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HUMAN RIGHTS & INDEPENDENT MEDIA

1. Local Elections in Belarus or Against Opposition Hunting Season?

The Belarusian Helsinki Committee (BHC) is observing the elections for local soviets that began on Tuesday, January 9th, 2007. Members of the human rights group are expected to monitor the poll at the early voting stage and on the main voting day, January 14th, 2007 both in Minsk and in the provinces. Polling stations are open from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. every day at January 9 -13 early voting stage. The early voting procedure allows any voter to cast a ballot early without explaining why he/she cannot do this on the official polling day.

Meantime opposition members are detained all over Belarus. Here are some of their names and their stories:

A meeting of the leader of the United Democratic Forces Aleksandr Milinkevich with voters was held in Byaroza (Brest region) on Jan. 11th, 2007. After the meeting Aleksandr Milinkevich was detained by policemen. He hadn't been charged with anything. Policemen demanded to write down identification details of people who were traveling with Milinkevich in his car. Policemen justified their request by an order from their commanders.

Later Milinkevich's car without any explanations was stopped by traffic policemen when he was driving into Brest. After Milinkevich asked for explanation, policemen said that he was arrested. The car of the united democratic forces leader was convoyed to one of the police department of Brest. Milinkevich's wife was in the car as well. In an hour without presenting any charges Brest policemen released Milinkevich.

The activist of the United Civil Party Andrei Dzmitryev has been seized by unknown people in mufti in the center of Minsk on Jan. 12, 2007. Dzmitryev was arrested in Zakharov street by two athletic men in mufti. They had close-cropped hair. Dzmitryev tried to fight, but his arms were twisted back, and mouth gagged. Two more men ran out of the dark green car UAZ 8912 BT7. They pushed Dzmitryev into the car and took him in an unknown direction.

A candidate for deputy in Pinsk city council Aleksandr Vasilyev was detained on Jan. 8th, 2007 and has been sentenced to 7 days of administrative arrest. He has been charged with petty hooliganism during consultations of the local vertical of power with members of election commissions. Participants of election campaign in Brest region state that it is not an isolated case of intimidation of independent candidates by the regime.

Yelena Medvedeva, a member of the Hramada Belarusian Social Democratic Party running in the local elections in Bobruisk, Mogilyov region, was detained by police for several hours on Sunday, Jan. 7th, 2007. The activist said that she had been detained by police nine times during the previous local elections.

Vladimir Katsora, an agent of Viktor Korneyenko, a member of the United Civic Party running for the Gomel Regional Soviet, was detained by police on Tuesday, Jan. 9th, 2007. He was pulled over by traffic police in the city's Gomselmash neighborhood and ordered to drive to a police department. "They told me that I might have killed a pedestrian and hidden the body in the trunk," Mr. Katsora told *BelaPAN*.

On January 12, 2007 a court of Pruzhany district sentenced a member of the United Civil Party Uladzimir Radzivonchyk to 5 days of arrest for an alleged use of foul language. Radzivonchyk was detained by policemen in his native town on January 11. During the court trial policemen charged the UCP leader with using foul language in a public place. Uladzimir Radzivonchyk tried to explain it was a lie. However, Judge Alena Lahoda found policemen's evidence valid and sentenced the opposition activist to 5 days of arrest.

The Belarusian Helsinki Committee (BHC) said that observers have problem getting any information from poll workers during the early voting stage of local elections that began on January 9. "Few of our monitors have been told the total number of voters in the precinct," said BHC Executive Director Oleg Gulak. "It's impossible altogether to obtain any data about how many people have voted and how many ballots have been supplied to the polling station." Poll workers have refused to reply even to written requests for such information, according to the activist.

Democratic activists in Minsk, Homel, Bobruisk, Brest, Pruzhany, Barysau are detained every election day. As usual politicians are to be groundlessly charged with hooliganism.

Source: Michael Batiukov, *American Chronicle*; January 16, 2007;
<http://www.americanchronicle.com/articles/viewArticle.asp?articleID=19094>

2. Censorship of Russian TV Channels in Belarus

These days in Belarus, news on the Rossiya TV channel is broadcasted an hour later. Belarusians used to watch Russian news at 1 p.m., 4 p.m. and 7 p.m., Minsk time (simultaneously with the people of Russia). Now they start at 2 p.m., 5 p.m. and 8 p.m., which is one hour later than in Russia. (There is a one-hour lag between Russia and Belarus). A worker at one of the Russian TV channels told *Charter'97* press-center that by doing this, the Belarusian authorities leave open the possibility for them to censor Russian news if necessary.

