pomp and Punch-ups in Belarus

Being in Minsk this week is like being back in the USSR.

At the giant Palace of the Republic, 2,500 delegates are attending a lavish Soviet-style congress. Among them are tractor drivers and priests, factory directors and soldiers.

They are here to take part in the All-Belarussian People's Assembly. Their mission: to adopt a new five-year plan for the country, and to heap praise on their president - Alexander Lukashenko. I can only watch the spectacle on TV.

Like all foreign journalists in Minsk - except Russian media - I've been banned from attending. "Sorry," Mr Lukashenko's press secretary had informed me over the phone, "There's no room!" Large congresses are not the only communist-era icon that President Lukashenko has revived. He has restored, too, the Belarussian flag and anthem from Soviet times; the command economy and the police state.

Showered with praise

For the last 12 years, he has ruled Belarus with an iron hand, gaining a reputation in the West for being "Europe's last dictator".

You would not think so watching the People's Congress. One by one, speakers file to the podium to express their support for Mr Lukashenko and his policies.

Even Mr Lukashenko himself, in a marathon three-hour speech, came across at times as a gentle giant.

"Belarus," he declared, "is a friendly and peace loving nation." He slightly spoiled the image though moments later, adding that friendliness needs fists to protect it.

Perhaps that explains some of the violence in Minsk this week.

Police crackdown

When one of the candidates challenging Mr Lukashenko in this month's presidential election tried to get into the People's Assembly, he was knocked to the ground by plain clothes officers and beaten.

Alexander Kozulin was then dragged off and taken into custody.

Outside the police station, a number of his supporters and journalists were detained, too. One newspaper photographer at the scene was beaten up by police. He received concussion and a broken nose.

Later another presidential candidate from the opposition had problems.

Alexander Milinkevich attempted to hold an election rally in the city centre. But the authorities declared it illegal and sent in the security forces: hundreds of riot police blocked off the roads and dispersed a crowd of several thousand Milenkevich supporters.

"The authorities saw that the popularity of the opposition is growing rapidly," Yaroslav Romanchuk of the United Civil Party told me. "That's why they are now trying to block the opposition from campaigning. This isn't an election. It's a sham."

I have seen two very different pictures of Belarus here this week. The first - on a TV screen, painted in pomp and ceremony, depicting Belarus as a haven of stability with a leader adored by the nation. And a second Belarus - an unofficial one, not intended for live broadcast and public consumption; a country where political rivals are beaten and detained by police.

When they go to the polls in two weeks, it will be time for the people of Belarus to show how they view their country.

Source: Steve Rosenberg, BBC News; March 3, 2006; <http://news.bbc.co.uk/>

REGIONAL

10. Belarusian Election Scene Heats Up, Ukrainian Activists Involved

As Alyaksandr Lukashenko, the man described in the West as Europe's last dictator, prepares to run for a third term of office in Belarus, Ukrainian politicians are increasingly getting involved in the pre-election polemics, which largely reflects a broader struggle by Moscow against the wave of democracy that has threatened its rule in the former Soviet Union.

Election day in Belarus is scheduled for March 19, just one week ahead of Ukraine's parliamentary poll, but heated exchanges between the two countries on the diplomatic level reveal a regional political battle being waged beyond the border of either country.

President Lukashenko accused Ukraine on March 2 of channeling money into his country to overthrow him, recalling the string of revolutions held over the last few years in Ukraine, Georgia and Serbia, which brought to power pro-Western leaders.

The Ukrainian Foreign Ministry denied the accusations in an official statement which, in line with criticism raised by Western governments and observers, also questions the democratic standards used by the Belarusian authorities in holding the elections.

All the while, the country of 10 million wedged between Russian and the European Union, has become the destination of Ukrainian politicians intent on showing their support for one or the other of the contenders for the Belarusian presidency.

Not invited

Vladyslav Kaskiv, head of Ukraine's Pora party, which became well known when it was a non-governmental youth organization playing an active role in Ukraine's Orange Revolution, was banned from entering Belarus on March 2.

Kaskiv, two members of his party and three Ukrainian television journalists arrived in Belarus to cover the presidential election campaign, but were detained at the airport and sent back to Ukraine the same day.

According to Serhiy Yevtushenko, one of the members of Pora, which is running in Ukraine's parliamentary elections in a bloc sympathetic to President Viktor Yushchenko, the moment the Ukrainians arrived at the airport in Minsk, they were taken to a separate room and interrogated by the Belarusian KGB.

"When we got in, there was a group of KGB employees led by Alyaksandr Zharsky, who introduced himself as the head of the KGB's department for terrorism," said Yevtushenko.

The group of Ukrainians was then put on a plane and flown back to Kyiv without explanation. In response to inquiries by Ukraine's pro-Western Foreign Ministry, the Belarusian authorities said that "as a sovereign state, Belarus is entitled to such a decision."

"The Ukrainian authorities have declared that they have a list of individuals who are not welcome in Ukraine.

