

A BEACON OF FREEDOM

Civil Society Forum shares condolences with Belarus upon sad death of Vitali Silitski



13 June 2011 - It is with great sadness that we mourn the loss of one of the brightest thinkers in Central Europe, Vitali Silitski, Director of the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS), and a participant in the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum.

Vitali, who died on 11 June 2011 at the age of 38 after a long fight against cancer, will be remembered for his unflinching independence of thought and for his persistent intelligence. As well as having authored hundreds of policy studies on issues ranging from democratisation and authoritarianism in the former USSR, to electoral revolutions and pre-emptive authoritarianism, the politics of economic reforms, EU relations with Belarus, and Belarus-Russia relations, his published works included *Postponed Freedom: Post-Communist Authoritarianism in Serbia and Belarus*, and *A Historical Dictionary of Belarus*.

Vitali graduated from the Belarusian State University, going on to earn an M.A. in Politics (Central European University, Hungary) and Ph.D. in Political Science (Rutgers University, USA). In 1999-2003, he worked as Associate Professor at the European Humanities University in Minsk, a position he lost when the university administration acted upon the orders of the state authorities to punish him for publicly criticising the government of President Alexander Lukashenko. He went on to become a Reagan-Fascell Democracy fellow at the National Endowment for Democracy (Washington D.C.) and visiting scholar at the Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law (Stanford University).

At a time when civil society is facing further restrictions in Belarus, and three opposition presidential candidates have been given long prison sentences after the presidential elections of December 2010, we hope that the Belarusian people will remember, and unite around, the positive and inspirational qualities of Vitali - his unshakeable wit, intelligence, and commitment to a democratic future for Belarus in Europe. Those of us who knew him in Belarus and throughout Europe and the US will work together, and invite everyone in Belarus or who cares about Belarus to join together, to realise Vitali's own wish for which he worked so long - to "light the candle of freedom" in Belarus.

He was a true friend of a democratic Belarus, and of Wider Europe as a whole. He will be much missed, for his lively spirit, his passion for improving European politics, his determination to keep making progress even when the steps seemed terribly small, and the joy that he brought to discussions of even the most contentious issues.

We will miss him greatly, and the candle of freedom in Belarus will be kept shining bright in his memory.

We extend our heart-felt condolences to Vitali's family, friends, and colleagues.