

# Women In Technology Week, Nobel laureate's Intellectual Club, Earth Hour 2019 – Civil society digest

Belarusian authorities allow mass actions to celebrate the 101st anniversary of the Belarusian People's Republic in Hrodna and Minsk. Nobel laureate's (Svetlana Alexievich's) Intellectual Club resumes its meetings. Minsk hosts the first 'monstration'.

The Belarusian court sentences Maryna Zolatava, the chief editor of TUT.by portal, to a fine over dereliction of duty under the so-called BelTA case. Human rights defenders alarmed by the unprecedented attack on critical bloggers.

Women In Technology Week supported by USAID was held on March 18-22. Belarus joins the global action Earth Hour for the 11th time. The Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) names the Ministry of Emergency Situations, MFA and the State Border Committee as the most open ministries.

## Civic activities

[Freedom Day marked for three days in Belarus](#). The authorities allowed mass actions to celebrate the 101st anniversary of the Belarusian People's Republic (#BNR101) in [Hrodna](#) (March 23) and [Minsk](#) (March 24), each of them gathered from 1,5K to 5K people. A number of unauthorized actions were held on March 25. While there were no detentions in Hrodna, at least 15 people, including opposition politicians and known musicians, were [detained](#) on March 24-25. Most of them were later released without charges.

[Nobel laureate's Intellectual Club](#) meeting took place on March 26, at the Lithuanian Embassy in Minsk. The speakers, Belarusian authors Alhierd Bakharevich and Viktor Martsinovich, [debated](#) on the topic *Price Of Compromise*. After receiving the 2015 Nobel Prize in Literature, Svetlana Aleksievich's declared readiness to spend part of the money prize on the establishment and activity of an intellectual club for Belarus.

[First Belarusian 'monstration': more posters than participants](#). On March 6, in Minsk, volunteers of the HRC *Viasna* organized a monstration. The participants were holding posters with the inscriptions "Workers of all countries, quit!", "Thank you for nothing", etc. The Monstration is an idea of mass demonstration with absurd mottoes invented in Russia.

[Over 230K Belarusians engaged in volunteer activities](#). This is nearly 2,4% of the population. According to the Statistical Committee's poll of the Belarusians aged 15-74, the most common areas of volunteers are social support (28%) and animal care (24%). An average volunteer is a woman who lives in a city: twice as many women than men, as well as four times more urban residents than rural ones are involved in voluntarism.

## Human rights

[Human rights defenders alarmed by the unprecedented attack on critical bloggers](#). The HRC *Viasna* is concerned about the situation of blogger Andrei Pavuk, who was detained for having allegedly used his computer to email a fake bomb threat to the government building. *Viasna* believes that the case is a sign of intensified repression in the Internet on the eve of elections. Earlier, charges were brought against bloggers in Brest.

[Guilty: Zolatava to pay a fine and BelTA costs](#). On March 4,

the court announced the verdict to Maryna Zolatava, the chief editor of TUT.by portal. She was found guilty of dereliction of duty under the so-called [BelTA case](#). She must pay a fine and sue charges totalled of \$6,3K. BAJ and Belarusian Pen Center released a joint [statement](#) regarding the conviction of Zolatava. [OSCE](#) hopes the verdict will be overturned.



Maryna Zolatava in court. Source: tut.by

[Monitoring of LGBT-topic in the Belarusian media](#). During the ten months (January-October 2018), the human rights initiative *Journalists for Tolerance* monitored 161 Belarusian media outlets and found 891 LGBTQ+ related publications. Compared with the previous monitoring, the share of relevant materials has increased, and more materials with hate speech have appeared.

[Earth Hour 2019](#). This year, Belarus joins the global action Earth Hour for the 11th time. On March 30, the last Saturday of March from 8:30 pm to 9:20 pm the lights will be turned off on the most famous buildings. This is a demonstration of the human will to global environmental problems. Three topics are chosen this year: for clean air, clean neighbourhood and clean energy.

# Gender Equality

[Women In Technology Week](#) supported by USAID was held on March 18-22. The Week is a series of workshops and discussions to help empower women and girls as future business leaders and entrepreneurs, particularly in tech sectors. On March 18, Jenifer H. Moore, U.S. Charge d’Affaires to Belarus, [took part](#) in the opening panel discussion on women’s leadership.

[W-day in Minsk](#). On March 2-13, Minsk will host a network of events dedicated to the spring holiday of gender fight. The organizers hope to return the lost meanings to the International Women’s Day that means respect for women’s work and a symbol of the struggle for gender equality. The program includes lectures, discussions, a master-class on feminism with own hands, etc.

[Week of educational activities against racism, discrimination and hatred](#) is held in Belarus on March 16-24. The Week is organized by Human Constanta human rights CSO together with partners. The agenda includes public lectures, youth debates, and presentations. The Belarusian Week runs in parallel with the European Action Week Against Racism.

# Education

[ICNL releases report on restrictions on higher education](#). The report seeks to understand the ways in which governments are repressing university autonomy and closing academic space. Belarus is mentioned in relation to forced membership in the government-controlled youth organization, the pressure on students for their socio-political activity, etc.

[Hackathon for teachers](#) was held in Minsk, on March 23-24. The Hackathon titled of *EduTHON* is a creative laboratory, where professionals from the education and IT sectors get together

to address educational problems and come up to technical solutions. The *Education for Future* association organizes the event.



Women in IT week. Source:  
<http://gender-route.org>

**First SDG Impact Investment Forum** was held in Minsk, on March 28. The forum was designed to stimulate social impact investment growth and support active engagement of the business community into the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) achievement in the country. Initiated by UNDP, the event gathered CSOs, high-profile officials and business companies.