We respect the position of our Ukrainian colleagues," said Andrey Popov, press secretary at the Belarusian Foreign Ministry.

The events mirror an incident in Ukraine early last month when a radical Russian scholar, Kiril Frolov, was banned from entering Crimea.

Welcome home

From the opposite end of Ukraine's political spectrum, radical leftist Natalya Vitrenko and Communist leader Petro Symonenko have also made a visit to Belarus lately, but they didn't have any trouble at the border.

On March 3, both Vitrenko and Symonenko, who favor establishing a union between Belarus, Russia and Ukraine, joined President Lukashenko at an all-Belarusian Forum. At the forum, the two Ukrainian politicians said that Belarus was on the right path of development.

Symonenko praised Lukashenko for Belarus' economic growth over the past several years, while Vitrenko assured her audience that no "Orange Revolution will be exported to Belarus."

“The current Orange parties of Ukraine are actively trying to export their own experience in forcibly seizing power,” Vitrenko said at the Forum, adding that she agrees with the seditious allegations against Ukraine made by the Lukashenko regime.

Western interference?

Also on March 3, the Belarusian KGB arrested four Belarusian election observers from an unregistered NGO that receives funding from the US-supported National Democratic Institute and works closely with the European Network of Election Monitoring Organizations (ENEMO).

According to the head of Belarusian KGB, Stepan Sukharenko, his people confiscated from the election observers forged results of exit polls dated March 19, which gave Lukashenko 41.3 percent of the vote, with one opposition candidate said to have 53.7 percent support.

Sukharenko said that the NGO and other local activists were going to present these exit-poll results as authentic ones to disrupt the election. The Belarusian KGB also reported confiscating thousands of dollars in cash from the NGO's office, computers with encrypted files and more than 100 mobile phones.

Political analysts say that NGOs in Belarus cannot become registered officially and thus cannot open bank accounts, so donor organizations that support them have to bring money into the country in cash.

According to the head of ENEMO's mission in Ukraine, Peter Novotny, the four local observers were only involved in monitoring activities.

Lukashenko announced on March 3 that his secret services uncovered a total of 72 organizations that were planning to disrupt the presidential elections and overthrow his regime.

Lukashenko is being challenged in the elections by united opposition candidate Alyaksandr Milinkevich and Alyaksandr Kozulin who was reportedly beaten and later charged by Belarusian police when he tried to enter the all-Belarusian forum.

The incident was harshly criticized by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the United Nations and the United States, who accused the Belarusian authorities of oppressing the opposition through mass arrests, media closures and the banning of foreign observers and journalists from entering the country.

A poll taken by Gallup/Baltic Surveys in the first half of January found that nationwide nearly 55 percent of Belarusians want to vote for Lukashenko and just 17 percent for Milinkevich.

Yet Lukashenko has been almost universally criticized for his human rights abuses and poor democratic record. The notable exception has been neighboring Russia, which has also been increasingly accused of deviating from democratic standards, including a recent ban on foreign NGOs.

Source: Evgenia Mussuri, Kyiv Post; March 8, 2006; <http://www.kyivpost.com/>

11. Russia-Belarus Living Through Steady Economic Growth

The heads of the Russian and Belarussian governments, who attended a meeting of the Union Council of Ministers here on Tuesday, pointed to a steady economic growth in the Russia-Belarus Union State. “Trade turnover between Russia and Belarus grew by three-fold during ten years of integrated relations – from five billion dollars in 1995 to 16 billion dollars in 2005,” Belarussian Prime Minister Sergei Sidorsky said.

In his turn, Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov pointed to “the steady economic growth in the Union State,” to the boosting of investment programmes and to the intensification of social

aspects in the policy of the Union State. According to his information, "trade and economic cooperation grew by 45 per cent in January 2006, as against the corresponding period of 2005. The growth of cooperation in the fuel and energy sector is especially impressive."

According to Fradkov, the meeting will coordinate the fuel and energy balance for the period ending in 2020. "The problems are being settled in a constructive way and on a mutually advantageous basis," he said.

"The commission for tariff and non-tariff regulation will play a very important role. It should work even harder," Fradkov continued. He added as well that the meeting would discuss problems dealing with the formation and functioning of the single transport system, crime control and the main directions of the development of common scientific and technological space.

Sidorsky also pointed to the fact that the work for the creation of equal rights for Russian and Belarussian citizens on the territory of the Union State had also been boosted of late. He reminded that the latest meeting of the Supreme State Council had adopted a package of agreements, whose implementation would permit to settle "the most burning problems facing the people of both countries." According to Sidorsky, those agreements "made our Union more comfortable."

The Belarussian prime minister said as well, that the Union Council of Ministers had discussed and settled some 400 various problems within the framework of economic development of the Union State. "By today a sufficient legal basis has been formed," he said. In his opinion, "conditions have been created for the lifting of customs control on the border for the making out of documents on the goods coming from third countries." He believes the lifting of that type of control would create "real common customs space" on the territory of the Russia-Belarus Union State.

