

Edited by Maria Kabalina
International League for Human Rights

THIS WEEK'S TOP STORIES:

- Ethic Polish Activist in Belarus Jailed for 10 Days
- Belarus Releases Two Election Activists
- Belarusian Opposition Appeals Election Results

Human Rights & Independent Media

1. Ethic Polish Activist in Belarus Jailed for 10 Days (*RFE/RL*)
2. Belarus Releases Two Election Activists (*RFE/RL*)
3. Defamation Law and Practice in Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine (*Article 19*)
4. Kozulin Refuses to Read Court Report (*AFN*)

Domestic

5. Minsk Not Seen As Popular Travel Destination (*RFE/RL*)
6. Belarusian Opposition Appeals Election Results (*Kommersant*)
7. Kozulin Reminded that Lukashenko's Credentials Expires on September 19 (*AFN*)
8. Number of Belarusian-Language Schools Shrinks (*RFE/RL*)

Regional

9. Talks on Russian Gas Price for 2007 To Begin in Fall – Belarus (*RIA Novosti*)
10. Belarus Raising Trade with CIS Countries (*Belorusskie Novosti*)
11. Russian Federation-Belarus Relations Develop Positively – Lukashenko (*Itar-Tass*)
12. Eurasian Customs Union Being Formed (*Kommersant*)

International

13. Poland Calls On Belarus To Release Activists (*RFE/RL*)
14. Czech University Offers Scholarships To Belarusians (*RFE/RL*)

HUMAN RIGHTS & INDEPENDENT MEDIA

1. Ethic Polish Activist in Belarus Jailed for 10 Days

A district court in Hrodna on August 22 sentenced Andrzej Poczobut -- an activist of the Union of Poles in Belarus, which is not recognized by the Belarusian authorities -- to 10 days in jail, finding him guilty of petty hooliganism, *RFE/RL's Belarus Service* reported. Reporters of the local television in Hrodna accused Poczobut of preventing them from filming a wreath-laying ceremony at a local cemetery, which was organized on August 18 by the SPB. Poczobut and one of his colleagues were detained during that ceremony, after which the Polish Foreign Ministry issued a note of protest.

Source: RFE/RL; August 23, 2006; <http://www.rferl.org>

2. Belarus Releases Two Election Activists

Two members of a Belarusian election-monitoring group have been released after spending six months in jail on charges of working for an unregistered organization.

The two monitors -- Enira Branitskaya and Alyksandr Shalayka - were among four election monitors from the U.S.-financed Partnership organization who were arrested in February in the run-up to the March 19 presidential election. They were released on August 21.

The two other monitors - Mikalay Astreyka and Tsimafey Dranchuk, who have been sentenced to one and two years in prison, respectively - remain jailed.

President Alyksandr Lukashenka won a third term in the election, which was condemned by Western countries as unfree and unfair. // *AFP*

Source: RFE/RL; August 22, 2006; <http://www.rferl.org>

3. Defamation Law and Practice in Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine

1 Executive Summary

The right of freedom of expression is guaranteed in the Constitutions of Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine. Over the years, this right has been violated to varying degrees in all three countries, especially by widespread use of defamation lawsuits to shield the authorities from criticism. These instances have occurred in contravention of international agreements which are binding on Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine.¹

However, this practice has substantially decreased in Ukraine following the 'Orange Revolution' of late 2004 and the adoption of progressive freedom of expression amendments to their laws. Criminal defamation laws have been abolished in Ukraine and partially abolished in Moldova. However, in both countries, penalties imposed by courts in defamation cases have been clearly disproportionate to the damage caused in some instances. Suitability of a pre-set cap on fines for defamation have been widely discussed in both countries. However, Moldova actually abolished its cap in 2003 despite protests from journalists and other civil society organisations. Ukraine has in the past attempted to introduce a ceiling, although discussions on this issue were subsequently abandoned.

By contrast, in Belarus criminal defamation laws are still widely used, particularly to provide special protection to the president. The law envisages harsh sanctions, which include periods of

¹ All three countries have ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Moldova and Ukraine are members of the Council of Europe and have ratified the European Convention on Human Rights. Belarus, as an applicant for membership of the Council of Europe, should still comply with the principles arising from the European Convention.

imprisonment and forced labour. Severe economic penalties, which are clearly disproportionate to the damage caused, are often imposed by the courts. Such practices have created a considerable 'chilling effect' on the media, with considerable self-censorship and an environment where freedom of expression is hardly possible.

