

Brno 15 November 2020

Letters to Political Prisoners in Belarus

On the occasion of 17 November, the Centre for Experimental Theatre in Brno, in cooperation with the Embassy of Independent Belarusian Culture in the Czech Republic, will launch an extraordinary project in which important personalities of Czech cultural and public life write personal letters to Belarusian political prisoners.



Centre for Experimental Theatre (CED) and the Embassy of Independent Belarusian Culture in the Czech Republic decided to honour this year's anniversary of the Velvet Revolution and November 17 with a direct connection to current events in the world and contemporary issues. The result of these reflections is the instigation of personal letters to Belarusian political prisoners.

CED thus wants to build on the legacy of Vaclav Havel, who has always strived to uphold fundamental human rights and freedoms, whether they have been violated in our country or elsewhere in the world. The ethos of 17 November seems to the initiators to be a good date to launch this extraordinary project.

The citizens of Belarus have been fighting for fair elections and freedom for many months. „We find it right and extremely important to loudly warn the Czech and world public that Belarus and Lukashenko's authoritarian regime are acting unfairly and that they are suppressing basic human rights. In Belarus, people are arrested, imprisoned, beaten, intimidated and otherwise fought for peaceful and non-violent expression of their views. This is inadmissible and we fundamentally oppose such actions, „explains Miroslav Oscatka, Director of CED.

The Ambassador of Independent Belarusian Culture in the Czech Republic, Sjarhej Smatrychenka, adds: „Of the thousands of people detained in Belarus or imprisoned, especially in connection with protests against the irregular presidential election in 2020, we have selected twelve personalities to encourage and send a message to them that we think of them and that we are not indifferent to their efforts and destiny. We therefore invited important Czech personalities of public and cultural life to write a letter to them in these difficult days. „

The Centre for Experimental Theatre considers the form of personal letters to be appropriate also in view of the state of emergency and the ban on gatherings announced in the Czech Republic in connection with the spreading corona virus epidemic.



The call of the Centre for Experimental Theatre and the Embassy of Independent Belarusian Culture in the Czech Republic has so far been accepted by:

Semyon Bychkov
Chief Conductor and Music Director of Czech Philharmonic

Radka Denemarkova
Writer and translator

Fedor Gal
Slovak politician and sociologist co-founder and later chairman of the Public Against Violence (Verejnost proti nasiliu) movement

Vaclav Maly
Assistant Bishop for Prague, co-founder of the Committee for the Defense of the Unjustly Prosecuted (Vybor na obranu nespravedlive stihanych)

Monika MacDonagh Pajerova
Spokesperson for striking students in 1989, diplomat and university professor

Pavel Rychetsky
President of the Constitutional Court of the Czech Republic

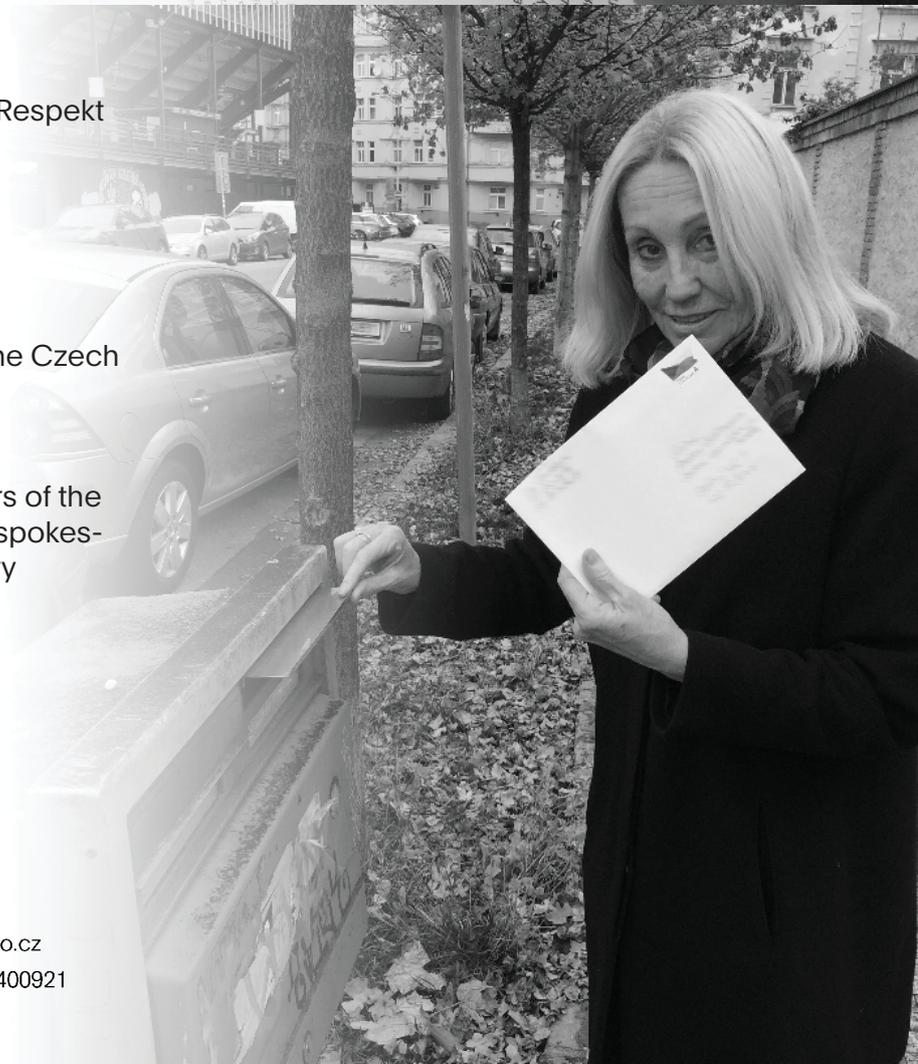
Olga Sommerova
Dokumentalist and director

Erik Tabery
Journalist and publicist, chief editor of Respekt magazine

Katerina Tuckova
Writer, publicist, curator

Milos Vystrcil
President of the Senate Parliament of the Czech Republic

Michael Zantovsky
Diplomat, translator, one of the founders of the Civic Forum (Obcanske forum) and its spokesman, director of the Vaclav Havel Library



The letters were written in Czech and translated into Belarusian and English. In addition to publication in the media, these letters were also sent to all addressees in the relevant Belarusian prisons.

