

Congress Of Belarusian Studies Scheduled for October in Kaunas

Organisers of the International Congress of Belarusian Studies officially published its list of sections and panels for the upcoming event.

This year's Congress will include a wide range topics such as culture, Belarusian language translations of the Bible and problems facing the modernisation of the Belarusian economy.

The Congress remains a rare opportunity for scholars from all over the world to gather with their colleagues from Belarus. This year it will take place the 3-5 October in Kaunas.

The Congress has already become a recognisable brand and an academic must for researchers and experts who professionally deal with Belarus.

Kaunas will be hosting a few hundred international participants for the event for the fourth time. During the Congress' gathering, this sleepy Lithuanian city becomes a vibrant meeting point for researchers of Belarus.

Belarus Digest spoke with Aliaksei Lastouski, Head of the Department of Modern History at the Belarusian Collegium and a senior analyst at the institute for political studies *Political Sphere*, which is the main organiser of the Congress, in order to understand what it is all about.

Who Comes to the Congress in Kaunas?

The Congress has already become a permanent fixture of autumn in Kaunas. The International Congress of Belarusian Studies took place there for the first time back in 2011 as an

initiative of Andrei Kazakevich, the Director of the institute for political studies *Political Sphere*.

Today the Congress remains the largest event fully devoted to research on Belarus. "We expect around 350-400 scholars this year", Aliaksei Lastouski told Belarus Digest.

Belarusian researchers constitute a majority of the participants of the Congress. Other scholars come primarily from neighbouring Poland, Lithuania, but also from more remote and less obvious places, like Japan. Last year nearly 400 scholars from 16 countries took part in the Congress.

Kaunas: Connecting Scholars from Belarus

The large number of participants from countries other than Belarus proves that there is indeed a niche for Belarus-oriented research. The event fills this gap and facilitates researchers coming together. The popularity of the Congress also demonstrates the demand from the Belarusian scholarly community to meet and communicate with their colleagues from other countries. Belarusian scholars continue to carry out their work in stifling isolation, Aliaksei Lastouski argues.

The organisers of the Congress aim to provide participants with an opportunity to meet up, present their research, as well as discuss their ideas and potential opportunities for future cooperation. Indeed, the organisers guarantee facilities, so the participants can busy themselves networking with other scholars.

Participants stay in the same hotels, have lunch in the same place, and have ample opportunity to talk during coffee breaks – apart from more practical purposes, it also helps to create a specific sense of solidarity, according to Lastouski.

The Congress also promotes researchers of Belarusian area studies, awarding them annually for the best Belarus-related publication in humanities and social sciences. What clearly

distinguishes this event from others, is its multidisciplinary nature. This year the list of sections to be covered is to include economics, politics and society.

The Congress: "a Zone of Freedom", but is not Politicised

According to Lastouski, the Congress remains a "zone of freedom", where academics can freely present and discuss their research without fear of being censored, unlike in Belarus. The organisers openly welcome scholars with various views.

But at the same time, the Congress is not a political platform. The event should be regarded as a platform for constructive dialogue where its participants can freely discuss differing views on the development of the country.

Although the Congress specifically brings together Belarus-oriented scholars, and a majority of the researchers who attend are Belarusian, it takes place in neighbouring Lithuania rather than in Belarus. The organisers decided to organise it outside of the country in order to minimise the risks associated with potential academic censorship.

This is an issue that a number of Belarusian-related events and organisations have faced and, as a result, have moved to Lithuania in search of more favourable conditions. For example, the Belarus Research Council holds its events in Vilnius and the institute for political studies *Political Sphere* is also registered in Lithuania.

Moving Back to Belarus

Belarus, naturally, would be the most ideal place to organise these events event. "Kaunas is just a temporary place for the Congress", Lastouski explains. Given the current circumstances, the city has simply several advantages over other places outside Belarus.

These include its high quality infrastructure and affordable

accommodation for the congress' participants, even for those coming from further abroad. Organisational support from the Kaunas-based Vytautas Magnus University is an additional argument supporting holding the congress there. "I hope that the situation in Belarus will improve, and there will no longer be any restrictions or barriers to organise it there one day", Aliaksei Lastouski explains – but for now, this is just wishful thinking.

Over the past couple of years Lithuania has become a hub for a number of Belarus-oriented events. Clearly, Belarus' neighbour offers something that is scarcely available in Belarus, as true in the case of academic events – a better environment for discussion of pressing political, economic and social issues.

Lithuanian cities, such as Kaunas and Vilnius, are well-known for hosting not only the International Congress of Belarusian Studies, but also the European Humanities University and other conferences and seminars devoted to Belarus. It seems that both Lithuania and Belarusian civil society derive benefits from this situation. Lithuanian receives financial benefits and provides support, while Belarusian scholars and activists can freely work on their projects.

The organisers of the Congress have already closed the call for submissions for individual applications. However, anyone interested in the event, can register to attend one or another section as a guest. The registration form is available [here](#).

