

June 8 – June 14, 2006

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HUMAN RIGHTS & INDEPENDENT MEDIA

1. Opposition Leader Speaks About Detention Experiences

Belarusian Popular Front head Vintsuk Vyachorka was the deputy head of opposition leader Alyaksandr Milinkevich's campaign during the March presidential election. During the course of his political career, Vyachorka has been detained several times by the authorities. He spoke to RFE/RL correspondent Valentinas Mite about his time spent in detention centers as a political prisoner.

RFE/RL: How do the authorities go about detaining people? And who is it that does this?

Vintsuk Vyachorka: As a rule, they come from a special department of police, the so-called OMON, which has now been renamed 'Spetsnaz' [special operations police unit]. Very often they are dressed in plain clothes. They do not produce any documents and perform their duties in a very rough way. They twisted my hands and though they did not throw me face down to the ground or on the floor of a bus, they often treat other people this way.

RFE/RL: Tell us more about your detention during the presidential campaign last March.

Vyachorka: I was detained in a rough way on March 8 after I organized Milinkevich's campaign rally, by the way a completely legal one, aimed at meeting with voters. People in plain clothes seized the bus where we were transporting our [sound] equipment. The head of Minsk's police unit [in charge] of public security, in person ordered me to spread my legs and to put my hands on the wall [while he conducted a search.] He was very happy that I was caught on that bus and told me he wanted to get me for a long time.

RFE/RL: What usually happens after being detained?

Vyachorka: The police take away everything from you, everything you have in your pockets, as their instructions say that all items, with which you can hang yourself, have to be taken away. After a detention, a person is transported to a detention center. Here a person, if he is detained on Friday, spends a night or two before a trial. He is kept until Monday [for a trial.]

RFE/RL: What are the conditions like in Belarusian detention centers?

Vyachorka: After a trial, when you are given a sentence, you become a full-fledged detainee. The state takes care of your expenses. It means that twice a day you get food. In the morning you get porridge and tea. You get soup, porridge, a cutlet and also tea in the evening. And also bread. They give enough bread and there are no problems with the quantity of food, but there is nothing positive to say about the variety and vitamins in the food.

RFE/RL: What was it like in the detention centers after the postelection protests were dispersed in March?

Vyachorka: Many people were arrested in March. All in all, some 1,000-1,300 people were detained in Belarus. All the prisons were overcrowded. In the cell, where I was put, there were around 14 people and some were sleeping on the floor.

RFE/RL: What was the attitude of the institution's administration toward political detainees?

Vyachorka: I would not say that the bosses of the detention center, the personnel of the center, were in some way rough toward political detainees. On the contrary, they treated them rather softly. If it is possible to say, speaking about a jail, they treated us normally. However, just before the elections and during the elections some special measures were introduced from above. For instance, it was not allowed to get anything from the outside -- no provisions, no newspapers, no nothing, and it was called a quarantine."

RFE/RL: How did ordinary detainees treat political prisoners?

Vyachorka: When I was detained in April, after the Chornobyl March, I was housed together with the center's usual inhabitants -- hooligans and so on. I have never experienced these people -- if not given special orders -- treating political detainees in a bad way.

Source: *Valentinas Mite, RFE/RL; June 14, 2006; <http://www.rferl.org>*

2. Belarus' Prosecutor Orders Crackdown on Jewish Children's Group

A Jewish kindergarten music teacher in Belarus, who celebrated the traditionally joyful Jewish holiday of Purim with Jewish children, has been threatened with criminal prosecution, Forum 18 News Service has learnt.

Lyudmila Izakson-Bolotovskaya is accused of "illegal and deliberate dissemination of religious dogma to young children, which could cause considerable harm to their world view, rights and legal interests."

Public prosecutor Sergei Kopytov refused to talk to Forum 18 about his threat — one of several recent attempts, known to Forum 18, to restrict all religious activity to existing state approved places of worship.

A public prosecutor in eastern Belarus, who recently warned a kindergarten music teacher that she risks criminal prosecution by celebrating a Jewish religious holiday with Jewish children has declined to speak about the incident.

"We don't give consultations by telephone," Sergei Kopytov of Mogilev's Lenin District public prosecutor's office told Forum 18 News Service on June 13, refused even to confirm that he had issued the official warning to Lyudmila Izakson-Bolotovskaya. The warning is seen as part of recent efforts by the state to minimize religious activity in public life.

Lyudmila Izakson-Bolotovskaya is accused of "illegal and deliberate dissemination of religious dogma to young children, which could cause considerable harm to their world view, rights and legal interests," in an April 17 letter from Kopytov which has been obtained by Forum 18.

Kopytov goes on to maintain that, although the 2002 Law on Religion prohibits "anonymous or other illegal activity by religious organizations in educational institutions," Izakson-Bolotovskaya has conducted "events of a religious nature" as director of Alef. This is a musical group providing an optional class on Jewish culture and traditions for some 12 Jewish children at Mogilev's state-run Kindergarten No. 72.

According to public prosecutor Kopytov, Alef's aim is "the formation of the foundations of Jewish national identity by introducing children to the culture and traditions of the Jewish people, encouraging their interest in Hebrew and acquainting them with Jewish holidays."

His letter to Izakson-Bolotovskaya states that, "rather than acquaint the children with religious holidays you organized them with the children and propagandized some of them in the mass media." Thus, it continues, on March 14, 2006 Alef was shown on local television celebrating "the Judaist religious holiday Purim" with children from Kindergarten No. 72, while all the musical group's events incorporate "Judaist church symbols, such as the Star of David and Menorah."

"Elements of a crime under Article 193 of the Criminal Code are observed," in Izakson-Bolotovskaya's actions, Kopytov concludes, threatening that prosecution will follow if these actions are repeated. Article 193 punishes "organization or leadership of an association infringing upon the person or rights of the citizen" with a fine, deprivation of the right to hold certain positions or engage in certain activities, or arrest for up to six months.

Contacted on June 13, Progressive Jewish leader Yakov Basin told Forum 18 that all Jewish symbols - "Menorahs and Stars of David — there wasn't anything else" - have been removed from the kindergarten in the wake of the warning at the request of Mogilev's local educational department. Basin added that there have been no further repercussions, however, in particular no answer to his May 4 letter to Belarus' general public prosecutor arguing that the warning had no legal basis.