The Russian journalist said that the need to monitor Russian news broadcasts preliminary was caused by recent criticism against the Belarusian regime on Russian TV channels. The source recalled that in late December in Belarus, Vladimir Solovyov's program "K barjeru" [Fight] "disappeared" from the NTV channel broadcasting. The program was dedicated to the Russian-Belarusian gas conflict.

Last year, NTV news broadcasts were censored as well. Instead of an evening news program "Segodnya" [Today] a recorded day news edition was broadcasted because of critical news on the situation in Belarus.

As we have been told, Russian TV channels are "abridged" when broadcasted in Belarus. The state Belarusian TV and Radio company is in charge of their broadcasting in Belarus, and it forms the TV viewing grid of Russian channels at their discretion.

Revised by ed.

Source: *Charter 97*; January 16, 2007; <http://www.charter97.org/eng/news/2007/01/16/tv>

3. Minsk: Picket against Local Elections

On January 14, a picket against participation in the local councils' elections took place, the public activist Ales Stepanenko told *BelaPAN*.

A few public activists, holding the banner "You are cheated", came to the building of the Minsk executive committee, he said. They stayed there for about ten minutes. Afterwards the police detained them.

Stepanenko says that Nastya Shashkova, an underage participant of the picket, was detained, beaten and taken to the Minsk hospital #1.

"She was beaten hard. They beat her legs. An ambulance took her away right from the police station. Currently, we are finding out what has happened to her," Stepanenko told *BelaPAN*.

Trans. by ed.

Source: AFN; January 15, 2007;
<http://www.afn.by/news/news.asp?pg=2&d=15&m=1&y=2007&newsid=82282#data>

DOMESTIC

4. Everybody Wants to Lead by Turn – Milinkevich

Yesterday, the political council of the United Democratic Forces tried to decide who was in charge. By a majority, the decision to switch to a rotating management of the coalition was reached. In other words, they decided to lead the opposition by taking turns.

Elena Skrigan, secretary of the central committee of the Belarusian Communist Party, told *BelaPan* that the decision of the political committee does not mean that there is any distrust towards its current head, Aleksandr Milinkevich. "We believe that he managed his task well but the political situation has changed and the one-man management does not work any more. We have to look for other ways, other paths."

Aleksandr Milinkevich completely disagrees with this decision.

- The heads of parties decided that they do not need a unified leader. They will be leaders themselves by turn. But I think it is a mistake," Milinkevich told the *Solidarnost* journalist. - I am sure that this decision will not bring any positive results in the conditions of dictatorship. It would in democracy. But if the majority wants rotation, I can not insist on anything different."

- Don't you think that this decision was caused by the wish to depose you?

- I do not know. I was ready to be at the congress. But there should be a principle of voluntary subordination. Everything should be voluntary.

- What do you intend to do about this decision of the political council?

- I am not planning to do anything. I am staying a leader of the democratic forces. And after... The decision of the political council of the unified democratic forces does not mean I am leaving politics. The parties just decided they do not need a unified leader. It is their decision and I can not impose mine.

Trans. by ed.

Source: Anya Bashkevich, *Solidarnost*; January 16, 2006;
http://www.gazetaby.com./index.php?sn_nid=4566&sn_cat=32

Permit Stamps in Passports To Be Cancelled This Year

Permit stamps for foreign travel placed in the passports of Belarusian citizens are to be abolished by the end of this year, Vladimir Naumov, Minister of Internal Affairs, told journalists at a meeting of the Brest regional executive committee administration.

He said that the government is already working on this question. However, it will be resolved when the automatic system of registration at the boards would be created. "As soon as this is done we will immediately cancel the permit stamps in passports. We expect this work to be done by the end of the year," the minister said.

Vladimir Naumov also said that currently, the government is considering the issue of the ability to go abroad using exit passports, but without a stamp. The principal innovation will be adopted only in the case of introducing a different form of IDs, for example, biometric passports. /

/ *BelTA*

Trans. by ed.