**First Belarusian Forum of Innovative Ideas** will be held in Mogilev, on April 19-20. The Forum aims to promote the work of regional CSOs and their contribution to the development of the regions. The organizers are the Center "Kola", Studio for Useful Competencies and the Center "Third Sector", Grodno. Deadline for applications is March 29.

# Other

[Rating of the most closed state bodies](#). The Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) surveyed journalists about the openness of the Belarusian ministries and departments. The Ministry of Emergency Situations, MFA and the State Border Committee received the best marks. The most closed are the Information and Analytical Center, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the KGB.

[12th MediaBarCamp opens registration](#). The MediaBarCamp *Inspired BY* (Inspired by Belarus/Inspired by someone or something) is a place where activists meet to build networks, inspire each other, and share their experiences of working with civil society projects. During the four-day event, discussions, workshops, presentations etc. are held at different venues. Application deadline is March 24.

*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.*

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## **Human rights in Belarus: arrests decrease, fines increase**

Amid the Belarusian presidential election in 2020, it is unlikely that significant steps will be taken towards political liberalisation. After the lifting of Western

sanctions in 2016 against Lukashenka and several Belarusian officials, there has been no improvement in the human rights situation in Belarus. The authorities are likely to maintain pressure on independent online resources (TUT.by and others).

Nevertheless, after the change of geopolitical situation in 2014, the annexation of Crimea by Russia, and the war in the east of Ukraine, it became even more important for the West to prevent Belarus from losing its independence. The dialogue with Minsk was intensified. Lukashenka was invited to visit a few EU capitals, including Paris, Vienna, and Riga. As a result, Belarusian authorities replaced brutal arrests with more sophisticated methods of punishments of civil society activists such as fines and employment ban.

## **As the number of arrests decrease, fines increase**

After the lifting of EU sanctions, there was no change in the attitude of the authorities towards the opposition and civil society. As before, Lukashenka often speaks of them as “fifth column”. On 24 August 2017, he even spoke about “children of the fifth column” and “our, ordinary children.” More than once he claimed that BRSM (the state-run Belarusian Republican Youth Union), veterans’ associations and trade unions – the organisations fully controlled by the authorities – were a civil society. Lukashenka often stated that human rights were the rights to life and to work and that the human rights situation in Belarus was no worse than in the West.

Only one aspect has changed – the government has modified somewhat the methods of pressure on the opposition and civil society. Since spring 2016, there have been fewer cases of arrest of opposition activists, independent journalists and people protesting the authorities’ actions. However, the number of fines has sharply increased.

According to the database of human rights activists, in 2017, activists and protesters were detained over 600 times. According to the courts' decisions, they paid more than 200,000 rubles (about \$100,000) in fines. In many regions of Belarus, a monthly salary of \$200-300 is seen as a good salary.

According to the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ), in 2017, the courts issued 69 fines under Article 22.9 (Part 2) of the Administrative Code (illegal production and distribution of media products). Journalists paid 52,923 rubles in fines (the equivalent of about \$26,500). In the current year, the courts have already handed down 106 sentences to pay fines for the total amount of 92,316 rubles (about \$46,000). According to preliminary data, the participants in the actions in 2018 will pay fewer fines issued by courts than in 2017. However, this in no way means a softening of the political regime.

## **Employment ban as a means of punishment**

The government still widely uses the employment ban against leaders and the best-known activists of NGOs, as well as civil society activists, in whose activities the government sees political overtones. KGB officers make sure that a "black-listed" person cannot get a job at a state enterprise or agency. In a large city, one can still get employed at a private enterprise. However, it happens that the employer then starts to have problems with various government agencies, such as the tax inspection, the sanitary-epidemiological service, and the fire inspection.





Hienadz Fiadynich and Ihar Komlik, the leaders of the independent trade union movement. Source: tut.by

In a town with the population below 50,000 people, such persons will not even find a temporary employment: they are known, and a business owner does not want to get into trouble. The maximum that they can count on is informal, casual earnings from an acquaintance. Or they will be offered the most unskilled, low-paid job – a janitor or a cleaner in a store so that whoever sees them learns a lesson.

The fate of an opposition-minded high-school history teacher, who was dismissed for having organised a campaign in his district to collect signatures for one of Lukashenka's opponents, serves as an example. This person was the leader of the largest NGO in the district, which organised and held meetings with Belarusian historians, local history experts and cultural figures. He also wrote several history books. Nevertheless, his repeated attempts to get a job were unsuccessful as he remains blacklisted.

# Politically motivated lawsuits and pressure against NGOs

Politically motivated lawsuits against Belarusian activists were also initiated. There was a possibility that political prisoners would reappear in Belarus. Thus, on 14 June 2018, officers of the KGK's Financial Investigation Department searched the apartment of Ales Lipaj, a poet, renown independent journalist, founder and director of BelaPAN news agency, for seven hours. Criminal proceedings were instigated against him under Article 243 (Part 2) of the Criminal Code (large-scale tax evasion). On 23 August, Ales Lipaj died. He was only 53 years old.



Ales Lipaj Source: naviny.by

On 24 November 2011, under the same article, also for an alleged large-scale tax evasion, the court sentenced Ales Bialiatski, a renown human rights activist, to four and a half years in a medium-security correctional facility and to the confiscation of property.

On 30 July 2018, Hienadz Fiadynich and Ihar Komlik, the

leaders of the independent trade union movement, were put on trial. They were charged with large-scale tax evasion (Article 243 (Part 2) of the Criminal Code). After two months of trial, they were sentenced to four years of restraint and fines.

Article 193-1 of the Criminal Code, which provides for criminal liability (imprisonment for up to two years) for activities on behalf of an unregistered organisation, is yet to be repealed. Many Belarusian NGOs were denied state registration, or they are not able to obtain state registration under the current conditions. Their activists still face the risk of this article being used against them.

