

### **Belarusian Foreign Minister meets EU Troika**

On January 27 Belarusian Foreign Minister Syarhei Martynau held talks with the EU Troika. The meeting took place in the middle of a six-month suspension period of the visa ban against Belarusian officials. It was aimed at reviewing the evolution of the bilateral relations following the previous meeting in October 2008. The partners concluded that they had upheld the positive impetus in the relations that was stepped up by Belarus and the EU in 2008.

Benita Ferrero-Waldner, the EU's External Relations Commissioner, said after the talks that the dialogue was "encouraging". "Of course, we're halfway, so to say, with Belarus, but we see that they are taking important steps that go in the right direction". The steps include allowing printing and distribution of the two independent newspapers (Narodnaia Volia and Nasha Niva) and registration of movement "For Freedom". The Belarusian government also promised to simplify registration procedures for the country's media, improve the situation of the civil society and lately agreed on cooperation with OSCE regarding electoral law reform.

In order to avoid sanctions to be re-instated in April and potentially to become a full-fledged member of the Eastern Partnership Belarus has to meet five conditions set by the EU as they were announced by the head of the European Commission's office in Belarus – Jean-Eric Holzapfel. These include reform of the electoral code and concrete action to safeguard democratic values, the rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms - including those of expression and assembly.

According to undisclosed experts inquired by the media, not much "concrete" progress has been achieved so far in any of these areas. EU diplomats as well as European Parliament members note, however, an improved "atmosphere" in EU-Belarusian relations.

*Sources: RFE/RL, Javno, ISRIA, Europolitics, Belarusian Review*

### **Viktar Sheyman Returns**

Only six months after his dismissal from the position of the Head of Belarus' Security Council, Viktar Sheyman has been appointed Assistant to the President for Special Assignments. The president's decision did not specify any concrete tasks or duties Sheyman would be responsible for in his new position.

The official was "transferred" from the previous position after July's bomb blasts in Minsk. The bomb that exploded during a concert commemorating the Independence Day caused injuries to some 50 people. President Lukashenka dismissed him reasoning that Sheyman was the "first one to blame" for the incident. Even after losing the position in Security Council, however, Sheyman was kept as the co-chairman of the Belarus-Venezuelan Committee on Cooperation.

According to the 2004 report of the Council of Europe on Belarus (prepared by Cyprian parliamentarian Christos Pourgourides), Viktar Sheyman was involved in 1999-2000 disappearances of a Belarusian journalist, entrepreneur and two opposition figures. His name also remained on the visa ban list even after October 13, 2008, when the European Union suspended sanctions on other 36 Belarusian state officials, including the President Lukashenka.

*Sources: Naviny, Council of Europe*