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EDITORIAL

Dialogue during 6-month probation

The months following the Parliamentary elections in Belarus have shown a great deal of activity on the part of the Belarusian government in both directions – East and West.

Various ministers and President Alexander Lukashenka himself have engaged in what has become an annual event in haggling with Russia about discounted prices for oil and natural gas. Russia has extended another 2-billion dollar loan to Belarus in exchange for part-ownership of the pipeline systems traversing Belarus on the way to European consumers. In addition, the Belarusian government appears to have accepted an earlier demand by Vladimir Putin that trade between the two countries be conducted in Russian rubles, rather than in US dollars. It raised a valid concern that this may be the first step in fully accepting the Russian currency as its own, with the accompanying loss of sovereignty. President Lukashenka continues to pledge warm brotherly relations toward its big neighbor and promises to protect Russia's western flank by allowing the stationing of Russian missile bases on Belarus' territory. However, despite strong Russian pressure, Lukashenka has been less than enthusiastic in supporting Russia's aggressive steps in the Caucasus, finally choosing not to recognize as independent states the two breakaway Georgian provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

This latest maneuver by Lukashenka has led the West, and more specifically, the European Union, to initiate steps toward rapprochement with the Belarusian regime. It followed the release of three prominent political prisoners and Lukashenka's promises of conducting free and fair parliamentary elections. Earlier, he even made this outlandish statement: "We want show the western countries and Russia how elections should be organized."

The release of the political prisoners has led the United States to remove sanctions against two subsidiaries of the Belnaftakhim concern, a major hard currency producer. And the barely perceptible improvement in the conduct of the elections has led the European Union to lift visa bans against most Belarusian high officials, including Lukashenka himself, despite the fact that the OSCE Election Observation Mission concluded that the elections "ultimately fell short of OSCE commitments for democratic elections." Not a single member of the opposition was elected to the 110 member body, considered to be most sanitized one under Lukashenka's rule. The lifting of the sanctions and of the visa bans took place in October, and both penalties are to be automatically restored at the end of a 6-month period in April 2009, if the Belarus government fails to fulfill its promises of democratic and human rights changes.

The warming of relations with EU has resulted in a number of meetings between Brussels and the Belarus officials.

Belarus has been invited by EU to join its newly formed Eastern Partnership, a group of countries – former Soviet republics, west and south of the Russian Federation. EU has indicated its readiness to support the entry of Belarus into the World Trade Organization (WTO). The International Monetary Fund has shown remarkable patience in considering Belarus' request for a two-billion dollar loan, despite the churlish declarations that "our country will not be dictated to by anyone." The most recent advance in opening the dialogue between EU and the Belarusian government has been the arrival in Minsk of Helga Schmidt, the representative of Javier Solana, the EU High Commissioner for the Common Foreign and Security Policy. She has met with government representatives, some heads of the foreign missions in Minsk, and separately with selected members of the democratic opposition. The recent closer relations with the government officials already have an adverse effect on the democratic opposition in that despite assurances that the opposition will take part in any Western discussions with the government -- that has not happened. The opposition representatives are periodically consulted, and presumably informed of any results in the ongoing official discussions, but they are not an integral part of the process.

The 12 points or requirements that the European Union placed on the government of Belarus in order to establish normal relations with the EU states, were quite demanding, and as such, they were generally ignored by the regime. They have now been drastically toned down by the EU, and reduced in number to five. The following demands have been completely eliminated: Independent investigation of the cases of disappeared persons, independent and impartial judicial system, the end of arbitrary arrest and detention, respect for the rights of workers and their trade unions, the rights of entrepreneurs, respect for the rights of national minorities, abolishment of the death penalty, making use of the help of international bodies and organizations in institutionalizing respect for the rights of its people.

The remaining five points, as they were announced by the head of the European Commission's office in Belarus – Jean-Eric Holzapfel:

- There should be no more political prisoners.
- Some improvements should be made with regard to media access.
- Dialogue with OSCE on reforming the electoral law should continue.
- The conditions regarding the NGO status and activity should be improved
- Freedom of assembly and of the activities of political associations should be guaranteed.

The Belarusian government has already introduced some minimal changes in response to some of the above points, and judging by past behavior, may consider them as having adequately fulfilled those reduced requirements:

- A person accused of participating in organizing the traders' street demonstration was sentenced last week to one year of corrective labor. The sentence was quickly reduced to a one year probation.
- Two well known newspapers were recently allowed to be printed in Belarus and to be distributed through state channels. This permission is nevertheless restricted by specific and rather draconian rules.
- The NGO "For Freedom", headed by the former Presidential candidate Milinkevich, was finally officially registered upon the fourth attempt.

Will Lukashenka's renowned political gamesmanship be tolerated by the European Union in the dialogue during the remainder of the 6-month probation period?

Will the EU and United States have the political courage to reintroduce the sanctions and the visa bans at that time, if necessary?

Or will the EU forget its promise to the people of Belarus to restore some vestiges of democracy in the country, and focus only on the economic and trade interests of its member states?

These crucial questions should not be forgotten or ignored during the ongoing dialogue. However, the following possibly even more important questions should be kept in mind:

What will an expansionist and newly aggressive Russia do to increase its control over its near-abroad, including Belarus?

Will the economically-cornered Lukashenka sell out his country to Russia for a promise of retaining at least a portion of his current power, influence or wealth?

Walter Stankievich



**Dear Readers !
BR Editorial Staff in Prague
wishes all of you
a MERRY CHRISTMAS
and a HAPPY NEW YEAR !**

From the Publisher

This year has been truly the political year in the United States. The Presidential campaign and the preceding party primaries collected unprecedented amounts of money and reached record audiences. After eight years of Republican control of the government, and some of that time of both houses of Congress, there will be changes in Washington.

President George W. Bush was well acquainted with the difficult situation in Belarus and mentioned it many times in his speeches. He met in person with many members of the Belarusian democratic opposition, and encouraged them to keep up their struggle for freedom.

President-elect Barack Obama will have the opportunity to continue U.S. support for democracy in Belarus, and may have the privilege of witnessing its restoration. It is up to all of us, the producers and readers of this publication, to inform the incoming Administration and the incoming Members of Congress about Belarus and the desperate need for change there. Their worldwide influence and support will be crucial. So, let's stay in touch with our old friends in Washington and reach out to the new ones!

This issue marks a twentieth anniversary for Belarusian Review. The magazine has published many authors, some frequently, others -- one time, has re-printed pages and pages of selected material about Belarus, and has served as a research source for many students, both through the printed page and on the Internet. Over the years we have involved more than one generation of those with Belarusian roots, as well as other friends of Belarus.

The need for fresh forces continues now more than ever. If you are interested in participating in this rewarding venture in any capacity, or can recommend someone, you and they will be welcome.

Finally, I wish to take the opportunity to wish a speedy health improvement to Joe Arciuch, the longest serving member of the BR team. He began as the Founding Publisher/Editor in 1988 and continues to-date as an involved Editor-at-Large

The annual subscription for 2009 remains unchanged: \$45 for individuals, \$65 for institutions.

FEATURES

Helsinki Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

Belarus' Parliamentary Elections Fail to Meet OSCE Democratic Elections Commitments

By Orest Deychakiwsky and Winsome Packer, Policy Advisors

Vote Count Particularly Problematic

The conduct of the September 28 parliamentary elections in Belarus fell significantly short of international standards, despite some hopes that there would be improvements following the August release of political prisoners, Belarus' reluctance to recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia and statements by senior Belarusian officials raising expectations. The Commission followed the run-up to the elections closely, holding a hearing on September 16 titled "Business as Usual? Belarus on the Eve of the Elections," and issuing a press release expressing concern about the pre-election climate and encouraging last minute steps, including transparency in the vote count and full access for OSCE observers. [Both the hearing and the press release are available on the Commission's website.]

Two members of the Commission staff traveled to Belarus as part of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly's delegation of the overall OSCE Election Observation Mission, observing in Minsk and Smolevichi. In its statement, issued the day after the election, the OSCE election observation mission concluded that despite minor improvements, the conduct of the parliamentary elections in Belarus "ultimately fell short of OSCE commitments for democratic elections." On election day, voting itself was generally well conducted, though the vote count was assessed as bad or very bad in 48 percent of OSCE observations.

The experiences of Commission staff on voting day were consistent with those of other OSCE observers. For the most part, the voting itself in the precincts staff visited went smoothly. However, the vote counting process was particularly problematic, given the lack of transparency. All 110 elected members of the Chamber of Representatives of the National Assembly (lower chamber of parliament) are pro-government. No opposition activists from out of 70 nominated by the democratic opposition were elected.

The vote count in one Minsk precinct in which Commission staff observed jointly with a Swedish member of parliament was dramatically lacking in transparency.

There were three candidates on the ballot in this precinct, including one opposition member. Both the OSCE and domestic observers were hindered from having a full view of the vote counting proceedings. The precinct electoral commission set tables up as barriers about three meters from the tables on which the ballots were being counted. Further obstructing the observers' view of the ballot count were the electoral commission workers themselves, who were positioned in such a way as to make viewing difficult. Attempts by observers and a proxy of the opposition candidate to clarify which provisions of the electoral code permitted this behavior by the electoral commission went nowhere. All of the ballots – from the early voting, mobile voting, and regular voting were mixed in together. When an OSCE observer took a picture of the vote count, or, more accurately, of the election commission members blocking the vote count, the chairwoman interrupted the count to write a complaint against the observer. After about 20 minutes, the opposition candidate's proxy notified her that according to Article 55 of the electoral code, "the count must be performed without a break until the results of the voting have been obtained." Only at that point did the Chairwoman cease writing and resume the count.

In the North-East Minsk district that other Commission staff monitored with an Irish senator, the experience was similar. The voting process at the eight polling stations that they monitored was orderly and transparent. The problems came in the counting process. Similar to the reports from other observers, Commission staff and

**.. obstructing the observers' view of the ballot count
were the electoral commission workers
themselves (with their bodies)**

the Irish observer were prevented from standing close enough to watch the vote counting in a manner that allowed them to see the names and other distinguishing information on the ballots, even though the importance of this facet of observation was stressed to the government by the OSCE and the Interior Minister assured observers in a briefing on September 25 that election monitors would be able to watch the counting from a close vantage point.

In a far departure from this promise, the precinct officials refused to announce what boxes they were opening during the process. They would lift a box, dump its contents on a table on the other side of the room from where the observers were seated, and ten or so people would crowd around the table to separate the ballots and "count" the votes. Observers could not distinguish which ballots came from early voting versus the ballots cast on election day, or spoiled ballots. They refused to announce the results of the count or record them in the protocol as was delineated in the procedural manual provided by ODIHR. They then huddled with a calculator to tabulate numbers, write them on a piece of paper in complete silence. Afterward, the precinct chair posted all of their numbers on a bulletin board. They then gathered up the ballots and left the building without a word. It is apparent that further legal and cultural changes are required for truly democratic elections to occur in Belarus.

Several problems that manifested themselves during the actual voting were that the material used to seal the

ballot boxes was easily manipulable and could be removed and put back on (clay dough and a string). In a number of precincts, the early voting ballot boxes were not in plain view, as required by law. Early voting was significant in several precincts, up to 39 percent in one case.

Before voting day, there appeared to be a certain willingness on the part of some in the West to give the benefit of the doubt to the authorities, in part due to the minor improvements that had taken place in the election campaign, such as slightly increased access of opposition representatives to district election commissions, and the decision to repeat the airing of the candidates' five-minute campaign spots on state TV and radio stations. This, together with the release of political prisoners Aleksandr Kozulin, Syarhei Parsyukevich and Andrei Kim (which led to the temporary lifting of U.S. sanctions on two subsidiaries of Belarus's giant petrochemical conglomerate Belnaftakhim), and Belarussian leader Alexander Lukashenka's unenthusiastic response to Russia's occupation of Georgia and refusal to date to recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia created an atmosphere of optimism that Lukashenka would be willing to take steps towards democratic reform and engage in a dialogue with Europe and the United States.

The stark lack of transparency in the vote count was also surprising to many because it flew in the face of Belarussian authorities' pledges prior to the vote, and it was probably unnecessary. Given the overall election campaign climate, which did not allow for genuine political competition and where the opposition had extremely minimal representation on precinct election commissions, the vast majority of pro-governmental candidates would have won in any event. This is within the context of the wider extremely inhospitable environment for the democratic opposition, in which for almost 15 years the Lukashenka regime has tightly controlled the media; vilified the opposition; repressed the independent media; disappeared, detained, imprisoned, and beaten opposition members and democracy activists; harassed and suppressed non-governmental organizations and, in short, done its best to stifle independent thought.

Notwithstanding the EU's temporary lifting of some visa sanctions against senior Belarussian officials, Mr. Lukashenka may have yet again missed an opportunity to move Belarus towards democratic Europe, which would enhance Belarus' independence, at a time when it especially needs to be strengthened, given intensifying Russian pressure on Belarus. Notwithstanding the flawed elections, both the United States and Europe have displayed a willingness to continue to engage in dialogue with Minsk and to encourage Belarus to move forward along the path of compliance with freely undertaken OSCE human rights and democracy commitments. The poor quality of the September 28 elections did not facilitate this process, as had been hoped by the West. Nevertheless, if the Belarussian authorities take steps to increase political freedom and respect for human rights, the real possibility exists for a gradual opening in U.S.-Belarussian relations – for Belarus to begin the process of reducing its self-imposed isolation and eventually taking its rightful place among the community of European nations.

Changing Priorities in Belarus

By: David Marples

Several recent events suggest that changes are underway in Belarus as it emerges from isolation and begins new dialogues with the countries of the European Union. According to sociological surveys, the electorate remains behind the president; and after a brief shock engendered by sharp price rises at the end of 2007, Belarussian society rapidly returned to apathy, which is described in the official media as "stability" (*Belorusy i Rynok*, November 17-24). That allowed the government of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka to enjoy a comfortable victory in the 2008 parliamentary elections, albeit in a restrictive environment.

After the much-touted removal of the travel ban to Europe imposed by the EU on Lukashenka and his associates two years ago, the Belarussian leadership has taken initiatives in a number of areas that suggest change is imminent. On November 18 a Belarussian Investment Forum opened in London, with the participation of Prime Minister Syarhey Sidorski and senior European business executives. It took place at the Church House Conference Center, a venue originally built to mark Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee in 1887 (*Belapan*, November 18). Sidorski met with members of the two British houses of parliament as well as with Lord Mayor of London Ian Luder to discuss potential cooperation between the two countries at a time of global financial crisis. The Belarussian prime minister urged his British counterparts to visit Belarus (*Narodnaya Volya*, November 18).

Although relations with the United States have been less smooth in recent months, Lukashenka announced his desire for the start of a new dialogue in an interview with *The Wall Street Journal* on November 11. Much of this interview was shown on Belarussian Television's Channel One on November 14, and it featured the Belarussian leader bemoaning the effects of U.S.-imposed sanctions on trade between the two countries (www.naviny.by, November 16). Lukashenka expressed his pleasure at the election of Barack Obama as the next President of the United States, referring to him as a "new, young, and unblinkered man" and drawing parallels to himself when he was first elected in 1994. Americans, according to the president, comprehend the importance of Belarus as "a key country in Europe" (*Reuters*, November 11).

The changing nature of elite politics in Belarus was also discussed by Valeriy Karbalevich, in a paper presented to the Second Conference of the Institute of Strategic Studies, held in Kyiv, Ukraine, on November 11 and 12 and published in an abbreviated format in a Belarussian opposition newspaper. Karbalevich noted Lukashenka's self-appointed task of making Belarus's investment climate one of the 30 best in the world as well as starting to "normalize" its relations with Europe. Belarus formerly revered its Soviet past and supported a union with Russia, but today the emphasis is on stability derived from the activities of the president and the strengthening of Belarussian sovereignty (*Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta*, November 18).

