



Freedom Day in Brussels: Screening of the Movie “Ploshcha” (Square) and the Solidarity Concert



The Belarusian Freedom Day was marked by a number of cultural events in Brussels. The holiday, celebrated on the 25th of March, commemorates the Belarusian People's Republic, proclaimed in 1918. The Freedom Day is traditionally ignored by the Belarusian authorities on one hand, and widely celebrated by the Belarusian opposition on another. Last year's Freedom Day was a culmination of the street protests in Minsk. Screening of the documentary film “Ploshcha” (‘the

Petra Jordan's concert was a truly European one in its nature: performing her songs in English, the Slovak singer appealed to the audience for solidarity with the Belarusian people.

“Without the Velvet Revolution we wouldn't have got anything”, - Petra Jordan said to the audience. “I'm here today, which would probably not be the case, if we had not gone through that. I'm passing the message to everyone, who is out there in the audience to pass it to all the other people – you are going to have a great concert tonight, but there is still a dictatorship, the last one in Europe, and it is in Belarus. We should let the people know, that there is a time for a change, and the change would be coming soon”.

These events were organized by the Office for a Democratic Belarus and were held under patronage of the Delegation on Relations with Belarus in the European Parliament.

The German Marshall Fund of the United States and the Slovak delegation in the EPP-ED group in the European Parliament also provided significant support to the project.

It is necessary to emphasise, that the Office for a Democratic Belarus decided to mark the anniversary of the March 2006 protest by cultural actions in the first place.

The events were united under the title “Minsk. Kalinouski Square. March 2006”. Thus, the photo exhibition about the post-election protests of March 2006 was unveiled on the 14th of March. The Free Theatre (Minsk) performed in Brussels the same day, presenting the public its plays “Being Harold Pinter” and “Generation Jeans”.

In the future, the Office for a Democratic Belarus will continue to implement innovative cultural project with the objective to create a new image of Belarus abroad.



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Square’) by the famous Belarusian dissident film director Yury Khashchavatski took place on the 24th of March.

The screening was followed by the concert of the Slovak singer Petra Jordan. The concert was held as a sign of solidarity with Belarus. The event proved to be a real success: the concert and the film were visited by more than 70 people.

The film by Yury Khashchavatski studies the backgrounds of the protests in Minsk in March, 2006. “Ploshcha” evoked a wide range of emotions among the viewers – from laughter till indignation. The screening was concluded by a lively discussion about the future of Belarus and its people.



Large Scale Demonstrations in Minsk

More than 10 000 people (numbers vary in all media) took part in the events marking the Freedom Day and the anniversary of the short-lived 1918 Belarus republic crushed by Bolshevik troops. The demonstration marks the one year anniversary of when police used force to break up mass protests in Minsk against the elections in which Lukashenka won a third term. The election was deemed neither free nor fair by the international community.

It was planned that participants will gather on the October Square in the center of Minsk, but the square was blocked by the riot police and participants of the action were forced to split into several groups. Only people with tickets for the theatre play "Swan Lake" could get onto the Poloshcha, as the performance was taking place in the Republic Palace. The area was full of riot police, three trucks and several busses were standing behind the surrounding buildings. Opposition leader Alyaksandr Milinkevich suggested to go to the Sport Palace and hold a demonstration there.

When they got to the planned destination, large number of policemen was already waiting for them announcing that in case people do not leave within the next five minutes, "special measures" would be taken against them. After some time, first clash took place. Several people were beaten, Aliaksandr Milinkevich and Inna Kulei were beaten as well.

Aliaksandr Milinkevich, Vintsuk Viachorka, Ales Straltsou, Igor Shinkarik and other members of the democratic opposition addressed the crowds. Milinkevich told supporters at the rally: "We are the majority. We will win. The authorities will fall under the pressure of their lies." Protesters in the demonstration shouted "Long Live Belarus!" as they made their way toward the city center. Milinkevich led the demonstrators in chants of "We want freedom!" and "Belarus will join the European Union!" Many carried blue EU or the white-red-white Belarusian flags. Participants of the rally called on the government to start fulfilment of the 12 conditions mentioned by the European Commission in the Non-paper that was released in November 2006

Russian MP Vladimir Ryzhkov said that Russia needed a free Belarus that would be part of the European family of nations. Nikita Belykh, leader of Russia's liberal Union of Right Forces, described Belarusian and Russian pro-democracy activists as "one family." Isa Hambar, leader of Azerbaijan's Musavat party, said that Europe would be united only when Belarus joined the European Union. Janusz Onyszkiewicz, member of the the European Parliament ex-



pressed solidarity with the Belarusian people, calling Belarus an "anomaly in the center of Europe.". In Germany, Chancellor Angela Merkel marked the 50-year anniversary of the creation of the European Union with words for the people of Belarus. She said the thoughts of the European Union are with the people in Belarus today. Ambassadors of the United States, Estonia, Germany, Latvia, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Romania and Lithuania were observing the rally.

