

Britain's theatre community comes out against oppression and censorship in the "last dictatorship of Europe".

Sir Tom Stoppard and actor/director Sam West Has led a protest of high-profile theatre practitioners outside the Belarussian Embassy at 6 Kensington Court, London, W8 5DL on Thursday 1st July at 11.30am.

They present an open letter to President Alyaksander Lukashenko of Belarus calling for greater democratic freedom and for an end to censorship of the Internet. Other signatories include **Mark Ravenhill, Howard Brenton, Alan Rickman, Laura Wade, Caryl Churchill, Henry Goodman, Henry Porter, Simon McBurney, Simon Stephens and Lyndsey Turner.**

"We urge you to allow the people of Belarus the right to express and share their opinions freely, whether this is on the internet or not. We urge you to use your powers to prevent any further repression of citizens who hold alternative, and oppositional, beliefs to you. We urge that the practice of physical abuse and intimidation against any citizen, including those who dare to hold alternative and oppositional points of view, be stopped. Finally, we urge you to protect the right to freedom of assembly in accordance with Article 21 of the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights to which Belarus is a state party," – the letter says.

Sam West performed an extract of *Generation Jeans*, a play from the multi-award winning Belarus Free Theatre.

"Generation Jeans" charts one man's journey as an activist. It captures all of the courage, the humour and the foolhardy determination that you need to resist a totalitarian regime, which makes it perfect for our protest today," says director **Clare Lizzimore**, co-organiser of the protest.

On Thursday 1st July a new Presidential decree on the Internet comes into force. It gives the authorities greater powers to monitor usage and will enable the Government to restrict or block access to websites that offer independent and alternative sources of information. It has been described as *"a step in the wrong direction"* by the European Union.

The decree is a clear attempt to curb the freedom of speech and the right to self-expression.

Playwright and co-organiser of the protest, **Alexandra Wood** says *"The internet is a vital tool in communication and should be available to all. Lukashenko's law, imposing censorship on the Internet, particularly affects those in Belarus who oppose his regime, who want to offer the Belarussian people an alternative, which is of course, his intention.*

Clare and I were inspired to take action after spending ten days with the Belarus Free Theatre, who are some of the most courageous and passionate defenders of freedom we have ever met, and we want them to know that in the face of huge obstacles, their actions are making a difference and they have supporters in the UK."

Actor **Sam West** says *"The purpose of theatre and the purpose of the internet is the same: to connect people, to bring them together as a collective entity, an audience, a world. Repressive regimes are rightly frightened of the internet for its ability to put free thinkers in touch with one another and give them inspiration and strength; it's not us and them out there, it's all us. We must*

oppose any withdrawal of these freedoms as anti-thought, anti-freedom, anti-human.”

His partner and playwright **Laura Wade** adds *“This decree is potentially a disaster for the Free Theatre of Belarus. For them, the internet is a lifeline – a way to find their audience in Minsk and beyond, but also to stay connected to a global network of friends and supporters. I believe that the Free Theatre, a group of passionate and brave theatre makers, have something vitally important to say to the world. We must make sure that they can.”*

Thursday’s protest was in support of the *Belarus Free Theatre* and is in conjunction with the Global Artistic Campaign in *Solidarity with Belarus*, founded by playwright, Sir Tom Stoppard.











**Prime Minister, Mr David Cameron MP
10 Downing Street
London
SW1A 2AA**

1 July 2010

Dear David Cameron,

END BRITIAN’S TOLERANCE OF DICTATORSHIP

We are a group of British artists working in the theatre who are deeply concerned about the censorship and human rights abuses taking place in Belarus.

We are writing on a day that President Lukashenko brings in a decree imposing censorship on the internet. He states that it is an attempt “*to protect the rights of Belarusian citizens, society and state in the field of information.*” But we believe it will result in the further persecution of individuals and groups who wish to offer alternative points of view to the Belarusian citizens. It is our belief that it is only a Government that is deeply insecure about its legitimacy and aware of its failings that

would wish to suppress opposition in this way.

Countries such as Finland and Estonia have ruled that internet access is a human right for their citizens and international bodies such as the UN are also pushing for universal net access. To impose restrictions on the internet is a deliberate attempt to limit the Belarusian people's access to a means of debate, which is a vital part of any healthy society. We must oppose any withdrawal of these freedoms as anti-thought, anti-freedom, anti-human.

We urge you to use all your powers and influence to ensure that fair Presidential elections take place in Belarus. The elections that took place in 2001 were widely considered by international observers to be un-free. After the 2006 election the UN's Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) said that the election failed to meet their commitments for democratic elections and that Lukashenko "permitted State authority to be used in a manner which did not allow citizens to freely and fairly express their will at the ballot box... a pattern of intimidation and the suppression of independent voices... was evident throughout the campaign."

Today's decree certainly reduces the likelihood that the forthcoming election will be any more democratic or fair than the last two.

While there might not be open killing in the streets yet, there have been countless politically motivated killings and kidnappings, such as of Yuriy Zakharenko (Ex-Minister of Internal Affairs) and Victor Gonchar (Vice-Speaker of the Parliament and ex-Head of Electoral Committee) to name but two. What will it take for our Government to act?

Thank you for giving this matter your urgent attention.

Sincerely,

Sir Tom Stoppard, Mark Ravenhill, Samuel West, Caryl Churchill, Alan Rickman, Henry Goodman, Howard Brenton, Simon Stephens, Simon McBurney, Henry Porter, Laura Wade, Lyndsey Turner, Alexandra Wood and Clare Lizzimore.