Source; AFN; January 16, 2007;

<http://www.afn.by/news/news.asp?d=16&m=1&y=2007&newsid=82348#data>

5. 79-percent Voter Turnout in Belarus' Local Elections - Authorities

According to the central election commission, a total of 79 percent of all eligible voters cast their ballots in Belarus' January 9-14 local elections.

Nikolai Lozovik, the commission's secretary, told *BelaPAN* that the highest voter turnout, 90.4 percent, was in the Vitebsk region, compared with 83.3 percent in the Mogilyov region, 82.7 percent in the Gomel region, 81.4 percent in the Minsk region, 80.3 percent in the Grodno region, 80.1 percent in the Brest region, and 60.1 percent in the city of Minsk.

The country's regulations governing local elections require a minimum voter turnout of 50 percent for the election results in a district to be declared valid.

General voter turnout was reported at 73.4 percent in the previous local elections held in 2003 and 66.3 percent in the 1999 local elections. / *BelaPAN*

Source: Belorusskie Novosti; January 15, 2007;

http://www.naviny.by/rubrics/inter/2007/01/15/ic_articles_259_149346/

6. Opposition Largely Boycotting Belarus Local Polls

Belarus holds local elections on Sunday but the opposition is largely boycotting the vote because it sees no chance of loosening President Alexander Lukashenko's iron grip on the ex-Soviet state.

Voters will elect 22,000 deputies to local councils across this country of 10 million people but the opposition has fielded only around 200 candidates.

"Many people did not want to become candidates because they understood the authorities would not allow them to win. They saw no sense in this campaign," said Pavel Mozheiko, spokesman for Belarus' main opposition leader Alexander Milinkevich.

Since 1994 when Lukashenko took power, Belarus has not held a single election judged as free and fair by international observers.

U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has branded Belarus "the last dictatorship in Europe" and the EU has imposed travel bans and asset freezes on Lukashenko and his top officials.

Several opposition parties have boycotted Sunday's polls completely, dubbing them a "farce."

"The formal result of these elections is absolutely predictable. The authorities will give their candidates as many votes as required," Vintsuk Vechorka, the leader of opposition Belarusian Popular Front, told Reuters.

Belarus has relied heavily on neighboring Russia for political and economic support but the once-close relationship has broken down in a row over energy prices and tariffs in recent weeks, further distracting voters' attention from the local elections.

"Candidates are campaigning very inertly. Political parties have in fact either ignored or overslept this election campaign," Nikolai Lazovik, Secretary of the Central Election Commission, told Reuters.

The trade dispute peaked this week when Russia halted oil supplies to Belarus, closing a major pipeline exporting oil to Europe in protest at a new Belarusian oil tax. Belarus gave in after four days and agreed to scrap the tax.

State television in Belarus has been running regular advertisements reminding voters about the polls on Sunday and explaining how to vote. But not all will participate.

"I have not noticed our candidate made any effort to win our votes," said Irina, 34, a housewife. "I do not even know how many candidates there are in our district. I doubt I will go to the polls." // *Reuters*

*Source: Andrei Makhovsky, The Washington Post; January 12, 2007;
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/01/12/AR2007011200933.html>*

7. Lebedko Withdraws From Local Election

Anatoly Lebedko, leader of the United Civil Party (UCP), has withdrawn from the local elections. On January 12, during an impromptu press conference at his last pre-election picket, he announced his decision. The politician said that after the picket he would submit an official statement to the electoral commission of the Soviet district in Minsk.

In particular, Lebedko stated that none out of 537 UCP nominated activists were included in electoral commissions in Minsk. Only 61 out of 202 UCP members, who wanted to participate in the political campaign "local elections", managed to get a registration. The politician says that three candidates, who are the students of the Belarusian State University, were subject to pressure and threats. Oleg Kaban, candidate for the deputy of the city of Minsk council, spent 15 days of his election campaign in prison for participation in the action of solidarity with the political prisoners.

Lebedko also pointed out that "he personally and his closet colleagues were detained by police numerous times for distributing informational materials. And electoral commissions refused to assist in making the officials follow the electoral code." "I claim that this campaign does not meet international standards and that it is aimed at appointing deputies but not to electing them. As the head of the UCP, I state the impossibility of my participation in the fabrication of the voters' will and officially announce that I withdraw from the elections," Lebedko says in his statement.