However, Karbalevich continued, these new developments had in turn posed some problems for the regime. In 1998, after the financial collapse in Russia, Belarus strengthened its administrative command system; but a decade later its focus is on liberalization. This change of policy has led to changes in the social basis of support for the Lukashenka regime. A consumer boom period from 2003 to 2008 led to the birth of a new middle class. Increasingly, says Karbalevich, this group, which supports the president, is to be found in Minsk and the larger cities, thereby taking away the former areas of support for the opposition. The economic crisis, however, is forcing the government to satisfy this group by expanding economic freedom. The outcome in the long term could be the development of a new center of power in the country, creating what the author calls a nomenklatura-oligarchic regime that could restrict the previously unlimited authority of the president.

Lukashenka, according to this account, seeks a “Chinese” solution to his problems (economic reform while retaining a strong central government) rather than the sort of outcome that befell Mikhail Gorbachev in 1991. Though persuasive, the argument is not entirely convincing. One could make an equally plausible case that Lukashenka’s machinations are dictated more by external circumstances than any initiatives from Minsk. A feature of his long period in office has been his tendency to switch policies on an almost weekly basis. How does one equate a reluctance to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia with Belarus’s apparent agreement with Russia at Sochi last August to create a joint defense system? It was reported that Lukashenka recently discussed the possibility with Moscow of installing Russian Iskander missiles in Belarus, a prospect described by the United States as “unhelpful to regional security” (VOA News, November 14; www.belradio.fm, November 13).

Furthermore, although several political prisoners have been released in recent months, there is not the slightest indication that Belarus has created a more tolerant political climate for members of the opposition, unregistered youth groups, and other malcontents. Despite such repressive tactics, the Europeans have decided it is preferable to open a door to Lukashenka and his associates, mainly because of perceived threats from Russia and despite an election that fell well below acceptable standards. Finally, the changes in the sectors of support for the president will hardly be a lasting phenomenon if Belarus suffers the full effects of the current recession, as seems likely. The new middle class could disappear as quickly as it emerged.

Source: Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 5 Issue: 222
November 20, 2008

Quotes of Quarter

“We are in a difficult situation and we are asking Americans for help. 5 billion dollars is not a problem for them. Our relations could then considerably improve,”

declared **ALYAKSANDR LUKASHENKA** in his address in Minsk on December 16, 2008

Belarus after 15 Years of Largely Symbolic Gestures

By **Ethan S. Burger, Esq.**

Aleksandr Lukashenka has an uncanny knack of holding elections after which there is a major world crisis that overshadows the flawed results. This leads to only Belarusian citizens caring about what is happening in Belarus. In 2001, the “presidential election” was held two days before the 9/11 tragedy. This time the Belarusian legislative “elections” took place when most people concerned with international affairs and public policy were pre-occupied with the global financial crisis.

Mr. Lukashenka has held power for 14 years. During this time he has learned a lot. He recognizes that if the opposition is atomized, it is usually not necessary to be excessively brutal to remain in power. The key to success in a nutshell is to infiltrate the opposition, reward reliable officials, and keep any potential prominent alternatives to his continued rule off-balance. He has mastered guaranteeing a near monopoly of information over news about developments in the country and its relations with foreign states.

The European Union member-states and many international organizations, with a few exceptions, seem to have a form of attention deficit disorder. The statute of limitations for dictators who illegally govern is relatively short so long as one does not annoy one’s neighbors.

The Irish Times’ Dan McLaughlin perceptively noticed that “In order to woo Alexander Lukashenko from ally Russia, the West may turn a blind eye to an election neither free nor fair.”¹ Indeed, this seems to be the case, in Belarus’ most recent parliamentary election, opposition parties had 70 candidates on the ballot, but did not win a single seat.

Persons of integrity can justify their actions by noting that in terms of human rights, there are far more repressive regimes than that in Belarus and the World Bank has acknowledged that Belarusian economic performance in recent years has been far better than expected.²

This presents a moral issue: is the fact that Belarusian citizens are not the worst off in the world, should we regard its government as legitimate. Need we normalize relations with countries that fail to observe their international treaty obligations, simply because there are states where the quality of life for the average citizen is worse? Is it appropriate to hold European countries to different standards of conduct than for other countries?

Given the minimal economic ties between the United States and Belarus, our government need not concern itself with commercial interests urging legislators and members of the executive branch to “look” away – as is the case with

1. Dan McLaughlin, Belarusians fear West is about to sell them out to ‘Europe’s last dictator,’ *The Irish Times*, at 11, September 27, 2008.

2. See *The World Bank, Doing Business 2009: Country Profile for Belarus (Comparing Regulations in 181 Countries)* (2008) (rating 85th with respect to doing business; the U.S. was third and Russia 120th).

China. Admittedly, China has made dramatic economic strides in the last 25 years, but that is no reason not to hold its government accountable for not upholding its obligations under the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights.

It remains a major foreign policy goal for the EU, NATO and the U.S. to preserve an independent Belarus. In a country without developed political and social institutions, the fate of one individual can alter history. At some point there will be a post-Lukashenka era. There are many important lessons to be learned from the recent events in Georgia. One that cannot be overlooked is that the future of the successor states of the Soviet Union cannot be guaranteed should Russia like to change the course of history.

Economic sanctions have not brought down Mr. Lukashenka. Refusing to issue visas for certain Belarusian officials achieve little. I believe that Western policy towards Belarus should have two principal components.

First, the West should dramatically increase its West's transmittal of news via the Internet, radio and satellite television to keep the Belarusian population informed of its government's policies and their effect as well as influence public opinion in the country.

Second, and more importantly, the West should take steps to ensure that the Belarusian leadership and its "favorites" do not treat state assets as their personal property that can be used to generate any revenue and then laundered abroad.

The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) is the principal international membership organization dedicated to combating money laundering.¹ It has 34 members (32 countries and two regional organizations) as well as 27 associate members. Belarus is not a FATF member, but is a member of the Eurasian Group on combating money laundering and financing of terrorism (EAG).²

Ostensibly the EAG exists to cooperate with other EAG members to develop international anti-money laundering/combating financing of terrorism (AML/CFT) systems that conform to FATF Recommendations, international conventions, relevant UN Security Council Resolutions and EAG agreements. Specifically, this should entail:

- the promotion of FATF 40 Recommendations on Anti-Money Laundering (AML) and FATF 9 Special Recommendations on Combating Financing of Terrorism (CFT);
- the design and execution of joint AML/CFT training projects within EAG financial intelligence units;
- the conduct of mutual evaluations of the AML/CFT policies in EAG member states;
- the coordination of programs with international organizations, working groups and relevant states;
- the conduct of research into AML/CFT typologies

1. FATF maintains an excellent website that deals with all aspects of combating money laundering. It is located at http://www.fatf-gafi.org/pages/0,2987,en_32250379_32235720_1_1_1_1,00.html (Last Accessed October 3, 2008).

2. The EAG's website is located at <http://www.eurasiangroup.org/index-1.htm> (Last Accessed October 6, 2008).

and good practice and the sharing of such research among EAG members; and

- provision of technical assistance to the EAG member states.

Increasingly AML legislation contains provisions concerning Politically Exposed Persons [PEPs]. In most cases, such PEPs are present or former governmental officials or individuals acting as their agents. Although some governments are willing to treat money laundering activities by PEPs solely as a law enforcement matter. This is not usually a problem where PEPs are former officials who lack friends serving in their country's current government. In many cases, however, PEPs either still hold governmental positions or have connections to individuals who do. Hence, the offense of money laundering is a secondary consideration to issues having higher priority.

Furthermore, PEPs as well as private individuals may have such great wealth that they are in a position to retaliate against any government that seeks to prosecute them. In theory, financial institutions are supposed to closely monitor PEPs continually.

The large amounts of money being laundered in the world could not occur without the complicity of government officials, organized crime organizations, accountants, bankers and lawyers.³ Sometimes the professionals are offering services to clients without providing adequate "due diligence" prior to agreeing to take on a new client.

In other instances acting on behalf of and advising clients who acquired their property illicitly can be so lucrative so that they have no reluctance to assist them in circumventing the relevant anti-money laundering systems and ensuring that law enforcement does not see any "red flags" that might indicate that illegal activities are being undertaken.

Thus as a practical matter, I would increasingly focus on Belarus' activities from a law enforcement perspective that would cover not merely money laundering, but also human trafficking, illegal weapons sales, and other transnational crimes. In the near-term, it seems clear that it is unlikely that the West has the will and ability to influence events in Belarus. Nonetheless, in general Western (and other) governments are empowered to enforce their own criminal laws against Belarusian nationals.

Government officials traveling on diplomatic passports create a special situation since they in most cases enjoy diplomatic immunity. When such persons are the individuals committing crimes, other countries can only act against the assets involved. These actions will have limited effect, but they will send a clear message to both Belarusian officials and the Belarusian population that learns of it.

3. See e.g. Michael Peel, The dark side of London's success, The Financial Times, at 16, December 6, 2007 (discussing how banking professionals facilitate financial crimes by foreigners).

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OSCE Election Experts to Visit Minsk For Consultations

Belarusian election officials will hold consultations with representatives of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) in Minsk in the latter half of January, said Lidziya Yarmoshyna, head of the central election commission on December 17.

The consultations will focus on changes to Belarus' election regulations recommended by the international organization.

Alyaksandr Lukashenka asked the government to study the recommendations earlier this month. Ms. Yarmoshyna said that apart from the central election commission, the government's legislature-drafting centre would also examine the recommendations. "We are going to send the OSCE final report to all local election authorities for a study in order to discuss the election campaign and the OSCE recommendations at a round-table conference afterward. At least a dialogue will begin," said Yarmoshyna.

The official failed to specify which of the OSCE proposals could be the most acceptable for the Belarusian authorities.

While the preliminary report issued by OSCE observers shortly after September's elections said the vote had been in compliance with national regulations, the final report did not mention it and put an emphasis on shortcomings, Ms. Yarmoshyna said. "This is evidence that this document is politically biased," she stressed.

In its report, the international organization concluded that the vote had fallen short of international standards despite certain improvements.

In particular, the OSCE said that the "election environment" in the country "still did not allow genuine political competition and equal treatment of election competitors by authorities."

The organization concluded that Belarusian regulations continues to "present obstacles" to the conduct of elections in line with OSCE standards.

Source: BelaPAN, December 17, 2008

Belarus' Forum

"The China Syndrome"

Lifting of the EU sanctions against Alyaksandr Lukashenka has become a sensational event in the life of Belarus. It has happened despite of the fact that the "parliamentary elections" had been recognised as undemocratic and not free by the world community. Over the last week it has become obvious that many people understand the meaning of this event in a polar opposite way. And it is getting rather dangerous now.

"The United Democratic Forces support partial lifting of the sanctions. We are for this formula fundamentally. And today we differ with the decision adopted in Luxemburg on one person only, on Alyaksandr Lukashenka," said the ever-optimistic chairman of the United Democratic Party Anatol Lyabedzka in an interview to Deutsche Welle.

A well-known German political analyst and lobbyist, director of Russia and CIS Programs for the Foreign Policy Council of Germany, Alexander Rahr, is also very pleased.

"One shouldn't forget that Belarus is opening for privatization not just for Russian investors. Western firms are applying pressure on our governments for them to start a concrete dialogue with your country, and then the business would go there too. Everybody wants to gain money on the Belarusian market which is not so little and which is situated in the centre of Europe".

Alexander Rahr has also noted with unconcealed amusement: **"The West sees that there is no organized opposition in Belarus, it is split without one leader"**.

"Today most Belarusian citizens support the course of the government and President Lukashenka. The West does not want to wait 5-10 years till something changes in Belarus, the time has come to work with Belarus", he concluded.

British Lord Timothy Bell who is preparing the visit of Belarusian establishment to the investment forum to London, is also pleased by the prospects.

"Most Belarusians are glad and happy (...).The regime wants to attract inward investment, want Belarusian people to travel freely, they would like the visa sanctions removed from their senior people so they can gain experience of other countries." Lord Bell said in an interview to Russian TV channel NTV.

The former OSCE Ambassador to Minsk Hans-Georg Wieck, who visited Belarus as did Lord Bell, evaluates the situation in the country after the lifting of sanctions more shrewdly: "I cannot imagine that Belarusian authorities would make considerable concessions". He believes that **"a so-called Chinese model is being prepared for Belarus, when an authoritarian regime and a liberalizing economy are combined in the country"**.

We would like to explain what the Chinese style of the authoritarian regime is. It means massive public executions, dozens thousands of political prisoners, total control of the party over the society, complete "filtering" of political information on the web and so on.

An Uncommon Priest Wages War Against a Common Disease

By Branislava Stankevich (Excerpts by Editor)

"I promised to fight against alcoholism when I was only 12," Juozas Bulka remembers. "Already at that age, I realized that the unrestricted use of alcohol only leads a person towards evil and tragedy."

Dismissed by some as an eccentric, Belarus's Juozas Bulka, 83, has waged a tireless, lifelong crusade against the evils of alcohol. He's made believers out of many, but not everyone agrees with his methods.

MOSAR, Belarus -- Juozas Bulka began life anew in 1985. That was the year Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev introduced his campaign against alcohol consumption. Bulka was working in an electric-meter factory in Vilnius, the capital of the then-Soviet republic of Lithuania. Under Gorbachev's program, it was illegal to drink while working, or in spas, on picnics and tours, in parks, and on public transportation.

One day, Bulka discovered the secretary of the factory's Communist Party cell drinking with other administration officials. These were the very people responsible for enforcing the antialcohol ordinances.

Bulka complained to senior management. He was fired shortly after.

Only his faith in God and the strength of his beliefs, he says, helped him to survive this blow to his morality.

At the age of 60, Juozas Vintsentavich Bulka decided to become a priest and to fight alcoholism, wherever the Catholic Church sent him. A year after being ordained, he was assigned to the small northwestern Belarusian village of Mosar, where -- in defiance of aggressively atheistic communist policy -- stood the 200-year-old Church of St. Hanna.

Alcoholism is rampant in Belarus. In 2007, doctors registered 178,000 alcoholics in the country -- 4,000 more than the year before. In the past five years, the number of female alcoholics has risen from 7,000 to 46,000. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), life expectancy among males in Belarus fell dramatically in recent years and is currently around 63 years. The WHO says Belarus also suffers from the highest level of deaths in Europe due to alcohol poisoning and also has one of the highest suicide rates.

"I promised to fight against alcoholism when I was only 12," Bulka remembers. "Already at that age, I realized that the unrestricted use of alcohol only leads a person towards evil and tragedy. I swore this before God and have never lost faith that I chose the right path. The only thing I regret is that I didn't become a priest in my youth, because then I'd surely have achieved much more."

'People Would Watch Him From Afar'

"I remember well when Father Juozas came here," says Sofia Yakimovich, the head of the village. "At first, everyone was embarrassed to talk to him since he was Lithuanian and didn't understand our language well. People would watch him from afar and then talk about him -- 'small, stocky, walks with a cane.'"

It is clear that the Belarusian authorities are glad to see this scenario in action. On the day the sanctions were lifted, the head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus Syarhei Martynau said after a meeting with Javier Solana, EU's High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy: **"The Belarusian government has done a lot to make this day come true. We have appraised the EU's decision and expect for it to be extended and deepened as our cooperation and ties get closer."**

At the same time, Martynau didn't say a single word about reforms in the sector of human rights and freedom of speech.

Alyaksandr Milinkevich, leader of the "For Freedom" movement doesn't see anything dangerous in these events. After a meeting with Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski in Warsaw, he said to Radio Svaboda on behalf the whole delegation of opposition politicians: "Everyone stands for a dialog between Belarus and the European Union that is needed for the people of Belarus first of all."

"What concerns tempo of the dialog, tempo of softening, steps, which should be made by one of the sides and then by the other side, granting or non-granting a visa for Alyaksandr Lukashenka, it is debatable. I don't think these discussions are principal. Belarus is interested in economic, trading, and political cooperation with Europe, this is principal," the politician said.

"Not all of the oppositionists understand me. Many of them regard me as a predator. I continue to think that the European Union should try to talk with the regime," the former presidential candidate told in an interview to Polskie Radio.