Purim is a joyous Jewish holiday, that commemorates the deliverance of Persian Jews from a plot — recorded in the Book of Esther — to exterminate them. Amongst the activities traditionally associated with Purim are acts of charity and public celebrations.

Earlier a court in Minsk ordered closure of the Christ's Covenant Reformed Baptist Church, thus making it illegal. Its pastor, Georgi Vyazovsky, was jailed for ten days for leading worship in his home. Also, three evangelical Christians were given official warnings for silently reading the Bible on Brest's central square, as an expression of solidarity with those arrested after March's presidential elections.

This year, city authorities in the capital Minsk refused permission for the local Hassidic Jewish community to hold its Passover celebration at a state-owned Palace for Children and Youth, similarly arguing that a religious event could not be permitted at a venue frequented by children, Forum 18 News Service reported.

Source: MosNews.Com, June 14, 2006; www.mosnews.com

3. The Office of Public Prosecutor Is Looking for the Deputy Editor-in-Chief of Zhoda

The Office of Public Prosecutor accuses *Zhoda's* deputy editor-in-chief Aliaksandar Zdvizhkov of having reprinted the scandalous caricatures of the Prophet Mohammad. It is still unknown where Aliaksandar Zdvizhkov is at the moment. *Belgazeta* informed about it in the article "Art for the Office of Public Prosecutor. A journalist from *Zhoda* is accused of a crime".

A.Zdvizhkov is accused of having violated part.1 of art.130 of the Criminal Code of Belarus (exciting national and religious hatred). He allowed to publish the article "The Art of politics" in # 6 of February 18-26, 2006 which contained the infamous caricatures that had been printed in European mass media. After that the Religious Committee and the Muslim community of Belarus sent appeals to the Office of Public Prosecutor asking to start a criminal case.

First A.Zdvizhkov and A.Karol (the editor-in-chief) were considered to be witnesses in the case. On February 22 the police searched the office of the edition and confiscated all the office equipment and financial documents. On February 23 the Office of Public Prosecutor sent an appeal to the Ministry of Information asking to give the case a legal treatment and to close the newspaper. The Ministry of Information pronounced a warning to the editorial staff of *Zhoda* according to art.5 of the Law on Mass Media. It was a second warning and on March 17 the court decided to close the newspaper.

Source: Belarusian Association of Journalists; June 13; http://www.baj.ru/

DOMESTIC

4. How "United" is the United Opposition in Belarus?

The united opposition campaign during the 2006 Belarusian presidential election was a creditable effort, particularly in the weeks leading up to the vote as well during the protests afterward in October Square. Though hundreds were arrested, and the crackdown by the authorities is continuing, there was a genuine sentiment of new unity. As a result, the youth group Zubr announced its self-dissolution in order to combine its efforts with others in the movement "For Freedom!" (*Narodnaya Volya*, May 12).

However, there are some disturbing signs that this unity, attained with great difficulty under the most adverse conditions, may be weakening. The main issue is how to maintain the momentum generated during the presidential campaign now that President Alexander Lukashenka has been firmly reconsolidated in power (the manipulation of the vote count notwithstanding). Viktor Karneenka, a member of the Political Council of the united opposition, has commented that the opposition must emerge from its "ghetto" and go to the people. It cannot, in his view, be distracted by bureaucratic issues, such as how its executive committee is supposed to function (*Belarusy i Rynok*, May 29).

Anatol Lyabedzka, leader of the United Civic Party, and the candidate narrowly defeated for the united leadership by Alexander Milinkevich, attended a meeting of the Political Council of the democratic forces, but refused to vote for a new two-year strategy to bring democracy to Belarus. Lyabedzka proposed instead another full-scale Congress that would presumably vote on a new leader, but his proposal was rejected by other members of the Political Council, who consider this a waste of time. Political scientist Uladzimir Matskevich maintains that the campaign "For Freedom" is little more than a play on words, lacking in concepts. The people who gathered in the square, in his view, cannot be fooled by political mottos and do not believe "either Lyabedzka or Milinkevich" (*Belarusy i Rynok*, May 29; *Narodnaya Volya*, May 30).

Lyabedzka was reelected chairman of the United Civic Party at its 10th Congress in late May, receiving 138 votes from a possible 164. During his speech on this occasion, which appealed for another democratic congress, he declared that the supporters of jailed presidential candidate Alexander Kazulin should also be invited as well as participants from the October Square tent camp. His party's priorities for the future, he stated, would embrace a campaign to release political detainees as well as an international public tribunal for the Lukashenka regime (*BelaPAN*, May 28).

Meanwhile within the Social Democratic camp, rivalries and dissensions remain. Politicians such as Mikhail Statkevich (a former leader and, like Kazulin, still in prison) oppose any sort of agreement with the united opposition, according to deputy chairman of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Hramada), Anatol Lyawkovich. A common strategy of action, in Lyawkovich's view, should be founded on "common values" but not on personal political interests. The first step in his view must be the release from prison of Kazulin (arrested on March 25 during a clash with militia). However, the united pro-democracy forces have not been actively involved in the campaign for Kazulin's release. Only 218 signatures have been gathered on a petition, and of the united democratic camp, only Lyabedzka has signed it (*BelaPAN*, June 1). The Milinkevich team has been somewhat reticent in its support for Kazulin, a man with whom it had mixed relations during the election campaign.

The other major leader in the united democratic campaign, Syarhey Kalyakin, leader of the Party of Communists of Belarus, has his own problem --a state-engineered campaign to unite the two branches of the Communist Party at a congress scheduled for July 15, which would effectively oust him from authority and create a potential party of power should the president opt to move in that direction. In such a situation, Kalyakin intends to form a new party (*BelaPAN*, June 5). Meanwhile yet another democratic leader, the exiled Zyanon Paznyak, was recently reelected as the leader of the Conservative Christian Party of the BPF by 94 votes to 2 at the party's 7th congress, held at the Palace of Culture of the Minsk Tractor factory on May 27 (*BelaPAN*, May 27).