The CED expresses their admiration and support for all the people who are now demanding fair elections in Belarus and who are calling for freedom and democracy.

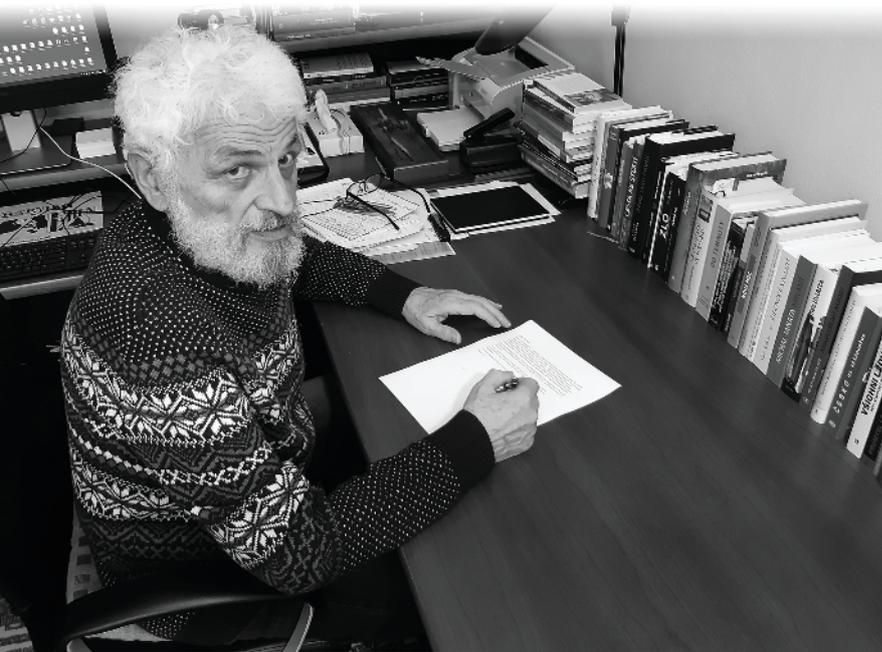
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Semyon Bychkov (born 1952)

Chief Conductor and Artistic Director of the Czech Philharmonic

He was born in St. Petersburg (then Leningrad), from where he emigrated to Austria in 1974 and then to the United States of America, where he obtained American citizenship in 1983. Among other activities, he worked as Music Director of the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra from 1985 to 1989, and from 1997 to 2010 he conducted the WDR Symphony Orchestra in Cologne as its Chief Conductor. In October 2017, he was appointed Chief Conductor and Music Director of the Czech Philharmonic for a five-year term, effective from the 2018/2019 season.



Semyon Bychkov



Mikalai Statkevich



Mikalai Statkevich (born 1956)

is a politician and leader of the Narodnaya Hramada (Social Democracy) party

A reserve Lieutenant Colonel and in the 1990s one of the founders of the Belarusian Association of Soldiers. Doctor of Technical Sciences. One of the most famous opponents of Lukashenko's regime, in 2010 he was one of the presidential candidates. He has spent a total of more than 6 years in prison since 2004. Last time he was detained in May 2020 on his way to a pre-election rally of Sviatlana Tikhonovskaya and, after several consecutive 15-day administrative imprisonment penalties, he was charged with organising mass riots. He has a wife; his two adult daughters live in Germany.

Dear Mr. Statkevič,

Each year on 17 November the people of Czech Republic celebrate the 1989 Velvet Revolution. We always associate revolution with bloodshed that often leads to a civil war, creating permanent wounds in the nation's psyche which continue to be felt many centuries later.

Yet what happened in the Czech Republic in 1989 offered a vision of how the change desired by the people can take place without the tragedy of war.

This is the vision that you and your comrades have been fighting to realise for the nation of Belarus. Your courage in the face of the regime's violent suppression of peaceful protests following blatant falsification of the election results; your dignity in defending the most basic right of every citizen to be heard and respected; the maturity of the overwhelming part of Belarussian society which refuses to believe the official claims that other countries are bent on creating a constitutional crisis in Belarus; each of these have become a source of inspiration for the millions throughout the world who believe that every nation has the right to determine how it wants to live and by whom it chooses to be governed. Any regime that refuses to recognise this fundamental right is bound to fall when it loses the will, just as the Berlin Wall did. The only questions are when and how. Today it is in Belarus that these questions are to be faced and answered. Each nation has to find its own solution and its own route to achieving it.

History is our only teacher. Nothing that is happening today is without precedent. One historical law is the inevitability of change. The more brutal the regime the more inevitable its collapse. There comes a point when the pain inflicted on the people is no longer to be tolerated. We see this right now in Belarus. We also see how the country's national temperament leads it to freedom by peaceful means. It is truly inspiring to see the images of demonstrators manifesting their convictions day after day, facing the regime's raw violence, arrests, threats and the endless lies of the official propaganda machine. Yet you continue your fight and you absorb your losses...

It is not for me or anyone living abroad to offer advice as to how you should pursue your dream of a just and fair society, when it is your lives that are constantly at risk. What I do want you to know is that your aspirations resonate not only in my heart but in the hearts of many millions the world over. We admire you for your courage to defend the values you believe in and for daring to express your dreams at whatever cost.

Your own life, dear Mr. Statkevič, the sacrifices you and your family make in pursuit of the noble vision are a testament to the power and beauty of human spirit that nothing and no one can break.

May you succeed soon.

May you and your people succeed without losing lives.

May you continue to be an example to the world of how to defend peaceful change.

Semyon Bychkov
Music Director & Chief Conductor, Czech Philharmonic

Radka Denemarková (born 1968)

writer, translator and scriptwriter

She studied Czech and German at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University, where in 1997 she obtained a PhD. Subsequently, she worked as a researcher at the Institute for Czech Literature of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic and as a lecturer and programme editor at the Na Zábřadlí Theatre. Since 2004 she has been a freelance writer.

She is the author of a monograph on the theatre and film director Evald Schorm entitled *Sám sobě nepřitelem* (Enemy to Myself – 1998), the novel *Peníze od Hitlera* (Money from Hitler – 2006) and the novel monograph *Smrt, nebudeš se báti aneb Příběh Petra Lébla* (Death, You Won't Be Afraid, or The Story of Petr Lébl – 2008) and many others.

