

Freedom of expression: why do Belarusian authorities fear graffiti?

On 22 December 2016, three Belarusian street artists sued an investigative committee for unfounded accusations of hooliganism. On 13 January, the court rejected the claim, pointing to the absence of any violations of the artists' rights.

Street art has become a new form of political expression. The disproportionate reaction of authorities to street art is reflected in administrative punishments, harsh beatings, and regular KGB checks.

Freedom of expression in Belarus remains highly restricted. Positive changes in [visa policy](#), a decrease in political repression in 2016, and the release of six political prisoners in 2015 have raised hopes that the country is liberalising. However, as the prosecution of graffiti artists demonstrates, Belarusian authorities are still unwilling to make concessions to citizens and open up spaces for free expression of ideas.

How Belarusian authorities punish street artists

Street art has become a tool for expressing and illustrating political views in many European cities. However, Belarusian streets are different than in Europe in that they have [almost no graffiti](#).



Illicit paintings in Belarus survive for no longer than a few days or sometimes even hours. Authorities usually prosecute street artists for political paintings according to article 339 of the Criminal Code on 'hooliganism'.

The first graffiti case to elicit a disproportionate reaction occurred in 2005. The youth activist Artur Finkevich faced 12 years of imprisonment and spent more than 20 months in jail for writing the anti-Lukashenka slogan 'We want a new one (instead of Alexander Lukashenka)!' on the wall of a building in Minsk. Human rights defenders recognised Finkevich as a political prisoner who had been prosecuted for his active political position.

In 2015, street artists painted a bird in a cage, symbolising the fight of Belarusian journalists for their rights, on a building in Vitebsk. A short time after, the piece was covered in grey paint. Nevertheless, journalists who managed to photograph the painting received fines for participation in a so-called unsanctioned strike action.

Later, local authorities agreed that the painting was just an art piece and the photo-shoot was not a strike. However, journalists and human rights defenders believe that the authorities saw the graffiti as 'ideologically dangerous'.

In 2016, an unknown artist in Minsk added thorns on the garland and bouquet of a girl and boy painted onto the face of a building. Initially the street art, painted by a Russian artist in the style of socialist realism, aimed to depict the friendly relations between Russia and Belarus. Minsk

authorities are currently preparing a court case against the painter, whose name has not been disclosed to the public.

The 2015 street art affair

One of the most famous graffiti cases occurred in August 2015, when the investigative committee started a criminal case against the three street artists [Maksim Piakarski, Viačaslaŭ Kasinieraŭ, and Vadzim Žaromski](#). The civic activists were threatened with imprisonment for one to six years for two instances of graffiti and damaging a billboard with colour.

Their graffiti message conflicted with state ideology, and therefor led to a criminal case, as the human rights centre Viasna remarked. One painting stated 'Belarus should be Belarusian', while the other read 'Revolution of Consciousness'.

Violations of the artists' human rights during their detention and the disproportionate sentences they received led to a public outcry. In the end, the street artists received fines totaling 25, 000,000 BYR (around 1000 British Pounds). With the help of Art Siadziba, the activists gathered the money through a public campaign.

Human rights defenders classified the street artists as political prisoners. [Ales Bialiacki](#), the head of the human rights centre Viasna, commented to *Radyjo Racyja* that any form of civic activity in Belarus which contradicts official state ideology is punishable by the state.

On 22 December 2016, the three graffiti artists initiated a claim against the investigative committee for falsely accusing the artists of extremism and hooliganism. According to the investigative committee, Maksim Piakarski, Viačaslaŭ Kasinieraŭ and Vadzim Žaromski had published extremist material, including propaganda of violence against the police.



The artists first aimed to prove the accusation false and show that the committee had violated the disclosure principle. Moreover, The committee had released photos of extremist materials which according to the painters has no relation to them. The

proceeding, held on 13 January 2017, was short. The court decided that the painters' rights had not been violated, in accordance with a decision by media law and the criminal code.

Why do Belarusian authorities perceive street as a threat?

Regular restrictions of rights, the prosecution of civic activists, and violations of freedom of speech, as in the case of [John Silver](#), who suffered during detention and received personal threats to himself and his family, hardly surprise anyone familiar with Belarusian politics. However, punishing street artists for expressing their thoughts through graffiti is a new form of oppression. The court decision regarding the case of graffiti artists versus the investigative committee is evidence of Belarus's oppressive system.

