

Invisible Minority: Surviving with Disability in Belarus

On 5 May 2016, Minsk hosted a rally of Belarusians on wheelchairs, who gathered to remind the society of continuing discrimination.

Neither the state nor the public noticed this desperate cry in the desert, ignoring the needs of about 500,000 people with disability.

In 2015, Belarus was the last state in Europe to sign the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, yet disabled people here still remain a hidden minority.

Various [forms of discrimination](#) in education, employment, and everyday life limit the chances of the disabled for full social integration. They suffer from the lack of barrier-free access and persisting stereotypes, which deny them equal chances of realising their potential.

“Nobody sees or hears us here”

✘ Any traveller to Belarus who strolls through the streets of its capital or any other cities for that matter, will not likely see disabled people, wondering if they indeed exist here. Yet according to Belstat, about 500,000 Belarusians suffer from various disabilities, making up 6 per cent of the population. Among them, around 20,000 are wheelchair users.

These people are often left on their own in the struggle for equal opportunities. Only a few dozens of disabled managed to attend the rally in Minsk on 5 May 2016. The organiser of the

event, the Republican Association of the Wheelchair Users, wanted to highlight basic needs of the disabled, primarily creation of barrier-free environment and ending discrimination.

Unfortunately, the rally took place far from the city centre, on the Bangalor Square, invisible to the wider audiences. It is a traditional venue where Belarusian authorities allow the opposition to organise political protests, thus conveniently moving them away from public attention.

Same scenario applied to the protest of the disabled, only in their case authorities did not even care to send the police forces to secure order. Neither medical teams nor restrooms were available on site, indicating callous neglect from the side of the state.

✘ The head of the Republican Association of Wheelchair Users, Jauhen Shauko, noted that not much has changed since the last similar rally of the disabled in 2012: “Yes, we have better food and clothes now, but our cages became tighter. Authorities try to force us into accepting the role of a burden, in need of constant supervision.”

Ordinary Belarusians often display similar attitudes, pitying disability or seeing it as a drawback. Belarusian model Angelina Uelskaja aka Angel of Wales demonstrated how disabled people can fight these stereotypes. She built her career and achieved professional success despite the diagnosis of cerebral palsy.

Barrier-free: quantity over

quality?

✘ On 28 September 2015, Belarus signed the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, committing to the creation of an inclusive community. Recently, it also funded a series of initiatives to introduce facilities for the disabled into urban spaces. One of them was the state program of barrier-free environment for 2011 – 2015 aimed to improve the quality of life of the disabled.

According to the representative of the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, Anatol' Razhanec, the program turned out to be a success, overfulfilling its goals in the best traditions of the Soviet record-setting. Instead of initial re-equipment of 5,000 facilities to meet the needs of the disabled, the state constructed 9,000 barrier-free access points.

In Minsk alone, it has spent over \$3.5 million, creating 2,107 barrier-free objects. Minsk subway invested over \$150,000 into re-equipment of the stations: overall, 32 stations now have elevators, special platforms or ramps.

What this optimistic statistics does not reflect, is how many disabled people have benefited from the new barrier-free environment. Many of these new facilities are extremely difficult to use, while others are there just for a show-off or simply do not work.

In a recent incident at the train station in Puhavichy, Viktoryja Zhdanovich, suffering from cerebral palsy, wanted to use the elevator, installed on the bridge over the tracks. After failing to turn it on, she had to contact the station employees, who demanded to see a special ID, identifying her as a disabled person. In the end, Viktoryja still could not use the elevator – it did not work.

Campaigning for parking spots

According to Siarhej Drazdouski, who coordinates the Office on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, most problems of the disabled Belarusians stem in discrimination. Pointing out the chief responsibility of the state, he suggested amendments to the Law on Social Protection. New clauses should define discrimination of disability, provide for its prevention, and protect the rights of people with disability.

✘ Currently, discriminative practises surround all aspects of everyday life of the disabled. Many stores, administrative and residential buildings often lack necessary ramps for barrier-free access. If a wheelchair user travels abroad by car, he or she is stuck in lines for hours at the border crossings, which usually lack adequate restrooms.