Are there really major problems within the united opposition? There are several key issues. In the first place, there is a danger that Milinkevich may be perceived by the more radical elements in society as too passive and out of touch. For example, the For Freedom campaign is vague, too sweeping, and lacking in any immediate and attainable goals. Second, Lyabedzka's disaffection, as well as the various party congresses, reflects an alarming tendency to allow party politics to supersede the urgent need to maintain unity, form a common strategy, and to encompass all democratic forces within Belarus -- from Kazulin, to Kalyakin, and even Paznyak, who has yet to support any of the common platforms of the opposition movement.

Lastly, Lukashenka faces difficult days ahead, particularly with Russia concerning gas prices. But his task will be rendered considerably easier by public bickering within the opposition camp, which could easily result in the loss of trust of its supporters, particularly the radical youth. At the same time it may give credence to Lukashenka's common references to the futility of the opposition.

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

5. Opposition Communists Condemn Belarusian Government

The leadership of the Belarusian Party of Communists (BKD) condemned on June 7 what it calls "a government-inspired" attempt to merge it with the pro-government Communist Party of Belarus (KPB), Belapan reported. The BKD issued a statement saying the government intends to "turn the Communists into obedient executors of the will of the authoritarian ruler and a support of presidential autocracy" for the purpose of "weakening and then destroying" the opposition Communists' organization."

Valery Draka, secretary of the Central Committee of the KPB, told Belapan that the initiative for the merger came from the rank and file of the BKD. "Common Communists did not like the policy of the BKD leaders, which had the sole purpose of fulfilling orders from the West and the United States and preventing the reelection of the incumbent president for a new term."

Source: RFE/RL; June 8, 2006; <http://www.rferl.org>

REGIONAL

6. Lukashenko Notices No Price Growth

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko approved Friday the Program for Social and Economic Development of Belarus in 2006 to 2010. The program almost ignores the expected surge in prices for Russia's gas up to \$200/thu cu meters and forecasts the annual growth of GDP at 8 percent to 9 percent and the budget deficit of 1.5 percent. The outlook of the Kremlin's analysts is not so optimistic, setting forth the budget deficit of between 6 percent and 7 percent once Belarus shifts to the market relations with Russia. Moreover, the Kremlin is said to be studying chances of granting a stabilizing loan to Belarus to avoid the crisis.

The program sealed by Lukashenko Friday had been elaborated before March elections of Belarusian president and prior to hush statements of Gazprom, which pledged to hike gas prices for Beltransgaz in 2007.

Gazprom and Beltransgaz confirmed past week they are in talks about gas deliveries at \$200/thu cu meters starting from 2007. Regardless, the changes introduced to the economical program of Belarus to adjust it to higher gas prices are negligible.

The program forecasts the GDP in Belarus will be gaining 8 percent to 9 percent each year to step up from 46 percent to 55 percent vs. 2005; the output is expected to increase 43 percent to 51 percent. The inflation is estimated to be curbed to 5 percent on year by 2010, while the annual budget deficit is estimated at 1.5 percent over the following five years.

Of interest is that the document emphasizes "the growth in world prices for energy sources," which is "objective," but doesn't take it into account.

Meanwhile, the estimate of the Kremlin, which was discussed at the latest meeting of Russia's President Vladimir Putin with the country's Security Council, appears materially different. As soon as prices for gas climb above \$100/thu cu meters for Belarus, its GDP won't grow at all, the number of losing enterprises will rise up to 50 percent and the annual inflation will be from 18 percent to 20 percent.

The Kremlin obviously feels danger. This summer, the key concern of Russia's government in respect of Belarus will be not the gas prices (which increase has been decided to-date) but processing the oil at Belarus refineries, the loss of stability in which, by the way, is much more crucial for the local budget.

Source: Kommersant; June 13, 2006; <http://www.kommersant.com>

7. Lukashenko Risks All

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko has reacted harshly to a growing pressure from the Kremlin. In a meeting with Altai Territory Governor Alexander Karlin, he said that Belarus would never become part of Russia or sell the Beltransgaz pipeline concern at the balance cost.

This is no news at all. What is important is that Lukashenko has opted for conflict and against accepting Moscow's offer of a joint venture with Beltransgaz.

Alexander Karlin is an unusual governor. Before his appointment, he headed the presidential department for state service and his functions included a reform of state service carried out under the guidance of Dmitry Medvedev, now first deputy prime minister.

In other words, Karlin has most probably maintained close ties with the Kremlin administration and Medvedev.

Although he most likely went to Belarus as an unofficial Kremlin envoy, and a person whose formal status is much lower than that of his interlocutor, Lukashenko discussed top priority issues with him. He said by raising gas prices for Belarus Russia violated the principle of equal rights of the two countries' companies. According to Lukashenko, if gas prices are raised for Belarus, this should also affect the Russian parties. He said he was surprised that gas for enterprises in Smolensk (central European Russia) was cheaper than for Belarusian companies.

"Economically-wise, we want to work as a united country," the Belarusian president said. This statement was almost immediately followed by a declaration that Belarus was a self-sufficient country and would never agree to become incorporated into Russia.

The formula is simple: Russia and Belarus should be divided politically but united economically. Lukashenko thinks this would be a true union of fraternal nations, whereas Russia says this is paramount to subsidizing the Belarusian economy.

After the "orange revolution" in Ukraine, the Kremlin has revised its foreign economic strategy, refusing to subsidize even friendly economies. Russia has abandoned the policy of signing contracts to ensure the geopolitical loyalty of CIS leaders, because this policy malfunctioned in periods of crisis.

Leonid Kuchma, the pro-Russian president of Ukraine, disregarded Moscow's interests when he added to his country's strategic doctrine an objective of joining NATO. Moldovan President Vladimir Voronin, who had been loyal to Russia, decided to turn "orange" when he saw signs of pre-election political destabilization in his country, which greatly worsened relations with Russia.

Russia's more pragmatic policy is to create relations of interdependence, in particular, by buying the other countries' gas distribution networks. Therefore, the Kremlin intends to press fraternal Belarus into respecting the commitment to create a joint venture of Gazprom and Beltransgaz. If Minsk goes back on its pledge, it will have to pay a market price for Russian gas.