Heads of political parties and Alyaksandr Milinkevich are satisfied with their roles of advisors for Europe. They say proudly that they are preparing a new "road map" for offices of European politicians, forgetting that the previous one -- 12 proposals of the European Union, hadn't been fulfilled.

European players, who forgot about their 12 conditions, too, expect just one rather abstract thing from Lukashenka. "One of the new elements of the EU's resolution on Belarus is connected ... with the hope that the adopted Law on Media will be softened within 6 months," Polish MEP Janusz Onyszkiewicz told in an interview to Radio Svaboda.

"Softening of the new law on media" - what a "severe" and "concrete" requirement for the Belarusian dictatorship for the nearest 6 months!..

In this situation, leaders of the "For Freedom" movement and opposition parties are trying to persuade pragmatic and cynic Europeans to let them be at least consultants during negotiations between the EU and Lukashenka. But agreeing to a role of the "weak opposition" in someone else's game, lost an opportunity of breaking up the electoral farce and demonstrating their power, they can hardly count their plaintive requests to be heard.

This estimation may seem rather harsh, but only a realistic view of the current situation will help us to overcome the crisis.

Source: Commentary of the Charter'97 press-center, 24 October 2008

"I was the first to talk with him when my husband died back in 1989. I came to him to ask that he hold a service for my husband, and he immediately asked, 'Will you have vodka there? If you will, I won't do anything! It's a sin to drink at a funeral!' Back then, it was customary for us to have no less vodka for a funeral than we would for a wedding -- 50 or 60 bottles. But what can you do? The new priest made a request, so I promised that there wouldn't be any vodka."

According to local custom, three toasts must be made to the peace of the immortal soul. But mourners never stopped there and often woke up the next day with an aching head or under the neighbor's fence. No one in the village would have found it strange if someone had drank so much they fell into the snow and froze to death, or got run over by a car.

At first, the 440 inhabitants of Mosar considered Bulka an eccentric.



Bulka's church and its well-tended grounds have become something of a tourist attraction. The church contains what may be the world's first antialcohol museum.

Once, Bulka was invited to a neighboring village to hold a funeral service. The relatives of the deceased had promised Bulka there'd be no alcohol at the funeral, but in the house he saw both wine and vodka. He knelt down and said: "I won't read a prayer over the deceased when you lie and drink! For your sin, I'll take penance onto myself. I will walk home and pray for you the whole way!"

Bulka stepped out of the house into the winter cold and started walking the 10 kilometers home, leaning heavily on his cane.

Realizing that something improper was taking place, the villagers ran after him, begging him to return. They knew it wasn't proper to bid farewell to the dead without a prayer. But Bulka wouldn't forgive them, even when they poured all of the vodka onto the ground.

"Ask another priest," he told them. "I do not believe you anymore!"

He walked alone through the dark forest, refusing a ride home.

I ask for only one thing: May the Lord show me how to turn mortal life into a blooming garden of paradise!

One of Bulka's most memorable confrontations was with Mikhal, a shepherd from Mosar. Mikhal was well respected,

a veteran of World War II, and an incorrigible atheist who wasn't frightened by the divine punishment he incurred with every glass of vodka.

Villagers remember how the debates between the two men would go on for hours, ending with varied results. It could be that Bulka would return to the church in anger and take his heart medicine, recalling Mikhal's words: "You won't change anything! We used to drink vodka and will continue drinking!" Or the evening could end with Mikhal crying guilty drunken tears in the priest's home, hearing how a soul returning to God first of all deserves forgiveness.

'Violating Our Personal Rights'

Bulka has proposed that vodka be outlawed from the shops in Mosar. Not everyone appreciates this initiative to establish the village as an alcohol-free zone.

"For a long time now, Bulka has been violating our personal rights," says Ivan Zabela, a retired dentist. "Can you imagine, he even managed to close down the club in our village. He complained before the village council that youngsters almost never visit the club's library, but instead regularly go to the disco, where they're allowed to drink. I agree -- fighting alcoholism is a worthwhile cause. But every person must have the right to choose. Go to the library, or not. Drink vodka, or not."

"He forces people to share his views," continues Zabela. "He's no democrat, since he can't forgive a person for his failings. And he's certainly no politician!"

"Others swear by Bulka's positive influence."

"I suffered so with my husband and had no idea what to do. Every evening he would return home three sheets to the wind," says local resident Alla Starychonak, a dairy worker. "When he returns drunk, he starts to yell at me and at the kids. The next morning, he would ask me to forgive him and would make promises to stop drinking. Once, I was so fed up, I finally said, 'Don't make promises to me! Instead, swear to God that you'll kick drinking!'"

Starychonak says the couple went to St. Hanna's, and that Bulka placed his hand on her husband's head and "muttered something" to him. "After that," she says, "my husband really did stop drinking ... He said he would keep his promise and visited Father Juozas every Sunday. What they spoke about during those visits, I have no idea. But it's been about two years since I've seen my husband drunk."

"Maybe I really am too demanding of people, but I don't follow this path for the sake of awards or recognition," Bulka says.

Mosar resident Edvard Shyjonak says his wife threw him out of their house because of his excessive drinking, an event which he says led to some serious soul-searching.

"I was never a sincere believer," Shyjonak says, "but I heard about [Bulka] and decided to have a talk with him. I would never have thought that support from the outside could have such an effect. We talked not only about the dangers of alcohol but about life -- its flowers, my future plans. Gradually -- not immediately -- my craving for alcohol abated and disappeared. Thank God, it's 11 years and seven months now that I've been sober."

Many similar stories were recounted at St. Hanna's during the foundation laying for the church's Alley of

Sobriety, another of the priest's ideas. "When a person needs moral support in fighting alcoholism," Bulka explained, "then he may plant a tree here, so that it grows and strengthens as strengthens the will of a man ready to fight against his addiction."

Belarusian Versailles

The village of Mosar has become something of a tourist attraction, thanks to Bulka, who's now 83. Some even call it the "Belarusian Versailles."

The renovated church is an architectural monument to classicism, its graves adorned with artistic sculptures, and nearby sits a large park with artificial ponds, ornamented bridges and countless flowers growing along the paths.

Visitors drink the curative spring water, smile at the inhabitants of the ostrich enclosure, and admire the first monument in Belarus to Pope John Paul II -- built at the initiative of Bulka, who once had an audience with the pontiff. To be honest, everything in Mosar is the result of Bulka's initiative, and he spends every day caring for his holdings -- tidying around the church or watering the plants.

No Comfort In The Bottle

Every weekend, Bulka greets dozens of tour buses, whose passengers are accustomed to completely different sights in their Belarusian villages -- abandoned farm buildings, heaps of compost, and bumpy roads with everlasting puddles and dirty ducks bathing in them.

According to local residents, Mosar looked no better 18 years ago when Bulka first arrived. Horses grazed under the walls of the church. The church was surrounded by a swamp through which women dressed up for Mass had to trudge in their best shoes. The first thing Bulka did after coming here was to build a proper road to the church. He planted juniper and blue pines along the road.

That is the road the villagers use even now. Few of them know, however, that Bulka paved it with his own money. For that, he sold the apartment he inherited from his mother in Vilnius, where he had no intention to return.

Today, Bulka receives donations for the realization of his artistic ideas from those caught up by both his vision and his industriousness -- rich art patrons, national organizations, and common people.

Bulka sometimes gets the local drunks to work in the church's park. He hires them through the district cultural department as janitors and general purpose workers. Under his guidance, fans of the drink trim trees, plant flowers, and mow grass. And no one, as long as he works for Bulka, takes even a sip of vodka.

"A man capable of recognizing true beauty and ready to involve himself in creative work," Bulka says, "will never look for comfort in the bottle."

Translated into English by Ihar Maksymiuk.

Source: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, October 03, 2008

ECONOMY

Belarus Seeks Credit From IMF

MINSK (Reuters) - Belarus has requested credit from the International Monetary Fund to uphold stability and economic growth rates amid global crises, the central bank said on October 22.

News reports said a loan of \$2 billion was being sought.

The central bank confirmed the request a day after Russia's finance minister said Moscow would issue a \$2 billion loan to Belarus while resuming negotiations on a proposed common currency between the two ex-Soviet neighbors.

"We confirm that we have approached the International Monetary Fund to provide credit to support financial stability, create a cushion of security, and maintain growth rates in the economy," central bank spokesman Mikhail Zhuravovich said. "The amount of the credit depends on the IMF," he told Reuters.

The bank's chief spokesman, Anatoly Drozdov, described the request as a "precautionary measure." "As the economies of our neighbors and trading partners are affected by the crisis to some extent, we are taking precautions to ensure their problems don't become ours," Drozdov said.

"Belarus has not suffered directly from the crisis," he added.

The IMF extended credits of \$270 million to Belarus in the 1990s, but halted lending when the government failed to implement the fund's recommendations on reforms.

Belarus' economy is still largely state-controlled and plans for selective privatization have made little progress.

The government raised its inflation forecast for this year to 14 percent after Russia hiked gas prices, but growth rates remain high with a 2008 target of 8.5-9.5 percent.

Dmitry Gourov, an analyst with UniCredit Bank in Vienna, said the request was logical to cover all short-term government and corporate debt, which amounts to about 60 percent of total debt of \$14 billion.

Minsk suspended its privatization program a week ago, saying there was little point selling state assets at discount prices. It has been unable to issue a debut Eurobond this year as planned.

"They are trying to prepare themselves for the worst case scenario. If they were to cover all this short-term debt on the government and corporate sides, they would need additional reserves," Gourov said. "Everyone is still predicting robust growth for next year, only a slight mark-down from this year."

Foreign reserves fell in September to \$4.9 billion, covering about 40 percent of external debt, from \$5.6 billion.

Russian Finance Ministry Alexei Kudrin on October 21 said the decision to grant the \$2 billion loan was made last week -- with half to be issued this year and the other half next year. The terms of the loan were still under discussion.

Source: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, October 22, 2008

Issue of Imports Will be Dealt with During the Financial Crisis

The worldwide financial crisis caused the Belarusian government to pay closer attention to imports. It initiated a new crusade against them.

Ministry of Trade prepared the list of imported goods, disappearing of which "will not influence greatly country's consumer market", according to the officials

The list includes over 30 items of both food and non-food merchandise.. It concerns import of beer, non-alcoholic beverages, chocolate, cheeses, ice-cream, bread and other food items, while TV sets, bicycles, furniture and other non-food products are also listed. The Ministry of Trade has decided to reduce the volume of import of aforementioned goods by half by the November-December 2008. Moreover, if a company imports or stores the goods included in the list in rented facilities, contracts with this company shall be terminated since it imports "groundless" goods. Furthermore, in case of goods in the "black" list, it was suggested to introduce instalment payments during 180 days, which makes the delivery of goods unattractive for foreign companies.

One of the Belarusian importers commented the situation: "Foreign producers would not go for it. It is highly unlikely that somebody agrees to wait half a year while the Belarusian importer pays for delivered goods. Even in better times such instalments were never offered to us".

One of the solutions seems to be intermediate trade when a dealer buys goods shipped into the country and resells it to the importer for a higher price. Local authorities are ordered to impose additional measures on limitation of services and goods imports. For instance, authorities in Viciebsk have informed about their decision in their letter "On measures on minimization of the negative impact of world's financial crisis on socio-economic development of the Viciebsk region" and on the necessity to comply with city's forecasting indicators. In some regions the importers are administratively obliged to export goods in the amount of at least 25 per cent of their import turnover.

Authorities try to link the financial crisis with their attempts to preserve foreign currency in the country as well as to sell the contents of Belarusian enterprises' storehouses. It concerns mostly bicycles, soap, TV sets, and watches which have been selling poorly both in Belarusian and foreign markets. However, during the present crisis foreign markets could hardly increase their capacities for Belarusian products.

On November, 25 2008 Alaksandar Łukašenka ordered to save country's currency reserves and to produce all goods which could be manufactured locally in Belarus.

The Ministry of Trade assures that imports that are not produced in Belarus (seafood, coffee, tea) will be fully credited. Authorities intend to enforce control at the consumer market in order to preserve a fail-safe system of supplying products. On the other hand, Belarusian manufacturers and local trade offices are obliged to supply stores and warehouses with the full variety of goods produced in Belarus. Belarusian banks are asked to credit these procurement activities in 2009. So, slogan "Buy Belarusian!" is now being imposed by country's authorities in full swing.

Source: Web site NAVINY, tut.by.

A Complete Failure to Attract Foreign Investments

Prime Minister Siarhiej Sidorski scolded his cabinet on November, 28 2008 — for the third time in the last six months.

"We do not need statistical reports but concrete actions in this direction. We cannot survive without new investment programs, yet our bureaucrats do nothing while enjoying their stable salaries," the Prime Minister sounded like a liberal economist. "We should not have to wait, but to make the first step towards potential investors."

Sidorski described the situation on investments in Belarus as "shameful". In fact, most investors spend several months trying to reach responsible officials in Belarusian ministries or executive committees in order to present their business projects — often without success. During the investment forum in London the Belarusian PM heard from the world's leading companies interested in the Belarusian market more than 30 negative opinions critical of the working style of Belarusian bureaucracy.

Thus, a major American company "Caterpillar," manufacturing heavy construction machinery, has been for eight months tiptoeing next to the industry minister, proposing joint projects with the Belarusian BelAZ. Eventually the minister declared that he does not need them. Even though the investor was ready to cooperate in developing a joint marketing strategy.

Belarusian officials in the ministries do not want to assume personal responsibility on any project. Thus, they prefer to complicate the situation for an investor so that they may later refer to an unsuccessful business project in their annual reports.

Belarusian officials have recently reported a growing rate of investments in the Belarusian economy. However, the specific weight of foreign investments in Belarusian economy is currently estimated as only 3.5 per cent. Its share is to increase to 5 per cent by the end of 2009. In PM's view both branch ministries and local authorities sabotage government decisions on foreign investments.

This bureaucratic attitude of being very careful is caused by none other than President Łukashenka himself, who exhorted the officials "to be alert and selective" in choosing an investor. Moreover, it is the President who approves all major investment projects.

Jarasłaŭ Ramančuk, an economic expert, believes that Belarusian authorities' greatest problem is their lack of clear vision of country's development strategy. Belarusian authorities create favorable conditions not for all economic entities, but only for those selected. Furthermore, the Belarusian government has in reality become nothing more but a secretariat of President's Administration. Various branch ministries compete with each other for more favorable conditions for their activities instead of working out a clear strategy for the national economy. All these factors lead to a growing level of bureaucracy and corruption in Belarus' government institutions, while many officials develop an immunity to any rebukes.

Source: Web site NAVINY.tut.by, November 26, 2008



Syarhei Sidorski

Belarus to Adopt New Economy Liberalization Documents By End of 2008

By the end of the year Belarus is expected to adopt new enactments simplifying administrative procedures and liberalizing economy, Prime Minister Syarhei Sidorski said at the ceremony of presenting governmental awards for quality achievements in 2008, reports BelTA.

According to the Belarusian Premier, today it is necessary to use all levers to sell products and avoid excessive warehousing given the downturn in the world demand. Hence, close attention will be turned to the activity of Belarusian companies, production and sales. "Our companies need to produce high-quality, science-intensive products," said Syarhei Sidorski. Several steps to support the exporters will be undertaken in order to minimize the effect of the global financial crisis.

Earlier Mr Sidorski met with Fishman Group representative Eliezer Fishman to discuss opportunities for implementation of investment projects in Minsk.

The current visit of Israeli businessmen is set to settle all the issues related to the implementation of joint investment projects.

The Fishman Group is one of Israel's largest and most renowned private investment companies. It primarily invests in trade, media and communications. Jointly with its subsidiaries, the company controls more than five millions square meters of commercial industrial and dwelling estate in Israel. In recent years the company has made great strides in the international market, particularly in real estate and trade. In 2002, the Group initiated strategic projects in Russia, Ukraine and India.

