

EC Opens Delegation in Belarus

On April 18, the European Commission opened its Minsk delegation. The opening was the culmination of a process lasting more than two years, although the event itself went unnoticed by a majority of both the domestic as well as international media. Importantly, the opening of the Delegation took place in a time when the US Embassy in Minsk is being pressured by the Belarusian authorities to drastically reduce its staff and in the light of the recent decision from the Council of the European Union to prolong the visa ban for Belarusian officials.

The European Commission has been working to open a Minsk office since 2005. Despite the effort and numerous EU concessions it was not until late 2007 that significant developments in relations between Brussels and Minsk took place. In 2007, President Lukashenka authorized Belarusian Deputy Foreign Minister Valerij Varanetski to negotiate with the Commission. The agreement establishing the EC Delegation was finally signed on March 7 this year in Brussels between EU External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner and Varanetski. The long-awaited Minsk decision to allow the opening of the EC Delegation has sparked a hope about a 'liberalizing' tendency within the Belarusian regime.

"We are ready to re-engage with you and move toward normalization of our relations, provided that additional serious steps are taken in Belarus toward democratization", Ferrero-Waldner said. Her statement was supported by Jean-Eric Holzapfel, first counselor at the European Commission's Kyiv-based Delegation to Ukraine and Belarus, now heading the delegation in Minsk, who described the signing of the agreement as an "important" event for relations between Belarus and the European Union.

Within two days of the opening of the Delegation, the Council of the EU and the Commission extended the travel restrictions and freezing of financial assets against certain Belarus officials for another year, to be reassessed on 10 April 2009. The action was a reflection of the fraudulent elections and referendum in October 2004, the violations of international electoral standards in the March 2006 elections and the crackdown on civil society and the democratic opposition, as well as the current development in the country, such as raids on demonstrators and the free press.

Sources:

RFE/RL, Bellorusskije Novosti, BelaPAN, TASR, Delegation of the European Commission to Belarus

Civic activist Andrei Kim sentenced to one and a half years in prison

On April 22nd, a court in Minsk delivered its verdict for ten young activists, who took part in the January protests of small entertainers and self-employees who were protesting against a new law increasing taxation. Around 3,000 people were in attendance at the rally.

Seven activists, Michail Pashkevich, Alexei Bondar, Artsem Dubski, Ales Straltsov, Andrei Charnyshov, Michail Kryvau and Tatsjana Tsishkevich were sentenced to two years of corrective labor. Another two activists were ordered to pay a fine of 3.5 million Belarusian rubles (\$1,640) each.

Andrei Kim, a 22-year old activist of the youth association *Initiative* was among many other protesters who were sentenced to between 5-15 days in prison following the January protests. His group *Initiative* organizes flash mobs, street gatherings and solidarity activities with political prisoners in Belarus. Unlike those others sentenced,

Andrei spent 10 days in prison and after which was also charged with violence against a police officer, allegedly taking place during the January protests.

A video, which was expected to confirm Kim's attack on a policeman, did not provide any such evidence. On April 22nd the young activist was sentenced based on the oral testimony of the allegedly-attacked policeman.

Andrei Kim has remained in detention since January, despite the release of all political prisoners but one- the former presidential candidate Alyaksandr Kazulin. This followed an increase in pressure on the regime from the USA in February after the introduction of a new set of trade sanctions against Belarusian companies based abroad.

By releasing political prisoners, Minsk supposedly sought to avoid another set of US economic sanctions against the state company Belneftekhim, and possibly affecting private finances of some of the regime's representatives. The Belarusian side has since pushed the US Embassy in Minsk to reduce its staff to less than a half. American Ambassador Karen Stewart left the country in the first half of March.

Via the release of prisoners the regime intended to demonstrate its fulfilment of one of the 12 political conditions defined by the European Union in November 2006 to start political dialogue. The dialogue has been frozen following the unconstitutional referendum in 1996, the referendum in 2004 as well as the parliamentary elections in 2004. The most prominent regime representatives are now refused entry to EU countries. Although the EU – the largest business partner of Belarus – stated convergence will only be possible after the fulfilment of all 12 conditions, differences between the stances of member states has meant the EU has become ready to accept a more minimalist version based solely on one point; the release of all political prisoners - in order to start a dialogue. However even this one point has not been fulfilled in its entirety, as the regime continues to be too fearful of releasing Alexander Kazulin.

The Pontis Foundation believes that the arrest and conviction of *Initiative* activist Andrei Kim was based on untrustworthy accusations. It represents another means of the regime to exploit its citizens as "hostages" in the negotiations with the European Union and the USA with the eventual goal to minimalize their influence on domestic politics.

Sources:

Radio Svaboda, Charter97