The works of Radka Denemarková have been translated into 23 languages so far. She is the only Czech author to have received Magnesia Litera four times – for fiction, for non-fiction, for a translation book, and the main award Book of the Year 2019



Radka Denemarková



Sergei Tikhanovsky



Sergei Tikhanovsky (born 1978)

is a video blogger and businessman

His YouTube channel *Strana dlja žizni* (A Country for Life), which showed and exposed bureaucratic practices, corruption, and injustice inflicted on ordinary Belarusians, became very popular, which added to Tikhanovsky's determination to run for president. However, he was denied registration under the pretext that he had to submit the application in person, and at that particular time he was taken into custody. As a result, his wife Sviatlana applied for the registration and was granted it. Later, while collecting signatures for his wife he was arrested due to a police provocation and accused of grossly disrupting public order and obstructing the exercise of the right to vote. He and his wife Sviatlana have two children.

Dear Sjarhej Cichanouski,

You are a living portrait of defiance and pride for me. What was considered unthinkable and unpronounceable yesterday has become a reality in a short time. Humanity and human rights, freedom and the rule of law have been under attack and undermined in Belarus for a long time. It's an attack on all of us.

When democracy is dying, it is inch by inch. Europe is tearing and crumbling, instead of sticking together; she forgot the words of Andrej Glucksmann that the road to democracy is very difficult. It is paved with battles and also with a certain solidarity, which is often forgotten.

History turns new pages. They are written in the old language. Many squares in Eastern Europe spoke about democracy, free elections, and artistic freedom in 1989. Thirty years later, the Belarusian government rejects free elections and Belarus has become a brutal, police state. In the age of neoliberalism many quickly forget concepts such as human rights, democracy, freedom of opinion and many do not even care that the Internet is censored. Alexander Lukashenko does not intend to tolerate any move towards real democracy, which he is very afraid of. Politicians of his type are dazzled by Russia and China; they see that it really works otherwise. The benefits of capitalism can be enjoyed without risking democracy.

It is about self-presentation and arrogance of power. Power again reveals its intention: to put life straight, to pull out everything beyond it and independent from it. But there is a different political style. The opposite of Lukashenko, Trump, Putin, Si Jinping, Orban, Erdogan, Babish, Zeman, Kaczynski ... You and Sviatlana Cichanouska are changing the way people think about politics and democracy. Only authentic personalities can unite and convince people in crises. Politics means responsibility. It is the opposite of oligarchs and politicians of the "Trump" style who try to deceive the world with the help of social networks. To be authentic means, in other words, to live a life of truth.

In Belarus, people are bravely demonstrating against a return to totalitarianism. They defied the role of a helpless part of the dictator's machine. They found a deeper responsibility for the world and their place in it. The struggle for freedom and free critical thinking is difficult at all times and never ends. Not only the Eastern European variant of capitalism today re-establishes the law of the jungle: the stronger rules the weaker and where money speaks the truth is silent. But the law of democracy is: the stronger protects the weaker. The questions that Belarus forwards to the world are simple and universal today. An individual or a mass? An open democracy or a closed society? Tolerance and freedom or totalitarianism? The way we have reduced democracy to business is not working. The protests in Belarus are also a brave defence of human rights, defending the rights of all of us. You fight injustice; you showed bureaucratic arbitrariness on your YouTube channel Strana dlja žizni, you exposed corruption. You are not afraid to stand up for rights in public. By doing so you also defend freedom of speech. And that is the basis of human rights, the root of humanity, the mother of truth. To cut off freedom of speech means to trample on human rights in its infancy, to stifle humanity, to obstruct the truth.

Dear Sjarhej, I look forward to the day when Belarus is a country of democracy and the voice of every citizen has the same weight. As for brave people like you who are being silenced, arrested and tortured for their views in Belarus today, I hope that these are the last victims of dictator Lukashenko. Now we need a cool head, clear reason, bold thinking. The truth at this

time is so obscure and hidden, and the lie so widespread that the truth is not known to those who do not love it. The people of Belarus are in the streets. These are living portraits of defiance and pride. In every dislocated time, there are imaginary monuments of personal courage. Such was the seemingly inconspicuous act of a Hamburg shipyard worker. In 1936, during the ceremonial launch of a military ship, he refused to raise his right hand with the crowd to salute Hitler. The photo was published sixty years later. It captures a man in the middle of a forest of raised arms. Also a living portrait of defiance and pride. His next fate is unknown. Freedom does not exist unless it is reflected in concrete actions.

You show that we need a sense of morality to maintain what is good and just in our lives. You reiterate and remind the world of the old truth that the measure of our provocative hope is the measure of our ability to strive for something because it is moral and not just because there is certain success. Young people in your country and ours are fed up with the fact that only those who despise it talk about democracy. They do not want the populists to steal their hope, their future and exchange it for lethargy.

Dear Sjarhej, your stay in prison is of great importance in the time of general resignation. You have shown that it makes sense to be a brave citizen. You are helping to restore broken solidarity. We know about you and we are on your side. Perhaps even this report and awareness of international solidarity will help you and others to get through difficult times in prison. Improvement will only come if we can complicate the lives of dictators and people in power and talk about everything openly. Every authoritarian regime was eventually forced to pave the way for democracy. That is our hope. A hope for Belarus as well. It's just a matter of endurance.

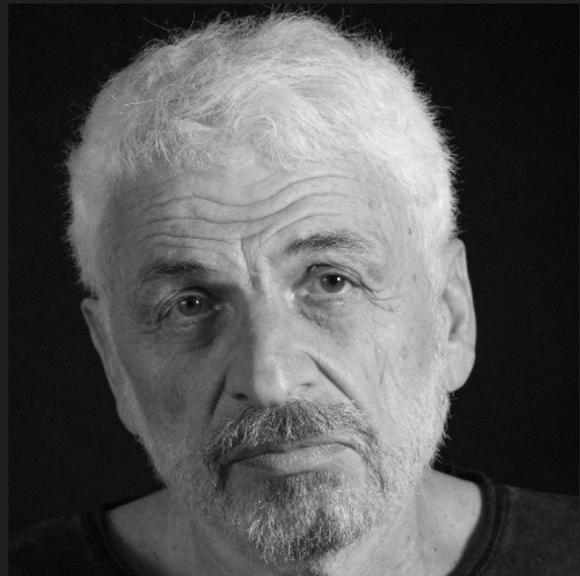
Radka Denemarkova
28. 10. 2020

Fedor Gál (born 1945)

Slovak politician and social scientist, co-founder and later chairperson of the Public Against Violence civic movement

After graduating from the Secondary Industrial School of Chemistry in Zlín, he worked for several years in chemical factories and undertook distance studies at the University of Chemical Technology in Bratislava. In 1992, he became a doctor of economic sciences at the University of Economics in Prague.