As before, there is information from the province that KGB officers have been having “preventive” conversations with businessmen, warning them about big troubles in the case of providing financial and material support to civic activists and initiatives. Therefore, it is unlikely that the authorities will ease the pressure on the opposition and civil society and take noticeable steps towards political liberalisation in the period preceding the presidential election.

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## **Covering protests: a new epoch for the Belarusian media**

On 25 March, a record number of Internet users visited the website of the independent Belarusian newspaper *Nasha Niva*. 109,000 Internet users read articles describing the protests against the [social parasite law](#). In Belarus, this is nothing to sneeze at.

The state media either ignored the March protests or covered them in a negative light. Thus, the independent media became the only source of information for the public about the countrywide demonstrations against the social parasite decree.

Despite 120 cases of detention or arrest of journalists between 10 and 30 March, the independent media managed to cover the protests with great degree of professionalism. Due to the arrest of oppositional leaders in smaller cities, reporters found themselves in the spotlight.

Unorganised protesters gathered around journalists to express their discontent with the government and hundreds thousand Belarusians followed online streams of people meeting to criticise the economic policy of the authorities on camera.

Due to the rapid developments in media technology, Lukashenka's propaganda machine can no longer keep up with real journalists.

## **How free is the press in Belarus?**

Unlike in many authoritarian states, in Belarus the public has free access to local and foreign news portals. Nevertheless, human rights organisations are highly critical of Belarus when it comes to freedom of press issues.

The country traditionally occupies the lowest rungs of media freedom indices. In 2016, the World Press Freedom Index, published by Reporters without Borders, assigned Belarus 157th place out of 180 countries. According to Freedom House, Belarus occupies the 194th position. Only Crimea, Eritrea, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and North Korea earned a worse ranking.



Comparison of most popular independent and state media. Unique users in March 2017



Indeed, the state controls all TV and Radio stations in the country and has a monopoly on print media distribution. Nevertheless, independent media has found much more success on the Internet. The most popular private news portal, *TUT.by*, is accessed by 46.42 % of Internet users in the country. According to Google Analytics, in March 2017 the *TUT.by* news service

attracted almost 6 million unique users.

According to a Belarusian rating of web-pages, *Akavita.by*, the most popular state news portal in the country was the official news-agency *Belta.by*. Approximately 470,000 users visit the page each month.

Media experts within the country agree that the media situation is not as drastic as international ratings claim. According to human rights organisations, no journalists are currently under arrest. The last killing of a journalist occurred 13 years ago in 2004. According to Belarus Association of Journalists chair Andrei Bastunets, the situation in Belarus is much better than in Azerbaijan or Syria, which rank above Belarus in many indices.

The highly restrictive nature of media legislation is the main reason for such low ratings. Several influential Belarusian media outlets, such as satellite TV channels Belsat and Euroradio, are based in Poland. To hinder their work, authorities introduced a law prohibiting journalists from working with foreign media companies without government accreditation.

This legislative norm is often used to target freelancers working for these stations or other 'foreign' media organisations forced to work without Belarusian accreditation. As a result, fines for freelance journalists have become a common practise. The law also allows the Ministry of Information to block websites containing articles harmful to the interests of the state. Websites can even be blocked because of unsavoury comments under articles.

## Covering protests

Protests against the parasite law and the following [crackdown on 25 March](#) have politicised Belarusian society. Naturally, this provoked a huge amount of interest on behalf of the independent media. The last time non-state media enjoyed such wide popularity was during the Silent Protests of 2011. While state TV stations broadcast propagandist programmes comparing the demonstrations to Nazi riots, independent journalists streamed online coverage from the ground.



However, the scale of repression of journalists in 2017 was much larger than in 2011. Between 10 and 30 March, 120 journalists were detained, arrested, or fined. Nevertheless, after 25 March, some media analysts started to talk about a new era of journalism in Belarus. Indeed, the media was able to not only cover protests, but also mobilise protesters.

Due to the absence of oppositional leaders at the demonstrations in small cities such as Pinsk, Slonim, or Rahachou, people gathered around journalists and openly criticised the government on camera. Somewhere between 20,000 to 350,000 people followed *Radio Liberty* and Belsat TV live-streams of the protests all over the country. Some journalists even managed to broadcast their own arrests and continued



live-streams from inside police stations.

Commenting on the work of the media on 25 March, editor-in-chief of Euroradio Viktor Malisheuski admitted that this was the first time that journalists managed to be so brazen. They worked in the same way that journalists in democratic countries do. Thus, media consumers received much higher-quality material than the authorities expected.

## The state media responds

The professionalism of the independent media was especially notable when compared with the state media. On 25 March, Internet users actively discussed developments on the website of the largest state-controlled Belarusian newspaper, *Belarus Today*. On a day when at least 700 protesters were detained in the centre of Minsk, the headline of the publication read '25 March. Everything is calm in Minsk'. The reaction of the public led to the post being deleted on 27 March.

In online broadcasts for state TV, the authorities provided low quality [propaganda movies](#). A recent documentary, broadcast on 12 April, linked activists suspected of inciting riots to ISIS and Nazi groups. Internet users were quick to respond with ironic comments and jokes comparing the documentary to science fiction.

Only a fraction of the public retains an interest in politics during lulls in repression

Experts agree that unlike state media, independent journalists showed a high level of professionalism. Nevertheless, it is questionable whether the free media really expanded its audience. After crackdowns on protests come to an end, interest towards politics usually declines.

Only a fraction of the public retains an interest in politics

during lulls in repression, and this group remains the primary target audience of the non-state media. Just as in 2011, interest towards independent media is expected to fall for this reason.