A tougher policy regarding Belarus has forced Lukashenko to review its foreign policy rhetoric. He speaks about friendship with China, offers good relations to the West, and renounces Moscow's demands and advances his own proposals during a meeting with a Russian governor. But he has

to be much more restrained when talking with the Russian president. The Kremlin is making harsh demands, and Lukashenko has no bargaining levers.

The Belarusian leader has limited maneuverability in the political dialogue with Russian political leadership. That is why Lukashenko is using non-political regional figures for making his stand. It is impossible to imagine a Russian governor negotiating the future of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, or Ukraine's accession to NATO, with President Viktor Yushchenko. No leader of a sovereign nation will discuss strategic intergovernmental issues with unauthorized persons. The only exception is Alexander Lukashenko.

The situation of the Belarusian leader is extremely complicated. His meeting with Governor Karlin showed that Russia is introducing isolation elements into relations with Belarus. This looks like a prelude to a harsh semi-latent conflict, with assurances of "friendship" at the top level and sharp statements at lower-level negotiations, when Lukashenko publicly rejects Russian demands.

Lukashenko has decided to take the risk, gambling on his relations with the only geopolitical ally Belarus has. But will the Belarusian voters follow him after Russia raises gas prices?

Tatyana Stanovaya is head of the expert department at the Center for Political Technologies.

The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and may not necessarily represent the opinions of the editorial board.

Source: Tatyana Stanovaya, RIA Novosti; June 13, 2006; <http://rian.ru>

8. EurAsEC Not Set Concrete Term To Create Single Insurance Market

Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) member states refused to set concrete terms on creation of single insurance market within organization.

Prime-TASS of Russia reported that the fifth session of heads of insurance inspection and regulation bodies under Integration Committee of EurAsEC said on Thursday in Minsk, Belarus.

Alexander Kurlypo, Deputy Finance Minister of Belarus, said the terms of creation of single insurance market were too tough. It is envisaged to the first phase of creation of market will end on 1 January 2008 and the second stage will complete on 1 January 2011, he said. He added that this is not real.

He said the creation of single insurance market postponed to undefined term. Kurlypo added that the member states are holding negotiations on accession to World Trade Organisation (WTO) along with creation of single insurance market.

Belarusian official added that the EurAsEC states do not refuse from idea on creation of single market. He said the EurAsEC target is to form single market of goods, works and services and naturally insurance market is part of single market. He added the member states will have to solve this issue.

Source: UzReport.Com; June 12, 2006; <http://insurance.uzreport.com>

9. Gazprom Multiplies Belarus by Four

Charges the country \$200 per 1000 cu. m. of gas

Gazprom officially acknowledged yesterday that it had sent a contract for 2007 natural gas supplies to Belarus. The price indicated in the contract is \$200 per 1000 cubic meters of gas, up from the current \$46.68. Now the price can be changed only on a higher than corporate level, according to deputy chairman of the Gazprom management board Alexander Ryazanov. Experts say that the Belarusian economy will collapse under a price of even half that amount. Belarusian

President Alexander Lukashenko responded by saying that the contract was politicized and that he would agree to the price hike if Russia raised its domestic price for gas proportionally.

Kommersant has learned that last week's negotiations in Moscow between Gazprom and Beltransgaz "were unproductive and added no small amount of new annoyances with Minsk for Moscow." The same source commented that Lukashenko will now "try to blame all socio-economic hardships that arise on Russia and its leaders." A high-placed source close to the Gazprom management board told *Kommersant* that a gradual price increase has been proposed to Minsk with the possibility of a stabilization credit as well.

A source in the Finance Ministry has said that that ministry is trying to settle the issues of payments by Belarus to the Russian federal budget for Belarusian exports of petroleum products and full unification of Russian and Belarusian export duties. That source said that Russian leaders acknowledge the possibility that their policies will cause socio-economic collapse in Belarus. Lukashenko stated yesterday at a meeting with Altai Territory Governor Alexander Karlin that "Belarus does not expect preferential treatment from Russia. We only want to function in the economy as one country." Thus, he added, Belarus agrees to the price rise "but the same price on a parity basis should be established for subjects of the union state."

Belarus could preserve its low gas prices, for several years at least, by selling Gazprom a controlling share in Beltransgaz, the national gas transporter. Lukashenko confirmed again yesterday that Beltransgaz would not be sold for its balance-sheet value. Ryazanov countered that there was no discussion of selling the gas pumper for its balance-sheet value. Gazprom and Beltransgaz tried to have the company assessed last year, but were unable to agree on an assessor. Negotiations on Belarusian gas supplies are expected to continue through the autumn.

Source: Natalia Grib, Sabina Sokol, Kommersant; June 9, 2006; <http://www.kommersant.com>

10. Russian Ambassador Critical of Belarus Travel Ban on EU, U.S. Officials

Ambassador Surikov told reporters in Minsk on June 8 it was "erroneous" for the Belarusian government to bar European Union and U.S. officials from entering the country in retaliation for a similar ban on Belarusian officials by Western countries, *Belapan* reported. It is necessary to do the opposite, to "fight against double standards," the ambassador told reporters. The same day, Andrey Papow, a spokesman for the Belarusian Foreign Ministry, revealed that Minsk has drawn up a list of unnamed Western officials who will be banned from entering the country.

Surikov described the EU's sanctions as a "big mistake." On the one hand, the European Union advocates democratic values and human rights, on the other hand, it infringes on them, he said. "With combined Belarusian and Russian efforts, it is necessary to explain everything to the Council of Europe in response to this 'slithery' move," he stressed.

Source: RFE/RL; June 9, 2006; <http://www.rferl.org>

11. Belarus Will Never Become Part of Russia - President Lukashenko

President Alexander Lukashenko said Belarus would never agree to becoming a part of Russia, but suggested a project to bind the two former Soviet republics more tightly together was still possible.

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 a proposal by Russian state-controlled energy giant Gazprom to hike gas prices for Belarus.

"We do not need [to become part of Russia]," Lukashenko said at a meeting with a Russian regional governor. "Belarus is a self-sufficient country."

On April 10, Gazprom said it planned to triple gas prices for Belarus from the current level of \$46.68 per 1,000 cu m - a move expected to tear a hole of around \$2 billion in the Belarusian budget.