During the existence of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic he was one of the well-known dissidents. In November 1989 he actively participated in the Velvet Revolution in Bratislava, where he also co-founded the Public Against Violence civic political movement. After the disintegration of the federation in 1992, he moved to Prague, where, among other things, he engaged in business activities; he co-founded the 'G plus G' publishing house and TV NOVA. Since 2009, he has focused mainly on film documentaries.



Fedor Gál



Maxim Znak



Maxim Znak (born 1981)

is a lawyer and an expert in several international programmes, such as the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme

In 2020, he became a lawyer for Viktor Babaryka's election staff; after the start of active post-election protests he was elected a member of the Presidium of the Coordinating Council, subsequently detained and now faces charges for incitement of acts leading to damage to the national security of the state. He went on a hunger strike in prison. He is married and has a son. Does sports (distance running, triathlon) and sings his own songs.

Dear Maxim,

My name is Fedor Gal, I was born in March 1945 in the Terezin concentration camp. I know the value of freedom. I co-founded the Public against Violence (Verejnost proti nasiliu) movement in November 1989 and was one of its leaders from the very beginning. It was the peak of my life and the lives of others. In spite of many errors and mistakes that we made, it was a significant moment in our modern history. I dare to say that the most significant since the end of the Second World War.

We have lived in an open and democratic society for more than thirty years now. It is not always a walk in the park but we are its creators ourselves. It was and still is worth the sacrifice.

I follow the situation in Belarus with respect. I follow the stories of those who non-violently resist violence. I consider myself to be one of you. I am certain you will win your battle.

I wish personally to you and all your close ones courage, persistence and health.

Fedor Gal

Václav Malý (born 1950)

Auxiliary Bishop of Prague, co-founder of the Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Prosecuted

After graduating from the Roman Catholic Cyril and Methodius Faculty of Theology in Prague, he was ordained a priest in 1976. In 1977, he signed Charter 77 and co-founded the Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Prosecuted. On the basis of these deeds, in 1979 he was deprived of state consent to perform clerical work, accused of subverting the republic and imprisoned for seven months. Until 1989, he worked as a boiler operator and geographical surveyor. At the same time, he secretly served as a priest and participated in the Catholic samizdat. From 1988, he was a member of the Helsinki Committee.



During the Velvet Revolution, he moderated large popular assemblies, co-founded the Civic Forum, and was its first spokesman. In 1997 he became the Auxiliary Bishop of Prague. He actively deals with the issue of political prisoners and tries to speak out against authoritarian regimes and totalitarian practices in a non-violent way. His episcopal motto is „Humility and Truth“.

Václav Malý



Maria Babovich



Maria Babovich (born 1995)

a native of the city of Mazyr in Polesie, Belarus, stayed in Minsk after graduating from the Belarusian State University of Economics, rented an apartment with a friend and got a job in a café. The day after the end of the elections and the outbreak of mass protests, the first victim of police brutality, Alexander Tarajkowski, fell on Pushkin Square, killed by two bullets. The very next day, an improvised popular memorial was erected on the site, people kept carrying flowers to the place and the ambassadors of European countries also laid wreaths there. At night, all the wreaths and flowers were removed by communal services, and inscriptions on the asphalt were deleted. Maria Babovich, along with Dzianis Hrachanav, were some of those who restored the large inscription

We Shall Not Forget! on the sidewalk, for which she was detained by the police, charged with mass rioting and later with particularly extensive intentional damage to foreign property, for which she could face up to 10 years in prison.

Dear Maryja Babovich,

I learned about your bravery. You had the courage to restore a sign on a pavement in Minsk bringing attention to the place where Aljaksandr Tarajkouski was murdered during demonstrations against false results of presidential election. I admire you. You are facing a long sentence. I would like to assure you that you are not forgotten. I would like to express my solidarity. You did not choose comfortable standing by deceptions, violence and injustice but despite the risk of punishment clearly decided to relentlessly say No to all evil and lies. For me you are an example of the power of spirit that is not to be intimidated. Believe that you are a challenge for me and my surroundings to come out of comfort. We live here in freedom and no one punishes us for our civic attitudes. The more we need to see particular examples of those who keep a clean slate even in adverse political conditions. Thank you and I will keep following your case. I hope you will be brought to justice and the prosecution will be stopped. If not, you are already known beyond the borders and this will not be lost. Freedom is indivisible and that is why I am not indifferent to the fate of courageous persecuted citizens of Belarus. I wish you a lot of spiritual and mental strength to continue on the path of truth and justice.

Vaclav Maly, Catholic Bishop 6.11.2020

Monika MacDonagh Pajerová (born 1966)

former diplomat and student leader of the Velvet Revolution of 1989, activist and university teacher

During her studies at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University, in November 1989 she became a representative of STIS (Student Press and Information Centre) and began cooperating with the city committee of the SSM (Socialist Union of Youth) on the preparations for a demonstration in Albertov. On 21 November 1989, she was appointed to the Coordinating Strike Committee of University Students and acted as its spokesperson.

Later, between 1990 and 1998, she worked as a cultural attaché at Czechoslovak and Czech embassies in Paris, at the Council of Europe and in Strasbourg. In 1998-1999 she held the position of spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic.

She is the chairperson of the civic association Ano pro Evropu (Yes for Europe), the author and presenter of the programme European Manual for Czech Television and of several publications on the topic of Europe. Since 2004 she has been working as a university teacher at New York University Prague.



Monika MacDonagh Pajerová



Paval Sieviaryniets

Paval Sieviaryniets (born 1976)

is a politician, journalist and writer



He was one of the founders of the Youth Front organisation (in Belarus it was repeatedly denied registration and eventually registered in the Czech Republic), then one of the leaders of Belarusian Christian Democracy (according to his statement, the Belarusian idea is Jesus Christ speaking Belarusian). He was first sentenced for opposing Lukashenko in 2005. Since then he has spent a total of about 6 years in prison. He is the author of several essay-type books. He was detained on his way home in June 2020 and, after several consecutive 15-day terms of imprisonment imposed on him mostly for participation in election rallies, he was declared suspected of organising mass riots. He has a little son with his wife Volha.

