2006 Sakharov Prize - supporting Freedom of Thought around the world

Every year, the European Parliament awards the Sakharov Prize for "Freedom of Thought" to exceptional individuals or organisations fighting against oppression, intolerance and injustice. Nelson Mandela, Kofi Annan and the UN are among former winners. The award is a visible means for Parliament to honour and support those who have put themselves at risk in the cause of liberty. This focus looks at the 2005 winners and profiles those who have been nominated for 2006.

The prize is named after Andrei Sakharov (1921-1989), one of the leading scientists who developed the hydrogen bomb for the Soviet Union, and who later became an outspoken critic of the nuclear arms race. In 1970 he founded a committee on human rights. His activities did not go unnoticed, in the Soviet Union he was jailed, while in the West he received the Nobel Peace prize in 1975.

The award founded in 1988 that bears his name is to recognise achievement in the following fields:
- defence of human rights and fundamental freedoms, particularly the right to free expression
- safeguarding the right of minorities
- respect for international law
- development of democracy and implementation on the rule of law

The prize is awarded to persons, associations or organisations irrespective of their nationality, place of residence or seat.

Why does the European Parliament support the prize?

The promotion and protection of human rights, democracy and the rule of law is one of the most fundamental of the European Parliament's roles. It has a number of "tools" to help this aim, they include:

A Subcommittee on human rights to monitor the situation internationally. There is also a yearly report on the human rights situation in countries both inside and outside the European Union. The reports list breaches of human rights and make practical suggestions for improving matters.

During Parliament's monthly plenary sessions, Thursday afternoon is reserved for debates on human rights. In September MEPs debated Zimbabwe, North Korea and Sri Lanka. Parliament also adopted regular resolutions condemning governments that breach human rights - the latest being on China. Parliament can also decide to allocate EU money to projects promoting human rights or democracy.
Who selects the winner?

Every year Political Groups in the Parliament and MEPs nominate potential candidates. From this list, the Committees on Foreign Affairs and Development jointly select three "finalists". The chairpersons of the political groups (the "Conference of Presidents") then select a winner. The prize is formally awarded by the President of the Parliament during the December Plenary session, on or around 10 December, which is also the day on which the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights was signed in 1948.

The winner receives a certificate and a cheque for €50,000. One of last year's winners, Hauwa Ibrahim, used the prize money to fund children's education in her native Nigeria.
**Focus**

**Last years winners: "Ladies in white", Hauwa Ibrahim, "Reporters without Frontiers"**

Last year the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought was awarded to three laureates: Cuban protest movement "Damas de Blanco", Nigerian human rights lawyer Hauwa Ibrahim and an association defending press freedom "Reporters without Borders". One year after the awarding of the 2005 prize we contacted the laureates and asked them about the influence the prize had on their activities.

"Ladies in white" ("Damas de Blanco") are a group of women who stand up for the rights of Cuban political prisoners. They have been protesting peacefully every Sunday since 2004 against the continued detention of their husbands and sons who are political dissidents in Cuba. They wear white as a symbol of peace and the innocence of those imprisoned.

One year after: "You don't know what this has meant to us," one of the Ladies told Laly Garcia-Pedrosa, a member of the Cuban American National Foundation, who serves as a liaison to the Ladies in White. The Sakharov prize award "offered them big protection. It meant being recognized outside Cuba and also made them well-known inside Cuba," said Ms Garcia-Pedrosa. The award helped them a lot in their work, protected them and won them respect from the Cuban government.

The Ladies in White are still struggling for the freedom of their men folk. Every Sunday they dress in white and go to Santa Rita Church in Miramar, then walk silently in the street. Now people recognise them, know who they are and why they are in the street.

**Hauwa Ibrahim** is a leading civil right lawyer from northern Nigeria, defending women who face being stoned to death for adultery and young people facing punishment for theft under Islamic Sharia law.

