

## ***I Live the Life of Congress***

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To:

*President of the Congress of non-governmental organizations of the Council of Europe*  
**Annelise Oeschger**

*General Director on Democracy and Politics of the Council of Europe*  
**Jean-Lois Lorain**

*Deputy-chief of NGO and civil community, CE Secretariat*  
**Plamen Nikolov**

*Chairman of the Council of the laboratory for legislative initiatives,  
Director of the Ukrainian school of Political studies*  
**Ihor Kohut**

*Chairman of the Centre for East European democracy*  
**Pavel Kazanecki**

*Executive Director of the International foundation “Rebirth”*  
**Yevhen Bystrytsky**

*Director of the Belarusian institute for strategic research*  
**Vital Silitsky**

*Dear ladies and gentlemen,*

This letter can be considered as a response to the Kiev regional congress held on November 25–27, 2007, where I was a participant.

The forum seemed to be very interesting. As you remember, every speaker made an analysis of the situation in the region and in his own country and touched the problems and the peculiar features of the NGO activity in Belarus. Soon I could understand the great difference in the conditions existed for the civil community development in the neighbouring Ukraine and those in our country. In Ukraine the state and business structures support this process. In our country we observe just the opposite situation and great efforts are undertaken to suppress the independent political and social organizations. Recently, for example, the office leasing charge was done 10 times higher... Retaining home from the forum I was troubled because of the absence of constructive decisions on our everyday problems. Still worse was the fact that all suggestions about the choice of the Belarusian NGOs development ways and frames of work seemed to be deadlock when being analyzed more thoroughly.

One opinion, for example, was absolutely justified and proper and I have supported it when speaking, i.e. if it is not possible to struggle with the totalitarian regime then let us develop the civil community and expand the NGO network. At least, it is the only thing left for us. Asserting our constitutional rights we should expand the work despite the destructive wish and energy of the “power vertical” officials. However, the forces opposing each other are not equal. That’s why it is not a surprise that our analysts prefer to speak not about the civil community in Belarus in general but about social associations, separate small islands of civil community that were not destroyed.

It seems that suggestions about the NGO cooperation with authorities unfortunately have no future. I assert it despite the success of our Organizing committee to perpetuate the memory of the Stalinist repressions victims gained in the Memorial Year. Offensive work of the Organizing committee, about one hundred of appeals, publications, letters which we sent to different governmental bodies often made the officials get in correspondence and carry on a “dialogue” with us on the issue of mass repressions in the country recognition or non-recognition and their actualization and covering in mass media. The end of our “siege” of the governmental walls was that the authorities made the problem of the repressions public on TV — the national channel ONT broadcasted a short movie with state officials and social organizing committee members participating. Still this case is rather an exception.

I’d like to refer to my own experience of some other kind.

In May 1999 on the initiative of the SA “Belarusian Social and Ecological Union “Chernobyl” (I am the head of this organization) and in cooperation with the UN Office in Belarus and OSCE Consultative and Watching Group the International scientific and practical conference “Formation of the civil community in Belarus in the context of sustainable development” was held. We managed to gather at the round table both the democratic parties and movements representatives and governmental bodies, institutions and parliament ones. The debates were rather critical and the conference worked out the well-grounded recommendations. The Conference proceedings were published in a book in Belarusian, Russian and English. And what was next? No one of the officials was touched upon by this forum.

One more example: in summer 2002 the “Belarusian Social-Ecological Union “Chernobyl” in cooperation with the Belarusian Writers’ Union held under the aegis of the UNESCO the three-day international symposium “Diversity of languages and cultures in the context of globalization”. The UNESCO Director-General Koïchiro Matsuura and the representatives of over 20 European countries participated at this symposium. It couldn’t have been ignored by the Ministers of Education and Culture. The symposium proceedings were published in two volumes and are of interest for scholars and students who ask them in libraries. Unfortunately, the draconian attitude of the officials towards the native language and culture has not changed in Belarus. Why?.. At the conditions of the authoritarian regime the officials deal with not the civil community but with ruler, dictator, Fuhrer. However he, as it is in our case, has no respect either to the history of his own country or to its language and culture...