Fradkov pointed to a high degree of the coordination of actions of the two countries in the international arena. "I am pleased to stress that our cooperation in the sphere of foreign policy is aimed at consolidating the prestige of the two countries and of their position in the international arena," Fradkov said.

"This year we shall celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Russia-Belarus Union. We see the results of putting to use the potential of the Union development. The agenda of the current meeting of the Council of Ministers is rather strenuous. It will become an important stage in the building of the Union State," he said.

Source: Itar-Tass; March 7, 2005; <http://www.tass.ru/eng>

12. Russia, Belarus Discuss Creating Joint Gas Transport System

The Council of Ministers of the Union State of Russia and Belarus discussed at its regular meeting on Tuesday the creation of a joint gas transportation system, Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov told reporters. He said the Russian government is interested in a more vigorous effort toward creating a gas transportation system jointly with Belarus.

Fradkov said the negotiations between Gazprom and Beltransgaz on the matter are in progress. "We hope Gazprom and Beltransgaz will realize the mutual interest determined by the potential of cooperation in the gas area between our countries," Fradkov said.

He remarked it is the matter of gas supplies, of the prospects for the development of cooperation in this area, the use of direct fuel supplies and of transport potential of Belarus.

Representatives of chiefs of the Russian Gazprom and of the Belarussian Ministry of Energy on the delegations that participated in the meeting of the Union Council of Ministers were discussing these matters.

Belarussian Premier Sidorsky recalled that the Belarussian Ministry of Energy and Gazprom signed in December 2005 the agreement on the development of cooperation in the gas area and on launching interaction to create a joint transportation system and develop its uses.

The agreement also envisages the use of underground gas storages in Belarus. Gazprom, in its turn, proposed investment into Belarussian enterprises.

Source: Itar-Tass; March 7, 2005; <http://www.tass.ru/eng>

13. Belarus Plays Down Ukrainian Doubts Over Fair Presidential Poll

Belarus rejects Ukrainian criticism of the country's upcoming presidential elections, a Foreign Ministry spokesman said Monday.

Belarussian diplomat Andrei Popov was responding to Ukrainian Foreign Minister Borys Tarasyuk who said earlier that Ukraine wanted the March 19 elections in Belarus to be "honest and transparent," but expressed doubts that this was possible.

Popov said Tarasyuk's statement was "made in light of the parliamentary elections in Ukraine [on March 26] itself rather than in the context of the Belarussian-Ukrainian relations."

"It is Belarus' aspiration to hold free and fair elections complying with the law and international obligations of our country, so our desires here coincide with Ukraine's," Popov said, adding that Minsk attached great importance to friendly bilateral relations with Ukraine.

The Ukrainian foreign minister's critical remarks followed a series of incidents in Belarus that aroused international concerns over the upcoming presidential elections.

On March 2, police in the Belarussian capital, Minsk, detained presidential candidate Alexander Kozulin, who was about to register for the All-Belarussian Assembly, a national gathering that identified the country's economic priorities for the next five years. Prosecutors said the candidate had pushed a policeman during registration and then damaged a picture of the country's president at the police station.

The Belarus State Security Committee (KGB) previously reported that it had uncovered a coup plot masterminded by the opposition and planned for March 20, the day after the presidential vote.

Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko, whom Washington has dubbed the "last dictator in Europe", said the state had banned 72 non-governmental organizations suspected of plotting the coup.

The foreign policies of the two former Soviet republics have diverged since pro-Western leader Viktor Yushchenko came to power in Ukraine after 'orange revolution' in 2003. Meanwhile, Belarus has been moving toward an alliance with Russia ever since the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s, and has been threatened with sanctions by the West, which accuses Lukashenko of building a "dictatorship."

Source: RIA Novosti, March 7, 2006; <http://rian.ru>

14. Ukraine Foreign Ministry: Ukraine-Belarus Relations Do Not Depend on Current Legislation

Ukrainian-Belarus relationship is strong enough to overcome some insignificant misunderstandings, Foreign Minister Borys Tarasyuk told.

"It is obviously difficult to say we have friendly relations with the country which forbids Ukrainian citizens Belarus. Actually saying, it violates bilateral agreements. However, I would refrain from dotting or evaluating whether it is friendly or not deed. Nevertheless, we do reckon Ukrainian-

Belarusian potential is greater than sporadic splashes which sometimes happen," commented Forging Minister Tarasyuk in 1+1 Channel live broadcast.

Tarasyuk stressed that the bilateral trade-economical relations do not depend on the ruling authorities in Belarus. However, the current Belarusian power badly influences the wide circle of bilateral ties, such as ratification of some important bilateral documents.

Regarding the incident with PORA-PRP members, Ukraine Foreign Ministry spread the statement with negative evaluation of the incident. The Head of the Ministry denies the information spreading by Belarus concerning so-called un-friendly actions held by Ukraine. Ukraine is also alleged to be the channel for the US financing of Belarusian opposition.

