

# Opening public spaces for people with disabilities in Belarus

On 18 March, the Paralympic Winter Games in Pyeongchang finished with Belarus eighth in the medals table. While the state invests in its paralympics competitors, the living conditions for other Belarusians with disabilities remain discriminatory.

Recently, various initiatives and individuals have promoted a barrier-free environment and inclusion for people with disabilities in such spheres as fashion and cultural life. Although public spaces for this social group have been opened up more than before, Belarusians only partly accept people with disabilities as equal members of society.

## An unnoticeable minority of Belarusians



Entrance to one of the restaurants in Minsk. Photo: kyky.org

After the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2016, public areas in Belarus started to adapt for wheelchair users. However, the Office for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has noted repeatedly that most ramps have inclines too steep, while lifts are too small for wheelchair users. In January 2018, the labour minister, Iryna Kastsevich, said that the government plans to introduce an administrative responsibility for the creation of a barrier-free environment.

According to Belstat, only a third of the 180,000 employable people with disabilities in Belarus have a job, while the rest live on a salary of \$75 to \$112 (data for August-October 2017). In that regard, in January the authorities initiated a discussion about the proposed introduction of a 5% quota for the employment of people with disabilities.

Of more than 500 thousand people with disabilities in Belarus, most remain invisible. Only part of the public transport system has special ramps and places for the disabled and public spaces remain inaccessible because of high stairs or small premises; this forces thousands of people to stay home. Greater restrictions also impose access to the culture and the labour market, where persons with disabilities lack representation. According to the National Research Institute of the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, [more than 70% wheelchair users rarely leave their homes.](#)

## **An inclusive beauty industry in Belarus**



Aliaksandra Chychykava, Miss Wheelchair World 2017.

Photo: sputnik.by

Aliaksandra Chychykava attracted attention to people with disabilities in the beauty industry when, in 2017, she won the Miss Wheelchair World competition. In February, the *Tumany* bar in Minsk refused to admit her into the venue because of its unsuitability and the presence of many drunken people. The reaction of Chychykava drew media attention to the place of wheelchair users in Belarusian society. While the authorities claim to work on developing infrastructure for people with disabilities, such cases demonstrate the real situation with an access to public places.

Belarusian fashion designers have paid attention to the needs of people with disabilities. In May 2017 they organised the first fashion show with models using wheelchairs. Katsiaryna Tsikota released a TIKOTAinclusive collection with a special range of clothing designed to be comfortable for wheelchair users. Dozens of wheelchair users attended the show, including paralympians and social activists. So far, this remains the only show in Belarus using models in wheelchairs, while the massive state-owned enterprises ignore a need of such clothes production. In May last year the project won the Grand Prix in the annual competition of the best social initiatives at *Social Weekend 9*.

On 4 March, models in wheelchairs took part in another popular event, the *Hrodno Fashion Show*. Designers Valiantsina Apanovich and Volha Vialichka from Hrodna created two trendy collections for people with disabilities. Before 4 March, the organisers refused to let people in wheelchairs from Hrodna perform at *Hrodno Fashion Show* for two years because of “inconsistencies with the aesthetic format of the show,” according to the show’s administrators. After models in wheelchairs participated in the show, the designers announced their intention to produce and distribute a catalogue of clothes for wheelchair users.

# Business and food places for wheelchair users in Belarus

In contrast to civil society activists, wheelchair users appear very rarely among Belarusian businessmen. For ten years Alexander Mahortau has produced qualitative and stylish wheelchairs at his own Minsk-based enterprise, *Invatech*. As the businessman told *Radio Liberty*, state-produced wheelchairs have a very low-quality and ugly appearance. Since the majority of his employees use wheelchairs, they aim to create comfortable wheelchairs taking into consideration users' measurements and preferences. Mahortau receives orders from abroad and from famous Belarusian wheelchair users. For instance, Chychykava performed in the Miss Wheelchair World competition in one of the company's wheelchairs.



Belarus's first fashion show involving wheelchair models. Photo: TUT.by

The Belarusian authorities are ready for dialogue and action in support of persons with disabilities but remain reluctant to take the initiative. Civil society activist Alexandr Audzevich has demonstrated an ability to negotiate with the

authorities. Thanks to him, the town of Lida has the first beach in Belarus adapted for people in wheelchairs. In addition, an activist successfully raised money through crowdfunding in order to travel 4,000 km through Europe on a manual bike, raising awareness about other Belarusians in a similar situation. Audzevich constantly visits Minsk's cafes and restaurants, and motivates wheelchair users to pursue an active life.

Most public places in Belarus [remain unavailable for wheelchair users](#); a problem that can be solved at the local level. At the end of 2015 a journalist from *Kyky.org*, Dmitry Valotka, checked the availability of 11 central cafes and restaurants of Minsk – only one of which wheelchair users can access on their own. According to the owners of such cafes, people with disabilities do not visit them, “so there is no need for [special] equipment.” Research conducted by the Belarusian State University and the Office for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2016 revealed that only 60 hotel rooms in Minsk suit tourists with special needs, and only five tourist agencies organise tours for wheelchair users.

## **Inclusive Belarus without governmental reform?**

In recent years, the authorities have begun to address the problems of people with disabilities. After the Belarusian Parliament signed the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2015, wheelchair-friendly infrastructure has become topical once again. The authorities focus on the question of benefits, the definition of disability in the framework of international qualifications and the introduction of quotas for the employment of people with disabilities.

However, Belarusian society remains a long way from accepting people with disabilities as an independent part of society.

This is demonstrated through the attitude in public places. At the same time, there exist positive examples in spheres such as fashion shows for wheelchair users or businesses created by people with disabilities.

To create favourable conditions for wheelchair users, Belarusian activists and authorities must cooperate closely towards the education of society. Labour quotas discussed in the parliament, better conditions for businesses owned by disabled as well as widening spheres of inclusion of disabled might lead to real, not merely formal, improvements.