During his conversation with journalists Lebedko declared the mission of the UCP candidates completed. Each of them spoke on the radio, the candidates in Minsk distributed about 300 thousand informational materials, including fliers, the regional development program and the EU proposals for Belarus. "The party activists worked on the "door-to-door" principle, they visited tens of thousands of apartments in Minsk and collected thousand of support signatures," Lebedko said.

To date, only three UCP members have withdrawn from the elections, including Lebedko. The other 58 people are to continue their struggle. // *BelaPAN*

Trans. by ed.

Source: AFN; January 12, 2007;

<http://www.afn.by/news/news.asp?d=12&m=1&y=2007&newsid=82259#data>

REGIONAL

8. Oil-and-Gas Conflict Between Russia and Belarus Can Repeat

The Russian-Belarusian oil-and-gas conflict seems to be over, as the countries completed their talks on oil transit on January 12. However, experts believe that the conflict can be repeated

again. Institute of Energy and Finance Foundation President Leonid Grigoryev explained to a *REGNUM* correspondent why it could happen.

REGNUM: What, do you think, is the outcome of the oil-and-gas conflict between Russia and Belarus? Who lost and who won?

During the conflict, we learned who is who and at what stage the process of establishing the Russian-Belarusian common state is. I believe that we cannot continue pretending that we are integrating, investing money into the union, but not to make the final step in unification. We need clarity in relations, clarity in who pays for what. From the economic point of view, Russia has a keen interest in friendly relations with the neighboring Belarus, both under historical reasons and as a transit country to Europe. So, it makes sense to invest in the country, but we do not need to call Belarus a country united with us, as it is not so. As well the Russian and Belarusian governments are not united; they see future of our countries in quite different ways. Nevertheless, economically our countries are bound to each other. Belarus resembles a large Russian region (like Russia's north-east, where 10 mln people live) that receives various subsidies and transit privileges, but does not submit to Moscow. Russia is open for Belarus, our market is open for Belarusian goods and Belarusian labor, while Russian investments in Belarus face numerous restrictions, although they are now being partially withdrawn. But up to the present moment, it is easier for Russia to invest in Ukraine and Eastern Europe.

Generally, the effect of high oil prices provided positive results for Belarus: for the last three years, GDP growth rate soared from 7% to 10%, average monthly wage increased by 80%. All this is result of Russian subsidies to the Belarusian economy: there cannot be such rise in labor productivity. In 2001, Russia gave Belarus an opportunity to levy export duty for oil transit that equaled difference in the domestic Russian price and the price at which Belarus sold our oil to the West. It is worth mentioning that such way of subsidizing the Belarusian economy can bear negative results for it. In case, oil prices go down sharply (the same concerns gas prices as well), the export duty in Russia will be equal to zero, and consequences of it for the Belarusian economy will be immediate. So, in terms of supporting a transit country the system has an essential flow.

To my mind, our help to Belarus, if we really plan to provide it to Belarus, should be transparent and public, so that no situations occur in the future like the recent conflict. We need to comprehend that we do help them and why we are doing it, and Belarusians should comprehend that we help them. Otherwise, it occurs that from \$7 billion received for oil export via Belarus, we take \$1 bln to ourselves and give \$6 bln as a present to the country, where for 3 years wage increased almost twice, and when we are trying to raise the price grounding on economic effectiveness, it suddenly turns out that we take away something from Belarusians. It means that the fact of subsidizing was concealed from the public for all previous years.

REGNUM: Can the events like the oil-and-gas conflict between Russia and Belarus repeat in the future?

Of course, they can. Because increase of Russia's share in export duties is envisaged by the oil and gas agreements. The process of transition to market gas prices in the post-Soviet territory will be completed when there is a same profitability of gas delivery abroad. Now high prices came to Caucasus. By the way, they came from Turkey instead of Russia. After the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum pipeline was completed, Azerbaijan got an opportunity to choose where to sell gas, either to Europe or to its neighbors. Thus, the prices are gradually becoming even, further we should expect increasing prices for Central Asian gas and so on. So, disappearance of preferential prices inside the post-Soviet territory and full switch to market prices is an irreversible process. Now the process is accompanied by political counteraction from transit countries, and Russia is suffering notable image losses in the conflicts, but the process will continue nevertheless.