Source: ForUm; March 6, 2006; <http://en.for-ua.com>

15. Ukraine Demands Belarus Explain Deportation of Ukrainian Journalists

Ukraine's Foreign Ministry demanded an explanation from Belarusian authorities for deporting six Ukrainian journalists and activists who arrived in the ex-Soviet republic to cover its upcoming presidential election.

Belarusian authorities detained the six journalists and three activists from the Ukrainian youth party Pora on Thursday. Six were deported the same day, and another three were to be deported Friday, according to one of the activists.

Ukraine's Foreign Ministry said in a statement late Thursday that the move violated the rights of Ukrainian citizens and demanded an investigation and an explanation from Belarusian authorities.

Pora activist Maryana Pochtar, one of those deported, said they were invited by the Belarusian opposition to monitor the March 19 election and also planned to take part in its campaign rallies.

"Our deportation is evidence of the absence of democracy in Belarus," Pochtar said.

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, harshly criticized by Western critics for his intolerance of dissent, is running for re-election and has warned that he won't allow the type of mass protests that ushered in new pro-Western governments in Ukraine and Belarus in recent years.

On Thursday, opposition presidential candidate Alexander Kozulin was beaten and detained by government security agents in Minsk after he tried to enter a conference chaired by Lukashenko.

The United States and the European Union strongly condemned the incident and warned that the former Soviet republic would face consequences if elections scheduled this month are not free and fair.

Source: Kyiv Post; March 3, 2006; <http://www.kyivpost.com/>

16. Ukrainian Politician and Journalists Denied Entrance into Belarus

Five Ukrainian journalists and the head of Pora party, Vladislav Kaskiv, were not allowed to enter Belarus.

Belarus counterterrorism directorate officials have detained the Ukrainians in the airport in Minsk, Belarus's capital.

Kaskiv, a candidate for Ukrainian parliament, reportedly planned to examine the Belarus situation in advance of presidential elections and to hold several meetings.

The detained may be deported to Ukraine.

Ukraine's Foreign Ministry demanded an explanation. According to RIA-Novosti, the ministry demanded that Belarusian authorities hold "adequate investigation of the incident."

"We will consider efforts to Prolong the investigation or a refusal to provide an explanation as disrespect of Ukrainian citizens' rights and as a step counter to the traditionally friendly relations."

The ministry added that this step violated the rights of Ukrainian citizens to enter Belarus freely. The refusal to allow Ukrainians to enter Belarus is considered an "unmotivated and discriminating migration control at the Belarus borders."

Pora was one of the parties that stood behind the 'Orange Revolution' in Ukraine.

Source: MosNews.Com, March 3, 2006; www.mosnews.com

INTERNATIONAL

17. Europe Calls for Fair Presidential Elections in Belarus

The head of the world's largest regional security organization appealed Monday to the Belarusian leadership to ensure "fair and peaceful" presidential elections in the country.

Belgian Foreign Minister Karel De Gucht, who is currently the chairman-in-office of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), said it was important that the Belarus authorities adhered to the fundamental freedoms of assembly and speech and refrained from interfering with the election process.

He also expressed concern over the detention of four local election observers and a candidate for president.

On March 2, police in the Belarusian capital, Minsk, detained Alexander Kozulin, a candidate in the March 19 presidential elections, who was about to undergo registration at the All-Belarusian Assembly. The prosecutors said the candidate had pushed a policeman during registration and then damaged a picture of the country's president at the police station.

The Belarus State Security Committee (KGB) previously reported that it had uncovered a state coup plot masterminded by the opposition and planned for March 20, the day after the presidential vote.

Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko, who Washington has dubbed the "last dictator in Europe", said the state had banned the activities of 72 non-governmental organizations suspected of plotting the coup.

Source: Alexander Shishlo, RIA Novosti, March 6, 2006; <http://rian.ru>

18. MEPs Go It Alone to Belarus

MEPs monitoring the Belarusian presidential elections on 19 March will not be speaking for the EU, the European Commission has warned, while signalling interest in new official election missions to Asia and Africa.

The European Parliament is planning to send an ad hoc delegation of seven MEPs to Minsk next week, with around five more liberal group members set to go under their own steam.

The MEPs are using member states' embassies in Belarus to try and get visas but will not have access to polling stations or produce a final report, with the commission leaving official observation duties to the OSCE.

"They [the MEPs] speak for themselves," external relations commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner said on Monday (6 March). "It is the OSCE who, at the end of the day, will make the official statement."

Commission methods rule out sending official missions to the OSCE zone, she explained, with the Vienna-based body covering the EU as well as all the former Soviet states.

The MEPs' ad hoc mission, led by Polish conservative Bogdan Klich, will focus on giving moral support to Belarus opposition parties and boosting international attention in the event of potential post-election protests and police reprisals.

"In the end we will see who can get in and what they can do," a parliament official indicated.