Dear Pavel,

I am looking at your young noble face, trying to imagine how are you feeling and what are you thinking about today.

I want to tell you that I know the fear of interrogation, of my own failure, of imprisonment.

I know how helpless I felt in communist Czechoslovakia, and I admit that I thought I would not live to see the end of communism in my lifetime.

I pray for you and your friends every day - in beautiful Prague where the churches are comfortably and warmly furnished, and in my native village in the Sudetenland where we only have a small cold chapel – but where I feel closer to realization.

I know that one day your Belarus will live freely and I hope with all my heart that it will be soon!

Please do not give up and God will take care of you!

PhDr. Monika macdonagh - Pajerova,

Spokesperson for striking students in 1989, diplomat and university professor

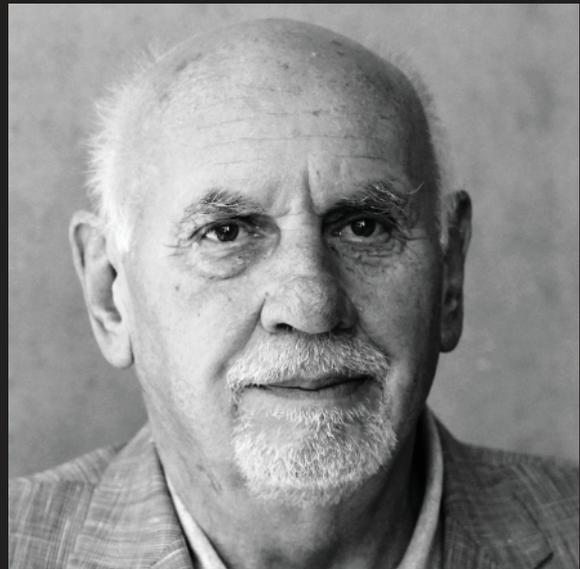
Pavel Rychetský (born 1943)

President of the Constitutional Court of the Czech Republic

He studied law at the Faculty of Law of Charles University, later became a signatory to Charter 77 and helped the newly-formed movement with legal documents. At this time he published in samizdat and exile publications. In 1989, he became one of the co-founders of the Civic Forum.

After the revolution, he was appointed General Prosecutor and then Deputy Prime Minister of the federal government. After 1992, he worked as a lawyer, specialising primarily in the legislative field. In 1996, he ran for the Czech Social Democratic Party and was elected senator. Two years later, he once again became Deputy Prime Minister and Chairman of the Legislative Council of the Czech government.

In 2020, he was awarded the Order of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk 1st Class for his outstanding contributions to the development of democracy, humanity and human rights.



Pavel Rychetský



Maria Kalesnikava



Maria Kalesnikava (born 1982)

studied flute and conducting

For more than ten years she studied and worked in Stuttgart, Germany. In 2017, she became the artistic director of a new cultural space in Minsk, founded by Belgazprombank and headed by Viktor Babaryka. In the spring of 2020, she became a member of Babaryka's electoral staff, and after he was arrested and denied admission to polls she became a member of the women's „electoral triumvirate” Kalesnikava – Tsapkala (the wife of another candidate who was denied registration) – Tikhanovskaya. After the outbreak of post-election protests, she became a member of the presidium of the Coordinating Council, was kidnapped by the secret police and forced to leave Belarus,

which failed to happen, because Kalesnikava tore up her passport at the border crossing. She was immediately taken into custody and faces charges for the incitement of acts leading to damage to the national security of the state.

Open Letter from the President of Constitutional Court of the Czech Republic

In Brno on 9th November 2020

Dear colleague,

For several years now, I have been concerned about the situation in the Republic of Belarus, which is becoming one of the last open-air museums in the post-communist world, characterized by a significant deficit of basic principles of democratic rule of law, which are being purposefully replaced by authoritarian methods of government. A clear symbol of this situation is the role of President Lukashenko and the systematic repression of fundamental human rights and freedoms. These days, in my country - the Czech Republic - we will remember the events of November 1989, which resulted in the fall of the authoritarian regime and paved the way for the creation of a free democratic society based on respect for the rights and freedoms of man and citizen. I would like civilian society to be liberated and emancipated in your country as well, for it manifests its attitude towards the repressive Lukashenko regime not only in Minsk but also in the streets of other Belarusian cities. At the same time, I consider it my duty to appeal for the release of Belarusian political prisoners - also from the position of the President of the Conference of European Constitutional Courts, which I hold this year. I am very pleased that the Embassy of Independent Belarusian Culture will be opened at the Centre for Experimental Theatre in Brno and I sincerely and wholeheartedly wish it success.

With best regards and wishes

JUDr. Pavel Rychetsky, dr. h. c.

President of the Constitutional Court of the Czech Republic

Dear Mrs

LILJA ULASAVA

MINSK

Olga Sommerová (nar. 1949)

documentary filmmaker and director

In 1977, she graduated from the Film and Television Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts – Department of Documentary Filmmaking, after which she worked as an editor at the documentary film department of Czechoslovak Television (1979-1980) and then as a director at Krátký film Praha (Short Film Prague – until 1993).

From 1991 to 2002, she taught at the FAMU in Prague, where she was elected chair of the Academic Senate in 1992. She is a member of the Association of Directors and Scriptwriters (ARAS) and the Czech Film and Television Academy (CFTA).

As a director at Krátký film Praha, for twelve years she shot documentaries for cinemas in the 35 mm format. After the revolution in 1989, she made documentaries for Czech Television, in which she dealt with social issues and interpersonal relationships, later with important personalities and phenomena of social and artistic life, feminism and the recent history of the Czech Republic. She has made 122 films, for which she won forty awards at Czech and foreign film festivals.



Olga Sommerová



Alexandr Vasilevich



Alexandr Vasilevich

does business in advertising, and owns a major cultural gallery in Minsk as well as several online magazines and portals

He was arrested on 28 August and the alleged crime has not yet been published for which they invented charges against him. In the same, so far undisclosed crime, his wife Nadzeya Zelyankova is also listed as a suspect; she is currently staying at home with her daughter and is due to give birth to her second child at the end of November.