In total, 40 people were arrested during March 25; and about 100—during March 23-25. According to human rights activists, arrests took place in Minsk, Hrodna, Brest, Vitsyebsk, Rahachow and Rechyt'sa. Reports have it that those detained included Valery Shchukin, a correspondent of the independent newspaper Narodnaya Volya, and Yuri Stepanaw of Radio Polonia. All the detained were charged of minor disorderly conduct. Workers of a special detention center of Minsk city executive committee in Akrestsin Street refused to accept food parcels for detained opposition activists. Some opposition activists received fines ranging from 62,000 rubels to 465,000 rubels.

Belarusian authorities have, as usual, blocked access to websites belonging to opposition media or carrying material about opposition rally, including the website of RFE/RL's Belarus Service.

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Lukashenka Promises to Grapple with Foreign Ambassadors



On the 28th of March for the first time Alyaksandr Lukashenka appeared in public. And from the very start he started with slashing attacks against opposition, which marked Freedom Day last week. Demonstrators who took to the streets on March 25 in Minsk, he called "a combat detachment that was marching around the city", and stated that he is to see into a matter of ambassadors who were present at that rally, as "in no other country of the world ambassadors are allowed to take part in illegal actions". The Belarusian leader told to journalists that he wouldn't tolerate oppositionists to stop processes which are taking place in the country. "We wouldn't yield the country to them. Speaking in Russian, we would clean clock to those who would dare to stop this process in the country. My influence and the force of the regime are in the fact that I am not holding on to the power, but I am not going to hand over this power to somebody tomorrow. The power is worthy of something only when it can defend itself, as grandfather Lenin said," Lukashenka noted. A. Lukashenka noted that he personally asked about events on March 25, actions of police, but he hadn't interfered, as Interior Minister Navumau and his team coped with everything. Besides, A. Lukashenka admitted that the process of the union state creation is braked from all sides, that real "logjams", in particular in customs sphere, in sugar deliveries, confectionery products and others spheres.

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A Message to People of Belarus from European Commission President José Manuel Barroso



Fifty years ago today, in Rome, the visionary idea of a unified Europe truly started to become a reality. Since then, this vision has fundamentally transformed the European continent. Where, before, a cycle of destructive wars was deeply entrenched, now peace and prosperity have become the rule. A unique pole of stability and democracy has emerged, based on respect for national identities, and on reconciliation, freedom and solidarity. The EU has also emerged as a global actor in its own right. We Europeans are rightly proud of this.

On this important day for Europe, and indeed, for Belarus, I would like to emphasize these significant achievements of the European

Union is ready to enter into a full partnership with Belarus on the basis of these values and towards these goals. I hope that we will soon see a willingness to move in this direction. Such a partnership would mean that the European Union's assistance to Belarus could be significantly increased and would thus help improve the quality of life of Belarusians. I am confident that the people of Belarus sees this outstretched hand as an opportunity to choose a democratic future, and I very much hope that the government of Belarus will reciprocate, beginning the reforms their people need and ending their self-imposed isolation.

I look forward to the day when Belarus takes its rightful place in a European family that shares the values of democracy, respect for human rights and the rule of law, and that yearns for lasting shared peace and prosperity.

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Press-Release from European Commission



Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighbourhood, Benita Ferrero-Waldner, on the reports of arrests in Belarus in the run-up and during the 25th March demonstrations:

"I am disappointed at the reports of arrests which took place across Belarus in the run-up and during the 25th March demonstrations in Minsk. Numerous peaceful demonstrators were intimidated and prevented from gathering on October square in Minsk on that day. I call on the Belarusian authorities to immediately release all those who are detained for having expressed their views freely and peacefully".

26/03/2007

Angela Merkel: "EU Will Support Belarusians on Road to Democracy"

German Chancellor and the chair of the Council of European Union Angela Merkel have called upon European deputies to support Belarus on its way to democracy. In the statement in the European parliament on importance of signing Berlin declaration Merkel underlined that this document means "a pledge to stand up for the future of the whole Europe together".

The German leader has underlined that Belarusian citizens "have a right to realize European ideals" in their country and that the EU "consciously supports Belarusians on this path", Radio Svaboda informs.