Pre-election beatings

The OSCE has so far deployed 46 experts in Belarus, with an interim report last week criticising the detention of opposition activists and the beating of independent presidential candidate, Aleksander Kozulin.

Ms Ferrero-Waldner called the beating a "serious development" and repeated EU threats to extend a visa ban on Minsk politicians if the OSCE mission concludes the elections are unfair.

The OSCE plans to deploy a further 400 observers for the elections, with another 300 to 400 observers due to arrive from separate national missions from the former Soviet countries.

But Minsk has questioned the objectivity of both the OSCE and the EU when it comes to discussing the elections.

Belarus foreign ministry spokesman Andrei Popov said OSCE, EU and US reactions to the Kozulin beating were not only misinformed but suspiciously-well coordinated, Belarus NGO Charter97 reported.

"All this prompts the thought that there is obvious stage direction here," Mr Popov said on state media.

Belarusian diplomats also attacked the EU's decision to hold VIP-level meetings with opposition candidate Aleksander Millinkevich in Brussels last month.

"One can even doubt the sincerity of the EU's analysis of the election results if the result is something other than what the EU expects," Minsk contacts told EUobserver.

Excerpt from

Source: Andrew Rettman; EUobserver; March 6, 2006; <http://euobserver.com>

19. Dialogue with Belarus necessary - Council of Europe

A senior official from one of Europe's leading human rights organizations said Saturday that a dialogue with Belarus was necessary.

Terry Davis, the secretary-general of the Council of Europe, said in an interview with RIA Novosti that conferences on Belarus, similar to one held in Prague on February 23, should be continued.

This conference involving representatives of the Belarusian opposition focused on the situation in the republic prior to the March 19 presidential elections.

He said Belarus was the only European country, which was not a member of the Council of Europe.

In 1996, the Council of Europe suspended Belarus' membership as an observer after elections, which it deemed undemocratic.

Davis said he wanted Belarus to join the Council of Europe, adding that the democratic and human rights situation in the country should be improved.

He said observers from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe had not been invited yet to monitor the upcoming presidential elections.

Davis added that the Belarusian leadership seemed to be afraid of monitoring on the part of European organizations.

Source: Kristina-Luna Rodriguez, RIA Novosti, March 6, 2006; <http://rian.ru>

20. US Says Belarus Arrest Reinforces Fears About Upcoming Election

The State Department says the arrest and beating of an opposition politician in Belarus Thursday reinforces concern the country's upcoming presidential election will not be free and fair.

Strongman President Alexander Lukashenko, the country's leader since 1994 is seeking a third term in office in the March 19 voting.

Officials here had already expressed serious concern that the Belarus elections would not meet international standards, and they say the concern has been reinforced by Thursday's events, in which an opposition presidential candidate was beaten and arrested.

News reports say the opposition figure, Aleksandr Kazulin, was accosted by security agents in Minsk as he tried to attend a pro-government assembly designed to endorse Mr. Lukashenko's candidacy.

Kazulin, one of two candidates challenging the incumbent, was said to have suffered facial cuts and bruises in the melee. He was arrested but released several hours later. Dozens of opposition activists were also reported to have been detained.

Initial U.S. reaction came from National Security Adviser Steven Hadley, traveling with President Bush in South Asia, who said a prerequisite for a free and fair election is not having opposition candidates beaten up and their supporters thrown in jail.

At a news briefing, State Department Deputy Spokesman Adam Ereli called for the release of the detainees and an investigation of Thursday's events.

"They reinforce our fears that a free election process will be compromised, and we have called on and will continue to press the authorities in Belarus to release the individuals detained, and to conduct an impartial investigation into the beating of the leader of the opposition and to hold the perpetrators accountable," he said.

The spokesman said the United States is coordinating its approach on the election with others including European governments and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which has a monitoring mission in Belarus.

Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs David Kramer, who visited Belarus last week, told the New York Times U.S. and European diplomats are considering punitive actions that would target Belarus officials who might be involved in election fraud.

Mr. Lukashenko, a Soviet-era collective farm official, has ruled the country with an increasingly authoritative hand since he was first elected in 1994.

A referendum in 2004, changing the country's constitution to allow him to run again, was widely condemned as having been rigged.

There are similar concerns about the March 19 voting, which follows a campaign in which Mr. Lukashenko's two challengers and their supporters have faced harassment and been barred from access to the state media.

National Security Adviser Hadley, who spoke Thursday in New Delhi, said there has not been enough outrage and international attention on Belarus in the run-up to the election.

In a gesture earlier this week, President Bush and adviser Hadley met at the White House with the widows of a pro-democracy businessman and an independent journalist from Belarus said by international investigators to have been killed by authorities because of their political activity.

White House Spokesman Scott McClellan said the United States shares that view about the circumstances of the deaths, and said President Bush stressed personal support for those seeking justice for the disappeared, and all those who seek freedom in Belarus.