Parking spots for the disabled started to appear in Belarus only about five years ago. Yet drivers often ignore this innovation and feel free to park their cars in these stalls. In April 2016, activists of the Republican Association of the Wheelchair Users launched an awareness campaign, reporting parking violations to the police and the media.

However, some recent trends show more promise for people with disabilities. For instance, barrier-free tourism directly addresses people with disabilities, seniors, and families with young children. One of the initiatives in this sphere is a collaborative project of several Belarusian NGOs and Valozhyn administration in the Naliboki Forest. Using the grant from the EU, they plan to create a tourist itinerary and a hostel suitable for people with disabilities by 2018.

For such projects to succeed, Belarusian society still needs to change its mentality and overcome stereotypes. Most of them root in the Soviet practises of marginalising the disabled people and removing them from public spaces, as it happened

with the disabled WW2 veterans on the eve of the Moscow Olympics in 1980.

Equally important is the challenge for the contemporary Belarusian state, which should abandon indifference and take the lead in securing basic constitutional rights of its citizens with disability.

People with Disabilities in Belarus: Struggling with Barriers

In May, Belarusian disability rights activists held a “Week of Accessibility.” According to the organisers, without the creation of an accessible infrastructure for disabled people it is not possible to talk about true equality in Belarusian society. Belarus remains the only country in Europe that has not acceded to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. People with disabilities remain marginalised in Belarus.

A significant portion of people with disabilities rarely leave their apartments and have no opportunity to study or work. Disabled people have to deal with both physical and regulatory barriers. The main blame for this lies with the state authorities and a society that still retains the stereotypes about the people with disabilities.

However, people with disabilities themselves take matters into their own hands and fight for their rights more and more often. Initiatives like the <https://keepmovingcare.com/> are

helpful. Today they require the solidarity of Belarusians and the international community to achieve the accession of Belarus to the UN Convention.

At Home, out of Work

More than 512,000 people with disabilities live in Belarus. Among them, 20,000 use wheelchairs. Moreover, the annual incidence of disability increases by around 50,000. Every twentieth Belarusian is disabled, but society seems not to notice this problem. The absence of adequate infrastructure leads to all-too-familiar stories where people with disabilities rarely leave their flats. According to the estimates of wheelchair users, 9 out of 10 people with a physical disability cannot leave their houses independently.

9 of 10 wheelchair users cannot leave their houses independently

Belarus is slowly creating the necessary conditions for the disabled in the form of ramps or low-floor buses. However, the majority of public and private institutions remain inaccessible to wheelchair users. A few years ago, the coordinator of the Office for the Rights of People with Disabilities Sergey Drozdovsky, while visiting the theatre in Minsk, told the guard that the theatre remains inaccessible to people with disabilities even after the latest renovation. In response, the guards of the theatre kicked him out of the theatre.

In addition to the absence of the needed infrastructure to help them get around, the disabled in Belarus face other issues with getting an education and securing work. The state has created enough secondary schools for the disabled. People with disabilities can study in specialised classes, special schools and even boarding schools, but often their infrastructure remains inadequate to meet the needs of the disabled. It should also be noted that there is not one high school in the country prepared to teach pupils that have a

variety of disabilities.

Only 14% of Belarusian disabled people of working age have a job. While the majority of disabled people are working in positions that require minimal qualifications with low wages. Also, companies often officially hire disabled people to work for them, but do not actually provide them with any actual work after they are hired.

This phenomenon is the result of the Belarusian authorities introduction of tax incentives for enterprises in which 50% of workers are disabled. Thus, the firms use disabled people for their own purposes. Meanwhile, the skills of the people with disabilities continue to decline.

What Makes Things Worse

Belarus does not seem like a unique country that has a problem with discrimination against the disabled. Even well developed countries are often unable to provide equal opportunities for people with disabilities. However, the situation for people with disabilities in Belarus remains different for several reasons.

Belarusian authorities still have not introduced any anti-discrimination legislation and some laws violate the rights of the disabled. Consider the fact that people with significant disabilities cannot adopt children. On the other hand, the same people have no right to go through the border without waiting in line. If disabled Belarusians live in nursing homes for retirees, they have no guarantee that they can leave them or while they are there, to be able to use their own money freely.