One year after receiving the Sakharov prize, Ms Ibrahim considers that "the award is opening gates and offers a lot of other opportunities". In June-August 2005, while officially investigating the killing of 6 citizens by the Nigerian police, she wrote a 2000 pages report, which was not accepted by the country's President at the time. After she received the Sakharov prize, one of the ministers wrote her an email saying that the president congratulated her on it and also accepted and used the once-rejected report.

"My receiving the Sakharov prize changed a paradigm, a vision in my country." She made an endowment with the money she received from EP. Several other people contributed to it and the interest of the sum helped 14 children, boys and girls, go back to school. "Women's education is still an issue in my country; I became educated by accident and I wanted to put this money back into education."

Currently she is a visiting Professor at Saint Louis University in the US. The news of her receiving the Sakharov prize made a headline in the university magazine at the time. In December 2006 she will go back to Nigeria and continue her human rights work.

**"Reporters without Frontiers"** is an international organisation campaigning for press freedom throughout the world. It also champions the protection of journalists and other media professionals from censorship or harassment.

Reporters without borders spokesman Jean-François Julliard said, "for us the prize gave us notoriety and credibility above all because people recall that we have received the prize last year. We will continue to do our work in defence of freedom of the press".

Time will tell who will join them on the list of Laureates.
2006 Sakharov prize nominees

This year’s nominees for the Sakharov prize represent a range of fields from the support of civil society against totalitarian regimes and defending the rights of minorities to combating violence against women and fighting for peace, dialogue and freedom of expression. The 10 nominees for 2006 were presented Tuesday to the European Parliament's Committees on Foreign Affairs and Development and the Subcommittee on Human Rights.

Hélène Flautre, chair of the Subcommittee on Human Rights, noted the diversity of this year's candidates and said that “the 2006 award represents a year's work of the EP in the field of human rights”.

The Committee on Foreign Affairs and the Committee on Development will agree a shortlist of three candidates on 25 September, in a joint meeting. The list will be forwarded to the leaders of the political parties, the Conference of Presidents, which will select the winner in October.

Each nominee has been proposed by at least 37 MEPs or by a political group. Below is the list of nominees, together with a brief description.

Ingrid Betancourt
A former Colombian Senator and Presidential candidate as well as a leading campaigner against corruption and drug trafficking. She has been held by the "FARC" (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) since 23 February, 2002. She has been nominated by Marie-Arlette Carlotti (PSE) on behalf of a group of MEPs.

Colombia: for all those fighting for the hostages kidnapped
The group of people (individuals and associations) fighting against hostage-taking and supporting the victims and their families in Colombia, which houses 80% of the world's imprisoned hostages - more than 3000 people.
Nominated by Monica Frassoni and Daniel Cohn-Bendit on behalf of the Greens/EFA group, supported by José Salafranca (EPP-ED), Fernando Fernández Martín (EPP-ED), Frédérique Ries (ALDE) and others.

Fulda-Moscho Project of Prof. Muthgard Hinkelmann-Toewe
The goal of the project is to overcome female genital mutilation (FGM) in the Moscho region in Kenya and improve the living conditions of women. Between 2002 and 2005 the rate of FGM in the region was reduced from 98% to 66%.
Nominated by Alexander Alvaro (ALDE) on behalf of a group of MEPs.

Vladimir Kozlov
A minority and human rights activist, he is the leader of the Mari ethnic opposition against the totalitarian regime in the Republic of Mari El (Russian Federation). He is also a writer and a journalist fighting for freedom of expression.
Nominated by Toomas Ilves (PSE) on behalf of a group of MEPs.

Bishop Erwin Kräutler
An Austrian Catholic bishop, who is a missionary in Brazil. He is fighting for the rights of indigenous minorities and the preservation of the rain forest in Brazil and the whole Amazon region.
Nominated by Herbert Bösch (PSE) on behalf of a group of MEPs.