ALJAKSANDR VASILEVICH

Dear Aljaksandr,

We have watched with apprehension and emotion the brave defiance of Belarusian civil society against the dictator who has plagued your country for an infinitely long time by totalitarian elimination of civil liberties and human rights. We have watched with horror the brutal interventions of militants against men and women who demand free and fair elections and the inalienable right of European citizens in the 21st century to oppose the lies and brutality of state power towards their own nation.

Unlike you, the citizens of Czechoslovakia had due to the geopolitical situation a chance thirty years ago to get rid of the hated communist regime that plagued us for forty years. Gorbachev's Soviet Union loosened its grip for a while and we managed to free ourselves and return to the democratic principles on which Czechoslovakia was founded a hundred years ago. Thanks to President Vaclav Havel, our republic emphasized respect for human rights throughout the world, in Cuba, China, and Tibet and also in Belarus. NGOs, such as People in Need, have been supporting the Belarusian opposition since the 1990s.

The Czech media regularly commented negatively on conditions established by Lukashenko. The Czech Republic played the role of an active advocate and supporter of human rights abroad and this image on the international scene was significantly strengthened by the personality of President Vaclav Havel, a dissident and fighter against the authoritarian regime. It was he who supported the emergence of civil society in Belarus because it is essential for the successful functioning of democracy and a threat to a totalitarian undemocratic regime. He also sought to raise the profile of Lukashenko's autocratic government, which was supposed to open the eyes of the European Union. During his term in office, Vaclav Havel visited and received representatives of the democratic opposition of Belarus several times.

Since 1997, close cooperation has been arranged between the Czech Republic and the Belarusian opposition; this year, Charter 97 was established in Belarus, modelled on Charter 77.

I am pleased that the historically first international Vaclav Havel Prize for Human Rights was won by the Belarusian human rights activist Ales Bjaljacki, who is the head of Belarus's largest human rights organization, Vyasna, and who was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in the past. He is now imprisoned for alleged tax fraud. He always used to say that Vaclav Havel was his spiritual advisor.

The world does not forget Belarus, as evidenced by the fact that the European Parliament awarded the Sakharov Prize for Freedom to the Belarusian opposition.

We watch the tireless resistance of Belarusian civil society against the dictator, which has been going on for three months, with admiration.

As a documentary filmmaker, I made fifteen films about the horrors and perversions of two totalitarian regimes, Nazism and Communism.

I filmed with brave people, Nazi occupation resistance fighters and dissidents who signed Charter 77 and with their bravery fulfilled the idea that EVERYONE IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE WHOLE WORLD, or if anyone is not free, neither am I free.

In my film about the national hero Jan Palach, who took his own life by self-immolation to arouse Czech society from the lethargy after the Soviet invasion in 1968, there appears is the idea that life cannot be lived without freedom and sometimes life must be sacrificed for it, as did not only Jan Palach but also many brave people before him. We Czechs lived in two totalitarian regimes for half a century. We know what that means and that's why we feel so much solidarity with the Belarusian struggle for freedom.

Dear Aljaksandr Vasilevich, you have not been able to share your life and your struggle with your family for two months now. Your wife Nadzeja is expecting a baby. I think of your family and I believe that your child's arrival in the world will be joyful. I believe in free Belarus!

In Prague, 2.11.2020

Olga Sommerova

Erik Tabery (born 1977)

Czech journalist, publicist and editor-in-chief of the weekly Respekt.

He got his bachelor's degree in journalism from the Faculty of Social Sciences of Charles University, and did not complete his MA studies in political science. He started working in the editorial office of the weekly Respekt in 1997, and since 2009 he has been its editor-in-chief. In his comment and publishing activities he focuses mainly on the reflection of domestic politics. He holds several prestigious awards, such as the Journalist Quail for Journalists under 33 (2002), the Ferdinand Peroutka Journalist Award (2008) or the Journalist Award for 2011.

He also has a number of achievements in journalism. In 2006, his first book *Vládneme nerušit* (We are Ruling, Do Not Disturb), was published, dedicated to the period of the so-called Opposition Contract, the consequences of which affected Czech politics for a whole decade. The publication won the prestigious Tom Stoppard Award and was nominated in the journalism category for the Magnesia Litera Award for 2006. In 2007, based on the eponymous story, the documentary *Vládneme nerušit* was shot, winning the Trilobit Award. His latest significant achievement is the Magnesia Litera (2018) for his third publication *Opuštěná společnost: Česká cesta od Masaryka po Babiše* (Abandoned Society: The Czech Journey from Masaryk to Babiš), which was also staged as a theatrical piece at the 'Divadlo na cucky' in 2019.



Erik Tabery



Stepan Latypav



Stepan Latypav (born 1980)

is an arborist and industrial alpinist. In the courtyard of his house, on the wall of a transformer station, graffiti was painted by two DJ's, who during a pro-regime mass outdoor concert played the revolutionary song *Peremen* and raised their hands in the sign of victory, after which they were arrested. The graffiti also became a symbol of protest, and although it was overpainted every night on orders from the authorities, local residents always restored it immediately. When the maintenance workers came one day, accompanied by people in civilian clothes who claimed to be from the police, Stepan Latypav covered the graffiti with his body and asked those in civilian clothes to prove to him that they were indeed from the

police. At that time the „police“ left without accomplishing their mission, as other locals joined Stepan, but a few days later Stepan Latypav was arrested at home, brutally beaten on the spot and escorted to prison. Subsequently, during a domiciliary search in his apartment, chemicals he needed as the owner of a firm dealing in eradicating giant hogweed for his work were found in his apartment, and he was accused of planning to use these dangerous poisons against the police. After his act and his arrest were covered by social networks, Stepan Latypav was identified in an older video from August handing flowers to participants during the very first female protest march.

Dear Mr Scjapan,

I am writing to you with some trembling because this is a special moment for me. There is so much I want to say but I am mainly moved by emotions that are not easy to capture on paper. We don't know each other and yet I feel that we are close friends. People who want to live freely are connected in a way and it doesn't matter how far apart they live or what language they speak. All the more so when they are from countries where freedom is not a matter-of-course. We Czechs have already been enjoying it for some time now and I believe it is coming to you soon as well.