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Viktor Yanukovych: Democracy in Belarus to Be Speeded up



Ukrainian Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovych has expressed a hope that processes of democratization are to be speeded up in Belarus. "We hope that the process of democratization of Belarusian society would be speeded up. When the system of government would be changed? We think that it would be in the near future, but it's hard to say when exactly, I am not a predictor," told Viktor Yanukovych on March 27 after a conversation with the chairman of the European parliament Hans-Gerd Poettering. "Today's processes in Belarus cause discontent in the society. As neighbours we know what is going on there. However a gradual process of democratization is observed there, and it is performed by dwellers of border regions," Viktor Yanukovych specified. According to Ukrainian prime minister, dissatisfaction in Belarusian society comes from a possibility of dwellers of border regions to compare their standards of living with neighbours. In his turn, after the meeting with Viktor Yanukovych the head of the European parliament told that the sides have come to a common stand on Belarus. "We have come to an understanding that we are in Europe. Like the nation of Ukraine, we are interested in development of free democracy, and in particular, freedom in Belarus, support of opposition leader Milinkevich and liquidation of the last dictatorship in Europe," told Hans-Gerd Poettering.

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Belarus Wants to Restore Status at PACE, Reluctant to Release "Political Detainees" – Zabolotets

Parliamentary Assembly
Assemblée parlementaire



The Belarusian parliament hopes to restore the country's status as a special invitee at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) and believes the political dialogue must proceed without pressure.

"The position of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (PA OSCE) towards Belarus and our National Assem-

bly has become more pragmatic recently," Deputy Speaker of the House of representatives [the lower house of the parliament] Sergei Zabolotets told Interfax on Friday.

In particular, he praised the results of the joint seminar with PACE, OSCE held in Minsk, which studied Belarus's chances in joining the European Neighborhood policy.

"We hope that this event will be followed by others, and that our European colleagues will show common sense and restore the previous status of the National Assembly at PACE," Zabolotets said.

"It will be proof of understanding of the importance of strengthening cooperation with the Belarusian parliament and a real desire to normalize relations with Belarus on an equal basis," he said.

The deputy speaker said that Minsk does want a dialogue but would not accept a dictate from political opponents.

In particular, he rejected the EU's condition to release "the so-called political detainees."

"I know of no such political detainees. In each specific case they were convicted for specific wrongdoings according to the law. All must be equal before the law, there should be no exceptions," Zabolotets said.

26/03/2007

Opposition Activist Shatsikava was Taken in Mental Hospital

Opposition activist Krystsina Shatsikava was put in a mental hospital two days before a key opposition demonstration in Minsk. The activist was taken to the hospital by unknown people who forced her into a Niva car in downtown Mahilyow. Ms. Shatsikava said that she had been tied to a bed and given some unknown medicine by injection at the hospital. "I was 'zonked out' during the two days. My mom was told that I had not been given any medicines." Mr. Shatsikava said that she had not been diagnosed with any disease. "Questions that doctors asked me were not even about medical matters. I was asked who I go around with, who visits me and who calls me. This was not medicine but pure politics. My mom was told that I am mentally healthy." The opposition activist said that she was determined to complain about the doctors and the unknown people who had driven her to the hospital. The activist, known for her active participation in last spring's three-day protest vigil against Alyaksandr Lukashenka's reelection as president, was arrested in Minsk on March 22. She was taken to Mahilyow, where she officially resides, questioned by KGB officers in connection with a criminal case against young opposition leaders, and released on the same

day. She was interrogated once again at the city's KGB office on Friday. The young woman repeatedly said that she was set to participate in the opposition demonstration in central Minsk on March 25.

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Criminal Action against Andrei Klimau



The prosecutor's office has initiated a criminal action against a deputy of the Supreme Soviet of the 13th convocation, a former entrepreneur Andrei Klimau for libel against Alyaksandr Luka-

shenka. The reason for the criminal action was an article by Andrei Klimau placed at the web site of the United Civil Party "Revolution forever, or How to Skin Romany boar in Year of Pig". In the article Andrei Klimau wrote about personal involvement of Alyaksandr Lukashenka to abductions and assassinations of Belarusian oppositionists. It is not the first time when Andrei Klimau is charged with libelling the leader of Belarus. In 2005 a criminal action for libelling the president was tried in the court of Pershamajski district of Minsk behind the closed doors. The case was returned for further revision. Then the court of Tsentralny district of Minsk sentenced Andrei Klimau to imprisonment for staging a street protest on March 25, 2005. In December 2006 he was released.