Somaly Mam
A Cambodian human rights defender, she is fighting against infant prostitution and sex slavery among women and children in Cambodia and South-East Asia. She founded the AFESIP (Agir pour les femmes en situation précaire) association, whose goal is to socially reintegrate the victims of sex-trafficking.
Nominated by Jules Maaten on behalf of the ALDE group.
Alexander Milinkevich
The leader of the opposition in Belarus. An ex-presidential candidate against President Alexander Lukashenko, he is calling for a democratic future for his country. In April 2006 he was jailed for 15 days for taking part in an unauthorised rally in Minsk.
Nominated by Jacek Saryusz-Wolski on behalf of the EPP-ED group and by Brian Crowley on behalf of the UEN group.

Ghassan Tueni
A Lebanese journalist and diplomat, he is an enthusiastic supporter of the Arabic identity. He is the father of Gebrane Tueni, the Lebanese newspaper editor who was assassinated last year. Nominated for Sakharov prize in memory of assassinated Lebanese personalities: Rafiq Hariri, Basil Lléhan, Samir Kassir, George Haoni and Gebrane Tueni.
Nominated by Béatrice Patrie and Véronique de Keyser on behalf of the PSE group and by Francis Wurtz on behalf of the GUE/NGL group.

Mesfin Wolde-Mariam
A founding member of EHRCO (Ethiopian Human Rights Council) and human rights defender, he is fighting against violence and famine in Ethiopia and for a more humane socio-political order. Arrested in November 2005, he is currently on trial facing the risk of capital punishment if convicted.
Nominated by Ana Gomes (PSE) on behalf of a group of MEPs.

"Women in Black" - Belgrade
This Serbian feminist-antimilitarist peace organisation campaigns for reconciliation between nations and ethnicities across the former Yugoslavia and recognition of the crimes committed by the Serbian military and paramilitary during recent wars.
Nominated by Jelko Kacin (ALDE) on behalf of a group of MEPs.
Sakharov prize finalists

Three finalists for the 2006 Sakharov prize were chosen on 25 September by members of the Committees on Foreign Affairs and Development. The purpose of the prize is to reward individuals and organisations fighting for freedom of thought, irrespective of their nationality or place of residence. The three candidates are, in alphabetical order:

- All those fighting for the hostages kidnapped in Colombia, represented by Ingrid Betancourt and the Pais Libre Foundation;

- Aliaksandr Milinkevich, leader of the opposition in Belarus and an ex-presidential candidate who was jailed for 15 days for taking part in an unauthorised rally in Minsk;

- Ghassan Tueni, a Lebanese journalist and diplomat, who has been nominated for the prize to commemorate the sacrifices of several prominent Lebanese figures who were assassinated: Rafiq Hariri, Basil Fuleihan, Samir Kassir, Georges Haoui and Gebran Tueni.

The Conference of Presidents will choose a winner in October. The prize will be formally awarded by the President of the Parliament on 13 December during the plenary session.
Sakharov finalist No 1: Those who campaign for hostages in Colombia

Ahead of the awarding of the Sakharov prize for freedom of thought in December, Parliament's website is running profiles of the 3 finalists. Today we look at the nomination of "All those fighting for the release of kidnapped hostages in Colombia". As nominees, this group is represented by former Colombian Presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt (herself a hostage), and the "Pais Libre" (free country) foundation which campaigns on behalf of those held hostage and their families.

Colombia is one of the most dangerous places in the world. Decades of violent conflict between government forces, leftist guerrillas and right-wing paramilitaries have left tens of thousands dead and thousands held hostage. It is estimated that there are currently 3000 people held hostage in Colombia, 80% of the world's total. Added to this is the carnage caused by Colombia being one of the world's largest producers of cocaine, a lucrative trade that has fuelled the violence and instability.

Ingrid Betancourt: campaigner for peace in Colombia

Ingrid Betancourt was someone who advocated a negotiated settlement to Colombia's problems. She stood as a Presidential candidate in the 2002 Presidential election on a platform of anti-drug trafficking, anti-corruption and the need to negotiate with the FARC guerrilla movement, (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) - something the government started in October. Mrs Betancourt was abducted on 23 February 2002, and is believed to be held by FARC.