Presently scientific and technological studies of a nuclear power plant construction began in Belarus. And despite many Belarusian citizens consider this idea after the Chernobyl accident as absurd and economic calculations prove it to be disadvantageous, this project is being galloped, as there is only a half-step from a peaceful atom to a nuclear weapon as many people think. At present there are certain technological restrictions. Still atom is to be got control over. And such an ambitious leader of the country as ours can’t go without a bomb in the pocket as it is like to go hunting without gun-powder.

Decision on the nuclear power plant building in Belarus was taken in secret, without being discussed and submitted to the public approval, the principles and claims of the Orhus agreement signed by our state leader in December 1999 thus being violated.

At the end of the 1980s our public community mobilized by writers stopped realization of some destructive draining project planned for the Belarusian Polesie. According to the project it was foreseen to cut off the large river flood-lands from the very river Pripyat, to straighten and to drain it. If we hadn't stopped this project timely, in Belarus there has been already a desert.

Coming home from Kiev I tried to comprehend the things heard again and again. And I saw the greater perspective, what really could be done to form and develop the civil community in Belarus.

As for the EU approaches to our country, they are, to my mind, too much traditional and standard, this is in fact not so bad. At the same time this is some disadvantage.

The authorities of Belarus ignore historic and cultural features of our people, that consider both the sovereignty and national culture and language as great values. The Belarusians struggled for these values not once. It's necessary to mention here the Kastus Kalinousky uprising (1863), the great contribution to the national revival made in 1860–1917 by the Belarusian writers Dunin-Martsinkevich, Bahushevich, Kupala, Kolas, Bahdanovich, Lastouski, the Lutskevich brothers, the great efforts of the politician Raman Skirmunt (landowner), Belarusian People's Republic (BPR) formation (1918), Slutsk insurrection (to support the BPR) (1920), the revival national movement in BSSR (1920–1929), student youth disturbances demanding the Belarusian language education (1960), numerous letters of intelligentsia and simple people to M.Gorbachev during the *perestroika* period demanding the national values restitution (1987–1988), Belarusian People's Front movement, at last the Republic of Belarus formation and activity (1991–1995, up to constitutional coup d'état), present day actions of the political parties and youth movements, all that is a clear evidence of those hopes and dreams that are always hidden in the souls of the Belarusians.

I have a friend, he is a writer Leanid Marakou. He investigates the repressions against the Belarusian nation beginning from 1792 when Belarus was incorporated to Russia as a result of Europe repartition. According to him, the most talented and active Belarusians were repressed every 20 years (with some fluctuations) beginning from the time of incorporation, suppressed and russified. The repressions achieved their peak in 1930–1940s, when near all the Belarusian-speaking and patriotically oriented intelligentsia was liquidated — 1,5 million Belarusians became the “enemies of the nation” and were either exiled to the North and Siberia (the best variant) or placed in the concentration camps. The Belarusian literature was also destroyed. According to existing documents during the only period of 1935 it was eliminated 1800 titles of books, total amount of 12 million copies. Patriotic musical pieces and compositions, Belarusian songs and traditions became out of use. The written originals were burned out...

Is it not a genocide of the nation?

Thus, this genocide continues, and those boys and girls repressed in 2007 and shown on the regional forum screen by L.Tankacheva are also victims of it. The official Belarusian political strategists need this suffocation of young patriotic people in Belarus for that not a thing could be said against when time of the Russia's annexation of Belarus comes.

Today everyone speaking Belarusian is listed to the opposition meaning potential enemies of the regime. That's why the only Belarusian language speaking lyceum having previously worked in Minsk is also listed to the “enemies”. Now it has to conduct the lessons with the pupils abroad.

The number of Belarusian language schools in Belarus at present is terribly decreasing, there is no one higher educational institution for the indigenous Belarusian language speaking people.