The Russian energy giant is also in talks with Beltransgaz, which owns pipelines leading to Europe - Gazprom's main customer - on taking a stake in the Belarusian state pipeline company. Control over the country's pipeline network is reportedly seen as a condition for preserving preferential prices for Belarus.

Lukashenko said in reply to the possible price hikes that there could be no talk of a union state.

But at his meeting Thursday with Altai Territory Governor Alexander Karlin, Lukashenko said Belarus remained committed to integration, even though negotiations on the union state were stumbling over some issues.

"We are not against a union state contrary to what some say," he said. "The world consists of unions today and they are the future."

Efforts to launch the union state include talks on introducing a single ruble currency for both countries. The Russian official overseeing the union state project, Pavel Borodin, said earlier this week that the currency would be put into circulation before the end of 2006. The two countries have also adopted measures including a common visa space and a joint customs committee.

But negotiations have been advancing slowly, and Lukashenko said the common currency issue had to be spelled out in a constitutional act of the union state - a transitional constitution - to be adopted by referendum. Borodin said Monday the referendum could be held in late 2006 or early 2007.

Source: RIA Novosti; June 8, 2006; <http://rian.ru>

INTERNATIONAL

12. Belarus Likely To Join Burma as EU Trade Pariah

Belarus is on the way to joining Burma as the second country in history to get kicked out of the EU's Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) on trade, with the European Commission dropping hints it will recommend the move to member states in June or July.

"We can expect in the weeks to come that the commission will convey a recommendation to the council," a commission official told EUobserver on Tuesday (13 June), adding "We are lacking at this stage satisfactory evidence that Belarus is in compliance with ILO [International Labour Organisation] commitments."

The decision hinges on Belarus violating ILO rules on workers' rights such as freedom of association, with an ILO report on 12 June and an International Confederation of Trade Unions' report in May stating things "changed for the worse" in the past year despite an ongoing EU probe.

Any commission recommendation would have very strong chances of approval in the EU council - the member states' decision-making body - with the clarity of GSP and ILO rules making it hard for EU governments to block the suspension without looking weak on the Lukashenko regime.

Under the GSP process, the suspension would enter into force six months later and could only be reversed by a fresh council decision.

The suspension would see higher EU import tariffs on Belarusian minerals, textiles, clothes and wood products worth €390 million a year. But it would not cover EU imports of petrol and gas worth almost €1.9 billion a year.

The EU was Belarus' second largest export destination after Russia last year, buying €3.3 billion a year of goods and providing 37 percent of Minsk's foreign income. It is set to become the largest destination this year.

Being put on a par with Burma, which lost its GSP privileges in 1997, could also deal a fresh psychological blow to president Lukashenko's authority.

Belarus NGOs say the EU's recent visa ban and asset freeze on 37 Belarus officials is already helping undermine the government's credibility in ordinary people's eyes.

The US-funded NGO Freedom House also attacked Belarus in its latest review of democratic standards in the post-Soviet area.

The study ranked Belarus as the third worst country in the region, coming ahead only of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan on standards such as free press and fair elections.

"The [Belarus] government has fully resorted to totalitarian methods of repression and has openly declared its commitment to defending the status quo by all means necessary," the report - Nations in Transit - said.

Double whammy

Belarus' economy officially grew by a robust 9.2 percent last year, with financial stability and lavish projects, such as the new golf ball-shaped library outside Minsk, forming the crux of president Lukashenko's political image.

But Belarus analysts such as Jaroslav Romanchuk and western diplomats based in Minsk say the country's outdated factories only generate money due to sweetheart deals with Russian buyers, while cheap Russian oil and gas keeps the economy afloat.

The €390 million GSP blow is threatening to hit Minsk at a time when Russian supplier Gazprom is calling to quadruple gas prices from \$47 per thousand cubic metres to \$200 from January 2007 onward.

The move would "tear a hole of around \$2 billion [€1.6 billion] in the Belarusian budget," Russian agency Ria Novosti reports.

Source: Andrew Rettman, EUobserver; June 14, 2006: <http://euobserver.com/>

13. Two Lithuanians Fined For Entering Belarus Air Space

Two Lithuanians have been fined an equivalent of about \$2,148 each for illegally entering Belarusian airspace on board a light plane on June 6, a judge said on Tuesday.

Tadas Blazeivicius and his sister Indre Blazeviciute were on board an aircraft that a Belarusian Sukhoi Su-27 warplane forced to land at a military airfield after being spotted by Belarusian air defenses.

Blazeivicius, who was piloting the plane, said the craft had crossed the border by mistake and blamed his compass.

No drugs, explosives or contraband were found aboard the plane.

A district court in Grodno region sentenced the brother and sister to fines. "Immediately after the decision, Blazevecius and Blazeveciute paid their fines and presented the court with receipts to that effect," judge Svetlana Dolgoshei told Interfax.

"Currently the Belarussian Ministry of the Interior is preparing documents for the deportation of the offenders," she said.

Source: *Interfax*; June 13, 2006; <http://www.interfax.ru/e>

14. Minsk Blasted for Harassing Independent Trade Unions

The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) has criticized the Belarussian authorities' policy vis-a-vis independent trade unions, noting that the government did not implement any of the International Labor Organization's (ILO) recommendations last year, Belapan reported on June 12. "The aim of using the Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus (FPB) as a tool of government was demonstrated as blatantly as ever, and laws were passed allowing the authorities to dissolve trade union organizations at whim," the ICFTU said in its annual report released last week. "New membership thresholds make it impossible for any union outside the FPB to take part in national tripartite dialogue. Independent trade unions faced constant interference and obstruction."

The report also says that some 90 percent of all workers are employed on fixed-term contracts, with many of the contracts being short-term, which paves the way for forcing workers out of independent trade unions. In its recommendations issued in 2004, the ILO called on the Belarussian government to make changes in the country's laws to allow unions to organize freely, and to respect independent unionists' civil rights.

Source: *RFE/RL*; June 8, 2006; <http://www.rferl.org>

15. Poland Refused To Issue Entrance Visas to a State TV Journalist and the Head of Ideology Department at Hrodna Region Executive Committee

The Consulate General of Poland refused to give a visa to an ONT journalist Mikhalai Meliachenka, - informs the *German Wave*. The head of Hrodna Region Executive Committee Department of Ideology Uladzimir Amelka was denied a visa as well.

