

Anti-corruption party, ECLAB enrolment, White Legion released, Social Business Forum – Belarus civil society digest

SYMPA/BIPART invite to an anti-corruption party. ECLAB opens student enrolment for the 2017-2018 academic year. First Social Business Forum takes place in Belarus.

Civil Society Parallel Forum is held in Minsk ahead of the 26 annual OSCE PA session. Human rights defender becomes member of the government's penitentiary system monitoring commission.

New gender project helps Belarusian women tell their stories. All defendants in the White Legion case are released. Ministry of Economy agrees with Perspektyva's proposals.

This and more in the new edition of the Belarus civil society digest.

Education and research

[SYMPA/BIPART invites to an anti-corruption party](#). The thematic event is held on 10 July in Minsk. The agenda includes a presentation of the Transparent Public Procurement Rating and the place of Belarus in it; an open lecture on the monitoring public procurement in Hungary, and a study on electronic public procurement. The entrance to the event is free.

[ECLAB opens accepting students for 2017-2018 academic year](#). European College of Liberal Arts in Belarus (ECLAB) is an

informal educational institution. The college suggests the courses on public history, mass culture and media, contemporary art and theatre, etc. For three years of work, the college has over 200 graduates and held over 30 public events and exhibition projects.

Belarus In the Trap of Slow Growth: Get Out or Settle Down?

seminar will take place on 30 June in Minsk. Organised by the IPM Research Centre and the Ministry of Economy, the seminar will present the results of studies on the situation of vulnerable groups in the recession period, a new concept of regional development, IPM's macroeconomic forecast, etc. The seminar is held under the Kastychnicki Economic Forum, KEF.



Study on the assessment of services for people with intellectual/mental disabilities in local communities

was presented on 28 June in Minsk. The **study** was carried out by the Prospects for Mental Health (Lithuania) in cooperation with the Office for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Belarus). The study analyses the existing community services and resources related to de-institutionalisation at the local level.

Minsk will host a conference on academic freedom in Belarus.

The conference will take place on 26 June and discuss the situation with violations of academic freedom in Belarus, such as the expulsion of from universities for civic activities, the imposition of the state ideology, etc. The organisers are

Human Rights Centre *Viasna*, Association of Belarusian Students (ZBS) and Libereco-Partnership for Human Right.

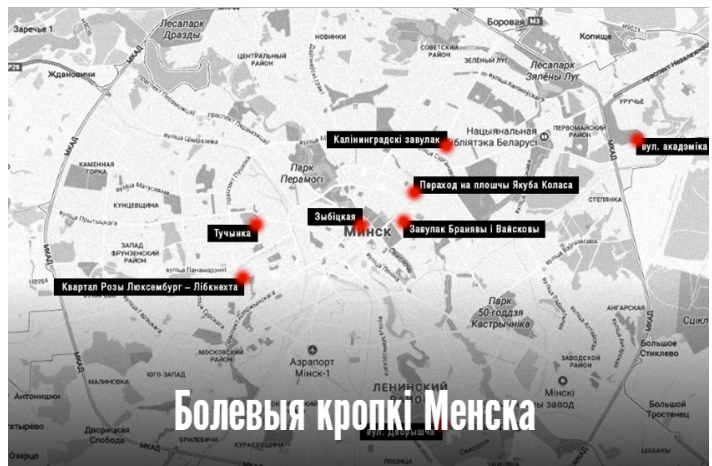
[Summer school Close Power](#) invites participants to Białystok to get acquainted with the system of the local government of Poland and Belarus. Organised by the *For Freedom* movement, the school includes meetings with leadership representatives, sessions about the mechanisms of decision-making at the local level, advocacy campaigns, etc.

Local and green activism

[City Show's Grand Finale](#). This week the City project has released the [last episode](#). In total, 8 video episodes tell how 20 activists from 13 Belarusian cities fight for the prize fund, meeting the urban challenges and implementing their ideas [in communities](#). The Grand Prix, a study trip to Brazil, went to the urban artist Bazinato who implements civic activism through art.

[V Forum of Environmental CSOs](#)

will take place on 21-23 July near Minsk. The key theme of the 2017 Forum is Public engagement. Representatives of eco-friendly organisations and initiatives are invited to participate. The Forum will raise such topics as partnership ethics, climate change, renewable energy, etc. The organisers are Green Network, EcoDom, Bahna CSO and others.



[Pain points of Minsk](#). [34mag.net](#) magazine has released a list of locations in Minsk that are under threat of destruction and need protection from urban activists. The list includes [Asmalouka](#) district and its active locals; [Baraŭliany](#), where

the authorities plan to cut down five hectares of forest and others.

[Susedzi 2017 bike marathon](#). The 7th International Amateur Bike Marathon *Susedzi 2017 / Neighbors* will be held on 15 July, at the Augustów Canal, Hrodna region. Anyone can participate in the bike marathon if he/she has a bicycle and a helmet. Gender, age, and cycling experience do not matter. The organiser is VelaHrodna local CSO.

Human rights

[Human rights defender enters the commission on the penitentiary system](#). This is a Chairperson of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee [Alieh Hulak](#). The Republican Public Monitoring [Commission](#) at the Ministry of Justice monitors compliance with the rights of convicts by institutions that carry out punishment and implement social projects aimed at the re-socialisation and adaptation of convicts.

[All defendants released in White Legion case](#). This week the remaining 14 people were released on recognisance in the so-called White Legion case; they have been charged with forming an illegal armed group, criminal art. 287. It was known about [31 people](#) who were detained on the eve of the 25 March Freedom Day protest rallies. In total, they spent behind bars 1,880 days.