In order to avoid repeating such situations it is necessary, first of all, to make the process of subsidizing the Belarusian economy open and public, so that nobody could present claims to us in the future: if we pay for stable, uninterrupted and conflict-free movement of our oil and gas via Europe, it means that no conflicts should arise in the future. So, contracts with Belarus should be signed in a way that makes such situations impossible, and if they do occur, norms of international law should be applied. Europe should know, who is the true author of the interruption in energy supply.

REGNUM: Do you think, the Russian-Belarusian common state has prospects?

The economic space of our countries is limited, as I have already mentioned, from the point of view of movement of Russian capital to Belarus. Now these restrictions are being withdrawn, so, hopefully, Russian investments will finally start coming to the Belarusian economy, which will bring good both to Belarus and Russia. Modernization of the Belarusian economy will inevitably include further democratization and gradual privatization of state-owned enterprises.

Source: *Regnum*; January 17, 2007; <http://www.regnum.ru/english/767649.html>

9. Gref Sceptical about Prospects for Russia-Belarus Union

German Gref, the Russian Minister of Economic Development and Trade, said that "the Russia-Belarus Union State will not be developing in any way, because it has not been created."

Gref said so while answering a lawmakers' question about his vision of the prospects for the Union State, in the wake of tensions over the transit of Russian oil to Europe via Belarus in early January.

In his opinion, the establishment of a union state of Belarus and Russia is impossible without economic integration of the two countries, which is making no headway at present.

"Russia and Belarus have no market relations," he said, "but the most regrettable fact is that integration processes are making no progress and inter-state agreements are not being implemented."

He reminded that to create a union state, the parties have to sign a joint Constitutional Act and introduce a single currency unit on the territory of the two states.

Gref recalled that Russian experts had spent two years on developing a plan to introduce the ruble as the Union State currency, but in 2005 the Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko, answering a direct question from the Russian President Vladimir Putin, said his country was not yet ready for that move.

The third necessary move is to form a one regulatable economic space in both countries. There has been no improvement in the sphere either, Gref said, because Belarus introduced 59 restrictions against Russian companies, and subsidizes certain branches of its economy, including agriculture, *PRIME-TASS* reported.

However, Gref expressed the hope that Russia will be able to settle these problems with Belarus in the nearest future.

Source: *Itar-Tass*; January 17, 2007; <http://www.itar-tass.com/eng/level2.html?NewsID=11162313&PageNum=0>

10. Is Russia-Belarus Friendship Over?

On January 12, Belarus and Russia signed an agreement resolving an impasse over oil transit that had led to the closure of the Druzhba pipeline (the main conduit of Russian oil to Europe) for

three days. The Belarusian side agreed to pay a tax of \$53 per ton on oil imported from Russia, and also accepted a tariff on exports of products from Belarusian refineries that are produced with imported Russian oil (BBC News, January 13). The oil dispute followed wrangling over the price of Russian gas, with Belarus agreeing to raise its payment from \$46.68 per 1,000 cubic meters to \$100 in 2007, while forming by July a joint company that will divide the Beltransgas enterprise over the next four years.

The division with Russia, in the words of President Alexander Lukashenka, was heated and dangerous, but ended peacefully (*Belorusskoe Telegrafnoe Agenstvo*, January 14). However, there are many questions being raised internally as to the significance of the energy crisis for the future of the Russia-Belarus Union. On January 14 Lukashenka criticized Gazprom's proposal to build a pipeline under the Baltic Sea to Germany, scheduled to be commissioned by 2010, as "the most stupid" program in Russian history (*Itar-Tass*, January 14). He blamed Moscow for undermining the principles of the Union State and commented that the two countries have very different perceptions of what that state should entail. Belarus believes that it must be based on "the principles of equality." However, Russia is again seeking to integrate Belarus into the Russian Federation (*Interfax*, January 14).

Several analysts have offered their opinions regarding the impact of the two crises on the Lukashenka administration, the Union, and the economic situation within Belarus. The former head of the National Bank, economist Stanislau Bahdankevich, believes that there could be heightened inflation and a devaluation of the Belarusian ruble. However, he predicted that no crisis would occur in the national economy for at least a year (*Narodnaya Volya*, January 5).