She was a former Colombian MP, Senator and founder of the "Oxygen" political party whose aim was to secure an end to the conflict through dialogue. Her campaigns against drug-trafficking, corruption in public life and violence made her many enemies. She received numerous death threats and survived an assassination attempt.

"Pais Libre" foundation: supporter of hostages and their families

This independent Colombian foundation campaigns not only for the release of hostages, but also for the welfare of those whose loved ones may have been abducted. It also helps victims of extortion.

Pais Libre aims to raise awareness of the problem in Colombia and the wider world and provides support and advice to those who have been affected by kidnapping. They also campaign for changes on the law in Colombia. The foundation offers psychological advice and advises people how to negotiate with kidnappers who are demanding ransoms. The organization does not participate in negotiations, support families financially or denounce crimes to the authorities. All of its services are free to victims.

There are two other finalists for the 2006 Sakharov prize. They are:

Alexander Milinkevich - Belarus opposition leader, to be profiled on 17 October:
Ghassan Tueni - journalist and representative of leading figures assassinated in Lebanon - 24 October.
Finalist No 2: Belarus opposition leader gets Sakharov nomination

Aliaksandr Milinkevich, 59 year old physicist and leader of Belarus's political opposition has been shortlisted as one of 3 finalists for the European Parliament's 2006 Sakharov prize for freedom of thought. The others are those who campaign for freedom of hostages in Colombia and Ghassan Tueni, who represents assassinated figures in Lebanon. In March Mr Milinkevich stood in Presidential elections against Alexander Lukashenko - the results of which were condemned by the EU and the US.

Mr Milinkevich was later jailed for 15 days protesting the result. President Lukashenko's supporters say the election this year gave him 82% of the vote with Mr Milinkevich getting just 6%. However, in the wake of the March poll monitors Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) condemned it as "severely flawed", whilst a delegation of MEPs were barred from entering Belarus prior to the poll.

After the election Parliament's President Josep Borrell said that persistent violations of the fundamental rights of the Belarusian people would not be without consequences. Following the elections, Mr Lukashenko and several leading ministers were banned from entering the EU.

Belarusian journalist honoured

In February this year Alexander Milinkevich came to meet MEPs and ask for their support - although he stressed that it was up to the Belarus people to change things themselves.

In September 2005 a resolution by the Parliament condemned the Belarus government for the closure in recent years of "several political parties, 22 newspapers and more than 50 pro-democracy NGOs...for criticising the President and his policies". This was the background to the awarding of the 2004 Sakharov prize to the Belarus Association of journalists.

Aliaksandr Milinkevich in brief

Born in 1947 in Hrodna, Belarus.

Education: studied physics and mathematics in Hrodna, France, USA, and Germany.

Professional life: headed the Physics department at the University of Setif in Algeria (1980-1984); associate professor at Hrodna State University in Belarus (1978-1980 and 1984-1990)

Political career: deputy mayor of Hrodna 1990-1996 responsible for education, culture, health care, youth, sports, mass media, religion, international contacts, and historical preservation.

2001: campaign manager for Presidential candidate Siamion Domas.

2006: Presidential candidate against President Lukashenko.

Sakharov award

There are two other finalists for the 2006 Sakharov prize. They are: "Colombia: for all those fighting for the hostages kidnapped" - (profile published on 10 October) and Ghassan Tueni - whose profile will be published on 24 October.

The winner will be announced in October and the award made in December's Plenary Session.
**Finalist No 3: Ghassan Tueni campaigner for unity in Lebanon**

Ghassan Tueni, a Lebanese journalist, politician and diplomat, has campaigned all his life for a pluralism and tolerance in Lebanon and the Middle East. He is one of the three candidates for 2006 Sakharov prize and was nominated for the prize in memory of a number of prominent individuals assassinated in Lebanon. The other two Sakharov nominees are: all those campaigning for the freedom of people held hostage in Colombia and Alexander Milinkevich, leader of Belarus's opposition.

