

"Exchanging" Political Prisoners for the Dialogue with the West?

Releasing of the political prisoners in Belarus continues on: after the early February release of Zmitser Dashkevich, Mikalay Autukhovich, Yury Lyavonau and also the youngest political prisoner in Belarus Artur Finkevich, another surprise came on February 15th, when Andrey Klimau, an opposition politician was released.

Andrey Klimau was sentenced in August 2007 for insulting the president and calling for revolution in the article he posted on the Internet. To his own surprise, he was released after serving only 6 months of his 2 years imprisonment.

A week after Klimau's release, another political prisoner was set free. Just one day after the European Parliament passed the resolution calling for immediate and unconditional release of *all* political prisoners, Alyaksandr Zdvizhkov's three years penalty was reduced to three months which he already served by this time. He was released on February 22. Zdvizhkov was imprisoned due to his decision to print the Mohamed cartoons in March 2006 in Zgoda newspaper.

Considering all these early releases of political prisoners, these may be perceived as a signal of desire for better relations with European Union and United States of America after Russia decided to increase prices for oil exports to Belarus.

At the moment, there are still two prisoners of conscience. The former presidential candidate Alyaksandr Kazulin remains in prison, even though initially president Lukashenka offered him to leave the country to accompany his wife Irina for her cancer re-treatment in Germany. Kazulin, who was sentenced to 5 1/2 years in prison for organizing events that "disturbed public order", refused this offer as a way of expelling him from the country. Irina Kazulina died on February 23, 2008. Mr. Kazulin has gone on hunger strike in order to be released to attend his wife's funeral.

At the same time, young activist Andrei Kim remains in prison, waiting for his trial. He celebrates his 22nd birthday in prison on February 25, 2008. Mr. Kim was detained during the rally of entrepreneurs on January 21 and is charged for "violence or a threat of violence against policemen".

Sources:

Belapan, Radio Free Europe/RadioLiberty, Charter 97

Entrepreneurs' protest continues

Small businesses in Belarus are on the strike: from the beginning of the year they protest against the presidential decree that doesn't allow them to hire employees other than three family members. If they do so, they are supposed to pay double tax fees.

The first protest rally took place on January 10, 2008, next on January 21, 2008. Another rally followed on February 18, during which the police took action and detained several protesters. Among them was also the leader of the Movement for Freedom and former presidential candidate Alyaksandr Milinkevich. After several hours of detainment, all were released without charges.

Source:

Radio Free Europe/RadioLiberty