Curbs remain unprepared to accommodate the disabled, and the drivers are not allowed to go out and help a disabled person to get into the bus.

Instead of really addressing these issues, the authorities

take half measures. For example, the Minsk Automobile Plant (MAZ) began to produce low-floor buses, but often people with disabilities cannot get into them. Curbs remain unprepared to accommodate the disabled, and the drivers are not allowed to go out and help a disabled person to get into the bus. Local authorities build ramps, but they often do not meet the appropriate standards.

Poverty also remains a significant factor influencing the lives of the disabled. The state does not have the necessary funds to provide appropriate conditions for disabled persons at universities or health centres. Social support payments to the disabled remain very small. For example, wheelchair users in Belarus monthly receive about € 100.

Despite the fact that Belarusian society remains concerned about the state of the disabled people in Belarus, it retains significant stereotypes.

According to the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies only a third of Belarusians support the idea that his child could study in the same class with disabled children. Only a quarter of Belarusians think that the state should create conditions so that people with disabilities could work equally with everyone. Others believe that the state should increase benefits and social payments to the disabled so that they did not have to earn a living. Still others believe that the state should create specialised enterprises for the employment of people with disabilities.

Will Disabled People Win Over the Authorities

Belarus has not acceded to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, though it has complied with all the formal requirements. Sergey Drozdovsky, coordinator of the Office of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities said that today, "we need only the political will and the raised hand of one deputy who would put the question of accession to the

Convention on the agenda.” The authorities refrain from acceding for one reason. The Convention binds the state, making it fulfil its obligations under the UN Convention.

Western aid has been of great importance to Belarusian people with disabilities. For example, the U.S. Agency for International Development promotes inclusive education for people with disabilities. The main purpose of the USAID programme is to create the necessary infrastructure – ramps and doors, that have been adopted to the needs of people with disabilities. Also as part of this program experts develop a joint study programme for children and those children with disabilities.

However, disabled persons are creating hope all on their own. People with disabilities unite together and form organisations, hold protests and create their own special maps, where they mark the places that are accessible for the people with disabilities. Self-organisation remains the only viable way to fight for their rights. During the “Week of Accessibility” disability rights activists held many public lectures and free legal consultations to help people with disabilities to preserve and utilise their rights.

The disability rights movement remains an important part of civil society in Belarus. The West should help it not only financially, but also facilitate and encourage Belarus’s accession to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Non-Formal Education, Minsk Brand, Gender Conference – Belarus Civil Society Digest

Festival of non-formal education, National Gender Platform approval, discussion of Minsk brand and human rights defenders of the year were among the most notable civil society events in Belarus last week.

Festival of Non-Formal Education. On 7-9 December, [the 4th Festival of Non-Formal Education](#) took place in Minsk. The Festival was attended by about 250 participants – teachers, trainers and other people sharing the values of life-long learning and non-formal education. The Festival format included various activities: a panel talk, more than 60 master classes and presentations, exhibition boxes, discussions, contests, etc.

The largest number of awards went to the [Grodno-based NGO Third Sector](#), including the top prize for the best educational website Golden Age University. For the Festival, The Association Life Long Education released a special issue of [Adukatar](#) magazine.

Minsk brand discussion. The past week was marked by hot public discussion around a new symbol of Minsk "[Think Minsk](#)", which turned out to be very similar to a London one. Alexander Zimovsky, former chief of state propaganda in Belarus, [dismissed it as flawed](#). [TUT.BY hosted a large talk show](#) among various advertising and creative groups to discuss the brand. A group of Belarusian marketing professionals announced that they are going to create [an alternative original brand](#).

Human rights defenders marked anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. On 10 December, [human rights](#)

[defenders](#) and representatives of civil society celebrated the date in different ways in different parts of the country, mostly going out onto the streets and handing out brochures with the text of the Declaration and other human rights publications.

Human Rights Defenders of the Year. On 10 December, representatives of human rights organisations announced the winners of [the Belarusian human rights prize of 2012](#). This year the lawyers of the year were Alina Shostak and Alvira Drygo, human rights defender of the year was Liubou Kavaliova, and journalist of the year was Andrei Poczobut.