President Lukashenko has responded sharply to international criticism. At Thursday's conference in Minsk, he spoke of dark forces, especially the United States, that he said are aligned against him and threatening the country's stability.

He said the United States had no grounds for teaching Belarus about human rights because of blood spilled in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere. He also warned the domestic opposition would be dismantled in a tough way after the election.

Source: David Gollust, Voice of America; March 3, 2006; <http://www.voanews.com>

21. Belarus: Havel's Advice For Belarus's Dissidents

Czechoslovakia's leading communist-era dissident and the first president of post-communist Czechoslovakia, Vaclav Havel, on March 1 presented a human rights award in Prague to the Belarusian rights activist Alyaksandr Byalyatski, head of the Vyasna human rights center until it was closed down by the Belarusian authorities. Havel's symbolic support for the award -- the Homo Homini prize presented at the annual One World festival of documentary films focused on human rights -- is the latest example of Havel's longstanding backing for Belarus' democratic opposition and came at the end of a week marked by another diplomatic spat between the Belarusian and Czech governments. RFE/RL's Belarus Service asked Havel to explain his stance on Belarus and share his advice to Western leaders and also to Belarus's opposition ahead of presidential elections on March 19.

RFE/RL: How do you explain your consistent support for Belarusian democrats?

Vaclav Havel: I sympathize, but I am not alone. It is an element of the Czech Republic's current official policy to sympathize with anyone who is striving for more liberal, more democratic conditions, with those who want to change an authoritative system because we have our own experience to draw on and because we feel a heightened responsibility to show solidarity with those who are striving after roughly what we ourselves sought after.

RFE/RL: The KGB today arrested several young people in Belarus. On TV it was also announced that an opposition conspiracy against the regime and against Belarus had been uncovered. You have rich experience as a dissident. What would your advice to Belarusian dissidents be? What can be done about the secret police in general? How can one deal with them? And is it possible to do something against it?

Havel: To be yourself and, simply, to retain a sense of detachment and take the high ground, and to take it all with a bit of humor. I recall our dissident days as days of relative happiness. There was a sense of solidarity between us, we stuck together, and at the same time we didn't take ourselves too seriously. We weren't obsessed with anything. It is true that everyone tends to

remember the good rather than the bad. Still, a measure of distance, a sense of the bigger picture, and also persistence, that's what is most important.

RFE/RL: Russia, is currently the only country in Europe that openly supports the regime of Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka. What do you think about that? What can the Western governments, Western countries do to counter that? Or how can the topic be addressed with Russia?

Havel: I think they should say openly what they think and not shut their eyes. And conceal nothing. After all, it should be the case that partners and friends are frank with each other and can say what they think.

Source: RFE/RL; March 3, 2006; <http://www.rferl.org>

HUMAN RIGHTS & INDEPENDENT MEDIA

22. A Newspaper in Minsk Goes Out in Envelopes

The stories have been printed and the journalists have gone home. But the work is far from over: Thousands of newspapers, stacked in ceiling-high piles, wait to be stuffed into envelopes, stamped and hauled to the post office.

Belarus' state-owned media distribution network refuses to distribute *Narodnaya Volya*, or People's Will, one of the few newspapers not yet under President Alexander Lukashenko's thumb, and state-run press kiosks are banned from selling it.

So the paper's staff is using the mail to get their message out.

In the run-up to this month's presidential election, in which Lukashenko is seeking a third term, authorities have been steadily tightening the screws on the few remaining independent media.

All television and radio stations are either owned or controlled by the state and their newscasts offer nothing but praise for the 51-year-old leader, who has ruled Belarus for more than 10 years. Alexander Milinkevich, the main opposition presidential candidate, complains that his name is never mentioned on television.

The majority of print media are heavily censored, and those that refuse to toe the official line have been denied the right to publish and circulate. Even buying a copying machine requires Interior Ministry approval.

Source: Maria Danilova, *The Moscow Times*; March 7, 2006; <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/>

23. Belarus Authorities Seize Print Run Of Independent Newspaper

The publisher of one of Belarus' largest independent newspapers says authorities have confiscated thousands of copies of the newspaper.

The reported move came amid a mounting campaign by officials to pressure the opposition ahead of the presidential election on March 19.

Iosif Syaredzich, publisher of the *Narodnaya Volya* newspaper, said two trucks carrying 250,000 copies were seized at the border late on March 5.

He said the paper had printed a special edition with photographs showing last week's beating of an opposition candidate, activists, and reporters by security agents.

Narodnaya Volya whose print run is normally around 30,000, is printed in Russia to avoid being shut down by Belarusian authorities.

Authorities have accused the newspaper of unlawful campaigning.

Belarus' authoritarian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka is seeking a third term in the March 19 election.