In early 2008, the company signed a partner agreement with the Lyons Company (South Africa) that envisages co-investing in the High-Tech Park in Minsk.

Source: BelTA, December 18, 2008

Quotes of Quarter

"If anyone thinks that I have taken the bait and will jump like a bunny, he is mistaken, we will stand on dignity,"

President **LUKASHENKA** stated on December 16 regarding the dialogue with the European Union.

Culture & Society

Belarus' Creative Opposition

By Iryna Vidanova

Belarus is often called "Europe's black hole" and is best known for its dictator Alexander Lukashenka and the 1986 Chernobyl Disaster. Indeed, with its statues of Lenin, KGB, socialist realist buildings and collective farms, time seems to have stopped in Belarus, where the Soviet Union still lives. But behind the country's closed borders, an exciting and vibrant youth scene is alive and well, producing alternative culture underground in dorms, music clubs, informal groups, artistic communities and cyberspace.

Most experts on Belarus write about the country's political or civic opposition. Only few articles have appeared on the cultural opposition. This is unfortunate, given the key role played by the creative opposition in many authoritarian countries. It is impossible, for example, to understand the revolutions of 1989 without studying the impact of independent elite culture, including Vaclav Havel's plays, Adam Michnik's essays, or Gaspar Miklos Tamas' philosophical tracts, or alternative popular culture, like the psychedelic rock of the Plastic People of the Universe in Czechoslovakia and the anarchist "happenings" of the Orange Alternative in Poland. The Soviet bloc was full of underground rockers, writers, artists, poets, religious believers, film-makers, environmentalists, hippies and punks. They were important because, in the 1980s, many Central Europeans were inspired by alternative culture to take up alternative politics, paving the way for political change.

The same thing is happening today in Belarus. One interesting difference is that the creative opposition in Belarus is largely made up of and driven by young people. This article is about a few young movers and shakers from the country's cultural scene. Each is a dynamic, unique individual who is not afraid to be different. Together they represent thousands of active and creative young Belarusians who, unlike the government, love their country and its unique culture.

Like kids everywhere else, young Belarusians are crazy about the Internet, fashion, music and popular culture. But unlike in the West, where all of this is readily available, in Belarus access to anything independent is controlled by the authorities. Here, in the middle of Europe, youth activists are arrested, imprisoned, expelled from universities and fired from jobs. Independent schools have been closed down, youth NGOs dissolved, youth publications seized and alternative bands banned. The Lukashenka regime tries to control practically every aspect of youth life, because it fears any free ideas, whether home-grown or from the West. A "state ideology" course is taught during early school years and is required for all college freshmen. All state employees must take a special ideology exam as a part of hiring procedures. A new regulation requires that all college applicants wanting to study journalism,

international relations and law, must obtain letters of recommendations from their local authorities. The Ministry of Culture decides what kind of music private FM radio stations should play and the Ministry of Education sets the official guidelines for youth fashion. But, of course, the main decisions are made by the President, who a couple of years ago ordered that only Belarusian models should appear on advertising billboards.

The authorities can try to restrict, impose, threaten and repress, but they really can't determine what young people wear, listen to, read or watch. As was the case with jazz in the 1950s and jeans in the 1960s Soviet bloc, what is forbidden today in Belarus becomes even more fashionable and desirable. Young Belarusians are no different than other youth who respond to restrictions and regulations with creative forms of dissent. Thanks to the regime, the youth counterculture is alive and well in Belarus. When peaceful meetings are broken up, young activists stage flash mobs and street performances that ridicule the absurdities of the government. When concerts are banned, youngsters go to underground night clubs, across borders and to outdoor festivals to listen to their black-listed bands. When there is no officially approved venue for their works, young artists, photographers and designers show in alternative art galleries and post their works online. Independent writers and journalists publish samizdat (underground) newspapers and magazines, create online communities, and spread information through blogs and home-made documentary films and videos. "New media" and street art are becoming more and more popular in a country that finds itself near the bottom of every ranking of freedom of expression.

Here are some sketches of a few of the most creative young people in Belarus. What is unique about them is how they are using culture to promote activism among Belarus' youth, who are generally apathetic about politics. Someday, they will be the leaders of a free and democratic Belarus in Europe. But today, they are making "Europe's last dictatorship" a much more colorful and interesting place.

Rockin' in the Free World

Vital Supranovich is a 28 year-old producer of Belarusian music. He has helped dozens of bands make it to the main stage, but prefers to remain backstage himself. As a teenager, he co-founded the Belarusian Music Alternative Group (BMA Group) in 1996 because he wanted to promote the Belarusian rock that he loved. Since then, BMA has released almost a hundred albums and organized hundreds of concerts.

Independent music in Belarusian is a key political statement in this authoritarian and russified country. Over the last decade, musicians and fans have come and gone, but Vital says that a core group of independent rockers has remained. More importantly, crowds are still screaming "Long Live Belarus" at concerts, even though people can

be arrested for openly displaying their desire to see a free and independent Belarus. Organizing a concert in Belarus is difficult, expensive and risky. A dozen special permits must be obtained from various state agencies and even if the papers are in order, the authorities still can shut down a concert at the last moment without any explanation, apology or compensation for expenses. According to Vital, this is one of the main reasons why there are only a few producers working with independent musicians. He explains his own successful career by making it clear that his job is his passion, and that for him, Belarusian music is not just a business, but a way of life.

"It's very hard to make long-term plans in our country, where the rules of the game are always changing. I just try to do my best in any given situation," – Vital says. Before a number of leading rock bands were banned from performing in Belarus by the authorities, BMA mostly released the albums and organized the concerts of these bands. After the ban was imposed three years ago, Vital had to start from scratch in finding and promoting new names, as well as coming up with new forms of activities for those on the black list. In 2006, BMA put together and released "Songs of Freedom" a compact disc of protest songs produced in cooperation with the "For Freedom" civic campaign, which became the best selling album of the year; it was followed by two more successful editions. In September 2007, together with the student initiative "StudFarmat," Vital organized a Belarusian rock festival, "The Right to Be Free" in Lutsk, Ukraine. A concert which Vital put together in December to celebrate the 10th anniversary of one the most famous Belarusian records ever – "Narodny Albom" (The People's Album) – sold out and became the cultural event of 2007 (<http://www.democraticbelarus.eu/node/3149>).

Vital believes that neither ordinary citizens nor musicians can remain apart from the country's political issues. He works closely with a number of democratic initiatives and promotes civic activism through music. He is now trying to organize a "Songs of Freedom" fan club to unite and encourage the activism of the thousands of owners of these albums. Along with commercial rock concerts, he organizes folk music events, which are rarely profitable, because it is important for him to promote Belarusian culture in all its forms. As an expert on music, Vital thinks that some of the up and coming bands, especially those playing heavy metal and hard rock, such as "Tovarisch Mauser," "B:N:" or "Indiga," also have a real chance to become popular in the West, if they can somehow reach foreign publics. "It's crucial for musicians to feel that their music is wanted, but it's not always easy in Belarus," – Vital says. This is why he dreams that one day he will launch his own FM radio station, which will play Belarusian-language alternative music, the kind of music he likes best.

Green Gloves vs. Red Tape

Jenia is a 23 year-old private entrepreneur, the owner of a youth fashion boutique in Babrujsk, a city of 220,000 in eastern Belarus. Jenia says she has always been an active student, but not politically active. Yet during her last year, she was expelled from the State Economic University for

Thanks to the regime, the youth counterculture is alive and well in Belarus.

through distance learning, but instead of looking for a job in the state sector, she decided to start her own business.

Always fashionable with a unique sense of style—she was wearing fancy green gloves with plastic cuffs when I interviewed her—it wasn't hard for Jenia to figure out in which field she'd like to apply her entrepreneurial ambitions. "It's very hard to find stylish and affordable clothes in Belarus, almost impossible," – she says. "I really love second-hand stores. Finding something nice is like searching for treasure." Like most young people who want to be mod, Jenia prefers to buy her clothes abroad and makes frequent shopping trips to Lithuania and Poland. She gets ideas for her own clothes from magazines, movies and designers' websites. So it was natural that she decided to open a boutique for young people. And since she carried back the first batch of clothes from Lithuania in a big bag, Jenia called her store "The Suitcase."

Opened three months ago, "The Suitcase" is already a popular destination in Babrujsk, and not just for youth. The female-owned store is the exception in a country where business is dominated by males, and its bright and daring foreign fashions stand out. But Jenia is not sure how long it will survive. At the beginning of December, her cozy boutique was almost closed down by local authorities, because she was a day late in putting Christmas decorations in store windows, as required by municipal regulations. "The legislation and attitude concerning small business is horrible. State officials treat us like we are second class citizens." Commenting on a new restrictive law against small business, which sparked a nationwide strike paralyzing 80 percent of the open-air markets and malls last week, Jenia believes that "the choice the authorities offer to small entrepreneurs is a quick death by guillotine or a slow death by hanging." She doesn't think that regime can force people to buy Belarusian products by stopping private entrepreneurs from importing foreign goods. "People will always find a way to buy what they like. You can't create a ghetto in the middle of Europe nowadays."

Despite all the problems, Jenia is sure that the experience she gained was useful and will help her with future projects. "Just making money is not so inspiring and interesting. I want to use my communications skills and knowledge to make the world a better place." She plans to help some promising Belarusian bands and artists – her friends – in taking part in international festivals. "There are so many talented young people around, with great ideas and projects, but, unfortunately, most of them don't speak English and can't network on their own. But they are very entrepreneurial, have a European outlook and challenge our grey reality with their creativity and positive action."

They might not be ready for open political protest, but they want to change the situation in the country. They, too, need attention and some help."

Making a Point

Andrei, who is 21 years old, belongs to a new wave of activists who joined the democratic movement in March 2006. He was expelled from Belarusian State University for participating in the peaceful spring protests, but chose to stay in Belarus and start his own organization, known today "Initiative" (<http://www.iniciative.org/>). Its activists were first united by a passion for flash mobs organized through the LiveJournal online community. In mid 2006, their flash mobs were a sensation in the democratic movement, mobilizing hundreds of youngsters to protest the regime's falsification of the election results and post-election repression. It took several months before the secret services were able to track down the organizers and start arresting those planning or participating in the actions, causing a crisis in the flash mob movement and forcing its leaders to come up with new tactics and forms for the happenings. But the flash mobbers were able to redefine their goals, rework their strategy, and find their niche in Belarus' democratic movement.

Last year, *Initiative* organized more than 50 (flashmob) happenings

I talked to Andrei while we were marching down a Minsk street under a giant Initiative flag during the Dziady (Forefather's Eve) annual demonstration on October 28. The group's unusual logo (a red-white-red exclamation

point on a black background) on a huge flag (three meters tall) attracted a lot of attention and even caused some misunderstanding among older marchers, due to its radical appearance. Andrei explained that Initiative is a Minsk-based group, open to anyone who wants to join, which unites males and females, mainly young professionals and students, aged 18-30. It carries out well-planned, carefully prepared, frequent peaceful street actions designed to overcome apathy and fear among young people.

Last year, Initiative organized more than 50 happenings, and only once did the police manage to detain some participants. Paradoxically, this happened during an unplanned event when Initiative members, like many other youngsters around the world, showed up in Minsk's downtown wearing crazy costumes to celebrate Halloween. The group regularly manages to place the banned white-red-white historical flag on the tallest buildings around the city to protest the anti-Belarusian policy of the authorities. It took police more than four hours to tear down a flag put up on a downtown apartment building on May 15, the anniversary of the phony 1995 referendum which returned old Soviet state symbols to Belarus. Last May, Initiative organized "Cheer Up with Flowers Day" and handed out 2,000 tulips to people on the streets, including police and soldiers. A month later, about 30 activists wearing tee shirts declaring "Protect Old Grodno" handed out more than 5,000 leaflets with information on how the authorities were destroying historical buildings in one of Belarus' oldest cities.

"The most rewarding part is to see people's reaction when we talk to them on the streets," - Andrei said. "I was shocked to find out that most of them didn't know that we

have political prisoners in our country," – he continued, referring to the organization's best known action, in which Initiative activists ask people on the streets to sign postcards that are then sent as a sign of solidarity to political prisoners. The group's strategy of creativity, courage and activism seems to be a success. It was able to collect and mail more than 1,500 postcards to political prisoners for Christmas Eve. These energetic guys are definitely winning over people and gaining public attention. As I was interviewing Andrei, the flag his group was carrying broke. A bunch of old ladies, who at first were suspicious of the young radicals with the big black flag, ended up cheering them on as they tried to catch up with the marchers after fixing the staff. Like their flag, the group is making its point.

CONTINUED in the Spring 2009 issue of BELARUSIAN REVIEW.

Only 30 herself, Iryna Vidanova is Belarusian activist who has been working with independent youth groups and publications for more than a decade.

Source: Transitions Online, April 28, 2008

NGOs Face Drastic Rise in Rents

A new administrative decree for non-government institutions and organizations in Belarus' has been signed by the head of state Aliaksandr Lukashenka on April 24th, 2008

Belarusian Review has asked the chairman of the Belarusian Language Society, Dr. Aleh Trusau, former deputy of the Belarusian Parliament, to comment on the situation his public organization faces after the new decree on NGOs came into force. The Belarusian Language Society, is of crucial importance for the Belarusian society, defending its cultural heritage and national identity.

BR: What consequences are you facing after the new administrative decree on NGOs was signed by A. Lukashenka and came into force in Belarus'?

Trusau: Rental rates for the office of the Belarusian Language Society will increase at least ten times since April 24th, 2008 according to the new decree. As a result we are supposed to abandon our office in Salihorsk and to collect donations to save our headquarters in Minsk.

BR: What steps will be undertaken to persuade government officials to preserve previous existence conditions for the Belarusian Language Society?

Trusau: We have addressed requests to the Presidential Administration and are now collecting signatures of Belarusian citizens demanding the preservation of today's rental rates. Ambassadors of many countries were also informed about this situation and we are conducting an effective media campaign.

BR: What are the aims of co-sponsors of the new legislation "On the regulation of Belarusian orthography and punctuation" proposed by committees on education, culture, science, science and technology progress in the Parliament?

Trusau: They are designed to impede wider use of the Belarusian language in our society, particularly amongst young people.

BR Correspondent: How will the Belarusian Language Society react in the near future to defend the present status

Trusau: We will act in accordance with the Strategy of Belarusian Language Development (see http://tbn.org.by/tbn_old/bel/strategy.html). We will create new instruments to promote Belarusian in today's Belarus' and abroad. For example, the world's first satellite TV channel BELSAT in Belarusian came into being due to the initiative of the Belarusian Language Society. Recently our organization organized and held (on initiative of the Society's member U. Padhol) a nation-wide dictation dedicated to the 90th Anniversary of proclamation of the Belarusian Democratic Republic.

The interview was conducted by the correspondent of *Belarusian Review*, Raman Kavalchuk

HISTORICAL DATES

November 2 - Remembrance Day (Dziady)

The day for commemorating ancestors with a special family meal, dating from pre-Christian times and later associated with Christianity's All Souls' Day. .

Since the Belarusian Declaration of Sovereignty in July, 1990, **Dziady** became an occasion for patriotic demonstrations emphasizing the victims and heroes of the historical past. Such observances were led by the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) and other groups and included marches to **Kurapaty**, a site near Minsk where mass executions took place during the Stalinist era.

November 1st through December 31, 1920

The Anti-Bolshevik Slucak Uprising

Anti-Bolshevik military action in the region of Slucak, organized by representatives of the Belarusian Democratic [National] Republic.

November 3, 1882

The birthdate of **Jakub Kolas** - an outstanding Belarusian poet of the national renaissance era.

November 26, 1930

The birthdate of **Uladzimier Karatkievic** - a noted Belarusian writer of the Soviet era. Most of his works dealt with Belarus' history. Deceased in 1984

December 15, 1850

The birthdate of **Mikalaj Sudzilouski-Russell**, known as an activist in 19th century liberation movements, a scientist and doctor of medicine. He helped to organize Bulgarians' 1876 uprising against the Turkish rule. Lived and worked in Western Europe, USA, Hawaii. In 1900 he was elected the president of the Hawaiian Senate.