02/04/2007

Satirical Cartoon Creator to Apply to Estonian Authorities for Asylum

Andrey Abozaw, a member of a group that in 2005 created satirical cartoons featuring Belarusian leader Alyaksandr Lukashenka and other top government officials, intends to apply to the Estonian authorities for asylum. Mr. Abozaw, who was the administrator of the Trety Put (The Third Path) group's Web site, fled Belarus after the Minsk City Prosecutor's Office instituted criminal proceedings over the cartoons in August 2005. The previous week, Mr. Abozaw was arrested in the Russian city of Tver. The Belarusian national had been put on the Russian police's wanted list at the request

of the Belarusian investigators. A Tver court however ruled that Mr. Abozaw might not be extradited to Belarus under national regulations, according to Trety Put's Web site. The Belarusian national was brought to the Estonian border under convoy on Monday. The prosecutor's office launched the criminal case against the group under Article 367, which carries a prison sentence of up to five years for the defamation of the president. The Committee for State Security (KGB) then raided the apartments of Mr. Abozaw, and project coordinator Pavel Marozaw, seizing 12 pieces of com-

puter equipment. Mr. Marozaw and Aleh Minich, fled the country. Press freedom and human rights watchdogs condemned the case as politically motivated.

30/03/2007

Russia Won't Grant \$1.5 Billion Credit to Belarus



Belarus is in negotiations with Russia on receiving a stabilization credit of \$1 billion, told first vice prime minister of Belarus Uladzimir Syamashka to journalists on Thursday. According to earlier reports, Belarus asked Russia to grant a stabilization credit of \$1.5 billion. Thus the sum of the credit had been reduced by \$500 million. As said by Syamashka, stabilization credit would allow Belarus to pay for deliveries of Russian energy resources in full. "We do not conceal that because of hike in price for energy resources Belarusian economy has got into a very difficult situation: gas prices have grown by more than two times. Even considering price range, price has grown by 20-25% because of higher import dues and a necessity to divide export duties for oil," he said. Last week Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov said that the issue of granting stabilization credit to Belarus would be settled quickly.

29/03/2007

Belarus Government Promises to Simplify Business-Regulating Administrative Procedures

The Belarusian government has prepared a draft resolution meant to improve and simplify administrative procedures. The step is believed to contribute to the investment attractiveness of the country, said Belarus prime minister Sergei Sidorskiy summing up results of today's session of the Foreign Investment Advisory Council. He noted, in the near future Belarus will pass several other legal acts to foster business development. "We will remove red-tape barriers hampering investors in buying land for building new facilities in Belarusian towns", said Sergei Sidorskiy. "You can build hotels, enterprises instead of tailing officials requesting permissions. These norms are regulated by the presidential decree on the allocation of ineffectively used land". A step has been made to promote effective utilisation of unfinished facilities. Investors can buy them for one basic amount, informed the prime minister.

02/04/2007

More Than 50% of Foreign Investors Say Investment Climate in Belarus Improving

Sociologists surveyed foreign investors working in Belarus and discovered that over 51% believe the investment climate in the country was improving. This information was voiced by premier Sergei Sidorskiy after a session of the Foreign Investment Advisory Council. The Belarusian head of government said that "for the first time in recent years have we reached the mark of 51%, or 19% more than before". "We are confidently moving to the top. Within the scope of five points investors gave Belarus 3.9 points for improving the investment climate. The Advisory Council is a collective body which provides advice to the government in the issues of foreign investment, improving the legislation considering the economic development of the country and neighbouring states. Annual growth stands at 20% on average. Last year the country attracted investment worth of Br19,3 trillion, or \$9 billion, including more than \$700 million foreign investments. "It is important that investments are funnelled into industry, real economy while some time ago they were mainly present in trade. This shows that the investment climate in Belarus, effective legislation guarantees long-

term investment in the country's economy to foreign investors," Sergei Sidorskiy stressed. The head of government thanked the foreign investors who participated in the work of the Advisory Council for constructive proposals. Taxes in Belarus are reduced on an annual basis. An investor believes the less are the taxes the more profits she/he will earn. This is normal. We take it easy and will continue reducing the tax load," the prime minister said. Belarus welcomes foreign investors in the sphere of high-technologies, in various branches of economy, for example, in agriculture, pharmaceutical and processing industries, he added. Foreign investors working in small towns will be given tax preferences for three years. But even after this "if the process goes on smoothly", the tax preferences for the investors may be extended, he added.

02/04/2007

Belarus plans to Open Joint Oil Production Enterprise in Venezuela



By August 2007 Belarus plans to set up a joint venture with Venezuela to extract oil in that country, the presidential press-service told today after president Alexander Lukashenko held a working meeting with Viktor Sheiman, the state secretary of the Security Council of Belarus and co-chairman of the joint Belarusian-Venezuelan high-level commission. Under an agreement with Hugo Chavez, Venezuela will provide Belarus with land plots with well-developed oil production infrastructure where Belarus will be able to extract no less than 2 million tons of oil every year beginning 2008. During the visit to Venezuela, the Belarusian delegation signed a total of 24 agreements, contracts and memoranda. Under the contracts, Belarus will sell tractors, trucks, road-building equipment, refrigerators and food to Venezuela. The parties reached agreements on cooperation in agriculture, machine-building. For example, a decision was taken to start assembling some types of Belarusian equipment in Venezuela.

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