Expressing political opinion through street art would be unlikely to mobilise citizens to protest against the regime. However, the practise of repressing dissidents, such as bloggers, [anarchists](#), and graffiti artists reflects the state's fears: graffiti with political slogans attracts a great deal of attention in social and mass media. In this way, authorities perceive street art as a form of protest equally dangerous to demonstrations or strikes.

The ongoing prosecution of citizens who express their political opinions through the arts indicates that political repression in Belarus, despite the [release of political](#)

[prisoners](#), is ongoing. The state will most likely continue mainly to protect the political *status quo* rather than protecting the rights of citizens.

Your Tomorrow, Global Belarusians Meeting, ADNaK! Winners – Civil Society Digest

City show releases final episode. First Ostrogorski Forum on Belarusian foreign policy and security. Your Tomorrow project assists in looking for a job for Belarusians who studied abroad. Vilnius hosts Global Belarusians Meeting. Art Siadziba offers assistance to BRSM in organising Vyshyvanka Day.

Imena online magazine is looking for investors. OEEC launches new educational course for female community leaders. 1,5 year and \$2m donations – Belarusian Children's Hospice opens its doors for small visitors. Human Rights Defenders For Free Elections campaign starts releasing weekly reports on observations of the upcoming Parliamentary elections. This and more in the new edition of Civil Society Digest.

Culture

[The City show sums up results](#). In the final 11th episode, [The City](#) project shows how a children pirate ship was built in Braslaŭ, the Little Prince was painted in Kamianiec and if other participants continued implementation of their

initiatives. The City project was attended by 17 participants from 11 cities; attracted local resources and volunteer help for around \$6,000 and mobilised over 2,000 people in project activities.

[Global Belarusians Meeting in Vilnius.](#)

EESC in cooperation with partners is holding the Global Belarusians Meeting, which takes place on 29 June – 1 July, in Vilnius, Lithuania. The meeting [gathered](#) renowned Belarusian experts of Belarusian culture and identity from



Belarus, Lithuania, and other countries to discuss a joint Lithuanian-Belarusian past, contemporary Belarusian culture, etc. The official opening took place at Vilnius Town Hall.

[Art Siadziba offers assistance to BRSM in organizing Vyshyvanka Day.](#)

The pro-governmental Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRSM) uses an idea of Art Siadziba CSO in its event and organises Vyshyvanka Day/Embroidery Day at the Palace of Sports on 2 July. In 2014, Art Siadziba conducted [the similar event](#) without any state support. Now CSO activists decide not to fight plagiarism but help make the event interesting.

Community building

[First Ostrogorski Forum.](#) On 29 June, the Ostrogorski Centre held a conference on Belarusian foreign policy and security. The conference featured five studies conducted in spring 2016 with grant support from the Mott Foundation and Pontis Foundation. Speakers [discussed](#) issues including Belarusian soft power in the region, Belarusian-Russian relations after

the conflict in Ukraine, etc.

[Your Tomorrow project](#) was presented by the *Salidarnasć* Committee on June 29. The project aims to create a community of young professionals who studied abroad and willing to work in Belarus. A new project can be useful for more than 18 thousand Belarusians who received or are receiving education abroad. Surveys show that more than 50% of recent graduates would like to return to Belarus.

[Solve Together: course for community leaders](#). Office of European Expertise and Communications (OEEC) invites grassroots leaders to participate in the educational course aimed to help female community leaders to increase their competencies in identifying and solving local problems, considering the interests of women and vulnerable groups. Priority in participation is given to women. Deadline for applications is 1 July .

Social projects

[Imena invites investors](#). The online magazine Imena/Names tells about Belarusians, who got in trouble and those who help others. During the first 2,5 months, the magazine has got 120 thousand unique users; 5 thousand followers in social networks and BYR 93m (roughly \$4,700) collected in support of its heroes. The magazine requests support from its readers, in order not to depend on advertisers, international grants or subscription.

[1,5 year and BYR 38.5bn \(roughly \\$2m\) donations: Belarusian Children's Hospice opened](#). On June 16, the ceremony of the official opening of the Belarusian Children's Hospice took place near Minsk. The hospice was built via crowdfunding, without state budget money. From July 1, Hospice will start taking seriously ill children and their parents. As a non-governmental non-profit organisation, the [Belarusian](#)

[Children's Hospice](#) provides its services for free.