This memorandum also provides recommendations for changes to laws and practices in the three countries to reduce abuse of defamation laws and to better promote freedom of expression.

2 BELARUS

Belarus remains a country in which free expression is hardly possible. The regime of Alyaksandr Lukashenka has adopted highly restrictive legislation and instigated a barrage of other measures to strangle or silence independent media and any dissenting voices. There are no real possibilities for any public discussion of these legislative initiatives, which are regularly imposed from above.

2.1 Law

The Belarusian Constitution states that "everyone is entitled protection against unlawful interference with ... his honour and dignity" (Article 28). By referring such matters to court, one can claim compensation for damages (Article 61(2)).

2.1.1 Criminal defamation

New laws and amendments are often adopted swiftly and without public debate. This was also the case in the recent approval by both houses of the Belarusian National Assembly of draconian amendments to the criminal code that will further undermine freedom of expression. The new provisions are part of the law on the "Introduction of amendments and changes to certain legislative acts of the Republic of Belarus on strengthening liability for the actions addressed against a person and public security" (the Amending Law). They were adopted on 22 December 2005 and came into force on 1 January 2006.

Criminal defamation provisions are found in the Belarusian criminal code at Articles 188 (defamation), 189 (insult), 367 (defamation of the president), 368 (insult of the president) and 369 (insult of a public official). Defamation of the president can result in up to five years in prison. Defamation and insult of ordinary citizens (as per Articles 188 and 189) can lead to imprisonment for up to two years.

Article 188 prohibits knowingly spreading false information discrediting another person, while Article 189 targets the "deliberate degradation of the honour and dignity of an individual expressed in an indecent manner." Articles 367 and 368 were introduced in January 2001, in preparation for the (then) upcoming presidential elections. However, they still continue to be widely used against those who accuse the government of corruption. These cases are initiated ex officio: despite numerous prosecutions for defamation and insult of the president, President Lukashenka has never brought a defamation case himself.

Article 369(1) of the Amending Law introduces the criminalisation of defamation of the Republic of Belarus vis-à-vis foreign States and foreign or international organisations, a concept defined as "knowingly handing over false information concerning the Belarusian State or its organs."²

Comments to the Criminal Code Defamation Provisions and Recent Amendments

The key problem with Articles 188 and 189 is their inclusion in the criminal code rather than the civil code. Addressing such issues through the civil code would reduce the 'chilling effect' on

² Other provisions in the Amending Law relate to the national security of Belarus (Article 361(1) and (2)).

individuals and the media, and thereby enhance the free flow of information. Articles 367, 368 and 369 are clearly contrary to international standards of freedom of expression, according to which public figures should tolerate a higher degree of criticism than ordinary citizens.³ The penalties envisaged by the criminal code are grossly disproportionate and the legislation does not even allow a defence of reasonable publication.

In early 2003 the Belarusian Association of Journalists launched a campaign for the review of Articles 367, 368 and 369 and sent an appeal to the Constitutional Court. As a result of the appeal, on 1 September 2003, the Constitutional Court issued resolution "On the addition to the Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus", proposing to the Chamber of Representatives to amend Articles 367-369. Unfortunately, the Constitutional Court's recommendation has never been implemented.

ARTICLE 19 considers the Amending Law to be inconsistent with guarantees of the right to free expression enshrined in the Belarusian constitution and Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Belarus has ratified. In particular, Article 369(1) is problematic, as it criminalises defamation of the Belarusian State. The prevailing view in advanced democracies is that public bodies, including the State, do not have a reputation entitled to legal protection, since they lack an emotional or financial interest in preserving their good name. Furthermore, the disproportionate penalties envisaged for this offence is likely to greatly undermine exchanges between Belarusian people and foreign countries. In the words of the Belarusian Association of Journalists, the amendments "will plunge Belarusian society further into an atmosphere of fear."⁴

2.1.2 Civil defamation

Civil defamation cases are much more common in Belarus than criminal ones. The reason for this is presumably that in civil cases there is no need to prove the falsehood of the impugned statement, or to establish malicious intent⁵ in its dissemination.