M. Meliachenka is the author of many reports arousing national hatred from the point of view of Poland. Moreover, he was a witness in the case started against activists of the Union of Poles in Belarus (Andrej Pachobut and Andrzej Piscalnik).

The department of Ideology organized the election of a new head of the Union of Poles in order to please the authorities. Almost all Hrodna-located independent editions were closed due to U.Amelka's decisions, - reminds *Deutsche Welle*.

Source: *Belarusian Association of Journalists*; June 13; <http://www.baj.ru/>

16. Network Europe Looking East

- Why have the Baltics, Poland and Ukraine slammed the German-Russian Baltic gas pipeline?
- Can the EU do more to promote democracy and civil society in Belarus?
- And what are Ukraine's prospects of joining the EU?

The German-Russian deal struck last autumn to build a pipeline under the Baltic Sea to pump natural gas from Russia continues to raise concerns in the Baltic States, Poland and Ukraine. These countries' leaders have said they felt uneasy about, what they felt was, deals being made behind their back on an issue as vital as energy security.

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The elections both in Belarus and Ukraine this past spring were disappointing for the European Union. In Ukraine a pro-Russian party, sidelined during the Orange revolution of 2004, romped back into domestic politics. In Belarus, the democratic opposition failed to unseat the ruthless autocratic regime of Alexander Lukashenko. His massive security machine - employing an estimated one in 10 of the population - heavily rigged the elections in his favour. But even if he hadn't manipulated the elections, most observers think he would have won anyway - albeit with a smaller margin...

This begs the question: did the EU really use all its weight to influence the outcome of those elections? Or do the results in both Ukraine and Belarus demonstrate how limited the influence of the European Union is on its eastern neighbours. Deutsche Welle's Barbara Gruber has a closer look at EU-Belarusian relations.

'Aldis Kuskis, the vice chairman of the Belarusian delegation in the European parliament says its hard to believe what's going on in Belarus. First the rigged elections, then the violent crack downs on anti-government demonstrators and the arrests of all democratic opposition leaders. Stepping up its response last week the European Union launched a procedure to seize any foreign assets of President Alexander Lukashenko and 35 of his top aids. Kuskis says this was long overdue '.

'This money is stolen from the people of Belarussia. This money is earned trading the arms with the worst possible dictatorships in the world. Lukashenko is the top five dictator in the world, the last one in Europe.'

'A few weeks earlier the European Union had also introduced a visa ban restricting the travel of leading Belarusian politicians after the rigged elections in mid-March. But Aldis Kuskis remains sceptical as to whether these measures will have any real impact. After all Belarusian politicians rarely travel to the EU and are not known to have any financial assets in the Union. And even if they do the prolonged discussions about freezing assets has left them plenty of time to transfer funds elsewhere or cover their tracks. And yet Kuskis says these highly symbolic measures are a step in the right direction. He stresses though, that the European parliament has always been the most energetic and strongest supporter of democratic change in Belarus.'

'A year ago we were talking about supporting democratic civil society. Today, we are already dealing with the opposition. I believe, in the near future, we would be talking and dealing with the overthrowing the regime. This just takes time for the European Commission to change their structurized financial and other rules. And it takes time to discuss this between 25 countries in the council as t he European Council is more united and straight and direct.

'Indeed it was the European parliament which invited opposition leader Alexander Milinkiewicx to address the European assembly in Strasbourg. He called for support from Europe and sketched out possible options for European cooperation. Along with sanctions stipends for Belarusian students evicted from their universities after recent demonstrations are seen as an important measure. - Likewise supporting free and uncensored media is another big task that the UN has taken on.'

'Only informed Belarusians could take the right decisions. If they are not informed they are not taking the right decisions. Freedom of choice is the highest possible freedom to fight for.'

'And while opposition parties in Belarus might not enjoy nation wide support anti-Lukashenko rallies following the rigged elections were encouraging signs of a nations opposition. Alexander Furlingin, the president and founder of Equipe Europa, an organization that trains new and future EU members witnessed the demonstration in the capital Minsk.

'It was interesting to see that the opposition was flying the opposition flag, white-red-white, the classical one, but a lot of Ukrainian flags, which is symbolic, one or two Russian flags to say, help us better, and a lot of European flags , even some from Georgia. So, showing the flags was showing what the opposition really want: to follow Georgia and Ukraine and to be Europe.'

'So has Europe offered the Belarussian opposition the solidarity and support they were calling for? Jean Francois Vallinhd, an NGO promoting a Belarussian and Ukrainian issues in Brussels . He argues Europe's support has only been diplomatic window dressing issuing a few warnings unbinding resolutions and some cosmetic sanctions. '

'The fundamental problem is that the European Union refuses to give Belarus a concrete offer of membership to aim for so anything thr Belarussian opposition comes up with to promote EU membership falls on deaf ears. How do you expect them to campaign when the EU isn't supporting their cause. It's a scandal . Geographically speaking this country is part of Europe. There is not one square metre that is outside the EU. I mean really if you don't open up the doors to the west then obviously Belarus will look east - to Russia.'

'And many in Brussels say the European Union will also have to turn to Russia and remind Vladimir Putin that Russia's ties with EuroBalt were more than Lukashenko 's gratitude. The EU has already put Belarus on the agenda of the up coming G8 summit in St Petersburg and if the EU is really serious about putting an end to Europe's last dictatorship Europeans will have to seriously review their so-called neighborhood policy and ask themselves if warnings, non-binding resolutions and cosmetic sanctions shouldn't be followed up with saubstantive actions.'

The European Radio for Belarus has been broadcasting for young Belarussians out of the Polish capital Warsaw for three months now. The situation of independent media in Belarus ruled by the authoritarian Lukashenko regime is difficult. By combining attractive content such as popular music and independent news coverage, the station aims to foster a new generation of listeners. More from Gabriel Stille in Warsaw.

The station *European Radio for Belarus* is not, as you might think, a foreign radio station broadcasting to Belarus. Instead, it's a Belarussian station mainly operating out of Warsaw. As soon as the circumstances permit, it will pack its bags and move to Minsk.