January 28, 1588

Third and final edition of the **Statute** (Collection of Laws) of the Grand Duchy of Litva was published and ratified. The Statute is a unique monument of the medieval Belarusian judicial thinking and literature.

January 30, 1667

Truce of Andrusava concluded between Grand Duchy of Litva and Duchy of Moscow, terminating the bloodiest war in Belarus' history (1654-1667)

NEWS BRIEFS

September 22, 2008.

Artur Finkevich survived crash miraculously

One of the leaders of the Young Front Artur Finkevich has just escaped a death in a car crash. A wheel of Opel Omega where the young politician was driving came off at the speed of 100 km/h. The car left the road and overturned several times. There were two more Young Front members in the car.

The incident took place on Saturday when Artur was on his way back from Hrodna after a meeting with local activists. The plan of the oppositional protest rally on September 28 was discussed there.



"I want to say from the start, that the car was technically sound. The five bolts that hold the wheel could not get loose at once themselves. That is I do not exclude that this incident had a political underpinning. I called upon young people of Hrodna to come to Minsk on September 28 to take part in the rally against rigged election results. This mobilization job could be very disturbing for somebody," Finkevich concluded.

As the eyewitnesses say, Young Front members were very lucky that after such an accident nobody was seriously hurt. But the car is beyond repair. And the unfortunate wheel was found in 50 meters from the road.

Source: Charter 97 Press Center

September 29, 2008

OSCE observers didn't recognize "elections" in Belarus

Despite some minor improvements, the 28 September parliamentary elections in Belarus ultimately fell short of OSCE commitments for democratic elections, international observers from the OSCE concluded in a preliminary statement issued today.

The election took place in a strictly controlled environment with a barely visible campaign, said the observers from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA).

Voting was generally well conducted, but the process deteriorated considerably during the vote count. Promises to ensure transparency of the vote count were not implemented. The count was assessed as bad or very bad in 48 per cent of polling stations visited. Where access was possible, several cases of deliberate falsification of results were observed.

OSCE monitors were prevented or hindered from observing the vote count in 35 per cent of cases. This compromised the transparency of this fundamental element of the election process.

"The clear signals to improve the election process were not

implemented and substantial improvements are required if Belarus is to conduct genuinely democratic elections in line with our common OSCE commitments. Unfortunately the repeated signals of good will did not seem to have been correctly given or received. Consequently the significant progress we hoped for in the democratic development of Belarus did not materialize," said Anne-Marie Lizin, Vice President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and Special Co-ordinator of the OSCE short-term observers.

"I'm hopeful and disappointed at the same time. Hopeful because when we came here it seemed that there was some wind of change in the election environment; disappointed because we were unable to see a problem solved that has been with election observation in this country for a long time, and that is the non-transparency of the vote count. But we hope that the improved co-operation we have experienced during this election can be the basis for a genuine dialogue on implementing our recommendations", said Ambassador Geert Ahrens, Head of the OSCE/ODIHR election observation mission.

The OSCE deployed some 450 international observers from 43 countries, including more than 320 short-term observers and 58 experts and long-term observers fielded by ODIHR, as well as 66 parliamentarians and staff from the OSCE PA.

Source: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty

October 3, 2008

Belarus Accepts EU Invite To October Talks

BRUSSELS (Reuters) -- The European Union has invited Belarusian Foreign Minister Syarhey Martynau to rare talks with EU counterparts this month, an EU spokeswoman has said.

"[EU foreign-policy chief] Javier Solana invited him to come in a phone conversation they had this morning," Solana's spokeswoman Cristina Gallach said, adding that the minister had accepted.

The EU has been seeking to encourage democratic reform in Belarus, where the opposition was routed in an election this month.

Western monitors noted minor improvements over the staging of previous polls but said they still fell short of accepted standards.

Source: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty

October. 8, 2008

Stubb was surprised to hear that repressions against opposition take place

The OSCE Chairman-in-Office and Finnish Foreign Minister Alexander Stubb who was in Minsk on a visit, met representatives of the Belarusian opposition after meetings with officials.

Alexander Stubb stated that the aim of his visit was preparation for a report to ministers of the EU countries who will meet on October 13 in Luxemburg. Belarusian Foreign Minister Syarhei Martynau is invited to it as well, Radio Svaboda informs.

After meetings with officials Mr Stubb noted that the time had come to define the new role of Belarus in the international community. He noted that "he never believed in isolation, he always believed in cooperation". Besides, Mr Stubb noted that it is important for him to learn about the position of the democratic forces in Belarus as well.

Yesterday about 10 representatives of the democratic forces

met with him. Among them were the chairman of the United Democratic Party Anatol Lyabedzka, the first deputy chairman of the Belarusian Popular Front party Vintsuk Vyachorka, the chairman of the Belarusian Social Democratic party (Hramada) Anatol Lyaukovich, of the Belarusian Social Democratic party (Narodnaya Hramada) Mikola Statkevich, the leader of the "Young Front" Zmitser Dashkevich.

Vintsuk Vyachorka told that the major part of the meeting Mr Stubb was listening to representatives of the Belarusian opposition, and in the end he summed up:

"I think that it was a surprise for him that there were repressions against democratic candidates in different forms during the campaign. It was a certain novelty for him that in reality we as participants of this campaign hadn't noticed any considerable and even little changes as compared with the previous campaigns.

I told Mr Stubb that in reality Lukashenka has a very wide field for proving good will for the country's democratization," said Vintsuk Vyachorka.

Source: Charter 97 Press Center

October 8, 2008

Vice chairman of Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly wasn't allowed to visit Belarus

Kristiina Ojula, vice speaker of the Estonian Parliament, vice chairperson of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly (PACE), who planned to visit Belarus on October 9–10, was denied a visa.

The Belarusian regime showed again that a desire to improve relations with the Western countries were just words that shouldn't be taken seriously, Kristiina Ojula said.

Ms Ojula planned to meet with representatives of some opposition movements during her visit. In her view, she was denied visa due to this reason, novosti.err.ee reports.

Kristiina Ojula has been in politics for 16 years. She has never been denied visas until this time.

It is remarkable that OSCE Chairman-in-Office, Foreign Minister of Finland Alexander Stubb, saw some "positive changes" in Belarus, in spite of the rigged "parliamentary elections", but PACE vice chairperson wasn't allowed in the country.

Source: Charter 97 Press Center

October 17, 2008

Lukashenka doesn't allow European parliament deputies enter Belarus

On October 16 the chairman of the European parliament and factions leaders called upon the Belarusian regime to lift ban for entering Belarus against EU countries' politicians.

As the BelaPAN informs with the reference to the press-service of the European Parliament, deputies have called upon the official Minsk to make such a move in response to the decision of the heads of the EU countries' Foreign Ministers about suspension of the entry ban on Belarusian officials.

The president of the European Parliament Hans-Gert Pöttering said that constant refusals of the Belarusian authorities to issue visas to Western politicians causes special dissatisfaction in the light of the recent decision of the Council of the EU ministers.

On October 28 the meeting of the deputies from the delegation of the European parliament on relations with Belarus is to take place in Vilnius, as they have been denied a possibility to visit

the country. In Vilnius they are to meet with former candidates for presidency Alyaksandr Milinkevich and Alyaksandr Kazulin, and students of the European Humanities University.

MEPs who wanted to monitor the elections in Belarus were not granted Belarusian visas either.

On October 9 the European Parliament adopted a resolution on Belarus, urging the EU countries to reconsider sanctions against the official Minsk, and to make the EHU return into Minsk as one of the conditions for normalization of relations.

Source: Charter 97 Press Center

November 18, 2008

Belarus Denies Reported Comments On Russian Missiles

MINSK (Reuters) -- Ex-Soviet Belarus denied on November 17 that it sought to deploy Russian missiles as a measure to counter a proposed U.S. antimissile system in Eastern Europe.

A Foreign Ministry statement said an interview with President Alyaksandr Lukashenka last week in *The Wall Street Journal* had created a "completely incorrect interpretation" of his statements. *The Wall Street Journal* stood by its story.

Lukashenka was quoted by the newspaper as saying that Russia had suggested deploying Iskander missiles in his country and that even if Moscow failed to proceed with the proposal, Belarus would consider buying them for its own use.

The president was quoted as supporting Russia's proposal to deploy the missiles in its Baltic enclave of Kaliningrad.

"Even if Russia does not offer these promised missiles, we will purchase them ourselves," the paper quoted him as saying.

"Right now we do not have the funds, but it is part of our plans -- I am giving away a secret here -- to have such weapons."

Foreign Ministry spokesman Andrei Popov, in a statement on the presidential website, said "distortion" of Lukashenka's comments had led to incorrect assessments of Belarus's policy.

The Wall Street Journal in a statement, said it noted Lukashenka's "support for Russian plans to target any U.S. missile system in Europe with Iskander missiles.

"It further notes that Mr. Lukashenka was considering deploying Iskander missiles. It did not seek to link the two issues in any way."

Belarus gave up its Soviet-era nuclear weapons in the 1990s after the collapse of Soviet rule and has suggested it is prepared to deploy Russian nonnuclear weaponry if the Kremlin requested it. But no mention has been made of Iskander missiles.

Source: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty

November 24, 2008

Belarusian Girl Returns From U.S.

MINSK (Reuters) -- A 17-year-old girl from Belarus, whose longer than expected stay in the United States prompted a diplomatic standoff with Washington, has returned home, officials said.

The Belarusian Foreign Ministry said Tatyana Kozyro, the guest of a family in California, returned on November 23.

"At the request of Tatyana Kozyro's grandmother, the Foreign Ministry took the necessary measures for her return to Belarus," ministry spokeswoman Tatyana Vanshyna said.

Western countries have long accused Belarus of human rights violations, and relations between the two have been strained.

In March, the U.S. ambassador was asked to leave after Minsk

accused Washington of tightening sanctions on oil producer Belneftekhim.

But in August, authorities released several prisoners from jail, prompting relations between the Belarus and the West to improve somewhat.

Kozyro, who lives with her grandmother north of the capital, Minsk, was one of a group of 25 people who had gone to the United States on a "health stay."

Such visits are common in the former Soviet state, where people suffer from the effects of the 1986 Chornobyl nuclear explosion in nearby Ukraine.

In August, after Kozyro failed to return, Belarus exchanged diplomatic notes with the United States.

Authorities in Minsk accused the host family of keeping the girl in the United States and said they would stop sending children there.

In 2006, an Italian family concealed for three weeks a 10-year-old girl they hosted for the summer, saying she had been mistreated at her orphanage.

Source: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty

November 29, 2008

Subscription to *Narodnaya Volya* and *Nasha Niva* possible

On November 26 the independent newspaper "Nasha Niva" has signed an agreement with Belposhta, and now one can subscribe to the newspaper in all post-offices of Belarus. But there can be a delay with *Narodnaya Volya*'s appearance in kiosks (in Minsk in particular).

The post-office subscription code for the *Nasha Niva* is 63125, the press-service of the Belarusian Association of Journalists was told by its editor-in-chief Andrei Skurko.

The editorial office of the *Nasha Niva* hopes that the newspaper which is to be released on December 3-4, will appear in Sayuzdruk kiosks. "Now we are waiting for documents to be signed by all enterprises of Sayuzdruk system, they are all signed by us," A. Skurko said.

"The agreement with Belposhta for distribution of the newspaper through subscription has been signed for half a year. And the agreement with Sayuzdruk is concluded till the end of this year. In 2009 it is to be concluded till the end of this year. In 2009 it is to be signed again," said the editor-in-chief of *Nasha Niva*.

Source: Charter 97 Press Center

December. 2, 2008

That's a nice freedom of speech...

The regime has created very strange conditions for independent newspapers *Nasha Niva* and *Narodnaya Volya* to be returned into the state system of distribution.

The newspapers can be thrown out of the distribution network any moment, and the number of copies in sale can be limited endlessly.

According to *Nasha Niva*, there are three points in the contracts:

1) Contract can be cancelled if distribution would be profitless (can you imagine profits when 55% are charged?), but there are no criteria of profitability offered.

2) Contract can be cancelled if more than 30% of print run would be returned (last year there was a leak of information that

50% of state-run newspapers are returned, however, all of them are still sold in kiosks).

3) If more than 10% of newspapers are returned, "Sayuzdruk" has a right to reduce circulation intended for sale.

Return is a term for calling number of unsold newspapers. There is no way to check reliability of the information about the return of newspaper.

By the way, "Belsayuzdruk" took for sale a limited number of copies, for instance, only 2,500 copies of *Narodnaya Volya* will be sold in Minsk, and 1,400 copies of *Nasha Niva*.

Source: Charter 97 Press Center

December 4, 2008

EU Announces 'Eastern Partnership' With Former Soviet Neighbors

-- In a bid to strengthen ties with its former Soviet neighbors, and possibly replace Russia as the dominant player in the region, the European Union has unveiled an ambitious plan to spend 350 million euros on aid to Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Moldova, and Belarus.

The EU proposal calls for increased cooperation with the Eastern European states in four key areas: democracy and the rule of law, the harmonization of economic systems and rules, energy security, and people-to-people contacts, including visa liberalization.

In a statement, the commission said the EU has "a vital interest in seeing better governance and economic development" in Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Moldova, and Belarus, as well as an interest in reducing Russia's influence over them.

Barroso said commission felt an urgency to act after Russia's aggression toward Georgia, which led to a brief but intense war between the two countries in August.

But he said the proposed partnership is "not about drawing a new division of Europe." Rather, he said, the EU wants to support reforms that the ex-Soviet republics are willing and ready to make.

Under the new program, the 27-member EU will draw up new agreements with the six countries as a reward for making democratic and free market reforms.

The 350 million euros (\$443 million) in new aid will go toward strengthening state institutions, border control, and assistance for small companies. The EU has now pledged 1.5 billion euros in aid to its eastern neighbors by 2020.

External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner said, "the time is ripe to open a new chapter in relations" with the six countries and noted that the new agreement will have a strong multilateral dimension.

"That means platforms where the different countries of this neighborhood partnership can sit together and can learn from each other -- can see what has been the best practice in one country, [and ask] how can we do better?"

Ferrero-Waldner stressed that one of the goals of the new partnership is to create a "free-trade area" among the countries that could lead to a "neighborhood economic community between the region and the European Union. The partnership will be mutually beneficial, she said.

"On energy, it is for their own energy security but it's exactly also for our energy security," Ferrero-Waldner said. "Again, this

is a win-win situation. It matches our interests."

All of the countries involved are either rich in oil and gas or are critical transit countries for energy from Russia and other eastern states.

A summit is planned with the leaders of the six countries sometime in the first half of 2009. Belarus, which is ruled by a man many call "Europe's last dictator," President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, must initiate democratic reforms before it can qualify for the EU aid plan.

Source: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty

December 8, 2008

Alyaksandr Barazenska sentenced to 1 year of restriction of freedom

An activist of the civil campaign "European Belarus" Alyaksandr Barazenska has been sentenced by court of Tsentralny district of Minsk to 1 year of imprisonment without being sent to a correctional facility. The verdict has been passed by Judge Natalya Vajtsekhovich. The political prisoner was released in the court room.

Right after his release Alyaksandr Barazenska said in an interview to the Charter'97 press-centre: "The verdict is unambiguously political. It would be just to declare me not guilty. But it was expected. This verdict completely characterizes the court system of Belarus which is under total control of the regime".

Source: Charter 97 Press Center.

December 10, 2008

Market Vendors on Strike

MINSK -- Tens of thousands of Belarus's market vendors staged a one-day strike around the country to protest the government's policy toward small-business owners.

Beginning on January 1, market vendors will no longer be allowed to pay a fixed value-added tax on imports from Russia and will be required to show documents proving the origin of the goods.

Small entrepreneurs are concerned that such measures could force them out of business.

An estimated 40 percent of the country's 200,000 market vendors took part in the strike.