I know I have no practical means to support you. But at least I want to clearly tell you and promise that the dictatorial regime will never manage to tarnish your name. We know that all its accusations are fabricated. In regimes like Lukashenko's, imprisonment is a sign of decency. Not the other way around. I am writing to you from a country whose first democratic President, Vaclav Havel, and also the first free Minister for Foreign Affairs, Jiri Dienstbier, underwent several imprisonments before acceding to office. And they had been sent to prison by totalitarian power, just like you.

I follow what is happening in Belarus through the media or social networks and I feel great admiration for people who, even though they know what they are in danger of, go again and again to show their desire for freedom to faceless men. And more than once I feel a strong emotion from that tender courage on the one hand and a feeling of anger towards the brutes on the other. There is a great superiority in front of you, which has seemingly all the trump cards in its hands but it neither has justice nor heart on its side. And that's why the world is with you. They defend their privileges and power but you defend humanity. I must self-critically admit that it never occurred to me that it will be Belarus who would teach the whole world such a lesson. You are our inspiration.

Dear Scjapan, we are almost the same age. Rather young. I believe that one day we will have the opportunity to exchange letters or even meet in person, as representatives of two boring, free societies. There will be nothing in our letters about prisons or threats, we will rather write about the weather, a good concert or a movie.
Keeping you in my thoughts.

Erik

Kateřina Tučková (born 1980)

writer, publicist and curator

In 1999-2006, she studied art history and Czech language and literature at the Faculty of Arts of Masaryk University in Brno. She also continued her doctoral studies in art history at Charles University in Prague, which she completed in 2014 with a dissertation on the Rada Group. During that time, she published a number of expert publications in the field of fine arts: for example, the publications *Na hraně příběhu – Sochy v ulicích* (On the Edge of a Story - Sculptures in the Streets – Brno House of Arts, 2013) and *Fabrika – příběh textilních baroňů z moravského Manchesteru* (Fabrika - The Story of Textile Barons from the Moravian Manchester – Host, 2014) were published as guides for exhibition projects.



She is the author of several successful novels, such as *Vyhnání Gerty Schnirch* (The Expulsion of Gerta Schnirch – Host, 2009) and *Žitkovské bohyně* (Goddesses from Žitkov – Host, 2012). In 2018, she launched her drama work with her original theatrical play based on the life of the first Czech female composer and conductor *Vítězslava Kaprálová – Vitka* (Goose on a String Theatre, 2018).

Kateřina Tučková has collaborated or is collaborating with the magazines *Respekt*, *Salon* (cultural supplement of the daily *Právo*), *Deník N*, *Tvar*, *Literární noviny* and *Weles*.

Kateřina Tučková



Marfa Rabkova



Marfa Rabkova (born 1995)

is a volunteer coordinator for Belarus's best renowned human rights organisation, *Vjasna*. She graduated from the Faculty of Natural Sciences at the Belarusian State Pedagogical University and is now continuing her education at the European University of the Humanities in Vilnius, majoring in International Law. During the election period, she was one of the main coordinators of voluntary independent observers, in touch with about 1,500 volunteers, some of whom were detained straight away during the elections, often actually in polling stations. Marfa Rabkova was detained and charged with preparing and training people to organise mass riots. She has been married for a year now, and apart from her husband, a tomcat is waiting for her at home.

Dear Marfa,

I'm sitting at a desk in my study now, surrounded by books I've been collecting for the last twenty years, sitting in front of a computer screen, a blank white sheet in front of me - and I'm embarrassed. What can I write to you, dear Marfa, to give you hope and at the same time not sound superficial and stupid? You - locked in custody with the prospect of several years of imprisonment - reading a letter from me sitting in the safety of my home, reading news from your country and not being useful to you for more than a few words. That's not much. So - I wish I could come up with the ones that will encourage you.

I will start with this, dear Marfa - I would like you to know that we in the Czech Republic are closely monitoring what is happening in your country. In recent months, television, radio and press have been regularly reporting on rigged elections, demonstrations and disproportionate repression. Reports, photos, videos - all of this attracts our attention and in some cases it also evokes an oppressive feeling of *déjà vu*. This November, it is thirty-one years that we have also been through this. And it started in a similar way - people of the same age as you met on the main Prague avenue, joined by others across the republic and did not stop until the regime collapsed. It cost a tremendous effort by many ordinary people and four decades of unfading opposition work but in the end it only took a few weeks - and everything was different in our country. I wish I could comfort you by the belief that this will happen to you as well.

I mean, dear Marfa, that what is happening in Belarus now is for many of us - personal. It is an extraordinary historical event, which also has its faces. Like yours. Just a few clicks and people can find out something about you - for example that you are kept in custody, without the opportunity to associate with your family, in uncertainty and timelessness. So maybe the knowledge that you are not alone in this will help you. In addition to your loved ones who are trying to draw attention to your destiny, in addition to those who are still demonstrating in the streets of Minsk, you have those you have no doubt never heard of on your side as well. Like me. And hundreds of others, who write about you, have your face printed on billboards or just try to inform about your situation on social networks under the hashtag #stojimezabelorskem. That is - we stand for people who long for freedom as you long for it, we stand for your indignation, with which you must look back on twenty-five years of authoritarian rule of one power-obsessed man, we stand for your decision not to allow the regime machinery to move by self-movement further, we stand behind your anger, with which you had to watch the persecution of your loved ones, we stand behind your fear because the risk you are taking and the sacrifice you are making is frightening. We stand behind you because you are a symbol - of the desire for change, of justice, of freedom, a symbol of bravery, higher social responsibility and perseverance.

I do not know, dear Marfa, if this writing gets to you and I can't judge if it achieves its purpose, if it encourages you at least a little. But the truth is that there is hope - you are the hope yourself. The fact that you exist, that you have chosen not to remain silent but to step out, that you have been willing to take so many risks is the greatest proof that the system that is destroying your country is slowly but surely losing ground under its feet, that your country has a future.

I wish for you and your loved ones to see it soon.

Katerina Tuckova

Miloš Vystrčil (born 1960)

President of the Senate of the Parliament of the Czech Republic

He graduated in mathematics and physics at the Faculty of Science of Masaryk University in Brno. Subsequently, he taught at the Otokar Březina Grammar School and since 2009 he has lectured at the College of Polytechnics in Jihlava. He started his political career during the Velvet Revolution, when he co-founded the Civic Forum in Telč. In 1991, he joined the newly formed Civic Democratic Party, in which he currently holds the position of Vice-Chair.