Ghassan Tueni campaigns for freedom, unity and tolerance in a country often splintered among religious and ethnic lines. In his writing he promotes the idea of a nation that can be strong through its diversity.

Born in Beirut in 1926 and educated at Harvard University, he returned to Lebanon in 1948 in order to carry on the work of his father Gebran Tueni running the "An-Nahar" daily - an independent newspaper in Arabic founded by him in 1933.

His political career dates back to 1951, and he has several times held cabinet posts in Lebanese governments. As a diplomat he was Lebanon's ambassador to the United Nations between 1977 and 1982.

He is also a strong supporter of the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly - a body that aims to build parliamentary dialogue between countries that border the Mediterranean.

Mr Tueni agreed to be nominated for the Sakharov prize for freedom of thought in memory of five people who have been assassinated in Lebanon. They are:

**His son Gebran Tueni:** Member of the Lebanese Parliament and a journalist who published editorials in "An-Nahar" critical of the foreign occupation of Lebanon. His persistent campaigning against the Syrian military presence and political influence in Lebanon triggered threats on his life that drove him into temporary exile in France. He died in a car bomb attack on 12 Dec 2005, one day after returning to Lebanon.

**Rafik Hariri:** Prime Minister of Lebanon 1992-1998 and from 2000-2004. Mr Hariri played a leading role in the reconstruction of Beirut and worked towards unity of the different religious and ethnic groups. In 1993 he founded a television station in Beirut; he also founded a newspaper, "Al-mustaqbal" (The Future). He was assassinated on 14 February 2005, in a bomb attack on his convoy in central Beirut. A further 21 other people were also killed in the attack.

**Bassel Fleihan:** An adviser to the Ministry of Finance in Lebanon, from 1993-1999 and Minister of Economy and Trade 2000-2003. He played a major role in the development of Lebanon's economic reform program. He also died following the attack which killed Mr Hariri.

**Samir Kassir:** university professor, journalist and historian. He was also a columnist for the Lebanese daily newspaper "An-Nahar". Assassinated in a car bomb attack in Beirut on June 2, 2005.

**George Hawi:** Lebanese politician and former secretary general of the Lebanese Communist Party. Frequently spoke out against Syrian interference in Lebanese affairs. Assassinated in Beirut, in June 2005, when a bomb planted in his car was detonated by remote control.

Profiles of the other two nominees for the Sakharov prize have been published:

Colombia: for all those fighting for the hostages kidnapped - profile published on 10 October
Alexander Milinkevich - profile published on 17 October

The winner will be chosen by the Conference of Presidents on 26 October.
Aliaksandr Milinkevich - winner of the 2006 Sakharov Prize

Aliaksandr Milinkevich is this year’s winner of the Sakharov Prize. The Conference of Presidents - the political groups' leaders of the European Parliament - decided to award the prize for freedom of thought to the leader of the opposition in Belarus. Milinkevich stood in presidential elections last March, the results of which were condemned by the EU and the US.

At an opposition rally protesting the results, Milinkevich was arrested and held for 15 days. In February, the Belarus opposition leader visited the European Parliament and asked MEPs for their support, but a delegation of MEPs wishing to monitor the elections were refused entry by the Belarus authorities.

Mr Milinkevich is 59 years old and studied physics and mathematics in France, Germany and the US. He was deputy mayor of his home town Hrodna in the early nineties.

The Sakharov Prize will be awarded during a formal plenary session of Parliament on 12 December. The prize comes with a certificate and a cheque for €50,000.
Focus

Freedom of thought - freedom to watch

Now you've read all about the Sakharov prize, you can now watch a video clip about it.

Also available are posters, stickers, banners, postcards and leaflets.