Source: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

December 10, 2008

Belarus Police Briefly Detains Belarusian Activists

Police in Belarus have arrested at least 20 opposition activists marking Human Rights Day.

A number of activists wearing mock prison clothing were arrested Wednesday outside the Minsk headquarters of the Belarusian security service, known by its Soviet-era name the KGB. The demonstrators carried placards with slogans, such as "I'm an independent journalist" and "I am a human rights activist."

Several activists were arrested in front of a Minsk department store after handing out leaflets with the text of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Four other protesters were arrested in the western city of Hrodna. All the detainees were released on the same day without charges.

Source: VOA News



Opposition activists conducting a flash-mob near the KGB building in Minsk

December 16, 2008

Student Activist In Belarus Vows To Seek Justice Internationally

A student activist in Belarus said today he is going to appeal to international organizations, including the UN and the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, in an effort to make Belarusian authorities change his verdict.

On December 9, Alyaksandr Barazenska, an activist in the European Belarus campaign, was found guilty of "active participation in group actions grossly disturbing the public peace" and sentenced to one year of "restricted freedom" without having to go to jail.

His charges came from his participation in a demonstration held in downtown Minsk on January 10 against a government crackdown on small-business owners.

He told RFE/RL that he will now not be able to go to Poland to continue his studies at the University of Wroclaw.

Source: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty

December 17, 2008

Belarusian Opposition Movement Is Officially Registered

MINSK -- Belarus's Justice Ministry has officially confirmed the registration of the opposition Za Svabodu (For Liberty) movement.

Za Svabodu Deputy Chairman Yuras Hubarevich told RFE/RL's Belarus Service that the movement was officially registered only on its fourth attempt to gain registration.

The decision to establish the movement was made on October 23 in the city of Mahileu, at the movement's founding congress.

Prominent Belarusian opposition politician and presidential candidate Alyaksandr Milinkevich was elected as the movement's chairman. Viktor Karnyaenka and Hubarevich were elected deputy chairmen.

Source: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty

Quotes of Quarter

"I welcome the registration of the Belarus NGO "For Freedom" by the Belarus authorities. This is a step in the right towards respect of NGO rights and for freedom of assembly that the EU has been consistently calling for."

EU Commissioner **BENITA-FERRERO WALDNER** in Brussels on December 17, 2008

Thoughts and Observations

Removing Lukashenka from Visa Ban is a Mistake, both Strategically And Morally

According to influential American expert Bruce Jackson, president of the Project on Transitional Democracies NGO, Europe started rapprochement and almost hugged "the last dictator of Europe" in response to Russia's aggression against Georgia.

The expert told in an interview to DELFI.lt that a ground, suggested by supporters of normalisation of the relations with Lukashenka's regime, including Poland and Lithuania, was very controversial and difficult to understand.

- The US Administration included Lithuania into the Program of visa avoidance just before the parliamentary elections. Some analysts believe this contributed to the success of Lithuanian conservatives, the party leader on the elections results. Do you think the inter-relations exist?

There were six countries accepted into the visa waiver program (Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and South Korea) so it is difficult to argue that the Lithuanian elections were any factor in this decision. President Bush has never made any secret that he wanted to extend visa waiver to America's friends and allies, but it took this long for these six countries to meet the legal criteria set by the US Congress.

As is known, the Lithuanian conservatives are rather hard about Russia's and Belarus' regimes. What is your opinion about possible Vilnius foreign policy changes after parliamentary elections in Belarus and Lithuania.

In the middle of a global financial crisis, an uncertain EU leadership and an angry and resentful Russia, it is hard to see how Parliamentary elections shift broader European foreign policy towards Russia. Unfortunately, the EU foreign ministers have already reversed policy on Belarus by removing Lukashenko and key figures in his regime from the EU visa ban. This was a mistake, both strategically and morally.

-- Recently, the EU made a number of steps to normalize the relations with Lukashenko's regime. Some politicians, Lithuanian ones as well, consider the sanctions strategy had no success. Brussels, following Washington, suspended some sanctions, too. Is it possible to understand these solutions as Euro-Atlantic solidarity in relation to the "last European dictator"?

Civil Society organizations in both Europe and the United States were and remain firmly opposed to the decision of the European Union to lift visa restrictions against President Lukashenko and his regime.

These officials are still on the US visa ban list. The rationale advanced by advocates of the normalization, among them Poland and Lithuania, were very difficult

to understand and contradictory. The recent Belarus elections were neither free nor fair so "a Minsk spring" is not a viable explanation. The second argument was that Europe was responding to the Russian aggression in Georgia by embracing "the last dictatorship in Europe." How criminal aggression is countered by befriending criminals is something the EU will have to explain in coming months. The final unspoken explanation is that both Poland and Lithuania believe that they can make money in Belarus which is a more important consideration than human rights and international justice.

-- What is your appreciation of the Polish-Swedish initiative on a new Eastern partnership program?



Bruce Jackson

-The Eastern Partnership is a truly innovative and exciting initiative which coupled with the recent EU-Ukrainian Association marks a breakthrough in how the European Union engages with the new democracies of Europe's East. After the Russo-Georgian war in August, the EU accelerated the development of the Eastern Partnership which now contains serious substance of visa liberalization, trade, and economic development and assistance. In event, the Eastern neighbors of Europe are being promoted out of the Neighborhood Policy into a partnership which includes broader and closer relations with Europe and the possibility of increasing integration over time. The Eastern Partnership is a major achievement in the formation of a common foreign and security policy and confirms that the European Union is finally capable of acting on the world stage with confidence.

-- Many observers are already tired of looking at political battles in Ukraine. However, interest in the developments in this country is high both in the West and in the East. What is your opinion on the results of the upcoming elections in the Ukraine? What is the way they might influence the positioning of the country in the world?

- In general the political class of Ukraine is a complete failure in terms of delivering good government and prosperity to the Ukrainian voters. I suspect that the Ukrainian voters are as fed up with the endless and hopelessly selfish political warfare between the major personalities as outside observers have become. In

Washington, the consensus is that all three political parties have discredited themselves and that the December elections will settle nothing. In my view, we cannot expect a change or clarification of Ukraine's place in the world until new political parties emerge on Kyiv's political scene with a more European sense of how politics is supposed to be conducted.

-- The Russian Black-Sea Fleet will leave Sevastopol in 2017, if the Ukraine does not prolong the marine base rent agreement, the Russian vice-premier Sergei Ivanov stated in an exclusive BBC interview. Do you believe he was sincere?

I would certainly hope that Mr. Ivanov is sincere about fulfilling Russia's legal obligations to go home if the lease is not renewed. That said, I think that there is still a chance even a probability that Russia and Ukraine will agree to an extension for economic rather than political reasons.

A NATO summit is to be held in December. Can we expect something critically important for the Alliance member-states and post-USSR countries as results of the summit?

- There is a NATO Ministerial in December which will review the status and progress of post-Soviet and Balkan aspirants. I do not expect any decisions at this Ministerial among other reasons because the US will be in the middle of a Presidential transition. All attention is now focused on the 60th Anniversary NATO Summit in Strasbourg on April 2-4, 2009. My hope is that the NATO Heads of State can make a definitive statement on Georgia, Ukraine, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia and even Kosovo. I think that there will be serious pressure to answer the questions which were left unresolved at the Bucharest NATO Summit and to offer a complementary NATO program to the Eastern Partnership and Ukraine Association offered by the EU.

Source: Charter 97 Press Center, Oct. 29, 2008

Do You See What I See?

Two groups of observers seem to have witnessed very different elections in Belarus.

[Minsk put great effort into winning the approval of international observers of its parliamentary elections, held 28 September. But critics say the government simply controlled the environment instead of making real concessions to democratic politics. Although a number of opposition candidates competed, none was elected. The result was two very different views of the process. The first, by observers from the Commonwealth of Independent States, comes from the private Belarusian news agency Belapan, via BBC Monitoring. The second is excerpted from a statement by the OSCE.]

Source: BBC Monitoring, Belapan news agency

Minsk, 29 September, 2008: The CIS observation mission has recognized the parliamentary election in Belarus as "free, open and public," the head of the mission, Sergey Lebedev, has told a news conference.

Lebedev, who is also executive secretary of the CIS, emphasized that the mission's conclusions were based on the analysis of the mission's monitoring, factual material, the data accumulated during long- and short-term observation, and of information gathered in cooperation with electoral commissions, executive authorities and observers from other international organizations.

The CIS observers share the opinion that the electoral commissions, together with state and executive bodies, created conditions to involve in the election as many political forces as possible, and facilitated the securing and exercising of the citizens' election rights according to the national law.

Lebedev said that the mission did not reveal any facts to question the legitimacy and democracy of the election. "We think that the Belarusian election was held at a high organizational level, in accordance with the country's election law and international standards. The mission concludes that the election has contributed to further democratization of public life in Belarus," Lebedev said.

MINSK, 29 September 2008 - Despite some minor improvements, the 28 September parliamentary elections in Belarus ultimately fell short of OSCE commitments for democratic elections, international observers from the OSCE concluded in a preliminary statement issued today.

The election took place in a strictly controlled environment with a barely visible campaign, said the observers from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA).

Voting was generally well conducted, but the process deteriorated considerably during the vote count. Promises to ensure transparency of the vote count were not implemented. The count was assessed as bad or very bad in 48 per cent of polling stations visited. Where access was possible, several cases of deliberate falsification of results were observed.

OSCE monitors were prevented or hindered from observing the vote count in 35 percent of cases. This compromised the transparency of this fundamental element of the election process.

"The clear signals to improve the election process were not implemented and substantial improvements are required if Belarus is to conduct genuinely democratic elections in line with our common OSCE commitments. Unfortunately the repeated signals of good will did not seem to have been correctly given or received. Consequently the significant progress we hoped for in the democratic development of Belarus did not

materialize," said Anne-Marie Lizin, vice president of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and Special Coordinator of the OSCE short-term observers.

"I'm hopeful and disappointed at the same time. Hopeful because when we came here it seemed that there was some wind of change in the election environment; disappointed because we were unable to see a problem solved that has been with election observation in this country for a long time, and that is the non-transparency of the vote count. But we hope that the improved co-operation we have experienced during this election can be the basis for a genuine dialogue on implementing our recommendations", said Ambassador Geert Ahrens, head of the OSCE/ODIHR election observation mission.

Positive developments included the slightly increased access of opposition representatives to election commissions, the decision to rebroadcast once the five-minute candidate spots during prime time, and the recommendation to seal ballot box slots overnight during the five-day early voting period. Some opposition candidates noted progress in their ability to conduct meetings in authorized locations without interference.

The legislative framework continues to present obstacles for elections in line with OSCE commitments. The media coverage of the campaign did not provide meaningful information for voters to be able to make an informed choice. Political parties played a minor role, and restrictions imposed by the state authorities did not allow for a vibrant campaign with real competition.

Source: TransitionsOnLine, Minsk, 29 September 2008

OSCE Says Belarus Vote 'Falls Short' Of Democratic Standards

MINSK/PRAGUE (RFE/RL) -- It was taken as a promising sign when Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka allowed more than 500 monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) into the country to monitor the September 28 parliamentary elections.

In the end, however, it was not enough. "Our overall assessment is that the parliamentary elections in Belarus, despite some minor improvements, overall fell short of OSCE commitments," Jens Hagen Eschenbaecher, a spokesman for the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, announced.

The appraisal is likely to have a damning effect on efforts to improve ties between Belarus and the West. The European Union had indicated it would review its sanctions regime against Minsk if the OSCE gave a positive assessment of the vote.

Lukashenka had released political prisoners and allowed more than 70 members of the political opposition to participate in the ballot. He had expressed confidence a

clean vote would help bring Belarus closer to Europe and further from Moscow's aggressive attempts to raise energy prices.

Now it appears Moscow will remain the more influential force. Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin announced on September 29 that he will travel to Minsk next week, a step that appears to reflect Kremlin satisfaction with the vote's outcome.

Business As Usual

Roughly one out of every four candidates competing in the vote were members of the political opposition. But Lidziya Yarmoshyna, the head of the country's Central Election Commission, announced that not a single member of the political opposition won a seat in the 110-seat chamber.

"I can only comment [on election] figures, and the figures show this," Yarmoshyna said. "As far as the question of why [opposition candidates] didn't win is concerned, the voters didn't back them. I would understand if the difference in the voting figures was close; one could discuss the issue. But if you look at the difference between opposition candidates and those who won the vote, the figures are not compatible at all."

Belarusian Party of Communists leader Syarhey Kalyakin was the highest finisher among the opposition candidates, but won just 15.6 percent of the vote in his district.

Such results would be unsurprising in a typical Belarusian election, which ordinarily have the appearance of tightly orchestrated events that leave little to chance.

But President Lukashenka, reeling from a series of rows with Moscow over mounting gas prices and seeking closer ties with the West, wanted it to seem different this time. The European Union, in turn, had indicated it could reward a clean election by easing sanctions.

So Lukashenka had taken steps to ensure the vote would resemble, at least outwardly, a legitimate political contest.

The 260-plus candidates' list included nearly 80 members of the political opposition, and the vote was conducted in full view of more than 500 international observers from the OSCE.

The opposition has called the vote a sham. Some 800 activists marched in the capital, Minsk, late on election day to protest the ballot. They claim, in part, that advance voting allowed the government to dump opposition ballots because the early stages had not been as closely monitored as the actual vote.

'Sham' Elections

In its preliminary findings, the OSCE noted even regular ballot-counting was conducted behind closed doors, making it impossible to monitor.

"Our observers reported that although voting was well-conducted throughout the day, the integrity of the process was undermined by the vote count, which was judged bad or very bad in almost half of the observations," said Klas Bergman, a spokesman for the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly:

Anatol Lyabedzka, the head of the opposition United Civic Party, said the vote favored pro-presidential candidates from the start, because only a handful of opposition members were included in the country's election commissions.

"Our position has been clear: We do not recognize this [election] campaign as fair or legitimate because only 0.05 percent of our people were included in [election] commissions counting the votes, and 99.95 percent of commission members are people politically or economically dependent on Lukashenka," Lyabedzka said.

Alyaksandr Kazulin, who ran against Lukashenka in the March 2006 presidential election, was recently given an early release from jail, where he was serving a 5 1/2-year sentence for his role in protests following the vote.

His daughter, Volha, ran for a parliamentary seat, but received just 8.6 percent of the vote. Kazulin said the opposition has "a lot of facts and evidence" proving voter fraud, but encouraged the West to continue a dialogue with Minsk.

"Of course [the West] should not shut doors to the Belarusian political regime. It's necessary to work with them, teach them how things should be done in the civilized world and civilized community," Kazulin said.

"But I think it has to be clear that dialogue means cooperation, and cooperation suggests steps toward each other. That's why if the West takes a step toward the Belarusian political regime then this regime would have to make the necessary corresponding steps -- not declarations, not statements, but concrete actions and real changes for the democratization of Belarusian society."

The new Chamber of Representatives is expected to hold its first session on October 25.

Source: RFE/RL, September 29, 2008,

EU Ministers Extend Olive Branch to Minsk

By Ahto Lobjakas,

LUXEMBOURG -- European Union foreign ministers have extended an olive branch to Belarus at their meeting in Luxembourg.

They provisionally suspended travel restrictions placed on Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka and other top officials in 2006. The suspension will be in effect for six months and could be renewed if Belarus demonstrates a commitment to democratic reforms.

A handful of officials held to be personally responsible for electoral fraud and reprisals against members of the opposition will still be banned from traveling in the EU. At the top of the EU's shortened travel blacklist is Lidziya Yarmoshyna, the chairwoman of the Belarusian Central Election Commission. The ruling does not affect the bank accounts of blacklisted officials that were frozen by the EU.

The EU's external relations commissioner, Benita Ferrero-Waldner, said ahead of the meeting that the EU would send a "positive signal" to Lukashenka, whose regime has long been shunned by the bloc.