Business and civil society

[aDNAK! announced the winners](#). On 30 June , an [award ceremony](#) of the Festival of Belarusian advertising and communications aDNAK! took place in Minsk. Initiated by *Budzma* campaign, for 7 years the festival is a communication platform that gathers professionals and beginners of the advertising market and encourages the creation of Belarusian-oriented advertising. This year Festival got 285 applications from 135 participants.

[Non-food stallholders held another national forum in Minsk on 13 June](#). The event was hosted by Dom Moskvyy (House of Moscow), a building owned by the Moscow city government. The forum was organised by a small business association called *Perspektyva* that campaigns against president's Edict No.222 that introduced controversial rules for non-food stallholders.

Other

[Student activists make series about Bologna Process](#) (video). Two series are already out. The protagonist, Mr. Bologne, explains how the university autonomy works and what the quality of education is. "Belarus joined the Bologna Process on May 14, 2015 but no serious reforms have been carried out so far," the authors of the series noted.

[First report on the results of observation](#). The civil campaign *Human Rights Defenders For Free Elections* starts releasing the weekly reports on observations of the upcoming Parliamentary elections scheduled for September 11, 2016. The report of June 7-12 concludes that the current election campaign has a more favourable domestic political background as compared to last year's presidential election.

[People's voting for the non-formal event of the year](#). More than 50 Belarusian educational projects/events are presented for people's voting within the [VI Festival of Non-Formal Education](#), which will be held in Minsk on 7-9 July. The voting is available via social networks until July 5. The awards ceremony will be held on 8 July, at the Festival.

[Mahilioŭ authorities denied registration to a local Center For Gender Studies Ruža](#). According to the NGO's head, Aliena Barysava, the ban referred to an absence of gender discrimination in the country, as "gender equality is guaranteed by the Constitution of Belarus". Therefore, equality is secured by authorised government bodies, while eradicating discrimination is allegedly beyond the NGO's competence.

Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials provided by Pact. This digest attempts to give a richer picture of the recent political and civil society events in Belarus. It often goes beyond the hot stories already available in English-language media.

No Single Opposition Candidate for Presidential Elections? - Belarus Civil Society Digest


Who constitutes a 'new majority'? What is the 'Civil Agreement on Change' about? – campaign Tell the Truth! presented its strategy for the next local and presidential elections.

The civil society organised numerous educational opportunities and events for Belarusians. Among them was the meeting with Štefan Füle, the Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy, who talked about the role of the civil society in the dialogue with Brussels.

The state-run Public Administration Academy organised the training conference on the 'Social Responsibility of Entrepreneurship'. Number of experts from the non-profit organisations participated in the event.

Civil Society Campaigns and Activities

[Tell the Truth! launches a new strategy](#). The movement Tell the Truth! is launching a *Civil Agreement on Change* strategy that is aimed at creating a "[change agenda](#)" based on the interests of a "new majority". The movement is ready to unite local leaders and help them become politicians the authorities cannot ignore. The movement also [announced its decision to withdraw](#) for the time being from all talks about the nomination of a single presidential contender to represent opposition forces in the 2015 election.

On 21 February [the International Mother Language Day was held in Belarus](#). BelaPAN made infographics, which shows that in 2012-2013, the Belarusian language learning is used only by 11.4% pre-school children, 16.4% school pupils, and 0.2% higher education students. This day, sculptor [Henik Loika](#) who staged a picket in support of the Belarusian language, was sentenced to five days of administrative arrest.

[Historical board game Rebels](#). The *Rebels* is the first Belarusian board game in which one can immerse oneself in the atmosphere of 1863 and become a famous historical figure or a simple Belarusian and influence the historical events. The game involves from 6 to 20 people. The initiative to create the game belongs to the Grodno young poet Anton Jankowski and a designer Nastassia Lukashkova.

[Meeting with Füle](#). On 20 February in Brussels, the Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy Štefan Füle met with eight representatives of Belarusian civil society, the coordinators of the European Dialogue on Modernisation with Belarusian society. Commissioner Füle stressed the importance of support to civil society in Belarus as a matter of priority for the EU.

[Ponimanie and SOS-Kinderdorf's joint project](#). On 25 February the first working meeting of a new joint project of Hermann Gmeiner's Fund, Belarusian Fund SOS Children's Villages and the INGO "Ponimanie" took place. The project *Safe Families for Children Suffered from Violence or Neglect* is aimed at ensuring secure family environment and eradicating violence towards children and at professional advancement of specialists who work in the sphere of prevention of child abuse and neglect.