Nevertheless, the work of journalists this time around is evidence that the techniques of protest coverage have forever changed. New technology allowed the public to watch the demonstrations and witness police brutality online in real time. This gives the journalistic community immense power. The arrests, fines, and police attacks on the offices of Belsat TV in Minsk which occurred on 31 March are proof that the authorities are well aware of this danger.

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## **#DanceForReforms, Jails Monitoring, Websites Warned – Belarus Civil Society Digest**

StudWatch initiative launches a #DanceForReforms flashmob. Viasna publishes a report on monitoring detention facilities in Belarus. 106 new NGOs were registered in 2015. Three Belarusian crowdfunding platforms collect nearly \$140K of local funds in 2015. Belarus in Focus announces winners of its annual international journalism competition. Lawtrend presents infographics of 48 government websites.

Ministry of Interior confirms "no detention, fines later" as new tactic on protest rallies. Two independent websites receive warnings from the Information Ministry. Belarusian Christian Democracy Party denied registration for the sixth time. Since the presidential elections fines for civic activists and journalists grow, but arrests drop to zero.



# Civil society initiatives

[StudWatch launches a flashmob #danceForReforms](#). StudWatch initiative is a number of student CSOs that united to jointly uphold the quality of higher education and achieve true student self-government. The initiative calls on students who are dissatisfied with the status quo in Belarusian higher education, to take part in the flashmob – to dance on the background of the university, record a video and post it in social networks with the hashtag #danceForReforms.

[Mova Nanova announces a new flash mob](#). On the eve of Mother Language Day, people confess, why they do not speak Belarusian, creating posters with their photos. Among the advanced reasons are fear of making mistakes, lack of Belarusian-language environment, laziness. Mova Nanova/Language Anew is free courses of Belarusian language held in 10 cities over the country.□

## Reports and statistics

[Viasna publishes report on monitoring places of detention in Belarus](#). The Human Rights Center *Viasna* has analyzed the situation in places of detention in Belarus and prepared a report on the results of monitoring in 2015. The report states that the situation in places of detention did not considerably change last year and describes cases of violating human rights, using or encouraging cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment.

[Statistics on the registration of NGOs](#). In 2015, 106 new NGOs were registered in Belarus, which increased the number of registered organizations by 2.7% compared to 2014. Thus, now in Belarus there are 2,665 registered NGOs, 34 unions (associations) of NGOs, 164 foundations, and 7 republican

state-public associations.

[More than 3 billion rubles collected at Belarusian crowdfunding platforms in 2015](#). They are MaeSens.by, Ulej.by and Talaka.by. The total amount is around \$140K (on the recent exchange rate). According to [Ulej.by](#), the average donation is \$23-25. People respond more actively on social projects like support to children, disabled, inclusive education systems, and animals.

["Executive Authority Online" infographics](#). Lawtrend presents the results of a recent study of 48 official websites in a format of interactive infographics. The infographics reflects changes of the official websites since 2013, when for the first time Lawtrend conducted monitoring of the official resources of national executive authorities (general rating, accessibility for the blind, the changes for two years, etc.).

**Fines grow, arrests not applied.** According to the Human Rights Centre [Viasna](#) and [BAJ](#), since the presidential elections to present (October 2015-February 2016), about 90 administrative cases were initiated against civic activists and journalists. More than a half of cases ended up with fines for a total amount of Br320 million (around \$17K); no administrative arrests followed. To compare with the same period a year ago (October 2014-February 2015) – 70 administrative cases, Br120 million (around \$8K) of fines and 151 days of administrative arrests. Also, then six political prisoners remained behind bars.

## Other events

[Tell the Truth holds fifth founding congress](#). On February 21, the civil campaign *Tell the Truth!* held the fifth founding congress to apply for registration of the association. It was attended by 70 delegates from all regions of the country. *Tell the Truth!* has been trying to get an official registration

since 2011, to no avail. On February 25, the campaign celebrates its sixth anniversary.

[Belarus in Focus announces winners of the fifth edition of its annual international journalism competition for authors writing about Belarus](#). This year, the competition received 71 articles by 59 authors from 16 countries. The jury has decided to assign 4 prizes to professional journalists and 1 prize to the beginner. The winners will be awarded at the award-giving ceremony in Minsk in the end of April.

## Interaction between state and civil society

[Entrepreneurs' protests continue](#). On February 28, several hundred of private entrepreneurs gathered in Minsk October Square, trying to make the government abolish decree #222. No one was detained. Anatoli Shumchanka, the leader of the Perspektiva, and Mikalai Statkevich, ex-political prisoner announce an [Entrepreneurs March](#) under the same slogans for March 14.

[Interior minister explains why police go easy on opposition rallies](#). Recently, the police stopped dispersing mass rallies and detaining their participants – now they draw protocols and impose fines. Thus, the Belarusian police found a new suitable algorithm for responding to opposition rallies, which satisfied both the authorities and the West. The monthly [Human Rights Monitoring](#) for February confirms that all unauthorized peaceful assemblies within a month passed without the intervention of law enforcement authorities.



**Two websites warned by the Information Ministry.** Two independent websites, of Nasha Niva newspaper [nn.by](http://nn.by) and Ezhednevnik [ej.by](http://ej.by) received written warnings from the Ministry of Information. The chairperson of BAJ Andrei Bastunets underlines that a warning is not a preventive measure, but a sanction – two warnings can result in a closure of the mass media.

**Belarusian Christian Democracy Party failed to register for the sixth time.** The Ministry of Justice has found ‘rude violations of the legislation of Belarus’ in the statutes. The last constituent assembly of the BCD was held in December 2015.

**BAJ leader takes part in Editors’ Club.** The program Editors’ Club is broadcast on the Belarusian State Television Company and gathers for a discussion chief editors of state-run editions. After the [appeal](#) of key independent media, the Club invited Andrei Bastunets, head of Belarusian Association of Journalists, to the program on February 25.