Sending Signals

Brussels froze political contacts with Minsk to protest what it said were rigged elections that saw Lukashenka reelected to a third term in 2006. Aside from electoral shortcomings, the EU and the United States have linked economic and diplomatic sanctions to Belarus's jailing of opposition politicians and crackdown on free media.

But with the release of its political prisoners, and parliamentary elections approaching, avenues for compromise appeared to be opening. Both Washington and Brussels indicated in the run-up to Belarus's September 28 elections that sanctions could be loosened depending on the poll's outcome and commitment to democracy.

"They've done certain things. They've released all of the political prisoners, but then they delivered a profoundly lousy election, as you know," said Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt as he arrived for the October 13 talks in Luxembourg.

"They did not really live up to the expectations that we had concerning the election. It was, roughly, as lousy as elections in Belarus normally are."

Ferrero-Waldner held an early meeting with Belarusian Foreign Minister Syarhey Martynau this morning, but said Minsk had not offered any concrete steps toward meeting the EU's demands.

Ferrero-Waldner acknowledged that Russia's incursion into Georgia in August is partially responsible for the EU's intention to reverse the policy of isolation it has pursued with Belarus.

French Europe Minister Jean Pierre Jouyet told the European Parliament last on October 8 that the EU is acting on "geopolitical" considerations in seeking closer links with Minsk.

'Positive Measures'

But Ferrero-Waldner insisted on October 13 that the EU has not lost sight of its values, highlighting recent improvements in Minsk's record.

"At the present time we are facing quite a complex reality," she said. "We were not satisfied with the parliamentary election on September 28, it's true, and the way it was conducted -- because the election did not [measure] up to international standards and our expectations."

The EU commissioner said that the decision by Minsk to free all remaining political prisoners in August was what decided the issue for Brussels.

"The freeing, then, of the remaining political prisoners was regarded, I think, as an essential step not only by ourselves but even by the opposition," Ferrero-Waldner said. "And that is very important, even the opposition said that is very important."

Opposition leaders Alyaksandr Milinkevich and Alyaksandr Kazulin -- himself one of the last political

prisoners to be freed -- told the European Parliament on October 8 they fully supported the EU's change of policy.

Ferrero-Waldner has argued the EU had not had time to react to that move in September, ahead of the elections. That considered, she said the bloc was willing to overlook the electoral shortcomings if it meant improving the EU's standing with Minsk vis-a-vis Moscow.



Ms. Ferrero-Waldner

"Therefore, I think, we should not delay our response any longer as I think I fear that we otherwise will forgo the possibility to have political leverage [in Belarus]."

Ferrero-Waldner said the EU was keen to "give something" to the "moderates" in Belarus to encourage democratic reforms.

Source: RFE/RL, October 13, 2008

Statement by Commissioner for External Relations and ENP Benita Ferrero-Waldner Following Recent Developments in Belarus

"I welcome the announcement of Belarus on 19 November to take concrete steps to allow the printing and distribution of the two independent newspapers Narodnaia Volia and Nasha Niva and to discuss the international norms with regard to the internet media. I also welcome Belarus' readiness to discuss in detail OSCE/ODIHR recommendations regarding the improvement of the electoral legislation.

These are important and encouraging steps from Belarus and I am looking forward to their swift implementation as well as additional steps announced by Belarus in line with the EU's expectations.

For its part, the Commission is intensifying technical dialogue with Belarus in fields of mutual interest and I anticipate concrete results to help foster Belarus's economic development.

I also recall the EU commitment of 13 October to reengage with Belarus and to further review its sanctions against Belarusian individuals in the light of further progress towards democracy, respect for human rights and the rule on law. In this context, it is essential that Belarus remains a country without political prisoners and respects freedom of expression, association and assembly. In this regard, I note in particular the case of Mr Barazenska who is due to stand trial shortly and which we will follow closely."

Source: <http://www.commentvisions.com/media/>, November 24, 2008

Belarus Should Not Be Isolated, OSCE Chairman Says

MINSK (Reuters) -- Belarus should not be isolated and Europe's policy towards it is changing, the chairman of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe said on a rare visit to the ex-Soviet state by a senior Western official.

Finnish Foreign Minister Alexander Stubb was meeting President Alyaksandr Lukashenka a week after a parliamentary election judged by the OSCE to have fallen short of international standards. But both the OSCE and European Union noted improvements in the ballot.

The United States and EU have imposed financial sanctions and a travel ban on Lukashenka, accusing authorities of jailing opposition activists, muzzling the media, and rigging elections.

But they softened their approach after the release in August of the last detainees deemed political prisoners.

"Belarus cannot be and should not be isolated," Stubb told journalists on the plane taking him to Minsk. Finland holds the chairmanship of the OSCE.

"My message is clear -- it is time to turn the page in Belarussian-European relations," Stubb told Lukashenka. "There is a clear mood that Belarus is moving in the right direction."

Stubb aims to strengthen ties with the organization as well as talk to officials ahead of a meeting next week in Luxembourg of EU foreign ministers and their Belarussian counterpart, Siarhei Martynau.

Martynau is not among the 41 officials, including Lukashenka, barred from the EU and the United States.

'Real Change'

"There is clearly a real change taking place in EU policy towards Belarus," Stubb said.

The only other senior Western official to visit Belarus in the past several years was U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State David Merkel who came in August for talks on improving ties after authorities freed opposition activists.

Lukashenka has sought to improve relations with the West after a row last year with traditional ally Russia over gas import prices.

He is maintaining a balancing act between the 27-member bloc to the West and Moscow. Belarus resisted pressure from Moscow and stopped short of recognizing Georgia's breakaway republics after Russia's war with its southern neighbor in August.

But the issue will be put to a vote in parliament and Lukashenka has said he is not moving out of the Russian orbit.

"Some people have been hinting that we have started thinking about a trade -- Russia for Europe," Lukashenka said on October 6 before meeting Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

"We never make such trades with anyone. We would never trade our friendship with the Russians."

Source: RFE/RL, October 07, 2008



Alexander Stubb

Finnish MPs Criticized Stubb's Dalliance with Belarusian Dictator

Members of the Parliament of Finland harshly criticised remarks of the Finnish foreign minister, chairman-in-office of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Alexander Stubb, who visited Minsk on October 7, BelaPAN reports referring to Finnish Helsingin Sanomat.

On October 9, A. Stubb was questioned by the Finnish MPs. In particular, he insisted that the main message that he had tried to convey during the visit was that the recent parliamentary elections in Belarus were neither free nor fair. Besides, the Finnish foreign minister called for the abolition of the death penalty and for "parties, the media, and non-governmental organisations need to be given more freedom".

As for suggestions that he was trying to placate Russia, unsatisfied with his activity in the OSCE, Stubb said that it is "terribly hard to sign on" to such a notion. The minister noted that Belarus had let OSCE "observers into the country, in addition, election campaigning was slightly more open than before".

According to A. Stubb, "the OSCE has decided not to try to isolate Belarus, but rather to engage in conditional cooperation with the country".

Speaking about his talks with Alyaksandr Lukashenka, the Finnish minister noted that when he started criticising the country's treatment of the opposition, and the existence of the death penalty, "the TV cameras were immediately removed".

While talking to reporters during his visit to Minsk, Mr. Stubb said that "it is time to start looking at Belarus' role in the international community and its engagement in Europe from a different perspective. What we are starting to see is the first steps in the right direction."

The OSCE chairman-in-office said he "had never believed in isolation, only in cooperation". According to him, his talks with Foreign Minister Syarhei Martynau and Alyaksandr Lukashenka were "positive and fruitful". "Their basic message was to turn the page in the history of bilateral relations, A. Stubb said.

Source: Charter 97 Press Center, October. 15, 2008

Belarusian Opposition Backs EU U-Turn On Lukashenka

By Ahto Lobjakas

BRUSSELS -- Politicians in Brussels are openly talking of a "shift" in EU policy toward Belarus.

Despite the repeated failure of Belarusian authorities to hold democratic elections, last demonstrated on September 28, the EU is set to abandon its long-standing drive to isolate Minsk and is seeking dialogue.

The chairman of the European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, Jacek Saryusz-Wolski, said the EU "must counteract Russian influence" in the country.

The need to do this was impressed on EU politicians across the board by Russia's invasion of Georgia in August.

The change in EU policy has the backing of top leaders of Belarus's democratic opposition. Speaking at the European Parliament on October 8, Alyaksandr Milinkevich said securing the country's independence from Russia takes precedence over all other objectives. Dialogue, he said, is the only way to ensure this goal:

"For me, there is no alternative to the policy of dialogue," he said. "Because to say [there is] a dictator [in charge of] Belarus, to build a Berlin Wall, [avoid] all contact with him, then we will lose not only all

opportunity to influence the state of affairs, but will also sharply worsen the situation of the people in Belarus -- and 10 million Europeans live there."

Milinkevich said measures aimed at democratization must continue, even if their chance of success remains slim.

Milinkevich and fellow opposition leader and erstwhile political prisoner Alyaksandr Kazulin also met with Czech Deputy Prime Minister Alexandr Vondra and were later due to hold talks with French Europe Minister Jean-Pierre Jouyet. France is the current holder of the EU's rotating presidency, to be succeeded by the Czech Republic in January 2009.

Carrot-And-Stick

The European Parliament is set to vote on a nonbinding resolution on Belarus, unanimously backed by all political factions. One of the authors of the resolution, Polish deputy Jacek Protasiewicz, said it carefully balances praise with criticism.

"The first paragraph, which was deliberately chosen by all political groups [in the European Parliament] to be the first, [provides] a positive assessment of the decision that has been taken by Belarusian authorities concerning the [release] of [all] political prisoners," Protasiewicz said.

"But the second paragraph is a sincere [expression] of our regret that another opportunity for [improving] the political situation in Belarus was missed" by the failure to hold democratic elections, he added.

This is also the pattern the European Parliament recommends for EU policy, which might be described as a carrot-and-stick approach.

Key passages in the draft resolution call on the EU to selectively lift some of the visa bans currently in effect against about 40 Belarusian officials. However, deputies and Belarusian opposition leaders alike said officials guilty of human rights violations must not benefit from the measure.

Crucially, Kazulin and Milinkevich said the EU travel ban on Lukashenka must remain.

The parliament also wants the EU to earmark some of its 2009 Neighborhood Policy budget for Belarus. So far, Brussels has barred Belarus from participation in the policy, citing human rights violations and the lack of democracy.

Polish deputies in the European Parliament are also working behind the scenes to bring down the cost of an EU Schengen visa for Belarusian citizens, currently set at 60 euros (\$82). Saryusz-Wolski said he has secured assurances to that effect from the European Commission:

The Belarusian opposition leaders also underscored the discrepancy with Russia, whose citizens benefit from a visa-facilitation deal with the EU and pay 35 euros for a Schengen visa.

Source: RFE/RL, October 8, 2008

The Meeting That Never Took Place

By David Marples

On December 1 a session of the Supreme Council of the Union State of Russia and Belarus was scheduled to take place in Moscow. According to propaganda from the two sides, it was to be a significant occasion that, in contrast to the recent past, would produce real results. The meeting, however, never took place; and there are conflicting accounts of the reasons why.¹

One week ago, on November 24, Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka was interviewed by the French news agency Agence France Presse. During a wide-ranging interview, Lukashenka commented that relations with the European Union were taking root and that he hoped the new U.S. administration would bring about a more favorable environment for relations with Belarus. His country, he added, was a natural bridge for the conduit of energy resources between Russia and Europe. Ties with Moscow, moreover, would inevitably be close, because Belarusians and Russians were essentially “one people” (AFP, November 24). The statement only to increased expectations for the forthcoming Supreme Council.

A few days later, contradictory remarks came from the presidential administration in Minsk. With regard to recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the Belarusian president declared that he would be happy eventually to recognize the two regions of Georgia, because they were de facto independent states. He would not do so, however, simply under pressure from Russia. Under instructions from the Kremlin, Russian Ambassador to Belarus Aleksandr Surikov has been putting pressure on Belarus to take such action. On the same day, a Belarusian news

agency quoted Lukashenka as stating that while he was prepared to anticipate a viable future for the Union State, it could occur only under conditions of equal relations. However, he continued, the Russian side was responsible for the slow progress made thus far, and many questions on the Constitutional Act remained unresolved. “The constitution must be constitutional,” and both sides had to be in a position to consider the neighboring country their home (Belarusian Telegraph Agency, November 27).

That Russia has balked at some aspects of the proposed Union State is well known. Russia provides Belarus with loans on an almost annual basis in order for its western neighbor to meet the payments for Russian oil and gas. Furthermore, signals from the Kremlin are ominous. In discussing the possible loss of agreement among elite factions in Moscow as a result of the current economic impasse, a Western analysis has suggested that Russia might manufacture a crisis to bring about new unity or else expedite the union with Belarus. The Kremlin analyst Olga Kryshanova, however, says that one possibility might be the creation of a mini-USSR that would join together Russia, Belarus, and South Ossetia, with Putin as the leader of this union (www.telegraph.co.uk, November 13).

On December 1 Russian sources reported that the meeting of the Supreme State Council would not take place and President Lukashenka would not even be coming to Moscow. This was the second cancellation within the past month. Originally the Council was to assemble on November 3, but after Presidents Lukashenka and Dmitry Medvedev met on October 25, the decision was made to postpone the gathering until December 1 (RIA Novosti, December 1). The two presidents had met earlier in Sochi and agreed on the establishment of a joint air defense system. Both sides have approved the text, which reportedly caters to a perceived threat from NATO using bases in Poland and the Baltic States (Belorusy i Rynok, November 24–December 1). So why was the Council delayed for a second time?

According to a Russian report gleaned from sources close to the Belarusian government, the key problem is the wording of the constitutional act, which the Belarusian side insists must be finalized before any major agreement can be signed. Lukashenka maintains that Belarus cannot hold a referendum to approve the document put forward by the Russian side, which is a weaker version of the original draft. Without specifying what particular issue irked him, Lukashenka said that the Belarusians would “disgrace” themselves if they held a referendum on this version. There have been three draft versions of the Constitution of the Russia-Belarus Union. Originally, the post of president was to have been occupied by the head of the Russian Federation with the Belarusian leader as vice-president; but the most recent version assigns such power to the Supreme State Council subordinated to a chairman elected by a general vote (Kommersant, December 1). With the ruble as the common currency, Belarus would clearly be a junior partner in the union.

One explanation of the latest dispute between Russia and Belarus is that Lukashenka is still angling for a stronger role for his country but is increasingly bereft of real bargaining

power. As a result, the Russians are no longer amenable to suggestions that would enhance the Belarusian role in the Union State. In turn, Lukashenka cannot abandon this concept, which has been an integral part of his political platform for more than 12 years. Thus a stalemate has been reached. According to the Russian side, prospects for real negotiations were replaced by “a farce,” and Moscow is prepared to hold a meeting in the future only if there are real prospects for serious results. We should not hold our breath.

Source: Eurasia Daily Monitor, December 3, 2008

BELARUS ABROAD

BELARUS: Rays of Lights

was the title of an exhibition of photographs by the American photographer John Kunstadter, held on November 17, 2008 in the United Nations Secretariat Building in New York City.

We bring you excerpts from Mr. Kunstadter’s remarks at the opening of the exhibition:



“My photographic journey through Belarus continues to inspire and impel me in three ways.

First, to record the Belarusian Book of Hours. That is, the cycle of the Belarusian year and the new birth of faith as they are infused by the specific Belarusian light, the specific Belarusian smell of earth and the specific Belarusian sense of place.

Second, to chronicle the depth, resilience, and — again — specificity, and at the same time inherent Europeaness, of Belarusian Culture, of Belarusanness. I have witnessed innumerable times how the heart of the Belarusian nation beats in every child, even the smallest child; how the national language sings out in every gesture, in every smile; how Belarusians quietly but firmly live the words of the great Belarusian poet Maksim Bahdanovich.

“Thus the modest but devoted bee knows how to make honey even from bitter flowers.”

I would feel most fortunate if these melodies, these rhythms, this devotion were reflected in at least some of the photos in this exhibition.