Article 5 of the civil code prohibits the publication of information damaging the honour or dignity of the president, as well as high-ranking officials, and can lead to the closure of a media outlet following the accumulation of two or more warnings.⁶ The prohibition of insulting the president can also be found in Article 79 of the Belarusian Constitution, while Article 9 of Presidential Decree No. 5 renders unlawful the insult of State bodies' executive officials. Moreover, Article 47 of the Electoral Code contains a prohibition on "insulting or defaming the honour and dignity of official persons, presidential and parliamentary candidates." Privacy laws also provide an alternative way to thwart the dissemination of nearly any information concerning public officials.

All of the defamation provisions allow imposition of disproportionate penalties, fail to establish adequate defences (such as a defence of reasonable publication) and are excessively vague. In addition, although the Constitution guarantees the independence of the judiciary, in practice it is prone to political pressure.

In order to circumvent the problem of the routine use of defamation suits to silence non-State media, a number of media outlets have hired lawyers to ensure that their articles do not attract liability. However, many media outlets cannot afford to retain lawyers and legal advice is often an incomplete guarantee because of the extremely broad scope of statements that can fall foul of

³ See, for example, the European Court of Human Rights in its landmark judgment in *Lingens v. Austria*, Judgment of 8 July 1986, Application No. 9815/82 (European Court of Human Rights) paragraph 45.

⁴ Belarusian Association of Journalists, "Appeal to the Council of the Republic of the National Assembly of the Republic of Belarus and Constitutional Court", 7 December 2005, <http://baj.ru/2005/Dec/z071205e2.asp>.

⁵ See for example Article 188 and 189 of the criminal code, referring, respectively, to "false information known to be false" and "deliberate degradation of honour and dignity" [italics added].

⁶ Article 5 prohibits the "dissemination of information defaming the honour and dignity of the President of the Republic of Belarus and heads of State bodies whose status is established by the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus."

Belarusian law; self-censorship is consequently widely practiced. The Press Law provides under Article 40 that journalists must “verify the truthfulness of the data received” and “provide objective information for publication”. The meaning of ‘objective’ is not defined in the legislation and subject to wide judicial discretion. In cases against the print media, judges normally consider any statement made in a newspaper as being subject to the objectivity requirement, even if it is presented as a commentary.

Readers’ letters published in a newspaper or information by interviewees thus also have to pass the ‘objectivity’ test.

2.2 Practice

Lawsuits against media outlets are extremely common in Belarus. On top of their ‘chilling effect’ on the media, they make the already ruinous financial situation of most media outlets even more precarious, as the imposition of disproportionate fines can cause media outlets to go bankrupt.

Several journalists have been convicted under Articles 367-369 of the criminal code. Such was the fate of Pavel Mazheika and Mikola Markievich of the non-State newspaper Pahonia. In June 2002, they were sentenced to two and two and a half years’ ‘restricted freedom’ respectively, for ‘false’ and ‘defamatory’ articles published in the run-up to the 2001 presidential elections. In these articles, Mazheika and Markievich had questioned the legitimacy of President Lukashenka’s re-election bid, given widespread suspicions of his involvement in the disappearances of people opposed to his regime. A similar case is that of Vitar Ivashkevich, editor of Rabochy. His article ‘The Thief Must Go to Prison’, printed on the eve of the 2001 presidential elections, contained allegations of high-level corruption as well as the implication of the president in arms deals.

One of the publications most frequently targeted the independent newspaper *Belorusskaia Delovaia Gazeta (BDG)*, whose editors and contributors have been taken to court for defamation following articles investigating the shady affairs of certain public officials.

Most recently, *BDG* journalist Siarhej Satsuk was sued for defamation by Siarhej Bedrytski, a former officer of the Special Militia Unit. In 2003, Satsuk had accused Bedrytski of involvement in a crime of which he was later cleared. Bedrytski claimed that, as a result of this ‘defamation’, he had not been able to find employment for two years and demanded BYR 100 million (approx. € 40,000) in damages. In December 2005, the court imposed a fine of BYR 50 million (approx. € 20,000) on the newspaper and BYR 5 million on Satsuk. These were subsequently lowered to BYR 20 million (approx. € 7,000) and BYR 2 million, respectively. *BDG* argued that both the ruling that originally cleared Bedrytski of the crime and the later charges against the newspaper were ordered ‘from above’.