Narodnaya Volya correspondent Vyacheslau Orhish asserted that December's gas crisis was not resolved by the last-minute agreement on December 31. For the first time in many years, the Belarusian regime has suffered a strategic defeat. Ostensibly, Lukashenka emerged from the negotiations with some credit. However, the important factor is that the Kremlin opted to mount a serious attack on the policies of the Belarusian leader. He has constructed an economic policy based not on market competition and free entrepreneurship, but on a quasi-Soviet model: an administrative-command system of economic management. Belarus has used Russia as a source of cheap energy resources and to cover the losses of its unprofitable companies. The notion of an "economic miracle" has suffered an irreversible blow, and the only logical egress is to transform the economy into a market system. But that would require political democratization as well (*Narodnaya Volya*, January 4).

Political analyst Alexander Feduta, discussing the energy conflict in an interview with the newspaper *Belarusy i Rynok*, declared that it signified that there would be no fourth term for Lukashenka, and the concept of a union state has been buried definitively. Within four years, Belarus will experience a sharp drop in the standard of living and the president will be unable to offset popular discontent. The country might adopt the Albanian variant, i.e. a quasi-Soviet state isolated and opting to go its own path, while its young people choose to emigrate. The chairman of the United Civic Party, Anatol Lyabedzka, thinks the crisis could be potentially beneficial to the political opposition and has created new opportunities for public protests. The opposition must now develop its actions in two directions, in his opinion: mobilize the public for mass protest actions, and offer a positive form of alternative state development instead of the disastrous choices provided by Lukashenka (*Belarusy i Rynok*, January 8-15).

Lukashenka's strategy of relying on benevolence and subsidies from Russia, long regarded as the natural ally, is over. Possibly Moscow was irked by the patriotic content of Lukashenka's 2006 election: a platform of "For Belarus." The Kremlin may also be concerned by the close links between the Communist Party of Russia and the Lukashenka regime with a Russian parliamentary election in the offing. Analyst Andrei Suzdaltsev remarked that Belarus is a cordon sanitaire that divides Russia from the West: it excludes Russian business, the joint defensive system is a myth, and Belarus can freely confiscate Russian transit goods. "Lukashenka has exhausted the trust of the Russian leaders" (*RIA-Novosti*, January 11). Lukashenka has become, from Moscow's viewpoint, expendable.

The government of Belarus is clearly at a crossroads. The national television program Panorama, which reflects the government's perspective, lashed out at the opposition for its apparent lack of concern about ways to respond to the actions of "oil and gas monopolies." Neither Alexander Milinkevich, nor Syarhey Kalyakin, nor Vintusk Vyachorka had appealed to their friends in the West to help Belarus in a difficult time. On the contrary, "the opposition, like a whore, makes eyes at the Kremlin cavaliers" (*BT*, January 9). The failure of the opposition to back the president or to contest effectively the local elections on January 14 seems a secondary issue, given the government's new disaffection with its former friends in the Russian Federation.

Source: David Marples; The Eurasia Daily Monitor; January 15, 2007;
http://jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article_id=2371806

11. Russia To Reduce Economic Support To Belarus

Russian President Vladimir Putin says his country will continue to support Belarus' economy, but at a "significantly reduced" level.

Putin hailed an agreement signed last week ending an energy dispute with Minsk that led to the interruption of Russian oil deliveries to Europe via Belarus.

"I would like to point out that the main result of these negotiations is the transition to market relations with our Belarusian partners, first of all, in the energy sector," Putin said.

Putin's comments followed remarks by Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka on January 14 accusing Moscow of seeking to take over Belarus.

Lukashenka was referring to a plan to create a union state with Russia, Belarus's long-standing ally.

Source: RFE/RL; January 15, 2007;
<http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2007/1/D70BDE72-0C2F-425B-BDD3-D3E2842B9562.html>

12. Belarus, Russia Have Different Views of Bilateral Union – Lukashenko

Belarus and Russia now have different ideas of the bilateral union, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko said during Sunday municipal elections.

"I understood from consultations with Russian officials that we have different ideas of the union," he said.

"We have always said that we are ready for cooperation only on equal terms," he said. "We have the union treaty, and Belarusians have always complied with it."

Although the notions are different, Belarus and Russia should not abandon their objective of the union, Lukashenko said.

Source: Itar-Tass; January 14, 2007;
<http://www.tass.ru/eng/level2.html?NewsID=11154196&PageNum=0>

13. Russia, Belarus Sign Oil Transit Agreement

Belarus and Russia have signed an agreement resolving an oil transit row.

Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov said on January 12 that Russia will cut its duty on oil exports to Belarus to \$53 per ton. Moscow previously said it would charge more than three times that amount (\$180).

Fradkov described the deal as "a balanced solution corresponding to the interests of both countries."

The talks came after Minsk and Moscow agreed in principle earlier this week to resolve their differences in the dispute that had disrupted supplies through the main export pipeline to Europe.
// ITAR-TASS, AFP, AP, Interfax

Source: RFE/RL; January 13, 2007; <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2007/1/A773485D-E728-4F82-9760-092237DD53A0.html>

INTERNATIONAL

14. Senior Western Diplomat Travels to Belarus as Local Elections Condemned by EU

A senior member of the Council of Europe planned to travel to Belarus on Thursday, a rare visit by a Western diplomat, as loyalists of authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko appeared to have swept local elections condemned by the EU and the U.S. as undemocratic.

Dutch senator Rene van der Linden, who chairs the council's Parliamentary Assembly, planned to meet Foreign Minister Sergey Martynov, the speakers of the two houses of Belarus' parliament and dissidents and NGOs during his three-day trip that took a year to organize.

Belarus — the only European country that is not a member of the 46-nation Council of Europe — does not readily grant visas to Western politicians. Van der Linden said Russia was instrumental in helping him secure an invitation to Minsk.

"It was my condition to meet the foreign minister and the speakers of the two chambers of the parliament. (The Belarusians) have fulfilled the condition. I will now relay to them our concerns," Van der Linden said.

Lukashenko, appears to have extended his grip over the ex-Soviet nation after Sunday's local elections.

About 300 opposition members took part in the election, but about 100 of them withdrew before the voting, predicting widespread falsification in the vote held under close state control. Under Lukashenko's authoritarian rule, television is under state control and few independent media are allowed.

European Union External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner said there was "a blatant lack of democratic pluralism" in the elections.

The EU slapped a visa ban on the president and other top Belarusian officials after he won a third term in office last March, but the council is trying to engage Belarusian leaders in a debate about democracy, arguing that isolating the country would lead to a further strengthening of the rule of Lukashenko, considered Europe's last dictator.

"A dialogue is needed. You won't win citizens over by isolating them," Van der Linden said. He added, however, that would not soften his criticism when he was face-to-face with top Belarusian officials.

"I will not pay this price for getting the visa. I will remain independent," he said.

Belarus remains outside the Council of Europe, the continent's leading human rights watchdog, because it does not fulfill basic membership requirements, such as the rule of law.

Source: The International Herald Tribune; January 17, 2006;
<http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2007/01/17/europe/EU-GEN-Council-of-Europe-Belarus.php>

15. Smith Bill Promoting Human Rights in Belarus Becomes Law

A bill authored by U.S. Rep. Chris Smith (R-NJ) promoting democracy and human rights in Belarus was signed into law over the weekend by President George W. Bush.

"Alexander Lukashenka is Europe's last dictator and he rules Belarus with an iron fist," Smith said. "Lukashenka continues to systematically repress democratic activists and violate the basic human rights of the Belarusian people. By reauthorizing the Belarus Democracy Reauthorization Act, we are showing that the U.S. stands on the side of the Belarusian people in their effort to live in a free, democratic state not of the side of their oppressor."

The "Belarus Democracy Reauthorization Act of 2006" (H.R. 5948) passed the House by a vote of 397-2 and was passed by the Senate under Unanimous Consent in the final hours of the 109th Congress. The bill reauthorizes the "Belarus Democracy Act" (P.L. 108-347), which Smith authored and passed into law in 2004.

"It is my hope that the Belarus Democracy Reauthorization Act of 2006 will help to end the pattern of human rights violations and broken democracy commitments by the Lukashenka regime. The beleaguered Belarusian people have suffered so much over the course of the last century and deserve better than to live under a regime frighteningly reminiscent of the Soviet Union," said Smith.

Specifically, the law authorizes funding for each of fiscal years 2007 and 2008 for democracy-building activities such as support for non-governmental organizations, including youth groups, independent trade unions and entrepreneurs, human rights defenders, independent media, democratic political parties, and international exchanges.