We have been asked frequently by other journalists, that are you like *Radio Svoboda*, *Radio Free Europe* which said that when democracy comes, it closes the next day. And we say that it is not our goal. We are doing vice versa, we hope that when changes come, we can return there and work as a professional, attractive radio station with balanced information and education content which would be really recognisable by people in Belarus. I think this is the main difference of our project and other pro-democracy projects around Belarus.

The station aims, not at people already into independent media, but ordinary young Belarussians, and uses all possible means to reach out to its audience. Maria Sadovskaya is the coordinator in the Warsaw headquarters:

We are trying to introduce more entertainment. I mean, we broadcast 24 hours already by satellite and internet, and we will of course expand our FM broadcasting when possible. And what we are trying is to show them attractive things, music which they cannot listen to at home. This is one thing. The other thing that the information, the news that we try to do, is more or less of attractive content. For example, the program Window on Europe, which we are broadcasting daily for an hour, includes European news but also news of European fashion or music, reviews of possibilities for education or for travelling and other things like that. We will introduce more musical content, and all those things will at the same time be balanced by really professional news from Belarus, which would and are telling about political and economical realities in Belarus.

Using Internet to reach its audience has proved successful throughout the three months that *ERB* have been in operation. The FM broadcasts from Poland and Lithuania can only be heard in the border regions, whereas now 20 % of Belarussians have internet access through the national service provider.

Most of the reactions have been positive. We even had cases when young Belarusians rebroadcasted our program free of charge in their local computer network, and they put a link and said, OK, if someone doesn't want to pay traffic for listening to the radio, please join our home computer network. So that was quite encouraging.

European Radio for Belarus is coordinated from abroad, funded by the governments of USA and the Czech Republic, and the European Commission, but retains a presence in Belarus, despite the many problems faced by media there. During the recent presidential election, won by Lukashenko but widely regarded as unfair, *ERB* proved an important news channel:

While many other informational channels were blocked, our radio functioned and we were the first source to get some news about what was happening in the streets.

By gaining experience in the field of broadcast, *ERB* is also preparing to contribute to the civil society of a free Belarus as a regular radio station. Thus getting journalists and listeners alike ready for a pluralistic society, *ERB* takes part in a long term strive to finally make Europe's last dictatorship safe for democracy.

Since its orange revolution two years ago, Ukraine has declared that it wants to join the European Union. "The EU must be open to those who have clearly chosen their future and are prepared to share the continent of Europe", Ukrainian president Viktor Yuschenko said recently. More on Ukraine's aspirations from Tetyana Harbul of *Radio Ukraine International*.

Joining me in Network Europe now are: Krzysztof Bobinski, a specialist in EU affairs, from the Poland-Union magazine, who is with me in Radio Polonia's studio in Warsaw, and Dmitry Babich, a journalist and political analyst of the Russia Profile monthly, in Moscow. I'm addressing this question first to Krzysztof Bobinski:

'Is the European Union doing enough in Belarus? It's difficult to do anything in Belarus because the nature of the society, and the nature of the ruling system and that Poland is encouraging the European Union to do a lot about democratizing the system in Belarus. I think the European Union is coming to understand this is quite important. And I think probably the Kremlin is quite unhappy about what is happening in Belarus. There seems to be a certain amount of tension between the two rulers - Mr. Putin and Mr. Lukashenko and I think that the Kremlin would like to see a certain loosening up of the system in Belarus.'

'For the EU to have safe eastern borders it must primarily have good relations with Russia and Ukraine and Belarus. Right now that's not the case unfortunately. Actually Russia's position is that it's possible for Ukraine to be both an EU member and to have good relations with Russia. But the requirements come in from Brussels to Ukraine. It's not so directly but the meaning is that you have to choose between the EU and closer cooperation with Russia. And many Ukrainians would not like to make that choice. As for Belarus I think that already President Putin is unhappy with the developments there but primarily not because of their lack of democracy there but because of the lack of reliability. Lukashenko has not shown himself to be a good business partner.'

Poland is a strong advocate of EU eastward enlargement. Russian president Vladimir Putin describes the European Union as Moscow's biggest foreign partner but how does he view the bloc's expansion eastwards?

DMITRIY BABICH: 'Certainly President Putin would like to see Russia's interest accommodated. And there is a certain contradiction in that because Russia wants to have, at the same time, a special and a close relations with the European Union, while the European Union wants to have a general good neighborhood policy which makes no difference between Russia and say Morocco or Tunisia. The other friction point is that certainly Russia would like to have a chance to enter the EU at some point in the future just as the Ukraine has that chance probably. And Russia does not see itself in anyway worse than Ukraine. So there is a certain friction between Russia and the

EUont that point. And also there is a certain friction any time when the EU starts talking about values. Russia does not like this kind of talk because a lot of politicians in the Kremlin view it as discriminatory.'

A controversial deal between Russia and Germany to build a gas pipeline under the Baltic Sea has provoked fierce protests from Poland and the Baltic states. Poland's defense minister sparked off political storm when he compared it to the infamous World War Two Pact between Hitler and Stalin. Are Poland and the Baltic being too sensitive? Isn't Russia using gas and oil as a weapon to exert pressure on other countries, especially pro-western ex-Soviet states?

Dmitriy Babich: 'Gas is not a weapon that Russia uses against anyone but Russia does not want to be just an exporter of goodwill and gas. The only way to do it for Russia right now is first to have long term contracts with European countries that will guarantee Russia from the repeat of 1998 fall when suddenly oil prices fell down and all the Russian financial system just collapsed. And the second way is to participate in the ownership of the gas pipelines leading from Russia to Europe. And if possible ownership over the oil refineries in Europe. That would make Russia an energy player which does not just export crude oil but which also reprocesses that oil and which has launched many commitments with Europe. Unfortunately Russia did not see the EU particularly happy about that.'