Occasionally, the authorities chastise a newspaper more than once for the same material. For example, Alena Raubetskaya, editor-in-chief of *Birzha Informatsii*, was fined BYR 1.5 million in September 2004 for her article “Treason in the Name of the People”, where she criticised a national referendum. Two months later the Ministry of Information considered the article again, issued a warning and then an order freezing the publication for 3 months.

Exempt from

Source: Article 19; <http://www.article19.org/pdfs/publications/the-right-to-criticise.pdf>

4. Kozulin Refuses to Read Court Report

On August 16, Aleksandr Kozulin, former presidential candidate, received permission to read a 150-page court report for the period from August 15 (!) to August 18. He refused to read it.

“The court showed its face once again and showed that it did not follow the law but followed the order. I refuse to read the report, because I can not handle that harassment. I am not a machine

to rewrite this report, which contains a lot of mistakes, for such a short period of time," the politician stated, referring to the mere three days left for him to read the report.

On August 16, during a meeting with his lawyer, Kozulin confirmed that he received a reply to his petition to the court. He received permission to review the court report in the period from August 15 to August 18. Thus the political prisoner got only four days to review a 150-page document, to analyze it, to find all the inaccuracies and dubious information. And one day had already passed.

Kozulin himself was shocked by the behavior of Judge Vnukevich, who signed the permission. After Kozulin and his lawyer were refused a request to get the report copied, Kozulin stated that he was going to hand-copy it. Obviously, that scared the judges, who had tried to hide from the public and the defendant all their tricks during the trial, and particularly, the tricks in the court report itself, the press service of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Narodnaya Hramada) commented.

Meanwhile, Igor Rytkevich, Kozulin's lawyer, received the same document. He was also offered to review the report in the same period of time from August 15 to August 18. It is unclear, how Aleksandr Kozulin, who is in jail and Igor Rytkevich, his lawyer, who is supposed to review the report in the court building, may do so at the same time.

[Trans. Ed.]

Source: AFN, August 18, 2006; <http://www.afn.by>

DOMESTIC

5. Minsk Not Seen As Popular Travel Destination

More often than not, Belarus makes the headlines for its political repression, rather than as an attractive travel destination.

According to official statistics, 36,000 foreign tourists came to Belarus in the first quarter of 2006. Most of them came from neighboring Russia, Ukraine, Poland, and the Baltic states.

Most popular is Minsk, Belarus's capital, which attracted some 26,000 tourists in that period.

The number is very small when compared to Belarus's neighbors. Last year, some 3.5 million tourists visited Latvia and more than 2 million came to Lithuania.

Lack Of Infrastructure...

The head of Latvia's State Tourism Agency, Valdis Vitalns, says Belarus invests too little money in tourist infrastructure and creates too many bureaucratic hassles for potential visitors.

Many Belarusians seem to agree. One young man, who declined to give his name, tells RFE/RL's Belarus Service in Minsk: "We have no infrastructure. You come to Mir [a medieval castle near Minsk] and, I am sorry to say, there is no toilet there. Why should people come here?"

...Or Promotion?

A young woman says the authorities should allocate more money for advertising. She says that since foreigners know very little about Belarusian history and culture, they have no desire to visit the country.

"We simply need more promotion," she says. "We need to promote such places of interest such as the Mir Castle. Then I think we will have more tourists."

Belarusian officials say they are trying to fix the situation. Viktor Yankovenka, chief tourism expert at the Ministry of Sport and Tourism in Minsk, told the Belarusian news agency Belapan that officials want tourists to feel more comfortable in Belarus.

Yankovenka said that starting in the fall, new information points will appear in Minsk, informing visitors of city highlights. He said that in the next few years, Belarus will have new motels, camping grounds, cafes, and parking lots.

He also announced that travel agencies that fail to attract tourists will be closed.
Bad Image Abroad

Others from Minsk say that the environment keeps foreigners away. Belarus was heavily affected by the 1986 Chornobyl nuclear accident

"The main reason [why tourists are not coming] is the accident at the Chornobyl nuclear plant," one young man says. "People are not coming here because they are afraid of radiation."