Europeanization from the

Bottom, Bialiatski Gets Vaclav Havel Human Rights Prize – Belarus Civil Society Digest

Ales Bialiatski received Vaclav Havel Human Rights Prize for human rights defence in Belarus. IPM Research Centre, Belarusian Economic Research and Education Centre BEROC launched a new project "Economics live" on portal TUT.BY. Fond of Ideas together with the Pontis Foundation (Slovakia) will organise a forum in Minsk on corporate social responsibility.

[Law on CSOS adopted without CSOs participation.](#) On 2 October The House of Representatives of Belarus [adopted in the second reading](#) amendments to some laws on political parties and public associations. A suggestion of 25 CSOs to carry out a public hearing before the second reading of the bill remained unsupported by the Parliament.

[Ales Bialiatski receives Václav Havel Human Rights Prize.](#) On 30 September the Council of Europe announced the 2013 laureate of the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize which went to Ales Bialiatski, President of Viasna Human Rights Centre and Vice President of FIDH. The Václav Havel Human Rights Prize is awarded each year by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) in partnership with the Václav Havel Library and the Charta 77 Foundation to reward outstanding civil society action in the defence of human rights in Europe and beyond.

Civil Society Events

[Third International Congress of Belarusian Studies took place in Kaunas](#) on 11-13 October. About 400 scientists, experts,

analysts and intellectuals from 25 countries attended the event. The overall framework of the Congress is to look at Belarus through comparison with other countries, namely with the Baltic countries and Scandinavia as a special focus of this year. For the first time the current event is to award the best scientists with the Congress professional prize. The Congress is [broadcasting online](#).

[Public hearing on a new law for CSOs](#). On 9 October in Minsk, Centre for Legal Transformation and the Assembly of Democratic NGOs conducted a public hearing "Improving the legal environment for the activities of non-profit organisations". The event addressed a new law regulating the activities of CSOs, which was [passed by Parliament](#) at the second reading in early October. The hearing however was attended only by CSO representatives, government officials did not participate.

[EHU hosts roundtable on active citizenship](#). As part of a two-day Danish Culture Days program, EHU hosted a roundtable discussion on "Freedom of Expression and Freedom to Establish Associations". NGOs working in the Baltic Sea region and Belarus will share their experiences and challenges in strengthening CSOs. The discussion took place on 12 October on EHU's campus.

[Lecture on Europeanization from the bottom](#). On 3 October a public lecture by a famous German political scientist Stefan Garsztecki "Is the Europeanization possible from the bottom?" took place at the Minsk bar "Ź". The event organised by the Centre for European Studies (CES) was attended by about 50 people, including students from Germany, which accompany the professor in his trip over Belarus.

Trainings and Seminars

[Capacity Development Fair Diary](#). The Second Fair of Capacity Development of CSOs starts keeping a diary and posting

announcements of its master classes, presentations as well as other working materials. The Fair participants will have the opportunity to learn with the tools of project planning, guerrilla strategies of Belarusian PR, basics of time management, etc. The Fair is to be held in Minsk on 1 November and present the market of capacity development services for Belarusian CSOs.

Economics live. IPM Research Centre, Belarusian Economic Research and Education Centre BEROC and IPM Business School launched the column "Economics live" on the web portal TUT.by. This week issue presents the results of a survey of 400 Belarusian companies regarding their attitude and readiness to the possible accession and working in the WTO.

CSR experts to meet at the Forum. On 15 November Minsk will host a large-scale Forum on corporate social responsibility, a key event in the long-term project, implemented by Fond of Ideas in partnership with the Pontis Foundation (Slovakia) and supported by the European Commission. The Forum is organised with the support of the UN initiative "Global Compact" with the aim of establishing an effective interaction of the three sectors – government, business and civil society – to address social and cultural issues.

EaP CS Forum's resolutions. The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum in Chisinau, on 4-5 October adopted a number of resolutions. In particular, the EaP Civil Society Forum calls for creation of favourable conditions for unimpeded functioning of civil society organisations [in Azerbaijan and Belarus](#) and views as unacceptable the existence of political prisoners in Eastern Partnership countries

Green Initiatives

Presentation of "Apple at Apple" magazine. On 15 October at the Minsk Gallery "Ź", the Centre for Environmental Solutions

conducts a party in honour of the presentation of a new family environmental newspaper "Apple at Apple." The monthly newspaper covers environmental and family topics, provides useful and fascinating material for the environmentally friendly lifestyle, nutrition, child development and other relevant topics. The first issue was published in April 2013.

Forum of environmental CSOs 2013. On 18-20 October the Forum of Belarusian non-governmental environmental organisations is to take place in Minsk. The Forum is designed to enhance public environmental movement in Belarus and initiated by APB BirdLife Belarus, Green Alliance, the Centre for Environmental Solutions, EcoDom, and EcoPartnership. The special focus of the Forum is public environmental control.

Belarusian "Energy Club" session in Brussels. On 1-4 October the Office for a Democratic Belarus (ODB) hosted a study visit for a group of six Belarusian experts in renewable energy sources and energy efficiency gathering representatives of the National Academy of Sciences, green energy consultancy companies, universities and non-governmental organisations. The visit took place as part of the Energy Club activities in Minsk.

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.