Intellectual conference in Minsk. On 14-15 December, The Flying University held a conference titled "[Intellectual situation in Belarus: the circumstances and self-determination of thinking](#)." The purpose of the conference was a joint discussion of the contemporary intellectual situation in Belarus. The conference was attended by Valentin Akudovich, Vladimir Matskevich, Mikhal Anempadystav, Valeria Kastsyugova, Alexei Pikulik, and other researchers, intellectuals and cultural figures.

Statement of the National Platform. On 12 December, members of the National Platform of the Civil Society Forum of the Eastern Partnership [adopted a statement](#) expressing deep concern regarding the repressive actions of the Belarusian authorities. In particular, the statement condemns the confiscation of the Viasna premises, the practice of criminal prosecution of journalists, independent media and youth organisations, and the denial of visas for foreign partners of Belarusian organizations.

Gender conference in Minsk. On 8 December, in Minsk, participants of the conference "[Women's movement in Belarus: challenges, achievements and perspectives](#)" approved the National Gender Platform (NGP) and adopted an appeal to the

National Gender Council under the Council of Ministers of Belarus. NGP suggests introducing basic provisions guaranteeing gender equality in Belarus, as well as hope for equitable cooperation of civil society with state structures. The conference initiated by [the Women's Independent Democratic Movement](#) was timed to the 20th anniversary of the women's movement in Belarus.

Legal Transformation Center (Lawtrend) issued invitations to the press conference "Non-freedom of associations in Belarus after December 19, 2010: Facts, trends, and recommendations". The event is to take place on 17 December in Minsk. The press conference speakers will present two unique publications on administrative and criminal proceedings on the events of December 19, 2010, as well as an analytical report of the monitoring group Lawtrend on administrative cases in 2012.

Presentation on Poverty and Social Inclusion in Belarus. IPM Research Center and the Center for European Transformation invite to the presentation of the study [Poverty and Social Inclusion in Belarus](#). The presentation will be held on 17 December in the Minsk IBB. The [survey's text](#) is available on the IPM website.

Monitoring of barrier-free environment. On 7 December, [the members of the "Accessibility" coalition](#) went on to conduct regular tests to study the availability of architectural objects and buildings. This time the research was conducted at newly opened Minsk underground station Petrovshchina and the Berestyie cinema. The project titled Monitoring of barrier-free environment initiated by the Office for the Rights of People with Disabilities aims to create a barrier-free environment monitoring tool and its pilot implementation.

Essay competition on Accessibility and Disability. [The Office for the Rights of People with Disabilities](#) has announced the essay competition, Accessibility and Disability, aimed at increasing knowledge about the issues of disability rights in

Belarus, the promotion of the ideas of equal participation, etc. The winner will be awarded with a laptop.

New website to help in cases of domestic violence. A [New website](#) has been launched to help people – both victims and aggressors – in situations of domestic violence. Online consultations are conducted by experts of 19 CSOs dealing with domestic violence. The website is coordinated by the Belarusian Association of Young Christian Women.

Belarus Press Photo Multimedia Winners. The awarding ceremony of the [Belarus Press Photo – Multimedia](#) contest took place on 9 December, in Minsk's Знята photo studio. First place went to a clip dedicated to the presidential elections in 2010; second place to the Food not Bombs project; and third place to Andrei Liankevich for a multimedia-clip called Paganstva.

Meetings in Washington. BAJ Chairperson Zhanna Litvina, wife of political prisoner Ales Bialiatski Natalya Pinchuk and activist Tatiana Revyaka are [visiting Washington DC](#), where they have a number of meetings at the Senate, the State Department and the US Security Council. The main topic of the visit is the freedom of speech and the situation of political prisoners in Belarus. The Belarusian guests took part in the event with Congressman Christopher Smith dedicated to the 2nd anniversary of the events of December 19, 2010.

Belarusian photo-exhibition in Brussels. On 18 December, the Office for a Democratic Belarus and the Secretariat of the Steering Committee of the EaP CSF will host the opening of the [Discovering Belarus: Images of Today and Beyond](#) exhibition by the Belarusian photographer Siarhei Balay, which will be followed by an informal presentation of the EaP CSF Secretariat and a Christmas cocktail reception.

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.