Source: RFE/RL; March 6, 2006; <http://www.rferl.org>

24. Pastor Imprisoned for Leading Home Worship

To Forum 18 News Service's knowledge, the ten-day prison term handed down on 3 March to Pastor Georgi Vyazovsky of the Minsk-based Christ's Covenant Reformed Baptist Church for conducting religious worship in his own home is the first time for some twenty years that religious worship has incurred a prison sentence on the territory of Belarus. "We expected that my father would be found guilty," the pastor's son Yaroslav Vyazovsky remarked on the day of the trial. "What we did not expect at all is the punishment for his 'crime'. This was a real shock to all of us who were present." The church tried and failed to get re-registration under Belarus' highly restrictive 2002 religion law, which in defiance of international human rights conventions bans all but occasional religious worship in private homes. District administration leaders sent officials several times to raid Vyazovsky's church "with the aim of exposing religious organisations without registration".

Pastor Georgi Vyazovsky of the Minsk-based Christ's Covenant Reformed Baptist Church was sentenced to ten days' imprisonment on 3 March for conducting religious worship in his own home, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. "The accusations against him were that people were reading the Bible, praying and singing hymns in his house," Vladimir Bukanov, a fellow Reformed Baptist pastor who was at Friday's hearing, told Forum 18 later the same day. The judge at Partisan District Court gave no explanation for the sentence, he added, "only that it was not open to appeal." To Forum 18's knowledge, this is the first time since before the Soviet era of perestroika twenty years ago that religious worship has incurred a prison sentence on the territory of Belarus. The church was forced to hold its Sunday service on 5 March without its pastor.

"We expected that my father would be found guilty," Yaroslav Vyazovsky remarked in a message received by Forum 18 on the evening of 3 March. "What we did not expect at all is the punishment for his 'crime'. This was a real shock to all of us who were present."

According to Yaroslav Vyazovsky, some 25 Reformed Baptist pastors and church members attended the ninety-minute court hearing, which was followed by an hour's wait for the verdict and a further two hours' wait for it to be issued in written form. "From the court my father was taken straight to the police station and from there to jail. I had just enough time to go home and bring him warm clothes and some food."

Pastor Bukanov told Forum 18 on 6 March that, in what they intend to be a show of support for their pastor, all church members are planning to go en masse to greet Pastor Vyazovsky when he is released from prison about midday on Monday 13 March.

A combination of restrictions contained in the Administrative Violations Code and the 2002 religion law bans all but occasional and small-scale religious meetings in private homes, and religious activity outside designated houses of worship unless it has advance approval from the state authorities. A first offence is punishable by either a warning, a fine of between 20 and 150 times the minimum wage or three to 15 days' imprisonment. A repeat offence within one year is punishable by either a fine of between 150 and 300 times the minimum wage or ten to 15 days' imprisonment.

On 25 November 2005 Partisan District Court issued a warning to Pastor Vyazovsky following police check-ups on his home services on 26 May 2005 and 30 October 2005. An appeal against the court's decision was rejected by Minsk City Court on 10 January 2006.

Typically, first time offenders have been warned or handed down small fines, although these have been rising more. Those prosecuted a second time have so far received heavy fines rather than prison sentences.

On 22 February Pastor Vyazovsky described to Forum 18 how a local district official interrupted the Sunday service at his Minsk home on 5 February, attended by approximately 30 worshippers. Officially summoned to Partisan District Court at lunchtime on 22 February - the same day that the case against him was due to be heard - he explained that he was unable to attend and that the hearing was consequently postponed to 3 March.

On 23 February Pastor Vyazovsky sent Forum 18 copies of the court materials to be used in the 3 March hearing. These include two photographs of worship at his home and three witness statements, all dated 5 February.

In the first, Vyazovsky's neighbour from across the street, Natalya Konsichin, states: "As far as I know, there is a church in that house and on Sundays people gather there. I don't know exactly why they gather, whether they pray or sing hymns. The church doesn't bother us, we don't hear any loud noises from it."

The other, very similar statements are from the two state representatives who interrupted the 5 February service - local senior police officer Dmitri Lovkis and head of Partisan District's Social Protection Department, Vladimir Filipkov. According to these, the pair were sent on a "raid" [the English word is used] by the leadership of Partisan District "with the aim of exposing religious organisations without registration". In October 2005, recalls Lovkis, "we uncovered the fact that the owner of the said house [Georgi Vyazovsky] was organising and holding a religious gathering with prayers and hymns in a place not designed for the holding of religious gatherings, and without the relevant permission."

When the pair checked up on Vyazovsky's house on 5 February, according to Filipkov, "there were about 20 people present in the house, and a worship service with hymns was taking place. The hall where the people were located was equipped with benches for seating, a rostrum with a Christian cross and audio equipment. Vyazovsky was present at the service in person and was to be found in the hall, his son was behind the rostrum. Vyazovsky, seeing my presence, and also that I was taking photographs of the hall and those present, led me out of the hall."

Senior Lieutenant Lovkis did not enter the house. "In answer to my request to pass and see what was going on," he writes in his report to the local district police colonel, "[Vyazovsky] refused to let me into the hall, saying that he was not conducting a religious gathering and that his relatives were in the hall. After Filipkov said that he had gone into the hall, seen that a religious gathering was taking place and taken some photographs, Vyazovsky told us to leave his house."

