

# Trees Rally, Swamp Campaign, MaeSens – Belarus Civil Society Digest

Belarusian third sector demonstrates a remarkable diversity of activities – from campaigns to save trees and energy to initiatives against drug abuse and new student organisations.

**New student association – BOSS.** On October 5, Minsk hosted a conference on student self-government, where students discussed the situation with self-government in the Belarusian universities. The result of the conference was the creation of [the Brotherhood of Organizations of Student Self-government](#) (BOSS), aimed to carry out the coordinating work to protect the rights and interests of students.

**IT geeks for civil society.** [Drupal-gathering](#) which to take place on December 15-16, announces a competition for social projects, initiatives and CSOs to create their website for free in one day. The organiser is [youth CSO "Falanster"](#).

**Cyclists at the border.** Group of Belarusians managed [to get into Poland on the bikes](#) at the checkpoint Brest – Terespol ("Warsaw Bridge"), which was impossible for cyclists before. The action was held by the Brest youth NGO "Dzedzich" and Minsk Cycling Society, under the campaign "[For Cycling Brest!](#)"

**MaeSens.by – 1!** On November 11, a charity auction of meetings MaeSens.by celebrates its one-year anniversary. The project goal is to raise funds for the treatment of seriously ill children and orphanages. Funds collected through the auction – anyone can put up a meeting with him/her or to buy a lot with a person he/she likes. [The reports on the use of funds](#) are available on the website. In 2012, the project was awarded in

the category "[Best Startup of the Year](#)".

**Training for entrepreneurs.** On October 23, the Bel.Biz team held a training in Minsk entitled "[How to become a more effective manager?](#)" 14 representatives of small and medium enterprises took part in the event. The training was one of 44 trainings available within the international program for representatives of SMEs 'Business Edge' (BE). These trainings have been designed by IFC and held in Belarus with USAID support.

**Trees rally.** Youth activists of "[European perspective](#)" held a rally in support of the local residents who are struggling to keep the park of Friendship of Peoples. On October 30, in the park the posters appeared on the trees: "Investors, be friends for the park!", "Officials cut down us!" [Activists of the districts Vostok-2 and Uruchcha-2](#) signed an open letter in which they expressed their "solidarity and support for citizens of the Soviet district, who protect the park "Friendship of Peoples" from trees' cutting". The appeal also calls for the city administration to abandon plans to build a sports center in the Park, "not to provoke social conflicts." The process of negotiations between citizens and authorities is facilitated by civic initiative "European perspective."

**"Swamp" campaign launching.** On October 25, [a public campaign for the preservation of wetlands](#) in protected natural areas has been launched. The initiators of the campaign are APB BirdLife Belarus, Green Alliance, EcoDom, Center for Environmental Solutions. The campaign started with collecting signatures through the website Change.org. Also a public appeal to the relevant government authorities is being prepared.

**The Festival of Energy-Saving Ideas** starts in Belarus. It is timed to the International Day of energy saving, which is annually celebrated globally on November 11. This year, the Center for Environmental Solutions proposes to hold the

Festival under the slogan "[Tie Socks – Turn off the Heater!](#)" One of the main Festival's category "Best pair of warm socks" will assess handmade socks of natural materials submitted to the competition. The winners will get e-books, all the socks will be sent to an orphanage.

### **Belarusian Transport Experts Learn from Lithuanian Experience.**

On September 24-27, representatives of the Belarusian Union of Transport Workers (BUTW) [travelled to Vilnius](#) on a study tour organized by the Brussels-based Office for a Democratic Belarus in cooperation with the Office for European Expertise and Communication (Minsk, Belarus) in the frames of the project "EU and Belarus: Sharing Knowledge". The Lithuanian National Road Carriers' Association LINAVA hosted the event in Vilnius. On October 4, the Second National Conference, entitled "[Public Transport in the Republic of Belarus: current state and perspectives of development](#)" took place in Minsk. More than 80 delegates from all six regions of the country, including representatives of the local authorities, transport companies and vehicle manufacturers joined the conference.

**Journalism for people with disabilities and without.** The initiative group "[Step Forward](#)" invites to participate in a session for young people of 16-30 years. The workshop is to be held on November 3-4, in Grodno. The participants will not only get the basic knowledge and skills on journalism, but also learn how to properly raise the topic of disability in the media.