KRZYSZTOF BOBINSKI: This is an enormous subject and it's the subject of the future of energy security for the European Union in a situation in which within the next 20-25 years the great mass of gas supplied to the European Union will be coming from Russia because Russia has enormous reserves. And the problem is that after what has happened to Mr. Chodorkowski and Yukos, after the various pressures being put on western energy companies in Russia people are beginning to wonder whether Russia is a reliable partner, a reliable business partner. And secondly, people are beginning to wonder whether the energy weapon won't be used by Russia for political purposes. This is a problem that the European Union faces and I think it can be resolved with goodwill on both sides and by placing the whole energy business in Russia and in the European Union and in other countries like Ukraine, Turkey, etc. on a legal basis. This being said if we can put into place treaties and international agreements which would allow people to feel secure about their investments in all the countries, which would allow people access to pipelines so that if you invested say, in a Russian gas or oil field, or gas field certainly, then you could have a certainty of exporting that gas and all these things are very important. And one of the key issues here is something called the energy treaty which Russia is fairly unhappy about and had yet to ratify some of the protocols. There are other proposals by the European Union for putting the whole energy business on a legal footing.'

The EU wants to have a safe neighbourhood, but is it doing enough to encourage democratic processes in, says, Belarus and to prevent pro-western sentiments from dying down in Ukraine?

Krzysztof Bobinski, from the Poland-Union Foundation, and Dmitriy Babich of the Russia Profile monthly thanks for joining me in Network Europe.

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That's all in this NETWORK EUROPE special The program is a partnership of *Radio France Internationale, Radio Polonia, Radio Sweden, Radio Netherlands, Radio Romania International, Slovak Radio, Radio Prague, Radio Slovakia International, Radio Ukraine* and *Deutsche Welle*.

Excerpt from

Source: Polskie Radio, June 12, 2006; <http://www.polskieradio.pl/polonia/>

17. Belarus Bans Entry to Western Officials

Belarus has drawn up a blacklist of foreign officials who will be denied entry to the country. The tit-for-tat move comes after the EU and the US banned Belarusian officials and denounced the re-election of President Aleksandar Lukashenko.

"Retaliatory measures have been introduced for the European Union and United States officials. They are based on the principle of reciprocity," Foreign Ministry spokesman Andrei Popov told a press conference in the Belarusian capital, Minsk, on Thursday.

Popov did not reveal the names on the blacklist, but said they included "the most offensive political figures who have shown themselves to be in the forefront of not wishing our country well", and persons who have attempted to interfere in Belarus' internal affairs during the election campaign.

In late May, Belarus also threatened to block US and Canadian flights over its territory after the two countries refused to refuel a plane transporting Belarus' prime minister to and from Cuba.

On 16 May, Washington banned senior Belarusian officials and those with ties to the Belarusian government from traveling to the US.

The 19 March elections that saw Lukashenko win another term as president were denounced as fraudulent by the Belarusian opposition, international observers, and Western nations.

According to official results, Lukashenko won 83 per cent of the vote.

In April, Alexander Milinkevich, a main rival of Lukashenko's in the presidential poll, was jailed for 15 days for taking part in a demonstration initially sanctioned by the authorities.

US President George W. Bush said the ban on Belarusian officials applied to government officials "who formulate, implement, participate in, or benefit from policies or actions, including electoral fraud, human rights abuses, and corruption", and those who "undermine or injure democratic institutions or impede the transition to democracy in Belarus".

In late March, the EU declared Lukashenko and 30 other high-ranking officials "personae non grate".

Source: ISN Security Watch; June 9, 2006 <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/news/sw/details.cfm?id=16140>

18. Amnesty International Starts Support Action for Jailed Belarus Opposition Activists

Amnesty International has announced the beginning of "summer postcard action" - human rights activists from all over the world are invited to send postcards with messages of support to jailed Belarus oppositionists.

As members of an unregistered organization called the Initiative Partnership, political activists Mikalay Astreyka, Enira Branizkaya, Alyaksandr Shalayka, and Timafey Dranchuk were preparing to monitor the presidential elections that took place in Belarus in March 2006, the Amnesty International website says.

Weeks before the elections, KGB officers raided and searched the organization's regional offices, then detained the four activists in the capital city, Minsk, on February 21, 2006. The four have been held since then in a KGB detention centre. Authorities charged the four with acting in the name of an unregistered organization. The three men and one woman face possible maximum prison sentences of three years. If they are sentenced to prison, Amnesty International will consider them to be prisoners of conscience and will call for their immediate release.

The Belarusian authorities are increasingly employing harassment, intimidation, excessive force, mass detentions and long-term imprisonment as methods to quash any civil or political dissent. President Alyaksandr Lukashenko, whose victory in the March elections was widely criticized by international observers as being the result of a process rife with irregularities, has imposed harsh restrictions on non-governmental organizations and increased control on all forms of opposition

activity in his efforts to prevent a so-called “denim revolution,” which is how the Belarus political opposition are characterizing their movement, the action’s press release adds.

Source: *MosNews.Com*, June 8, 2006; www.mosnews.com

BUSINESS

19. Belarusian Fertilizer Giant Reportedly Ceases Operations After Stores Fill Up

Belaruskaliy, a state-owned potash fertilizer giant in Salihorsk, Minsk Oblast, on June 13 had to stop the operation of all four mines because it has filled its storage facilities to full capacity, Belapan reported, quoting an independent trade union activist. Belaruskaliy deputy director Mikalay Dakuka failed to confirm or deny the report.

First Deputy Prime Minister Uladzimir Syamashka reported to President Alyaksandr Lukashenka earlier this month that the export of potash fertilizers fell by 25 percent year-on-year in the first four months of 2006. The decrease largely occurred because China, the world's second-largest importer of potash fertilizers, has bought nothing from Belarus this year. The dealer in Belarusian potash, the Belarusian Potash Company, wanted the price to increase from \$165 to \$205 per ton, whereas China suggested reducing it by \$20.

Source: *RFE/RL*; June 14, 2006; <http://www.rferl.org>

20. President Calls For Market Liberalization

The Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko has called upon the Ministry of Communications and the Ministry of Information Technology to meet conditions for accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) by first liberalizing the country's telecoms markets. 'It is necessary to liberalize the communications market and ban cross subsidies for various services in this field', Lukashenko said on Monday, before adding, 'Technical progress in the field of information technology is moving rapidly around the world, and Belarus must not lag behind in this race'.

Source: *TeleGeography*; June 13, 2006; <http://www.telegeography.com/>

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.