Today the parliament, the National Assembly, as well as the President, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Education, the National Academy of Sciences use the language of the neighbouring country as a working one, disregarding the language of the native people. The Russian speaking Minister of Education heads the Commission on the Belarusian language reform. Lately he became the leader of the “power party” “Belaya Rus” (“White Rus”) and one dares predict the total involving of the school and universities teachers into the dubious anti-Belarusian politics. This Minister decided to issue an order to all the educational institutions of the country that the writers (members of the national Belarusian Writers’ Union, being some time ago deprived illegally of their property including the Writers’ House and out-patients’ clinic) must not be invited to the literary soirees to schools, institutions, universities, other educational establishments. At the approval of this Minister the works by popular writers who can be considered the national honor of the Belarusians were striked out from curriculum.

At the same time many officials understand the absurdity of this situation. If we compare, for example, the situation connected with the national school, culture and science in the 1930s, the period of the Stalinist repressions and terror, development with that under Lukashenko and Radkov, so strange though it may seem, the comparison would not be in favour of the present day.

To help change it and mobilize the people, the youth in particular to the democratic and cultural and educational reforms, I think we need quite a different strategic policy of the EU and CE NGOs.

They should raise their voice against the discrimination of native people not removing from agenda other principal questions on Lukashenko’s regime. The EU could have a motivated and logical support of the UNESCO and UNO on this issue. The International Court could possibly have a subject for consideration.

What EU and CU NGOs Programmes could be of the greatest effect?

First, foreign and domestic political campaign directed against the native people discrimination, in particular the patriotic and democratically oriented youth.

Second, establishing in neighbouring Ukraine with support of its authorities the National Belarusian University and the Belarusian cultural Centre so much spoken about.

Next I shall name the subjects which could be significant of the immediate support if being worked out. They are the following: support of the democratic mass media, independent newspapers available to impoverished people, development of radio, TV and computer mass media. Cultural and educative programmes for students and schoolchildren could also have a success, as well as publication of interesting well-designed books in Belarusian, and annual competitions for better knowledge of the native history, culture and language, workshops for the creative youth, tours of the historic places organized by the NGO’s (with possible support of some state bodies or without). And for the European community to be better aware of the Belarusian people life it would not be out of place to translate and publish the best fiction works of the Belarusian literature...

No doubt, the questions put in this letter are to be discussed and analyzed. Some other suggestions will appear in the process of these questions discussion. By the way, in the Internet in the near future will appear the website (developed by our group) “WE ARE THE NATION!” ([www.nation-sos.info](http://www.nation-sos.info)).

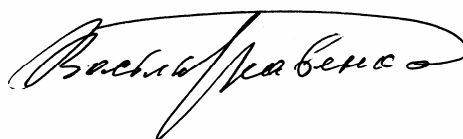
The strategic approaches and programmes suggested for discussion, I believe, could have quicker roused the people for the democratic transformations.

I ask the leaders and organizers of the Kiev regional congress the honoured *Mrs. A. Oeschger, Mr. J.-L. Lorain, Mr. P. Nikolov and Mr. P. Kazanecky* inform the CE officers about my ideas and suggestions taking into consideration the fact that in Russia there appear the followers of the ambitious policy of Lukashenko. Thus the situation becomes worse and in Belarus, with the connivance of the authorities, the pro-fascist organizations are coming to life and begin to act.

Let's help the Belarusians to believe in themselves, gather themselves up and feel self-respect!

*Vasil Yakavenka*

30.12.2007



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#### BIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCE

***Yakavenka Vasil Tsimafeevich**, b. 1936, a leader of the ecological initiatives and the Belarusian Social-Ecological Union "Chernobyl" (since 1987), editor of the social-ecological newspaper "Nabat" (1991–1996), chairman of the Auditing Commission of the Belarusian Writers' Union, co-chairman of the Organizing Committee to perpetuate the memory of the Stalinist repressions victims.*

*Author of the fiction and publicistic books, historical novel "The Breakdown" and trilogy "The Century of Martyrdom". The last works are based on documentary material and devoted to life, dramas and tragedies of the Belarusian people during the last century.*

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