To access them just open the zip file and click on the language you desire. For example "EN" for English, "FR" for French, and so on.
Belarus opposition leader Aliaksandr Milinkevich - 2006 European Parliament Sakharov Prize Winner for Freedom of Thought

Leader of the Belarusian Opposition Aliaksandr Milinkevich received the 2006 Sakharov Prize from European Parliament President Borrell. Each year, the Parliament awards the Sakharov prize to exceptional people or organisations fighting against oppression, intolerance and injustice. The aim is to help them in their efforts to protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law around the world.

Mr Milinkevich gave the €50 000 that comes with the prize to the human rights NGO - the Norwegian Helsinki Committee.

President Josep Borrell said: "In Europe we very often take human rights for granted and enjoy our freedoms to think, to speak and to believe as something indisputable and natural. However, still too many people around the globe are deprived of their fundamental right to live in freedom. It may be difficult to believe, but democracy is denied to ten million people who live on our own continent, in Europe, in Belarus. As Europeans, we have a special duty to defend and promote human rights in the world; therefore we should never tolerate the breach of human dignity and suppression of democratic values on our own soil and beyond. The 2006 Sakharov prize manifests this determination as strongly as ever.

Mr Aliaksandr Milinkevich, you are fighting against fear and intimidation, which reigns in Belarus. You are fighting for a simple liberty to speak one’s mind, to choose one’s future. You have become a true symbol of resistance against the oppression and of hope for a democratic future. Your personality is remarkable, your endeavours are outstanding and your example is inspiring not only to the Belarusian people, but also to us all here at the European Parliament. We stand shoulder to shoulder with you in supporting the promise of democracy in Belarus and the aspiration of Belarusian society to obtain the right to elect their leaders democratically, the right to have access to independent information, the right to establish non-governmental organisations and the right to have an independent and impartial judiciary.

We are all dismayed by the fact that 17 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, 17 years since we awarded our first Sakharov Prize, the artificial division of Belarus from Europe still exists.

We ... deeply regret that contrary to any signs of change of heart in Minsk, the situation of democracy, human rights and rule of law is further deteriorating. There is no doubt that the future of Belarus lies with Europe. The Belarusian people deserve to live in a European dream of democracy, freedom and prosperity. I believe that it is not the question of whether, but only the question of when Belarus will join the European family of democratic nations.

The experience of my own country in the 1980's and that of our Member States from Eastern and Central Europe, who have successfully emerged from the totalitarian regime as democratic and free nations, shows us that it is in nobody’s power to stop people from thinking, hoping, dreaming, striving for and winning freedom.

Our 2006 Prize winner is a scientist like Andrei Sakharov. Both shared the same views and values, both experienced the sad consequences of standing up to a totalitarian regime. This year’s Sakharov Prize is given not only to a civic leader, but also to a scientist. A scientist, who dreams, who is trying to see the future with a fresh vision unimaginable to others. While some of these dreams seem impossible to realize, scientists sometimes are able to invent ways and precise solutions to make these dreams come true.

The Sakharov prize is therefore given this year to the HOPE for a democratic Belarus and to every person that has the courage not only to dream of freedom but to turn this dream into reality."

President Josep Borrell then awarded the certificate for the 2006 Sakharov Prize to Aliaksandr
Milinkevich.

**Speaking in Belarusian, Mr Milinkevich** began his address to Parliament by expressing his thanks for the award, saying the prize was not for him alone but for all the Belarusians who are continuing their struggle for Belarus to rejoin the family of democratic European nations. Belarus had always been a European country, he said, and had been the first in Europe to have the prototype of a democratic constitution in the sixteenth century Grand Duchy of Lithuania. During the second world war, the country had the most powerful resistance movement in Europe, at the cost of the lives of a third of the population. One million of the six million Jews killed in the Holocaust were from Belarus, he said. The country had seen its national identity uprooted and its historical memory amputated, he said. Belarus had welcomed independence in 1991, but had not realised that independence and freedom were not the same thing.