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# CharkaShkvarka, BEROCC Conference, Shorebirds Festival – Belarus Civil Society Digest

Belarusians can afford less than 300 shots of vodka and pork bites per month, according to BIPART's new CharkaShkvarka Index. Sustainable Development Week continues until May 25.

34mag launches a series of off-line meetings with the editorial teams of Belarusian media. BEROCC announces opening of the registration for the Fifth International Conference in Economics and Finance. Science Without Borders project will make science closer to ordinary people.

Free bike rental launches in Minsk from May 1. Andrei Bastunets elected new Chair of BAJ. Accessibility Forum showcases initiatives to increase inclusivity of Belarusian society.

## Initiatives

[Nash Dom campaign explains its communication provocations with purpose to promote women's leadership and gender issues.](#)

Photos in the pin-up style, where the Nash Dom leader, Olga Karach is presented as a la Marilyn Monroe are conscious provocative, because it is the way where "the Belarusian society reacts most". The previous 8-year traditional efforts haven't given significant results, while over the last two years Nash Dom's provocations have successfully raised a topic of female presidential candidate in the public sphere.

[Shorebirds Festival in Turov](#). In early May, Gomel region hosted the sixth Festival of Shorebirds, traditionally organised by APB-BirdLife Belarus NGO and the local municipality. The main purpose of the festival is eco education of local residents and children. The participants visited a local meadow, a unique place where hundreds of thousands of birds stop for rest and meals during seasonal migrations.

[34mag with informational support of Press Club Belarus launches a project Open Briefing](#). This is a series of off-line meetings with the editorial teams of Belarusian media. The events will be held every Thursday in May, in the TSEKH space. The internal kitchen will be told by *Bolshoimagazine*, KYKY.org, Belarusian Tribune and CityDog.by. This series of meet-ups is designed for all who are interested in the field of Belarusian media. The first meeting with the *Bolshoi* magazine took place on May 7.

[MediaBarCamp 2015: Sub-Cultures of Politics](#). On May 7-10, the 8th international MediaBarCamp 2015, a unique social media, participant-driven, non-conference event, is taking place in Lithuania. The event has brought together activists from Belarus and all around the world. The organisers are the Swedish International Liberal Centre (SILC) in cooperation with local partners in Belarus and Sweden. The topic of 2015 is Sub-Cultures of Politics.

[Accessibility Forum opened with a dozen of different initiatives](#). On April 28, the Accessibility Forum, the key event of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Accessibility Week, gathered together examples of Belarusian initiatives representing successful practices of expansion of accessibility of inclusion to public life and perspective ideas. However, state representatives didn't find it necessary to visit an open event despite the invitation to cooperation. Organised by the DisRights Office, the [Accessibility Week 2015](#) took place on April 24-30 and included

a series of thematic events to show the society the importance of accessibility issues for persons with disabilities.

## **Lectures, Seminars, Conferences**

[BEROC announces opening of the registration for the Fifth International Conference in Economics and Finance](#) that will take place in Minsk on June 2. The goal of the conference is to facilitate integration of the Belarusian economic community into the global academic environment. Professors of the best universities and business schools from all over the world will be among the speakers and moderators of the conference. Working language is English.

[Summer School on Human Rights calls for participation in 2015.](#) Organised by the international community of human rights organizations, the Summer School will take place in Vilnius, at the Belarusian Human Rights House. The educational course aims to introduce to the history and philosophy of human rights, as well as methods of protection at the national and international levels. Young people from Belarus at the age of 18-27 years are invited to participation.

['Science Without Borders' project invites to a lecture on astronomy.](#) On April 30, the Central Scientific Library hosts a public lecture *Clashes of Galaxies* by astronomy Alexander Shimbalev. The lecture is a part of the 'Science Without Borders' project, initiated by the Youth Educational Center *Fialta*. The project aims to make complicated scientific issues clear and attractive and respectively provide knowledge outside the walls of schools, universities, laboratories, using accessible language and informal communication with the experts. The project [got support](#) from the national contest of social projects Social Weekend 5.□

[EU-funded project holds training seminars for CSOs in Belarus.](#) The EU-funded '[Civil Society. Dialogue for Progress](#)' project has conducted a series of training seminars in Belarus aimed

to enhance the capacity of CSOs and to help them more effectively to participate in policy dialogue. Representatives from 20 CSOs took part in trainings, which included six seminars over a period of a year. The project is implemented by Consortium led by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V. in cooperation with local NGOs from the EaP Countries.

[EU/UNDP: Funding for local initiatives discussed in Minsk](#). On April 24, Minsk hosted the first round table within the framework of the EU/UNDP project [Support to Local Development in the Republic of Belarus](#). Participants of the meeting are representatives of local authorities of Minsk region and the regional CSOs – reviewed case studies of international technical aid projects that were implemented in Belarus and discussed preparation for the 1st Contest of Local Initiatives.

## **Other**

[The contest video stories Aktyvi333uysya/Get Active named the winners](#). Video clips submitted under the competition of NewGroupMedia, tell about civic activism and promote socially important topics for society and communities. The winner of the contest became a video "The brutality will not go unpunished" by the legal service *Lapa law*, which draws attention to the mistreatment of animals and tells what to do if you face it.

[During the first quarter of 2015, prices rose by 4.9%, but "eating and drinking" became cheaper by 2.6%](#). Such data are presented in the CharkaShkvarka Index by the BIPART think tank. The Index takes into account the cost of a standard shot of vodka (charka) and 100 grams of pork (shkvarka). The Index converts income residents into CharkaShkvarka – thus, today, having the average salary of 6.5 million rubles (about \$450) Belarusians can afford 297 sets of "eat and drink". This is one of the lowest indicators compared to neighboring countries.