**Antimak.** Coordinator of the public initiative "[Antimak](#)" [Alexander Shpakovsky](#) and journalist Euroradio Yevgeniy Voloshyn made a 'raids' around Minsk and found that finally it became difficult to get "bubki" – poppy seeds mixed with opioids, the most popular raw material for drugs' producing in Belarus. Activists do not expect that this situation will last for a long time, because the new Law "On Drugs", which came into force at the end of October, contains nothing to prohibit

"bubki."

**Discussion "Art and new media"**. On October 25, in Minsk (free cafe "Fisher House") online magazine "New Europe" will conduct a discussion "[Contemporary art and new media in Belarus](#)". The event is to be attended by editors of portals [34mag.net](#), [ArtAktivist.com](#), [CityDog.by](#), [Generation.BY](#), [KyKy.org](#), [pARTisanmag.by](#).

**The film "Square. Women"**. A new documentary "[Square. Women](#)" was posted on YouTube portal. The idea of the film belongs to the well-known writer [Svetlana Aleksiyeovich](#). The film was shot with a cell phone's video camera. The plot includes a number of ordinary conversations with far from the politics women whose life has changed since the events of December 19, 2010.

**Inconvenient films discussion**. On October 22, the Lithuanian Centre for Human Rights and the Belarusian Human Rights House invite to a screening of the film "Belarusian Dream" and a discussion "[Is it possible to dream in the Island of Stability?](#)" The invited panelists are Freedom House Project Director Vytis Jurkonis, editor of the independent newspaper "Vitebskij Kurier" Oleg Borschevskij, Coordinator of "European Belarus" civic campaign Pavel Marynich, etc.

**'Belarus in Focus 2012'** is the second edition of a competition for journalists writing about Belarus for an international audience. Held by [Solidarity with Belarus Information Office](#) in collaboration with Press Club Polska, the competition aims to highlight articles that attempt to present a new, original side to Belarus and explore the country beyond the label of 'Europe's last dictatorship'. The deadline for submissions is January 15, 2013.

**Viva Belarus! /Жыве Беларусь!** The [first trailer of movie Viva Belarus!](#) is available on YouTube. The plot is based on the true story and tells about modern Belarus, youth and its

struggle for democracy. The screenplay was made by Krzysztof Łukaszewicz and Franak Viachorka. The film is accompanied by music of rock-legend Lavon Volski. Premiere of the film took place at the Cannes Film Festival on May 22, 2012.

*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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# How the EU and Lukashenka Keep Belarusians Out of Europe

Belarusians are the most travel-restricted nation in Europe. Both their own government and the European Union seem to be determined not to let them out.

The Belarusian authorities prevent leading opposition activists, students and state bureaucrats from travelling to the neighbouring EU states. The European Union also restricts Belarusian citizens by keeping the most restrictive visa policy in Europe and blacklisting top Belarusian officials and businessmen.

The malicious motivation of the Belarusian authorities is not surprising. Why the European Union keeps its visa rules so strict is much more difficult to understand.

## **Belarusian Authorities v the Opposition**

Following the last round of EU sanctions in February 2012, the Belarusian authorities banned over a dozen opposition activists from travelling to the EU. The authorities say that this is their response to EU sanctions. Perhaps they also hope that some activists will decide not to come back to Belarus to avoid future problems. The more political refugees abroad, the safer they feel at home.

In the past Belarusian opposition activists could travel to the West via Russia. There is no border control between Belarus and Russia which makes it easy. But last week the head of the Russian Border Service pledged not to prevent Belarusian citizens blacklisted by their own government from leaving Russia. If this threat materialises, many activists would be kept within the borders of the so-called Union State of Belarus and Russia.

### **Belarusian Authorities v Students**

Another group which the Belarusian authorities want to keep a close eye on is students. Full-time students can travel abroad during term periods only if they get permission. In the past, they had to seek permission from the Minister of Education. Now it is enough to secure permission at a university level.

In the Soviet Union the harshness of laws was balanced by their non-compulsory nature. This is also true for Belarus today – most students can travel abroad without any problems and their universities know about it. However, the student travel ban can sometimes be used as a pretext to expel politically active students as it has been used to do so in the past. That was the case with politically active students Tatsiana Khoma in 2005 and Tatsiana Shaputska in 2009.