Educational Courses and Trainings

[BAJ education courses](#). Belarusian Association of Journalists invites to a number of its education courses – [COOL'ture \(cultural\) analyst](#) to create cultural texts in various genres; [Creating Video from A to Z: the video for photojournalists](#) to prepare photojournalists to work with video; and [Investigative Journalism](#) for professional journalists.

[Call for students](#). Centre for Student Initiatives Development announces call for ideas from students who want to realize their projects in the following areas: the rights and interests of students, the development of the student self-government, the issues of students, the quality of education. The deadline for applications is 5 March 2013.

[The Academy of the First-2013](#) invited for participation representatives of Belarusian CSOs and initiatives. The long term education course consists of five trainings, home tasks,

and educational projects. The purpose of the Academy is to prepare democratic youth leaders who will take an active part in the life of their organisations and communities. The meeting took place on 28 February in Minsk.

Call for applications for the Week of Sustainable Development 2013. The call for proposals invites to participate in the Week of Sustainable Development, to be held on 20-28 April 2013. This year slogan is *Partnership in Action*. The organisers of the Week are Minsk International Educational Center, Support Program for Belarus and non-profit institution New Eurasia. The Week invites to cooperation national and local governments, CSOs, businesses associations, international organisations and diplomatic missions.

Expert meeting on higher education. On 12 February an in-country expert meeting dedicated to the post-soviet states' experience in adoption the Bologna principles in higher education took place in Minsk. Belarusian experts had a chance to meet Taras Finikov, a former Ukrainian Deputy-Minister for Education and Science. The Minsk-based Office for European Expertise and Communication was among the organisers of the event.

Environmental School for Trainers. On 8-10 March the School of environmental activist focused on training of young trainers of green movement is to be launched. The course is designed for proactive people, CSOs' members who have experience of civil activities and ready to provide training and educational programs in the field of environmental protection.

EESC announces training. East European Studies Centre announces a professional development opportunity for young Belarusian researchers under the Belarus Research Council initiative. 20 selected analysts from Belarus will attend a training in May 2013 in Vilnius.

Civil Society and Art

Life After Prison. The new book by publicist Aliaksandr Tamkovich *Life After Prison* will be presented on February 26. The book consists of 27 articles, which tell about what happened in the lives of the participants of the tragic events of 19 December 2010, who served short prison terms for participating in the so-called "riots".

Simple Words documentary. A new documentary film *Simple Words* was made for the International Mother Language Day, 21 February. The non-profit project tells about young Belarusians who speak Belarusian every day. The authors of the film note that the entire budget went to a cocktail of strawberry, blue pen and phone calls to municipal services.

Art-journalist School. A non-profit institution Art-Siadziba launched a short term *School of Art journalist* for young, active and creative people to learn working in the field of journalism. Thus, Art-Siadziba plans to form a team, which is to become the editorial team of the portal Art Siadziba Online. According to the belngo.info newsletter

Festival of Central European literature Shengenka. The First Festival of Central European Literature *Shengenka* will take place in March, at the Minsk Gallery Ÿ. The Festival gives an opportunity to get acquainted with the literary and philosophical works of Central Europe. The project initiator is Laboratory of Science and Art Translation, co-organizers are the campaign Budzma Belarusians! and the Association of Belarusian Writers.

Other

Visor Raised award. On 22 February, the special jury is to announce the winner of the Yury Zakharanka annual memorial award *With Visor Raised*. This year, for the first time ever the prize is awarded to a female human rights defender, Raisa Mikhailouskaya. The ceremony is held during the evening of memory of former Interior Minister, missing politician, Yury

Zakharanka.

SYMPA at the state-run conference. On 26 February at the Presidential Academy of Management, a scientific and practical training conference *Social Responsibility of Entrepreneurship* took place. Experts BIPART/ SYMPA Natalia Ryabova and Vladimir Kovalkin made a report *Ethics in the Public Service*. The conference was attended by members of the Parliament, researchers of the scientific, educational and social institutions, a group of SYMPA experts and trainees, etc.

Sixth World Congress of Belarusians. The World Association of Belarusians Batskaushczyna (Homeland) invites to the 6th World Congress of Belarusians, aimed to promote the unity of the nation, the strengthening of ties between the Belarusians from different countries, as well as help in solving common issues. The 6th Congress titled *The Belarusian nation and globalization: challenges and opportunities* will be held on 23-24 July in Minsk.

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