The bill also authorizes funding for each fiscal year for surrogate radio and television broadcasting to the people of Belarus. In addition, this legislation expresses Congress's will that sanctions be imposed against the Lukashenka regime, and that senior officials of the regime -- as well as those engaged in human rights and electoral abuses, including lower-level officials -- be denied entry into the United States.

"Belarus continues to have the worst rights record of any European state. The U.S. has rightly imposed some sanctions on the Lukashenka regime, but it is time to expand and strengthen those sanctions. It is imperative -- given their track record -- that we continue to hold the regime's feet to the fire and demand change," said Smith.

Source: EarthTimes. Org; January 15, 2007;
http://www.earthtimes.org/articles/show/news_press_release,44539.shtml#

16. Belarus Local Elections Failed to Meet Democratic Standards - EU Commission

Local elections in Belarus failed to meet democratic standards, the European Commission said Monday.

EU External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner said there was "a blatant lack of democratic pluralism" in the weekend elections.

Opposition leaders said the elections took place under tight official control, predicting widespread falsification.

The EU has been fiercely critical of the hard-line rule of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko. On Monday, it decried the restrictive rules on campaigning and the intimidation of opposition candidates.

"These elections therefore failed to give Belarusian voters a genuine choice," Ferrero-Waldner said.

Source: The International Herald Tribune; January 15, 2006;
<http://www.ihf.com/articles/ap/2007/01/15/europe/EU-GEN-EU-Belarus.php>

17. Lukashenko Names North European Gas Pipeline Russia's Most Foolish Venture

On Sunday, January 14, Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko has named the project for construction of the North European Gas Pipeline under the Baltic Sea Russia's most foolish venture.

"Russia's most foolish project is construction of a gas pipeline under the Baltic Sea. It's unknown what may happen with this gas pipeline, which is lying on a pile of armaments," Lukashenko told journalists in Minsk. He added that the project may make it into the Guinness Book of Records and said that "the realistic project is to build the second branch of Yamal-Europe gas pipeline", which goes through Belarusian territory.

The Belarusian leader has questioned Gazprom's policy in regards to constructing the Baltic gas pipeline, saying that he cannot hold normal negotiations with the management of Russia's state-controlled gas giant.

Commenting on Lukashenko's quips, Kremlin source told *RIA Novosti*: "These words once again prove very well that we need to build such a pipeline."

As *MosNews* has reported on previous occasions, the North European gas pipeline will bypass traditional transit countries, such as the Baltic states, Poland and Belarus, directly connecting Russia and the Baltic shore of Germany. Part of the pipeline will be built under the Baltic Sea. Lithuania has already complained of possible environmental damage, while Poland has named the agreement to build the gas pipeline a conspiracy between Russia and Germany.

Source; MosNews; January 15, 2006;
<http://www.mosnews.com/money/2007/01/15/lukashenkopipe.shtml>

18. EU Urges Russia, Belarus to Be Reliable

The European Union said Thursday it would ask for Russia and Belarus to be "transparent and reliable" in the future as oil resumed flowing through a pipeline after a row between the two nations shut off oil to Europe for three days.

Europe breathed a sigh of relief as supplies returned to normal but was left with lasting doubts about Russia's dependability as an energy supplier.

"We should learn lessons," EU Energy Commissioner Andris Piebalgs told reporters. "We ask from both producer countries and transit countries to be really reliable ... We call for transparent and reliable behavior in the future."

Excerpt from:
Source: Aoife White; Forbes.Com; January 11, 2007;
<http://www.forbes.com/feeds/ap/2007/01/11/ap3320719.html>

19. Russian Oil Flowing Again To Europe

After a three-day standstill, Russian oil is once again flowing across Belarus to markets in Western Europe. Belarusian officials yesterday agreed to resume shipments through the Druzhba pipeline after a "compromise" deal ended a trade spat between Moscow and Minsk.

It's not clear who did most of the talking during a phone call on January 10 between Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Russian counterpart Alyaksandr Lukashenka. But when it was over, it was Putin who had what he wanted.

Belarus restored oil shipments later that night, bringing relief to nervous officials in Western Europe. Minsk also lifted a hefty transit fee imposed last week. Moscow's refusal to pay prompted Belarusian officials to order the Druzhba shutoff on January 8.

Excerpt from:

Source: RFE/RL; January 11, 2007;

<http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2007/1/54481B93-E37A-49CB-A1EE-F657C247FB12.html>

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.
