



## FREE BELARUS: Europe's Last Dictatorship

In anticipation of the December 19<sup>th</sup> elections in Belarus, [Mischief + Mayhem](#) is focusing the November issue of its online magazine, [Wild Rag](#), on the Eastern European country. The special edition features work from Belarusian writers and artists: an essay and photography from Artur Klinov, examining the architectural history of the city of Minsk; recorded testimonies from three individuals whose family members and friends have disappeared after political statements, and the first US publication of Nikolai Khalezin's play *Thanksgiving Day*.

This special issue is part of a larger project, **Free Belarus**, which seeks to raise awareness regarding the political conditions in the country. For this project, Mischief + Mayhem is partnering with theater companies across the country to present readings of Khalezin's *Thanksgiving Day*. This effort will be aided by support from concerned organizations such as [freeDimensional](#).

The timing is perfect, as is the nature of the play. The plot centers on two characters: an elderly man living alone in middle America and his home nurse, an immigrant from Belarus. The story is seasonal, insightful, and, above all, exceptionally funny.

Throughout November and December, readings of the play can be seen in: Seattle ([New Century Theatre Company](#)) New Orleans ([Mondo Bizarro](#)), Connecticut ([Trinity College](#)), and Austin ([Shrewd Productions](#)). Please check Mischief + Mayhem's home page throughout the month for performance dates and added collaborators.

Participants in this project share concern for the people of Belarus and, in particular, the [Belarus Free Theatre](#), which has sold out venues around the world but must perform underground when at home. Productions are staged in private houses; invitations must be sent via cryptic text messages just hours before a performance begins. No one is charged for tickets. The company's work is verboten by Alexander Lukashenko's regime, which insists on sanctioning all theater, regardless of whether it's political or slapstick – or both. Several members of the Belarus Free Theatre have been imprisoned or, at the very least, threatened.

Nikolai Khalezin, a Belarus Free Theatre co-founder, and the company's director, Natalia Koliada, have made it clear there is no hope for legitimacy with the elections. Koliada tells an excellent, wrenching joke: "On the morning after the vote, the elections commissioner will walk into Luashenko's office and say 'I have good news and bad news. The good news is that you have been re-elected; the bad news is that no one voted for you.'" According to Khalezin and Koliada, the country's only true hope is gaining enough momentum for mass demonstrations. These efforts can be greatly aided by international coverage of the elections. Really, how many Americans pay attention to European elections? How many Americans know there is still a dictatorship in Europe?

**Free Belarus** aspires to help inch awareness of the elections toward critical mass.

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