But perhaps the problem lies deeper. A young woman from Minsk, who also declines to give her name, says the problem is Belarus's general image, which is seen as undemocratic in the West. "They [tourists] do not like our regime," she says.

Western countries have denounced as fraudulent Belarus's March 19 presidential election, in which Alyaksandr Lukashenka was reelected. The authorities have been widely accused of violating human rights and restricting political freedoms.

Meanwhile, the number of Belarusians traveling abroad is decreasing. In the first quarter of this year, some 224,000 Belarusians went abroad, 10,000 less than in the first quarter of 2005. // Based on material from *RFE/RL's Belarus Service*

Source: *RFE/RL*; August 22, 2006; <http://www.rferl.org>

6. Belarusian Opposition Appeals Election Results

Fight for Power

Yesterday the Superior Court of Belarus began to consider an appeal from the opposition demanding that the results of the country's March 19 presidential election be annulled. Opposition figures did not expect success, but rather hoped to attract the attention of their fellow citizens and, in particular, Western leaders after a prolonged silence. To remind the West even more clearly of its existence, the opposition sent its emissary to Washington. At the same time, the Belarusian government began the process of shutting down the country's Communist Party, which many see as a unifying link between members of the opposition.

The Superior Court of Belarus yesterday began to consider an appeal from the opposition protesting the results of the March 19 presidential election and demanding new elections. The judges received the text of the appeal, which was signed by 6,000 people, as well as 700 pages of reports detailing voting irregularities at polling stations.

The Belarusian opposition began the process of filing the appeal to the Superior Court at the beginning of April. Aleksandr Bukhvostov, the former head of opposition candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich's campaign initiative, coordinated the appeal process. The leaders of the opposition set him a simple task – to put together the documents and collect signatures. But the task turned out to be far more difficult. At first, Bukhvostov promised to finish by August 1, but in the process of getting signatures he was repeatedly picked up by the police for trivial infractions. Not until last Friday was the packet of documents, weighing eight kilograms, finally delivered to the Superior Court.

Milinkevich's press secretary, Pavel Mozheiko, told *Kommersant* on the eve of the delivery that the opposition is not counting on success: "We have dealt with the Belarusian justice system

before, and we know where it stands," he said. According to Mozheiko, the opposition is prepared to exhaust all its legal options, from the Superior Court of Belarus to the United Nations Human Rights Commission. "Our main goal is to show people, governments, and the international community that we are here and that we have not given up," said Mozheiko. Describing the opposition's plans in the event the appeal is denied, he said "only the people on the street can change the situation in Belarus, but in the immediate future we are not looking to rile up the people; right now the most important thing for us is to take part in demonstrations in the courts." Mozheiko summed up his remarks by noting that "there is no heroism in serving an extra 15 days in prison, none at all."

In the meantime, the Belarusian opposition is reminding people of its existence not only with legal appeals but also with the help of personal contacts. On Monday Aleksey Korol, the deputy head of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (BSDP) and the right-hand man of the party's jailed leader, Aleksandr Kosulin, met in Washington with David Kramer, the American deputy assistant secretary of state for Europe and Eurasia. Korol asked American diplomats to help the Belarusian opposition to create an alternative to the country's official mass media by means of satellite channels, radio stations, and Internet portals. Kramer assured his guest that Washington will not desert the Belarusian opposition and that it will continue to offer its support.

At the same time, Belarusian officials intensified their clean sweep of the political field. The target of the most recent attacks was the Belarusian Communist Party (PKB), which many experts consider to be the main force cementing the unified opposition. Last weekend Minsk city officials declared that the PKB had broken rules in setting up its offices, meaning that the entire party structure in the capital is illegal and will have to be shut down. Communist Party leader Sergey Kalyakin accused the mayor of political theatrics and promised to fight on to the end. Lamented Kalyakin, "legally we are in the right, but in Belarus it is not the rule of law that holds sway, but the law of power."

Source: Aleksandr Gabuyev, Kommersant; August 22, 2006; <http://www.kommersant.com/>

7. Kozulin Reminded that Lukashenko's Credentials Expires on September 19

Aleksandr Kozulin, former presidential candidate, recalled that on September 19, the credentials of the current president will expire, due to the fact that the elections were not accepted by the international community

Kozulin stated that "with every day, the Belarusian regime is getting closer to its illegitimacy."