Tree of Eternity, Palessie, 2006

Third, to help me understand even more clearly how the fate of our nation is linked to that of the Belarusian nation. We would not be Americans were it not for the crucial help, at Saratoga and elsewhere, of Tadeusz Kosciuszko. We have always honored Kosciuszko as a Pole but he was a son of Belarusian soil.

In a larger sense, I would recall that the dignity of our nation lies in the fact that we are a nation of the common man. And anyone who grew up as I did in Chicagoland, or in Pittsburgh, Cleveland, or any number of other American towns and cities across the heartland, knows how the Belarusian common man, and others living under the injustice of empire in the same region — Poles, Lithuanians, Ukrainians, and many other — have made the arduous journey to America;

how they have built our nation;

how they have played an integral part in determining who we are, and why.

So in looking at the portraits in this exhibition we are also looking in good measure at ourselves.”



Hodigetria Festival, Dzisna, 2008

BELARUSIAN DAY in Prague

took place on December 8th, 2008. It was initiated by the cultural foundation of the Czech ex-president, Vaclav Havel.

The day consisted of the panel discussion "Theater in Unfreedom," and the performance "Generation Jeans" by Mikalai Khalezin, the head of Belarus' Free Theater.

"Generation Jeans" was essentially a monologue by Mr. Khalezin as the only actor. Since it was based on real facts, the public was very appreciative and the atmosphere was warm. More than 50 people came to the little Monmartre Gallery to watch the Free Theater, including the head of US diplomatic mission in Belarus, Jonathan Moore, the former Czech ambassador to Belarus Vladimir Ruml, and senator Jan Ruml, member of the Czech association "Civic Belarus."

A man wearing jeans, symbolizing for him freedom, began his confession recalling his rejection of the Soviet unfreedom and getting his first pair of jeans on black market in 1970, and finished in the 21st century, in the Akrestin detention facility, where he felt uncomfortable, since, "one can't wear jeans in jail."



The narration was supplemented by the text in English, displayed on the wall with a video projector.

Participants of the preceding panel discussion included from the Belarusian side Mr. Khalezin, Free Theater's stage director Uladzimir Shcherban, and the feature's producer Natalla Kalada. The Czechs were represented by Ondrej

Hrab, the artistic director of Prague's Archa Theater, and senator Jan Ruml. They recalled the experience of Czech underground theaters during the Communist regime, about performances in private apartments and its influence on the modern Czech theater.

Natalla Kalada explained the reason why Russian is the language of their plays. According to her, Russian is being used in order to change the mentality of the Russian-speaking population. The Belarusian-speaking people need no explanations; they were ready to change the regime 14 years ago.

Members of the Free Theater emphasized that they are forced to work under very difficult conditions. Often they are being fired from their regular jobs and often had to perform during birthday parties and weddings. Yet, according to Mr. Khalezin, sometimes over 2000 people are waiting for their turn to watch a play due to insufficient space in private apartments.

MEDIA WATCH

Book Review

Window on Eurasia: Belarusians, Russians Aren't Cousins Let Alone Brothers, New Book Says

By Paul Goble

Vienna, October 8, 2008 — Even as Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka promote alliance between their two governments, a new book argues that "Russians and Belarusians are in no way brothers. Indeed, they are not even cousins" and adds that they have had very different histories and will experience very different fates.

The book, "The History of Imperial Relations" Belarusians and Russians," was written by Anatoly Taras and published in 150 copies by the Posokh Book Club in Smolensk. But its content is reaching a far larger audience through an interview Taras has given to the Internet newspaper "Solidarnasts" (gazetaby.com/index.php?sn_nid=16646&sn_cat=35).

In it, the Belarusian author argues that the Belarusians are very different than "their Eastern neighbors historically, culturally and even genetically and that it is completely incorrect to speak about the Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians as if they were "fraternal peoples." There are not but rather "three absolutely different ethnic communities."

"The Russians," Taras says, "are a people who were formed on the basis of Finno-Ugric and Turkic peoples. And the Russian language ... is an artificial tongue ... [which] arose on the basis of Finnish words (the word Moskva translates from Finnish as 'black water') and Turkic ones (for example, Karamzin, Sumarokov and Kutuzov are Tatar family names."

"Look at that Putin," the Belarusian author says, "externally, that is anthropologically he is 100 percent a Finn!"

The Belarusians in contrast, he continues, are Balts who mixed with Slavs and migrated as a result of pressure by German tribes from the banks of the Elbe," while "the Ukrainians are descendants of Iranian-language Sarmatian tribes who were subjected to the influences of the southern Slavs."

But these anthropological and linguistic differences continue in the separate histories of the three countries, Taras argues. "The entire history of the Moscow state is the history of uninterrupted expansion, 800 years of constant aggression." Regimes have changed periodically, "but the essence [of its policies] have not!"

Belarus and Ukraine have had very different histories, in large measure because they have been subjected to the imperial policies of Russia, he says.

Asked why he had published the book in Smolensk, a city within the boundaries of the Russian Federation, rather than in Minsk, the Belarusian author said that he had not been able to interest "a single commercial publishing house"

in the Belarusian capital but hoped that its publication in a limited print run would spark someone's interest.

More to the point, he said, Smolensk is not a Russian city as the interviewer's question implied. "From times immemorial, Smolensk is a Belarusian land, where there live Belarusians whom the Moscow powers that be consider Russian even though far from all contemporary Smolensk residents would agree. This is our [Belarusian] land."

And asked why he had chosen to publish his book in Russian rather than Belarusian, Taras replied that "those citizens of Belarus whom one can include among the nationally conscious in principle do not need what is in this book. They to a greater or lesser degree know everything that is in it."

This book, Taras continued, "is for others," both inside Belarus and in all "14 countries of the former Union" for whom "the problem of imperial relations continues to be relevant to this day." And it would be a good thing, he concluded, if some in the Russian Federation would become "acquainted" with it as well.

But he said that trying to argue with Russians who think differently on these issues "is something totally hopeless" because "they are simply blinded by the consciousness of what they believe is their own greatness, however illusory" that is in the eyes of anyone else. And he added that this problem is greater now in the wake of Russia's attack on Georgia.

"Thanks to the situation in South Ossetia and Abkhazia," Taras said, "a powerful wave of national patriotism, or more precisely chauvinism, has arisen in Russia." He noted that an acquaintance of his had recently been told by a Russian militiaman: You Belarusians "always were our slaves, and that's how you will remain!"

And another acquaintance told him that a Moscow publisher had said that Belarusians and all the other non-Russians should "kiss" the hand of Russians "for all that we have done for them" and that in the future "we will put them in their place, and things will be for them just as they are for Georgia now."

But if Russia is able to throw its weight around now, Taras said, it won't be much longer. And he predicted that as a result of "social cataclysms," Russia would break into a group of small principalities in about ten years. Over the same period, Belarus will become more European as it overcomes the Belarusian variant of "Homo Sovieticus."

As a result, the Belarusian author said, he is quite pessimistic about the future of Russia and the Russians but moderately optimistic about that of Belarus and the Belarusians.

Obviously not all Belarusians share the views of Taras, but his words are a useful, even timely reminder that many Belarusians do not share the attitudes of Lukashenka's regime or dismiss their country and its culture, as many in both Moscow and the West do as byproducts of Russian history that are fated to be "reabsorbed."

Press Review

'Last Dictator' Seeks to Woo the West

Excerpts from an article by Jan Cieski and Stefan Wagstyl
in *Financial Times*

Published: November 18, 2008

Belarus bears a more than passing resemblance to the former Soviet Union. Lenin broods from his plinth in the centre of town, the KGB is still called the KGB, the economy remains in state hands and the state is under the authoritarian control of a single leader.

A prolonged surge in economic growth, powered by Russia's energy boom, has highlighted the state-led economy's limitations. Exports to Russia are mostly sturdy machinery such as tractors that have few buyers elsewhere. There are growing demands for reform and privatisation from enterprises seeking western capital and state officials hoping to profit from sell-offs.

However, with the global economic crisis raging, a resurgent Russia determined to reassert itself in the region and the west divided over how to deal with Moscow, it is unclear how the diplomatic game that Mr Lukashenko has initiated will end.

It is a far cry from Mr Lukashenko's first decade in office. After taking power in 1994, the former farm manager secured from Russia cheap oil and gas which enabled him to build a welfare state that cushioned his people from much of the turmoil that enveloped the region. The deal worked when Russia was weak, but has become increasingly strained after Russia's revival under Vladimir Putin, the former president and now prime minister.

With Russian subsidies reaching an estimated 30 per cent of Belarus's gross domestic product in 2006, the Kremlin increased the price of gas and started taxing oil shipments. In the winter of 2006-7, gas supplies were interrupted. To clear debts, Belarus had to sell to Gazprom, the Russian gas monopoly, half of Beltransgaz, the gas pipeline operator, for \$2.5bn.

With Moscow determined to make Minsk pay EU prices for gas by 2011, the debts are mounting and Belarus is now getting a new \$2bn Russian loan. "With Russia it's simple. They'll give us a credit which we'll spend on their gas and end up being in debt to them," says Leonid Zaiko, an independent economist.

Some Belarusians fear Minsk and Moscow may already be too close to separate. "Integration with Russia has advanced so far that if it goes any further we will disappear," says Viktor Martinovich, editor of BelGazeta, an independent weekly newspaper.

Mr Lukashenko's opening to the west is also aimed at attracting investment to help firms modernise. The government has started economic reforms, including a planned flat tax, and is talking about privatising up to 600 state-owned companies. The friendlier environment has investors including Heineken, the Dutch brewer, and Telekom Austria, which bought the country's second-largest mobile operator for €730m last year. Mr Lukashenko says foreign companies are welcome. "If you

do come to us . . . you will be guaranteed full support from this dictator, from this country and our people," he says

The opportunity to invest in a fast-growing economy with 10m people (including skilled workers), a central location in eastern Europe, and good roads could draw investors. But it will take time before western business people are convinced Mr Lukashenko will keep his promises.

But economic liberalisation could prompt demands for political change. Economic disparities could grow, particularly if state officials use privatisation to enrich themselves as in Russia and Ukraine.

There are no easy answers for Mr Lukashenko. Only the knowledge that the complicated dance he has led to keep power is becoming ever more difficult.

(Note: November 18, 2008 Financial Times has extensive Special Report on Belarus: www.ft.com/home/europe)

Electoral Rot Nearby? The Russians Don't See It

Published: December 16, 2008

(Excerpts from a New York Times article)

By CLIFFORD J. LEVY

ZHODINO, Belarus — The voting monitor began his rounds on election day here at Polling Place No. 7. "Issues? Violations?" he asked the poll workers, glancing around like a casual sightseer. They said no, so he left.

The monitor, Kholnazar Makhmadaliyev, breezed from one polling site ("What's up? Things O.K.?"") to another ("Everything fine here?"), shaking a lot of hands, offering abundant compliments and drinking brandy with this city's mayor.

Such went Mr. Makhmadaliyev's stint on a large observer mission led by the Kremlin that concluded that Belarus, a former Soviet republic and an ally of Russia, had conducted a "free, open and democratic" parliamentary election in late September.

The Kremlin monitors' version of reality, though, clashed with the one described by a European security group, whose own monitors dismissed the election as a sham tainted by numerous shortcomings, not the least of which was vote rigging.

... The monitors play a critical role in creating a democratic veneer, solemnly giving their customized assessments and formal reports, which are promoted by the government-controlled media. They also provide a counterweight to observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, who denounce the same elections.

The goal for the Kremlin is to convince the public — and, perhaps, even foreigners — that these governments are lawfully elected and representative of the popular will.

... Senior Russian officials tend to tie themselves in knots explaining how governments that have crushed opposition movements can conduct fair balloting. The officials refer to Western election monitors as a tool that the West uses to smear Russia and other former Soviet republics.

Vladimir A. Pekhtin, a vice speaker of the Russian Parliament who supervised the Kremlin monitors in Belarus, said every recent election in the former Soviet Union had been democratic and fair. He included countries like Uzbekistan, whose president has ruled since the end of Communism and was re-elected last year with 88 percent of the vote.

Asked about the conclusions of Western monitors in Belarus, Mr. Pekhtin said, "They just made it up, invented it, to try to show that there was some kind of rot."

An Unlikely Monitor

As he canvassed polling places at a rate of one every 5 to 10 minutes, Mr. Makhmadaliyev, the Kremlin's monitor in Zhodino, allowed that he knew little if anything about Belarus's political situation. That is understandable, given that he is from a village in the former Soviet republic of Tajikistan, in Central Asia.

The observer teams typically work under the umbrella of the Commonwealth of Independent States, an alliance of former Soviet republics controlled by Moscow. In Belarus, many monitors were Russians, but some were from friendly countries like Tajikistan that had particularly checkered human rights records.

Mr. Makhmadaliyev, 60, won a parliamentary seat last April in Tajikistan, where the elections tend to be as fair as those in Belarus. A member of the ruling party, he received 86 percent of the vote, officials said.

He had received no training in election monitoring, he said, but that did not concern him. His sole aim, he said, was to assess whether election day was orderly in Zhodino, a city of 65,000 about 25 miles from the capital, Minsk.

Rumpled and courteous, he wore a blue armband that identified him as an official observer. He took no notes. And everywhere he went — polling sites in schools, recreation halls and apartment buildings — the responses to his brief questions were the same.

"Everything is fine here," said Larisa A. Chichina, the senior official at Polling Place No. 7.

Mr. Makhmadaliyev pronounced himself satisfied.

... The missions are now overseen by a former director of Russia's foreign intelligence service, Gen. Sergei N. Lebedev, whom Mr. Putin installed as the commonwealth's executive secretary last year. General Lebedev said that the West applied double standards, scrutinizing elections in the former Soviet Union far more closely than those elsewhere.

"We have a principle — the main principle — which is to objectively evaluate the situation, and not interfere in internal affairs," he said. "We cannot evaluate the political system of a country. Our main goal is not to find shortcomings, as Russians say, to find bugs."

Mr. Putin, the current prime minister and former president, and his aides have lately evinced even more hostility to the O.S.C.E., calling for drastic cuts in its monitoring teams. They have also imposed such heavy limits on the group that it refused to monitor Russia's presidential election in March 2008. (The Kremlin monitors did — and found no problems.)

... In the end, the Kremlin monitors in Belarus seemed to play just the role envisioned for them: helping to neutralize negative findings by the Western ones.

As Lidia M. Yermoshina, chairwoman of Belarus's election commission, put it: "If you are guided only by the O.S.C.E. report, you might become desperate. You need something to cheer you up."

Mr. Lukashenko had invited the Western monitors because he said that he was confident that they would endorse the election and that he was hoping for better relations with the West, which had imposed stiff sanctions on Belarus after opposition leaders were imprisoned in 2006.

But the Western monitors came down hard, so it was no surprise that the state-controlled television news focused mostly on the Kremlin teams.

Even Mr. Makhmadaliyev, the Kremlin's monitor in Zhodino, made a television appearance.

"At all the polling places, we have noted a very good mood among the people," he told a reporter. "They are coming to elect those who most deserve it."

With that, he hustled to his next stop, walking past a large sample ballot that directed people to vote for Mr. Lukashenko's candidate.



Putin Approves Oil Pipeline Bypassing Belarus

Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin approved an expansion of the Baltic Pipeline System to reduce Russia's dependency on links through countries such as Belarus for crude exports.

Putin signed an order for pipeline operator OAO Transneft to build the BTS-2 link from Unecha near the Belarusian border to Ust-Luga on the Baltic Sea, the Energy Ministry said in an e-mailed statement today.

The system, with a total capacity of 50 million tons a year, will be built in two stages, the ministry said. The first phase is planned to begin shipping 30 million tons of crude a year in the third quarter of 2012.

Financing will come from long-term ruble bonds sold to state-run banks, according to the statement. A number of government agencies, including the Energy, Finance and Economy Ministries, will develop the necessary financing mechanisms together with state development bank Vnesheconombank.

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