[Free bike rental appears in Minsk](#). From May 1 to October 1, 2015, Minsk residents and guests have an opportunity to rent a bike for a day for free. Bicycles will be located on bicycle parking on a code lock with a password available through a free online service. Free bike rental is implemented under the *Kind Bike* project; the organizers collected 37 used bicycles, put them in order and prepared for the season. Also, on May 1, the first ever [City Bike Parade](#) launches a bike season in Minsk.

[Andrei Bastunets elected Chairperson of BAJ](#). This is a unanimous decision taken by delegates of the IX Congress of the Belarusian Association of Journalists on April 24, in Minsk. Zhanna Litvina, who had performed the functions for almost 20 years, announced she would not suggest her candidacy for the post. Earlier, 48-year Andrei Bastunets was BAJ deputy chairperson.

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## **Solidarity Day, Election Observers, New Media Watchdog – Civil Society Digest**

The most notable events of the last two weeks include the launch of the first Belarusian online media watchdog. Civil society organisations funding from the state budget becomes possible through amendments to Law on Social Services. A

weekly election monitoring report notes the high rate of rejections of registration of opposition candidates initiative groups.

**Day of Solidarity with Civil Society of Belarus.** August 4, the day of arrest of Ales Bialiatsky, was chosen in 2012 by [the Committee of International Control](#) over the Human Rights Situation in Belarus as [the international Day of Solidarity with Civil Society of Belarus](#). Activists in Russia, Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania, Sweden, Germany, the UK, and other countries held public events, discussions, film screenings, and other activities. [Ales Bialiatski](#), head of the Human Rights Center "Viasna" was arrested on August 4, 2011 and later sentenced to four and a half years of imprisonment for his human rights activities.

**Belarusian Association of Journalists demands release of Anton Surapin.** A petition with the demand was sent to the chairperson of the Belarusian KGB on July 25. BAJ member, [Anton Surapin](#) is staying on the detention center of the KGB. He has been detained in connection with the investigation into the criminal case of border trespass, so called "the teddy bears landing". The statements to release "teddy bear" free speech activist were also adopted by [Amnesty International](#) and [Human rights Centre "Viasna"](#).

**Joint appeal of human rights NGOs.** Representatives of human rights organizations – [Belarusian Helsinki Committee, Centre "Viasna", Committee "Solidarity", Legal Transformation Centre and the Centre for Human Rights](#) – appealed to the General Prosecutor and Chairman of the Supreme Court requesting a meeting to discuss the situation with illegal preventive detention of civil activists and youth opposition groups. As examples human rights defenders mention detentions of more than 15 people in May-July 2012.

*Elections*

**Report on monitoring election results: July 23rd-29th.** The campaign "[Human rights defenders for free elections](#)" released its weekly report on monitoring election results. In particular, the report notes that 85 initiative groups were rejected registration which almost 4 times higher than during the previous parliamentary election. At the same time the overwhelming majority of the initiative groups in support of the oppositional candidates were registered.

**EOTP invites observers.** The project "[Election Observation: Theory and Practice Project](#)" (EOTP) invites active Belarusians to monitor the parliamentary elections to be held in September 2012. EOTP was launched in 2007 at the initiative of the students of European Humanities University (EHU) and Swedish International Liberal Centre (SILC). EOTP is jointly implemented by the Belarus Watch, EHU and Belarusian Human Rights House in exile in Vilnius.

### *Other Topics*

**Mediakritika.by: Truth Loves Criticism.** A new analytical media project has been launched – [Mediakritika.by](#). Created by [a team of Belarusian journalists](#), it is aimed at comprehensive critical analysis of the media in Belarus. The new project sets the task to improve the quality of the Belarusian journalism by monitoring the quality of news as it is presented in all Belarusian media.

**OEEC workshop for small and medium business.** On July 20, [the Office of European Expertise and Communication](#) in the framework of the project "Clearing House" conducted a thematic workshop for representatives of associations and organizations working in small and medium business. The participants shared their actual issues and needs, as well as delivered the priorities of this sector in the European context.

**The new edition of the Law "On social services".** On July 13, the national legal base has introduced a new version of the

law "On Social Services" which means that the law has been approved at all levels and entered into force. For the first time the law establishes the possibility of [the social services](#), which provides funding for non-profit organizations from the state budget.

**SYMPA's workshop.** On July 30-August 1, the School of Young Managers in Public Administration organizes the workshop "Human resource management in modern organizations: International experience and practical implementation". The focus of the workshop is HR for public administration. The workshop will take place at the conference hall of the Ministry of Trade. *According to the [SYMPA](#) newsletter.*

**Photo exhibition and the book "No stereotypes".** On August 1, Minsk hosted a photo exhibition and presentation of a book about the people with mental illness. The event was held under the project "[No stereotypes](#)" aimed at preventing prejudice against people with mental and intellectual illness. The project was launched in October 2011 and implemented by the international charity NGO "UniHelp" with financial support of the EU.

**APB BirdLife invites volunteers.** From July 30 to August 21, the NGO "[APB BirdLife Belarus](#)" holds a series of summer camps for the maintenance of the hydrological regime of the marsh Yelnya. This year the examination of hydrological structures and their maintenance will be made by about 50 volunteers as well as local residents of Miory and Sharkovshchina districts, Vitebsk region.

**Art works of prisoners.** On August 1, Gomel Picture Gallery opened an exhibition of works of women serving a sentence in a local penal colony. The event is organized by the Gomel Regional NGO "[Social Projects](#)" with the support of Deutscher Volkshochschul-Verband eV (Germany). The aim of the project is promoting the social rehabilitation of prisoners through improving their educational and professional level.