He called on Belarusian political parties heads to raise this question as a priority one during their activities and political decision making. Kozulin sees the preparation for the local elections in this light, the press service of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Narodnaya Hramada) noted.

The politician also stated the initiative to create a leftist party coalition: the Party of Communists of Belarus (PCB), the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Narodnaya Hramada); the Social Democratic Party led by Shushkevich, and Labor Party led by Bukhvostov He does not exclude the opportunity to create a powerful centre-left party in the future.

[Trans. Ed.]

Source: AFN, August 18, 2006; <http://www.afn.by>

8. Number of Belarusian-Language Schools Shrinks

Deputy Education Minister Kazimir Faryno told journalists in Minsk on August 16 that 4,006 schools will open for the new school year in Belarus on September 1, *RFE/RL's* Belarus Service reported. Of these, 2,313 (57 percent) have the status of schools instructing in Belarusian, 1,432 (36 percent) instruct in Russian, and 258 are bilingual. According to official data, last year nearly 60 percent of schools in Belarus instructed in the Belarusian language, while in 33 percent of

schools the language of instruction was Russian. Faryno revealed that in September, some 24 percent of Belarusian schoolchildren will be taught in Belarusian. He specified that in Minsk this figure will not exceed 2 percent.

Source: RFE/RL; August 17, 2006; <http://www.rferl.org>

REGIONAL

9. Talks on Russian Gas Price for 2007 To Begin in Fall - Belarus

Negotiations on the price Belarus will pay next year for Russian natural gas will be held in the fall, the Belarusian ambassador to Russia said on Tuesday.

After raising gas prices for several of its other ex-Soviet neighbors, Russia said it would pursue a European price formula for Belarus in 2007, and offered to partially compensate for the price hikes in exchange for control over Belarus' gas routes leading to Europe.

Vasily Dolgolev said, "Negotiations will open in the fall. I think the price structure will be clear in October-November."

The price of gas supplies to Belarus has not changed since 2004, and currently stands at \$46.68 per 1,000 cubic meters. Russia is seeking a price in the region of \$180-200 - a move expected to tear a hole of around \$2 billion in the Belarusian budget.

The ambassador also said the volume of gas supplied to Belarus would be regulated by the energy balance of the Russia-Belarus union state, established until 2020.

Russia and Belarus have been mulling the formation of a union state since they signed an agreement on April 2, 1997 on creating a common economic, customs, and political space, but negotiations have stalled recently over a number of issues, including gas prices.

Source: RIA Novosti; August 22, 2006; <http://en.rian.ru>

10. Belarus Raising Trade with CIS Countries

The Belarusian economy ministry reported a rise in the country's trade with CIS countries in January through June.

According to the ministry's press office, Belarus' trade with Ukraine grew by 29 percent to \$1,015 million in the period, with exports rising by 23.4 percent to \$498.5 million and imports by 34.8 percent to \$516.4 million.

The supplies of petroleum products to Ukraine jumped by 70 percent to \$129.2 million. The ministry linked the rise in imports from Ukraine mainly to soaring electricity supplies.

Trade between Belarus and Moldova climbed by 21.7 percent to \$80.6 million. Belarus' exports rose by 14.6 percent to \$44 million and imports by 31.6 percent to \$36.6 million.

Belarus' trade with Kazakhstan increased by 60.8 percent to \$152.4 million.

In the first six months, Belarus raised exports to Georgia by 220 percent, to Kyrgyzstan by 150 percent, to Tajikistan by 80 percent, to Azerbaijan by 50 percent, to Uzbekistan by 20 percent and to Armenia by 12 percent. // *Belapan*

Source: *Belorusskie Novosti*; August 19, 2006; <http://www.naviny.by>

11. Russian Federation-Belarus Relations Develop Positively - Lukashenko

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko said that the relations with Russia are developing positively.

During his meeting with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin on Saturday, Lukashenko said there is a progress in the construction of the Union state. Economic relations are also developing dynamically, he added.

"After the EurAsEC summit I can note a positive impetus. I believe that we have problems to discuss, including issues related to the construction of the Union state. In this aspect there is a certain progress," the Belarusian president said.