“Today we are fighting for freedom and defending our independence [...] We are doing this for our children, who like French, Lithuanian, Polish and British children have the right to live in a free country. It was our children who spent long nights in freezing temperatures on the square in Minsk after March's elections. They were arrested and imprisoned, expelled from their universities for their choice of conscience. I am proud of them,” he said.

The regime, he said, had made thousands of arrests. The prisons had never been as full as during that week in March. Nevertheless, the authorities had not expected such large numbers to participate in protests. “This was our first victory,” he said, “but I know we will need many more similar victories to put an end to this illegal regime.” Former presidential candidate Aliaksandr Kazulin had been sentence to five and a half years in prison. He had been on hunger strike for 50 days, and his life was now at risk, said Mr Milinkevich. Mentioning all the political prisoners in his country, he said the prize was a sign that Europe was paying attention to the situation in Belarus. It could also, he said, have been a prize for opposition figures such as Hienadz Karpienka, Yury Zakharanka or Viktar Hantchar, “But they have vanished without trace and we believe they have been murdered. These are the methods [...] used by the Belarus regime against their opponents.

Andrei Sakharov had always called for non-violent resistance, said Mr Milinkevich. “In this I am also a follower of his,” he said. “We need to overcome the fear which over the last ten years has been planted in people's spirits by unceasing propaganda,” he said, recalling a comment of Mr Sakharov that freedom of thought was the only guarantee against national myths which can lead to bloody dictatorship. “This is what is happening now in Belarus. Monuments to Stalin are being reinstated [...] the official media provides an unending torrent of lies and falsehoods, just as it did in Sakharov's time. The main enemy is said to be the West, and local democrats are presented as its agents.”

Mr Lukashenko had spoken of the opposition going abroad to call for sanctions on Belarus. “I want to use this opportunity to say, in particular to the people of Belarus, that these are lies. We would never call for sanctions, as we know they would hit ordinary people most severely.” Mr Milinkevich said that Moscow's conditions for its political and economic support to Lukashenko were that Belarus adopt a single currency with Russia – in effect, the Russian ruble – and that it ratify a “State Union” treaty. These would both cause the loss of Belarus's sovereignty. So far, the Lukashenko regime had resisted this approach: “they know perfectly well that with the loss of independence and the arrival of Russian capital in Belarus, few of them would keep their posts and their wealth.” But it may be that self-preservation would lead the regime to accept Moscow's terms and organise a referendum. “We need to be clear that it is democracy and not dictatorship which could be the guarantee of Belarusian independence.” Mr Milinkevich nevertheless stressed that a democratic, independent Belarus would want close and friendly relations with Russia.

He called on the EU to widen the scope of its travel restrictions on members of the regime, but at the same time called for the EU not to raise to €60 the price of a Schengen entry visa, as planned on 1 January 2007. For most Belarusians, he said, this would act as a new Berlin wall.

The latest proposal from the European Commission, inviting the Minsk regime to end its self-imposed isola-
tion in Europe, were welcome, he said, though there was little change of the Lukashenko government re-
sponding positively: “They know that once democratisation starts it will inevitably, and swiftly, result in the
end of their power. The present leader of Belarus could never again win a genuinely free election.” He
urged Europe to let Belarusians know that, contrary to their state’s propaganda, Europe was leaving its
doors open for a free and democratic Belarus.

He urged the EU to go beyond its existing support for democratic development, which was only effective in
countries actually trying to establish democracies. There needed to be support also for countries under dic-
tatorships, support for free media, civil society and repressed individuals. Europe should not shrug, he said,
simply asking ’What can we do?’ - “There is a lot you can do!” he said.

“I am deeply convinced that Europe cannot be complete without Belarus,” he said. “I want to thank you for
having faith in our victory. I promise it will not be long coming. My country is not the same as it used to be
– it is less frightened, and it believes in change. Belarus will soon rejoin the European family as a free and
democratic state. History shows that dictatorships do not last, and end badly for their tyrants. The only
choice when faced with a dictatorship is to struggle against it. Because we have no other choice.”