Since 2010 he has been working in the Senate of the Parliament of the Czech Republic; between 2016 and 2020 as the chairman of the senatorial club. In this period, he followed in the footsteps of his predecessor, Jaroslav Kubera, and despite opposition from other constitutional officials, completed the Senate delegation's journey to Taiwan. He received a medal for parliamentary democracy at the Legislative Yuan of the Taiwan Parliament.



Miloš Vystrčil



Viktar Babaryka



Viktar Babaryka (born 1963)

bankéř a mecenáš.

From 2000, he managed the Belgazprombank. He founded several charitable foundations (cultural, to help sick children, etc.). He became probably the most popular presidential candidate but was not allowed to participate in the election. In a fabricated trial he and his son Eduard were accused of economic crimes.

PARLIAMENT OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC

SENATE

MILOŠ VYSTRČIL

PRESIDENT

Prague 13th November 2020

Dear Viktor Babaryka,

I would like to warmly greet you and assure you that I support you and really wish Belarus and the Belarusian people the early arrival of freedom and democracy.

I am convinced that we cannot be indifferent to what is happening around us. Vaclav Havel wrote that indifference to others and indifference to the fate of the whole is exactly what opens the door to evil.

Dear Mr Babaryka, the letter I am writing to you is symbolic, open and, above all, supportive. I would much rather send it to you so that it arrives directly at your hands or I would like to call you directly and encourage you. Sadly that is not possible. Although I did my best to contact you, the result was a message that it is not possible to send a letter to your hands or call you.

I admit that I was not surprised. You are a political prisoner and I know what that means. There were political prisoners in the Czech Republic too. Some were executed by some communists, some were tortured, some were sent to forced labour and some, often broken mentally or physically, were released.

That is why I am thinking intensively of you and Belarus on 17 November - the day we gained freedom and began to create a democratic system. I mean, there is a person in your country who is called the last dictator in Europe. This person does not hesitate to use any means to maintain his power, including purposeful accusations and imprisonment of possible opponents, which has affected you as well. Despite all

his efforts, he was clearly defeated in this year's August elections. However, no dictator will voluntarily relinquish power because he cannot think as a democratic politician and is afraid that he will be treated the way he treats his opponents.

Please believe that the totalitarian power supported by the repressive apparatus is not able to withstand the constant pressure of all sections of society, supported by democratic countries around the world. The solidarity of a democratic community is one of the basic preconditions for a successful struggle against totalitarianism and we must not be indifferent to the struggle of the Belarusian people for freedom and democracy.

I firmly hope that, also under the pressure of the democratic community, you and the other prisoners of conscience in Belarus will soon be released and that you will achieve the removal of evil from Belarusian society.

I know that it was your birthday recently, so I would like to wish you and your country that after your early release we could say that you were the last prisoners of conscience in Belarus.

Sincerely

Michael Žantovský (born 1949)

diplomat, translator, director of the Václav Havel Library

After studying psychology at Charles University and McGill University in Montreal, he worked as a researcher at the Psychiatric Institute in Prague, where he researched non-verbal behaviour and theory of motivation. From 1980 he worked as a translator and publicist. He regularly contributed to the samizdat and from 1988 he worked as a Prague correspondent for the Reuters news agency. In the revolutionary year of 1989, he became a founding member of the Czech branch of PEN, which was banned in Czechoslovakia during the communist era.



Michael Žantovský was one of the founding members of the Civic Forum and a close collaborator of Václav Havel – first as his press secretary, spokesperson and later also the director of his Presidential Office. From 1992, he served in the diplomatic corps and was actively involved in national politics. Since September 2015 he has held the position of director of the Václav Havel Library.

Michael Žantovský



Maryna Hlazava



Maryna Hlazava (born 1995)

works as an English teacher

Arrested for organising a khorovod (a popular collective dance) on a street of Brest during a protest event. Accused of gross disturbance of public order. She is the daughter of the Brest Russian-speaking poet Vladimir Glazov (Hlazav), who some time ago took part in a meeting with Belarusian poets in the Václav Havel Library.

Dear Maryna,

I greet you from Prague, from the Vaclav Havel Library, where your father Vladimir read his verses some time ago. Ever since I first visited Minsk 20 years ago, the fate of your country has been close to my heart, and at least from a distance, me and my colleagues are with you in the long and brave struggle of your nation for freedom and democracy.

At that time, we drove to Minsk via Brest, originally as independent observers of the ongoing demonstrations in connection with the anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster, which also affected your country. After several meetings with Belarusian officials Vincuk Vyachorka and other figures in the Belarusian opposition, as well as ordinary Belarusians, we realized that in a clash between an oppressive government based on violence, oppression and the secret police and citizens seeking freedom, it is not possible to remain neutral. What we witnessed in the streets of Minsk on April 26, 2000 reminded us of the time of the Czechoslovak Velvet Revolution in 1989 and led us without much thought from the sidewalk where onlookers stood to the front lines of the peaceful march of tens of thousands of protesters. I will never forget that liberating feeling.

Europe has become unrecognizable over the last twenty years. However, one is still missing your Belarus on the European map of free and democratic countries, despite the clear will of hundreds of thousands of its citizens. It fills me with admiration that you still continue your efforts and risk your career, your freedom and your life. It is all the more admirable for me that you also express your desire for freedom in one of the oldest forms in which people express their desires and emotions - dance. At the same time, however, I also feel frustrated and saddened by the inability of the international community, and in particular European countries, to provide you with more effective support and assistance. Personnel sanctions imposed against some Belarusian officials are not enough. The European Union and its Member States also have the economic and political tools to put more effective pressure on the dictator to step down.

However, in the end, only its own citizens can decide on the future of Belarus. The huge number of young people taking part in the protests of recent weeks fills me with the certainty that it will be a free and kinder future for the wishes and desires of the Belarusian people. Svyatlana Cichanouska recently said in one of Vaclav Havel's dialogues on the role of women's rights in today's world: "Women can bring more kindness to the raw world of politics." I believe that you will also participate in this beautiful task, the success of which would benefit us all.

With respect and admiration

Michael Zantovsky