Christ's Covenant Reformed Baptist Church unsuccessfully sought independent re-registration under the restrictive 2002 religion law after previously being affiliated to the mainstream Baptist Union.

Source: Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18; March 6, 2006; <http://www.forum18.org>

25. Police Beat Journalists Covering Police Assault of Opposition Candidate

Police today turned on journalists in Belarus trying to cover an attack by plainclothes police officers on an opposition candidate in March 19 presidential elections. The Committee to Protect Journalists condemned the assault.

Aleksandr Kozulin, one of three candidates challenging President Aleksandr Lukashenko, was beaten and detained by police in the capital Minsk when he tried to enter a meeting to hear Lukashenko speak, local and international news organizations reported. Kozulin was released after several hours in custody.

Police beat reporters trying to cover the assault. A Reuters television cameraman, whose name was not immediately available, was beaten and hospitalized with minor injuries. Reporters were detained inside the meeting hall to prevent them from recording the arrest of Kozulin who was driven away to the Oktryabrsk police station.

Kozulin supporters gathered at the police station demanding his release. Police rounded up about 20 of them along with some of the journalists who covered the protest, Reuters reported.

A gunman then fired three shots at a vehicle carrying Kozulin supporters. According to a correspondent of the independent Belapan news agency, who witnessed the shooting, the shooter was a police officer dressed in civilian clothes. Police detained photographers from Reuters, The Associated Press, and newspapers Nasha Niva and Belgazeta after the shooting and confiscated their cameras to check for pictures, the human rights center Charter 97 said.

Plainclothes police beat journalist Oleg Ulevich of the newspaper Komsomolskaya Pravda in Belarus when he tried to take photographs outside the Oktryabrsk police station. He was taken to the hospital with concussion and a broken nose, local reports said.

"This is nothing but state thuggery," said CPJ Executive Director Ann Cooper. "We condemn in the strongest terms these flagrant attempts to stifle media coverage of opposition candidates during the presidential campaign."

Lukashenko, who rules Belarus with an iron fist, is expected to win reelection. Reuters quoted him as calling Kozulin's attempt to attend his speech "a provocation."

Source: IFEX; March 2, 2006; <http://www.ifex.org/>

BUSINESS

26. Belarus In For Another 5-Year Program

The 3rd All-Belarus People's Assembly approved past week the five-year acceleration program for years from 2006 to 2010. The program suggests stepping up GDP by 46 percent to 55 percent by 2010, retains and even toughens the state-control in economy, actually winds up the promised privatization, but offers a string of liberal reforms without describing them in detail.

Under the program sealed by All-Belarus People's Assembly past week, the GDP is expected to widen 146 percent to 155 percent by 2010; industrial output is to gain 143 percent to 151 percent; agricultural output will go up by 134 percent to 145 percent. The fixed capital investments are forecasted to step up 165 percent to 175 percent, while the salaries are promised to reach \$500 on average.

The new target has been elaborated in view of the economic achievements of 2000 to 2005. Past year, Belarus caught up and even exceeded a lot of parameters posted in pre-crisis 1990, according to strategic experts of Belarus.

Another matter that justifies the route chosen by Belarus is higher achievements vs the other countries of CIS. Compared with 1991, for instance, the 2004 GDP of Belarus was 117 percent; CIS had 89 percent; Russia – 89.5 percent; Ukraine – 66.7 percent; Kazakhstan – 115.9 percent.

The flaw in the program is its contradictions. "Promising to reach \$500 salary, the planners have written it will rise 50 percent, but in this case it will be actually nearing \$400," said Leonid Zaiko, one of the masterminds of election program for Alexander Milinkevich, the sole candidate of democratic opposition at forthcoming presidential elections in Belarus. Other shortcoming is that it sets forth the optimistic scenario exclusively. The program takes into account no possible rise in prices for energy sources, said Zaiko.

“When you’re listening to a fairy tale, you can evaluate just the flow of speech,” said a former official of Belarus on condition of anonymity.

Source: Kommersant; March 6, 2006; <http://www.kommersant.com>

27. Belarus’s Lukashenko Says Foreign Debt Can Be Repaid in One Year

Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko has said that the country’s foreign debt currently stands at about 1.5 billion dollars.

“We can repay the money within twelve months’ time,” he told the All-Belarussian People’s Assembly on Friday.

About the possibility of drawing foreign investments he said they would not resolve any problems, but on the contrary may result in the country’s dependence.

“Nobody lends money that easy. An addiction to U.S. or European money is developed quickly. Ridding oneself of it takes time,” he said.

The Belarussian president said foreigners “count money well and will not lend anything without chances of getting a profit greater than the one they can expect at home.”

“Those who these days sell fuel and energy for these sheets of paper act with great foolishness. What if Uncle Sam devalues the dollar tomorrow?” Lukashenko asked.

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

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.
