



BELARUS

Bi-weekly News Digest

October 2-16, 2005

October 3: PACE's Resolution on Forcible Abductions

At a session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), a report on forcible abductions in Europe was presented. PACE adopted a new set of recommendations that called for strong and effective measures regarding disappearance cases in Belarus.

<http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=http://assembly.coe.int/Documents/AdoptedText/ta05/EREC1719.htm>

October 4: Constitutional Rights Violated Again

The Belarusian Constitutional Court extended the deadline for scrapping the country's foreign travel permit system after the authorities failed to establish a new system that would allow travel abroad without obtaining special permission. In 2002, the Constitutional Court recommended abolishing travel permits by January 1, 2006 as such a requirement violates citizens' constitutional rights to freedom of movement. Belarusian citizens must currently obtain a passport stamp to travel abroad and pay a fee of 127,500 rubles (nearly \$60) for a five-year travel permit.

<http://www.charter97.org/eng/news/2005/10/05/pas>

October 4-5: Belarusian Prime Minister in Lithuania

Prime Minister Sergey Sidorski met his Lithuanian counterpart, Algirdas Brazauskas, in Vilnius where they discussed economic co-operation between the two countries. Earlier, President Alexander Lukashenko threatened to suspend transport activities via the Lithuanian port of Klaipeda if the country would not stop anti-Belarusian activities.

http://www.naviny.by/ru/content/rubriki/0-ya_gruppa/novosti/ekonomika/05-10-05-23/

October 7: Voka Suspends its Activity

The members of the youth initiative *Voka* have suspended their activity out of fear of persecution by the authorities. According to *Voka's* project coordinator, Vital Dabranach, the decision was caused by the Ministry of Justice's decree, according to which all coalitions and initiatives are to be registered. Youth Initiative *Voka* has a number of socially targeted projects and is mostly known for its campaign for the Belarusian language usage on TV and radio broadcasts.

<http://www.voka.tk>

<http://www.spring96.org/viewn.php?id=2547&pagelang=en>

October 8: Harvesting Festival in Slutsk

President Alexander Lukashenko took part in the national harvesting festival and fair "Dazhynki-2005" in Slutsk. In his address to the festival he stressed the importance of the agricultural sector and also commented on the congress of democratic forces, which was recently held in Minsk.

<http://president.gov.by/eng/president/news/archive/october2005/10-14>

October 10: Visit of Ukrainian Prime Minister to Belarus Postponed

Ukrainian Prime Minister, Yuriy Yekhanurov's planned October 11th visit to Belarus was postponed and rescheduled for October 18. Instead of meeting the Ukrainian Prime Minister, President Alexander Lukashenka went on a holiday to Sochi, a resort city in Russia.

<http://www.charter97.org/eng/news/2005/10/10/ministr>

October 11: Milinkevich at Forum 2000 in Prague

Alexander Milinkevich, who was elected as the single candidate from the democratic forces earlier this month, participated at an international conference "Conflict and Coexistence" in Prague. The conference was organized by Forum 2000, an institution established in 1996 by former Czech President Vaclav Havel. Alexander Milinkevich appealed to the international community for support for a free and independent press in Belarus, which will be vital in creating critical mass support. <http://www.radio.cz/en/article/71544>

October 11: No More Travels Abroad for Senior Students

President Lukashenka signed a decree to impose age limitations on students who travel abroad for health improvement. According to this decree, only students in grades 1-4 of primary school and 1-5 of specialized schools are allowed to travel for more than 15 days during the school year.

<http://www.spring96.org/viewn.php?id=2552&pagelang=en>

October 12: Polish Ambassador Returns to Minsk

Polish Ambassador to Belarus, Tadeusz Pawlak, has returned to Belarus. Ambassador Pawlak was recalled to Warsaw when a conflict over the Union of Poles in Belarus caused tensions in Belarusian-Polish relations.

http://www.interfax.ru/e/B/politics/28.html?id_issue=11405534

October 13: Democratic Forces Consolidation

Anatoly Lebedko took charge of the National Committee, and Sergey Kalyakin became the head of the electoral headquarters for Alexander Milinkevich's campaign in the 2006 presidential election. The National Committee, which was formed after the Congress of Democratic Forces, is responsible for designing and implementing programs and projects of legislative initiatives.