Commenting on the economic cooperation between the two countries, Lukashenko said, "Trade turnover increased by 33 percent in the first half year. The economy is developing dynamically. I'd like this tendency to continue and that is why we have problems to discuss."

Lukashenko, who is now staying in Sochi for a brief vacation, said he would not give President Putin an opportunity to work in this resort city on a simplified schedule. "Sorry, I disturb you. I know you have everyday meetings and you should deal with concrete matters," Lukashenko told Putin.

During their meeting, Putin said, "We have many things to discuss - the construction of the Union state, economic issues and interaction at the international arena."

"We have a big potential for cooperation. Thus, there are problems that should be raised," Putin added.

"I'm glad you could stay here several days and we'll have an additional opportunity to focus on bilateral relations," the Russian president stressed.

Source: Itar-Tass; August 19, 2006; <http://www.tass.ru/eng>

12. Eurasian Customs Union Being Formed

Russian President Vladimir Putin took part in the Eurasian Economic Community summit in Sochi yesterday and announced that Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan would form a customs union. *Kommersant* special correspondent Andrey Kolesnikov was at the Rus resort and has the details.

Besides Putin, Presidents Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan, Kurmanbek Bakiev of Kyrgyzstan, Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus, Nursultan Nazarbaev of Kazakhstan Emomali Rakhmonov of Tajikistan and, as an observer, Robert Kocharyan of Armenia were present. Putin explained that Russian Minister of Industry and Energy Viktor Khristenko was supposed to read the report, but had fallen ill. The report was therefore read by Eurasian Economic Community Secretary General Rapota. Putin limited his comments to saying that they must "intensify cooperation in the Eurasian Economic Community up to forming a customs union and accession to the WTO." Apparently he meant joint accession to the WTO, since few member states have any hope of accession individually.

The closed meeting was short but, instead of proceeding to the Tajik agriculture exhibit on the square in front of the ferry terminal, the leaders returned to the Bocharov Ruchei presidential residence and held a press conference on the summit, a day earlier than scheduled. At the press conference, Putin read a statement in the name of all the leaders. Putin announced that the leaders has "signed a document instructing the secretariat of the Eurasian Economic Community and three countries – Belarus, Russia and Kazakhstan – to develop documents on the foundation of a customs union."

In addition, Putin announced that the presidents had signed an agreement on Uzbekistan's membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization. That explained Kocharyan's presence, since his country is a member of that organization.

Lukashenko told journalists that Tajikistan was also interested in joining the customs union, although a lack of a common border with the other states hindered it, and that the union would be in place in about three years.

Source: Andrey Kolesnikov, Kommersant; August 17, 2006; <http://www.kommersant.com/>

INTERNATIONAL

13. Poland Calls On Belarus To Release Activists

Poland's Foreign Ministry has called on Belarus to release three detained officials of an association representing Belarus's Polish minority.

The ministry said in an August 19 statement that Belarusian authorities detained the three on August 18, a day before a meeting of the Union of Poles in Belarus (SPB).

Last year, Minsk accused the SPB of fomenting a revolution among Belarusian Poles.

Warsaw intervened in the dispute. Relations between Warsaw and Minsk soured when Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka accused Poland of interfering in Belarus's internal affairs.

The dispute led to a series of tit-for-tat expulsions of diplomats from both countries. // (AFP)

Source: RFE/RL; August 20, 2006; <http://www.rferl.org>

14. Czech University Offers Scholarships To Belarusians

A Czech university says it is opening a course for students from Belarus barred from studying in their own country.

Palacky University in Olomouc, 250 kilometers southeast of Prague, says the students will receive government scholarships for a six-month course in Central European studies, starting in September.

On August 16, the Estonian Education Ministry said six Belarusian students expelled from university on political motives have been invited to study in Estonia.

Source: RFE/RL; August 17, 2006; <http://www.rferl.org>

The Belarus Update is a weekly news bulletin of the International League for Human Rights (www.ilhr.org). The League, now in its 65th year, is a New York-based human rights NGO in consultative status with the United Nations and the International Labor Organization. To send letters to the editor or to subscribe/unsubscribe please contact Maria Kabalina at cis@ilhr.org.

The Belarus project was established to support Belarusian citizens in making their case for the protection of civil society before the international community regarding Lukashenko's wholesale assault on human rights and the rule of law in Belarus.