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*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.*

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## **Future of Belarus Conference, Youth Initiatives Festival – Civil Society Digest**

**International Conference “Future of Belarus”.** Renowned scholars, researchers, respected international experts, development professionals and civic activists from Belarus and abroad will gather in the capital of Lithuania, Vilnius on May 25-26 to debate the “Future of Belarus” at an international conference dedicated to the 20 years of independent research in Belarus and the establishment of the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS).

The conference is organised with support of USAID through Pact, the Eastern Europe Studies Center (EESC) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania. Organisers will provide live streaming from the conference over the Internet. The conference program is available [here](#).

**Experience of promoting the interests of people with disabilities.** Representatives of organisations working for people with disabilities are invited to participate in educational visits "Experience of promoting the interests of people with disabilities" aimed at [exchanging successful experiences](#) of Belarusian organisations. The organisers are the International Children's Fund, the Office for the rights

of people with disabilities and local organisations. The visit will take place in Gomel (June 7-8) and Polotsk (June 12-13).

**Human rights training in Homel.** The training named "[International standards in the sphere of human rights: monitoring of court proceedings](#)" was held in Homel, with the support of Homel Center for Strategic Litigation. The training was given by experts of the Center for Legal Transformation (Minsk) Mikhail Matskevich and Aleh Fiadotau. During the seminar the participants and trainers discussed the relevant instruments for conducting court monitoring, created by Belarusian human rights organisations and aimed at revealing violations of human rights and procedural legislation.

**Trial monitoring workshop "Observer".** The Centre for Legal Transformation [invites to the workshop "Observer" which will take place on May 21 and 25 in Minsk](#). The workshop will be devoted to monitoring the hearings in administrative proceedings.

**BAJ Congress.** On May 18, Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) organised its 8<sup>th</sup> Congress. At the event, attended by nearly 100 journalists and guests, BAJ Board [presented](#) the results of organisation's work in 2009-2012.

**Gomel NGOs to discuss third sector development.** Gomel Democratic Forum and Strategic Thought NGO invited Gomel-based NGOs to take part in a [discussion of third sector development](#) in the region. The organisers will present a brochure of best NGO practices in the region, and invite participants to openly discuss main development trends and institutional challenges that civil society face in Gomel.

**Scenarios of the Common Future.** On May 24, a roundtable "Belarus: Scenarios of the Common Future" will be held in Minsk. The organizer is the [project group "Cytadel"](#), which invites participants to make a meaningful attempt to interface

the existing social and political scenarios for Belarus.

**Amnesty International refuses to recognise opposition activist Syarhei Kavalenka prisoner of conscience.** MEP Marek Migalski received this information from [John Dalhuisen](#), Director for Europe and Central Asia at Amnesty International. To justify his decision Mr Dalhuisen relied on evidence by Belarusian police officers, who claim Kavalenka showed disobedience to police in jail.

**A second month without a passport.** [Dr Alaksiey Pikulik](#), BISS Academic Director received an official notification informing him that the term of checking the validity of his passport has been extended for another month. In April Alaksiey Pikulik's car was stopped in Minsk by the road police on suspicion of disorderly conduct and forging documents. The latter allegation was used as a pretext to confiscate his passport and iPad.

**Young Front activists: detained, beaten, sentenced to arrest.** On May 14, the apartment rented by the Young Front activists [Mikalai Dzemidzenka, Zmitser Kremianetski and Raman Vasiliieu](#) was assaulted by the riot police. The activists were beaten, detained and later charged with disorderly conduct. They were sentenced to ten and twelve days of arrest.

**Festival of youth initiatives.** A [festival of youth organisations and initiatives](#) took place on May 13, 2012 in Art Siadziba in an open space format. Center for the Development of Student Initiatives, Student Council, Public information service of BSU campus, Union of Belarusian Students, [AIESEC](#) and [AEGEE](#) took part in the event. In addition to learning more about each other's organizations, the participants viewed a presentation of monitoring results of academic freedom violations.

**Quality standards for NGOs to prevent trafficking.** The Program



"La Strada" / [NGO "Gender Perspectives"](#) under the project "Combating human trafficking: work with risk groups and experts: 2012-2013" started the development of quality standards of NGOs in the prevention of human trafficking. Standards will be internal quality criteria that establish minimum requirements for the organization of work.

**Current situation in Belarus to be discussed at human rights documentary film festival in Brussels.** FIDH, Viasna and People in Need invite to the screening of ONE WORLD 2012 documentary "[Belarusian Dream](#)" by Ekaterina Kibalchich with the presence of Taciana Reviaka from Viasna and Alexandra Koulaeva from FIDH to be held in Brussels on 21 May as part of the sixth annual One World human rights documentary film festival.

**Winners of Belarus Press Photo 2012 are determined.** The jury of the annual competition of press photographers, Belarus Press Photo 2012, decided on the winners of this year's contest. The [awards ceremony](#) will be held on May 28, 2012 in the Galery 'Ź'.

**PhotoBattle kicks off.** The first national competition among amateur photographers PhotoBattle kicked off on May 12, 2012, organised by Grodno-based Third Sector NGO. At the moment, the competitions' [jury is reviewing the works submitted by 16 teams](#) from Brest, Maladechna, Hrodna, Gomel, Baranavichi, Slutsk and Minsk.

**34 Multimedia Magazine from Belarus to receive IPI's 2012 Free Media Pioneer Award.** An independent jury of five members of IPI's Executive Board selected [34 Multimedia Magazine](#), a banned, Belarusian-language youth magazine, to receive the honor. IPI will present the award during a special ceremony at its Annual World Congress, which will take place from June 23 to 26 in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.