<http://www.charter97.org/eng/news/2005/10/13/new>

October 16: Day of Belarusian Solidarity

Irina Khalip, a well-known journalist, Irina Krasovskaya, the head of the civic initiative "We Remember," and *Zubr* activist Nikita Sasim called on the Belarusian citizens to show their solidarity by switching off their lights on October 16 at 8 pm and placing a candle on their window. The peaceful "Day of Solidarity" remembered four missing opposition activists and a journalist: Yuri Zakharenko, Victor Gonchar, Anatoly Krasovski and Dmitri Zavadski. Candles of freedom were also lit in the United States, Canada, the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden, Slovakia, Poland, Ukraine, Estonia and Russia to show solidarity with Belarus.

<http://www.charter97.org/eng/news/2005/10/17/kras>

Compiled by Natalia Moustafina

What should be on the agenda for the single candidate from the democratic opposition?

Natalia Moustafina

After the Congress of Democratic Forces earlier this month, media attention shifted toward a relatively new face in Belarusian politics – Alexander Milinkevich – the single candidate elected from the democratic opposition. It seems his name is unknown not only to potential voters but also to the current political elite. Vladimir Konopliov, speaker of the Chamber of Representatives of the National Assembly, commented to the *Time Europe* that “the name [Milinkevich] doesn’t ring any bells.” President Alexander Lukashenko did not say anything negative on the Congress’s choice of a single candidate either, choosing not to highlight the fact that in the past, Alexander Milinkevich was a candidate from the nationalistic Belarusian Popular Front. Alexander Lukashenko is confident in his victory, and has said he is convinced that there will be more than ten of “the so-called ‘single’ candidates.”

There is no doubt that Milinkevich is under great scrutiny from both camps: those who have elected him and those who are in power. The key issue for Milinkevich and his team is to develop and launch a public campaign with a solid program for the presidential election of 2006. There is no doubt that the campaign of official harassment and propaganda will undoubtedly depict Milinkevich as a nationalist extremist supported by the West. It is important, therefore, that he does not look like a “russophobe.” Advocating of neutrality will also be of little use, he needs to have a well-articulated strategy on relations with Russia and the future Russia-Belarus Union.

It is also crucial to maintain the fragile unity among all the opposition forces that participated in the Congress despite tensions as the election nears. First steps were taken when Sergey Kalyakin from the Party of Communists was appointed chief of election headquarters of the opposition candidate. Furthermore, the chairman of the United Civic Party, Anatoly Lebedko, has been appointed chief of the National Committee [shadow cabinet]. Nevertheless, more remains to be done. There is currently more dissent than unity among youth groups. In order to increase his popularity amongst such groups Milinkevich will have to consolidate the support of all youth movements.

Alexander Milinkevich recently traveled to Prague to attend Forum 2000 where he stated that regime change in Belarus could only occur following a wide popular protest, similar to Ukraine's Orange Revolution of 2004. He also appealed to the international community for support for a free and independent press in Belarus, which will be instrumental in creating critical mass support. At the Forum, European diplomats called for tough measures against the regime of President Alexander Lukashenko in an effort to support the opposition ahead of next year’s presidential election. On the one hand, it is a positive sign that Milinkevich has already gained support from the West. On the other hand, given the current political situation in Belarus, Western support and popularity might damage Milinkevich as he can be easily perceived as a protégée of the U.S. and Europe. In order to gather substantial forces for public protests it is more important to win the hearts and minds of common Belarusian people.

The “Day of Solidarity” campaign that took place on October 16 demonstrated the weakness of popular support in Belarus. Although the campaign found its supporters in Poland, Estonia, Russia, Hungary, Canada and the United States, it was not widely supported at home. This can be largely attributed to the fact that it was not widely advertised due to a lack of access to the media sources. Activists hope to establish a tradition of solidarity days every month on the 16th. If it is difficult for the Belarusian people to light a candle, it would be even more difficult for them to take to the streets.