### **Belarusian Authorities v Belarusian Officials**

A number of categories of state employees are unable to travel abroad without special permission. For instance, most officers of the Belarusian police or KGB have to seek permission from

their superiors when they want to travel abroad.

According to Moscow-based website *Belaruski Partyzan*, this April the Presidential Administration issued a new classified instruction in which senior officers of KGB and police were asked not to approve requests to travel abroad. It is was presented as a "temporary measure" but it did not specify how long it would last.

Belarusian legislation also prohibits those who have access to "state secrets" from travelling abroad without special permission. In the era of the internet, this restriction seems obsolete but it still makes the lives of some people more complicated.

### **European Union v Belarusian Officials**

Some Belarusian officials suffer not only from their own bosses but also from EU sanctions. In other words, they are under a dual travel ban.

In February 2012, EU foreign ministers added 21 Belarusian citizens to their travel ban list, bringing the total number to more than 200 individuals. The list includes judges, prosecutors, senior police officers and those responsible for the falsification of elections. This year the EU also began adding the most influential businessmen who, in their view, support the Lukashenka regime.

But some of the blacklisted officials can still travel to the European Union to attend official meetings of various international organisations. In January 2012 Minister of Interior Arkady Kuliashou travelled without any problems to attend an Interpol meeting in Lyon. In March the KGB chief Vadzim Zaitsev reportedly travelled to Rome as part of an official delegation.

### **European Union v Belarusian Citizens**

In any event, the restrictions discussed above affect only a limited number of people. The travel restrictions imposed by the EU on millions of Belarusian nationals are a much more serious problem.

It often takes months for Belarusian citizens to get a visa for an EU country. This includes waiting for an appointment, preparing thick packages of documents, and spending many hours queuing outside the consulate regardless of the weather. The procedure is very expensive too – a simple visa costs €60 – the highest price in Europe. To put it into context, the average monthly salary in Belarus is around €270.

What is worse, many consulates deliberately issue singly-entry visas valid for several days only. The German consulate is notorious for this. In practice this means that Belarusian nationals have to undergo this humiliating and expensive procedure again and again. No wonder that the pro-rata [number of Schengen visas](#) issued for Belarusians is the highest in the world.

Consulates of EU countries in Belarus are overloaded with visa applicants who cannot get long-term visas. According to the Coalition for EU-Belarus Visa-Free Movement, EU regulations allow visas to be issued for a period of up to five years.

### **Why So Many Restrictions?**

One can understand why the Belarusian authorities want to keep their citizens locked inside the country. Lukashenka and other top officials are already on the EU travel ban list and have no desire to help their fellow citizens. In January 2012, the spokesman for the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs admitted that the main reason why visa prices were so high was because Belarus was unwilling to sign a visa facilitation agreement with the EU.

It is more difficult to rationally explain why the EU treats Belarusian citizens so badly in terms of visas.

Is this policy a useful tool to keep away potential illegal immigrants? No. Issuing short-term one-entry expensive visas does not help. Even a one-day visa would be enough to enable a potential illegal immigrant to stay in the host country.

Is it a legal requirement to give visas only for several days? There is no such requirement. Each consulate is different in their treatment of Schengen visa applicants. For instance, Polish consulates often issue multiple entry visas for six or twelve months, while the German consulate in Minsk more often issues one-entry visas valid for a few days only.

Perhaps consulates of EU countries are just interested in earning money by charging €60 for a little passport sticker? That sounds like a possible but immoral explanation. Belarusians already have one the lowest salaries in Europe. It is wrong to make those who already suffer from the most repressive political regime in the region to pay the highest visa fee in Europe.

### **Time to Introduce "White Lists"**

It is time for the European Union to adopt not only blacklists for "bad Belarusians" but also whitelists for "good Belarusians". The whitelisted categories of Belarusian nationals should be entitled to long-term, multiple-entry visas free of charge.

These whitelists should go beyond the opposition leaders and include thousands of Belarusians: students, academics and teachers, political and human rights activists, those working for NGOs and various community initiatives.

When Belarusians travel abroad, the benefits of democracy and market economy speak for themselves. These people would become the best advocates of European values in their own country.

Rather than hoping for a [quick regime change](#) in Belarus, the West should patiently work to integrate rather than isolate

Belarusian citizens from the rest of Europe.

If Europe wants to have a stable and democratic neighbour tomorrow, it needs to plant the seeds of change today.