**Guidebook "I am setting up a non-governmental organisation in Poland" for Belarusians.** The Belarus Working Group in



cooperation with the Association Klon/Jawor prepared [the guide](#) which "step by step" shows the procedure for registration of Belarusian NGOs in Poland, as well as experiences of foreigners in providing social activities in our country. The guide's authors believe that registration of juridical personality in Poland is a solution that in the long run will help fund Belarusian organisations using foreign funds.

**Anti-homophobia pickets banned in Minsk.** [LGBT Human Rights Project 'GayBelarus'](#) was denied by Minsk City Executive Committee to hold pickets against homophobia in the government and opposition. The group asked city authorities to hold a picket near the office of BPF party to protest homophobic statements made by the party leader Alexander Streltsov.

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## **Opposition Activists Face Travel Restrictions – Digest of Belarusian Politics**

Belarusian authorities create problems for opposition activists who are crossing Belarusian borders. Isolation of the country is increasing. Following the departure of EU ambassadors, the IMF decided not to have any resident representative in Belarus and the country's representatives were missing at an Eastern Partnership meeting in Prague.

**Anatoly Lebedko not allowed to leave Belarus.** On 7 March, United Civil Party leader Anatoly Lebedko [was not allowed](#) to leave the territory of the European Union on the Belarusian-Lithuanian border. According to the politician, he was detained at the border checkpoint Kamenny Loh under restriction to leave Belarus. Two other opposition leaders – Siarhei Kaliakin and Viktor Karnienka were not allowed to cross the border. They subsequently managed to get to Lithuania, presumably through Russia.

**Belarusian customs detained Alexander Dobrovolsky.** On 7 March, the United Civil Party member [Alexander Dobrovolsky](#) was detained at the border with Lithuania. Dobrovolsky went to Minsk from a working meeting in Vilnius. Belarusian customs invited him to a separate customs control, resulting in Dobrovolsky having to wait overnight for the next train to Minsk.

**Syarhey Kavalenka set to continue his hunger strike until he is released.** [Syarhey Kavalenka](#) is determined to continue his hunger strike until he is released. The opposition activist is currently in a prison hospital in Minsk, since the beginning of his hunger strike he lost 30 kilo. On 24 February, a district judge in Vitsyebsk sentenced Kavalenka to two years and one month in a low security correctional institution on a charge of violating probation rules.

**Young opposition activist Ivan Shyla to spend 22 days in jail.** Young opposition activist [Ivan Shyla](#) has been placed in the detention centre on Akrestsina Street for 22 days to serve earlier imposed jail terms. The deputy chairperson of a Czech-registered youth group called Malady Front was arrested in Minsk on February 14 near the office of the Belarusian PEN Centre, where Malady Front activists were scheduled to present the "I Love Belarus" award.

**BAJ urges to abolish warnings to its members.** On 2 March, the

Belarusian Association of Journalists [submitted](#) an official letter to the Hrodna regional prosecutor, Viktor Marozau, in which the difference between freelance journalists and foreign media journalists is explained. The reason for the letter was a series of warnings to BAJ members Mikalai Dziachenia, Aliaksandr Dzianisau, Viktor Parfionenka and Hrazhyna Shalkevich for work with foreign media without official accreditation.

**Ministry of Justice refused to register BCD.** Ministry of Justice took a final decision [to deny registration](#) to the Belarusian Christian Democracy party (BCD). Considering the BCD documents, the Ministry of Justice has found a number of inconsistencies and contradictions. BCD also announced that on February 17 all party [websites were blocked](#).

Foreign Affairs

**Appeal to LT Foreign Minister.** [VISA-FREE Coalition](#) "Go Europe! Go Belarus!" appealed to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania Audronius Ažubalis to support further steps to promote people-to-people contacts and facilitation of ties between Lithuania and Belarus. The Coalition proposes to amend the legislation of Lithuania to allow the consular offices of the country to regularly issue short-term multi-entry Schengen visas with a validity of five years, rather than one year, as is still provided. The appeal was signed by NGOs, initiatives and campaigns from Lithuania, Belarus and other countries.

**U.S. supports expansion of the European Union sanctions against Belarus.** This was [stated](#) by the U.S. representative to the OSCE, Ian Kelly, during a video conference on 2 March. He says that sanctions, being far not the main instrument of influence on official Minsk, should demonstrate the Belarusian authorities that they have chosen the wrong path of self-isolation.

**Lukashenka warns EU of harsh response to sanctions.** On 4

March, [speaking](#) on the sidelines of an annual ski race involving top government officials, Lukashenka described as “absolute hysteria” the European Union’s latest move to extend the list of Belarusian citizens subject to entry bans and asset freezes. Lukashenka went so far as to apparently mock the sexuality of openly gay German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle. “It’s better to be a dictator than gay,” he said.

**National Platform Statement.** On 2 March, Belarusian National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum [adopted a Statement](#) in which expressed their deep concern at the diplomatic conflict between the authorities of Belarus and the European Union. NP urged the leaders of Belarus and the European Union to hold from further conflict escalation and transforming it into an exchange of blows according to the principle “an eye for an eye”.

**Belarus absent at Eastern Partnership meeting in Prague.** No representatives of Belarus arrived in Prague to attend a 5 March [meeting of the foreign ministers](#) of the Visegrad Group and Eastern Partnership countries. Vit Kolar, spokesman for the Czech foreign ministry, said that Belarus had been invited to send a deputy foreign minister to the meeting.

**IMF Won't Replace Resident Representative in Belarus.** [The International Monetary Fund](#) will not replace its representative in Belarus after April, suggesting that having a resident in place was having little impact in the crisis-hit former Soviet republic.

**KGB chairman to travel to Rome despite EU entry ban.** [Vadzim Zaytsev](#), chairman of the Committee for State Security (KGB) who is subject to the European Union’s entry ban, is expected to travel to Rome for an official meeting.

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