

All Belarusian political prisoners released

Within a short period of time, Belarus released all remaining persons who were recognized as political prisoners by the European Union and the USA. The most prominent one, Aliaksander Kazulin, was freed on August 16, 2008 while Andrej Kim and Syarhei Parsyukevich were released only four days later. The President Lukashenka's decision to grant them a pardon was welcomed by prominent EU and US representatives.

Mr. Kazulin was sentenced to five and half years of prison for organizing anti-governmental demonstrations, the other two men were sentenced due to their engagement in protests of entrepreneurs earlier this year for one and half and two and half years.

The release of all political prisoners was among conditions set by the West for re-starting the dialogue with official Minsk. Both USA and EU reacted to the news positively by speaking of possibility "of a significant improvement in relations" and "for a gradual resumption of dialogue." Following these statements USA sent a representative to Belarus to hold talks about improving the relations between the countries and EU stated that "this latest development could offer [...] the possibility of a review of the restrictive measures which [EU] has adopted against Belarus." These measures include travel ban on President Lukashenka and other more than 30 top Belarusian officials.

The development raised speculations about real reasons for the release of political prisoners which took place a month ahead of the parliamentary elections in Belarus. Some analysts (such as Jan Maksymiuk, Philippa Runner) argue that the step is most probably connected with Lukashenka's struggle to improve relations with the West by organizing "free and fair" elections and at least partially fulfilling EU and US demands. On the other hand, Lukashenka's sincerity about liberalization of the regime is undermined by the adoption of a controversial media law introducing new regulations over free press and internet media and obstructions the regime posed for opposition-nominated members of the election commissions.

Sources: Reuters, AFP, EUobserver, RFE/RL, BBC

Russian and Belarusian president discuss air defense and Georgia

Russian and Belarusian presidents met in Russia's Black Sea resort Sochi on August 19. They agreed that treaty on creation of a common air defense system of Russia and Belarus should be signed in the autumn. This is by many commentators perceived as a reaction to the deployment of US missile defense components in Poland and the Czech Republic.

Almost two weeks after the beginning of the war between Russia and Georgia and following the statements of Russian officials expressing disappointment about Belarus' belated support for Russian actions in Georgia and South Ossetia, the President Lukashenka made a statement on the Russia-Georgia conflict by marking Russian actions as "quiet and calm reaction which restored peace in the region." According to him the criticism of Russia by the Western states and America was „unwise“. Despite this verbal support, Belarus did not offer Russia any material aid.

Sources: The Moscow Times, Itar-Tass, RIA Novosti