[New gender visual project](#). A group of individuals has launched a visual project in Facebook allowing to Belarusian women to tell about themselves who they are, and not as they are expected to be; hashtag #такаякакесть375 (as I am). A series contains 19 stories of women, who wanted to share their looks, relationships with their breasts and bodies with the world.

Other

[Civil Society Parallel Forum in Minsk](#). On 4 July, ahead of the 26th annual session of the OSCE PA, civil society held the parallel forum in Minsk, for the first time in the recent 13 years. The forum focused on international mechanisms in the sphere of human rights in Post-Soviet countries, the human rights situation and problems of civil society. The forum's [resolution](#) is available.

[First Belarusian Social Business Forum](#). On 28 June, on the International Day of Social Business, Minsk hosted the First Belarusian Social Business Forum. Organised by a number of CSOs, the day was packed with events, including speeches from representatives of Belarusian social businesses, presentations from foreign guests, informal networking, and the Social Business Alley of over 20 Belarusian social companies.

[Ministry of Economy met CSO proposals](#). The officials agreed with a suggestion of the *Perspektiva* CSO that advocates the interests of small vendors. In particular, individual entrepreneurs will pay fees to the Social Protection Fund on a voluntary basis (now it's mandatory). The related draft of the presidential decree is being prepared.

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.

Election Prediction Contest, Non-Formal Education, Vyshyvanka Day – Civil Society Digest

The Movement for Freedom invites to take part in an election prediction contest.

The Belarusian Association of Journalists can be admitted to the state-organised Supervisory Council on the media during the parliamentary elections. VI Festival of Non-Formal Education took place in Minsk.

Freedom Square to be filled: with classical music fans next eight Saturdays organised by Fund of Ideas. The first ever official Vyshyvanka Day is held in Minsk.

The UN Human Rights Council renewed the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur to Belarus. Amnesty International reports that activists in Belarus are subject to unchecked government surveillance.

Parliamentary elections

The Movement for Freedom invites to take part in an election prediction contest designed to mock the coming elections for the parliament. After the candidate registration stage, people will be able to go to www.2016.pyx.by and check the names of the candidates-winners of September's elections. In such a way, the opposition calls for sharing a laugh over the electoral farce and expressing protest against the existing system of appointing parliament members. *According to BelaPAN NEWS mail out*

[Registration of nomination groups was more democratic.](#) The campaign *Human Rights Defenders For Free Elections* reports that the process of registration of nomination groups (initiative groups) of candidates for the House of Representatives was more democratic than that during the previous election campaign. The vast majority of groups of opposition candidates were registered. Parliamentary elections will be held in Belarus on September 11.

[BAJ can be admitted to take part in the Supervisory Council on the Media during Parliamentary elections.](#) This was stated by the Central Electoral Commission's secretary [Mikalaj Lazavik](#), responding to the related Belarusian Association of Journalists' appeal. The Supervisory Council on the Media is designed to enforce observance of media law and procedures of political agitation during elections.

Non-formal education

[ECLAB recruits students for 2016-2017.](#)

In a new academic year, European College of Liberal Arts in Belarus (ECLAB) offers an additional education in such areas as modern society, ethics and politics, popular culture and media, etc. ECLAB is created as an informal



alternative to the system of higher education existing in Belarus, which inherited a range of shortcomings from the Soviet epoch.

[VI Festival of Non-Formal Education was held in Minsk.](#) The Festival was held on July 7-9 and traditionally served as a platform for professional interaction of non-formal education's providers. The opening ceremony gathered around

300 Belarusian and foreign participants; welcome speeches were delivered by EU Delegation, Education Ministry, IBB Center and others. The program included over 60 different events, including expert panels, workshops, master classes, and exhibitions.

Human rights

[The UN Human Rights Council renewed the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur to Belarus.](#) The resolution adopted on June 30, at the session on Geneva, raises a wide range of human rights violations committed in the country and highlights the need to continue monitoring the behaviour of the Belarusian government.

[Activists in Belarus are subject to unchecked government surveillance with no independent oversight.](#) In its report, published on July 7, Amnesty International documents that the Belarusian government uses telecoms companies to facilitate surveillance by demanding direct, remote-control access to customer communications and data. Against the background of an already restrictive legal environment, this creates a chilling effect that forces activists out of public life.

Civil society initiatives

[Mediakritika.by joins the campaign against the hate speech.](#) A Belarusian media watchdog MediaKritika launches a series of cartoons "Stop Hate Speech" to talk how the hate speech emerges, and why even a mild form of it could have a serious impact. The first visual story is [available](#) on the MediaKritika YouTube channel.

[Mini-forum on the development of social entrepreneurship in rural areas](#) will be held on August 10, near Minsk. The forum

is to analyse the state of individual initiatives in villages and offer proposals for the development of social entrepreneurship there. Organiser – Social Business Technology CSO – invites to participation organisations and experts interested in the development of entrepreneurial activity in rural areas and solving social problems.

[New gender-responsive program for local activists](#). The Office for European Expertise and Communications (OEEC) launched an educational program *We Decide Together* designed for community activists who are willing to promote the interests of women and vulnerable groups as a part of a local community. On July 9-10, the first group session was held. OEEC also released a summing up [video](#) on its [Leadership in Local Communities](#) program ended in June.

[Belarusian Thinking Week](#). On September 19-25, the Belarusian Thinking Week will take place in Belarus and aims to present a variety of manifestations of today's Belarusian thinking. The organisers – EuroBelarus, Flying University, *Budzma* campaign, *Mova Nanovacourses*, and others – invite CSOs, research and cultural initiatives, business companies, and individuals to participate in the developing and implementing of The Week.

Interaction between state and civil society

[Eight Saturdays with classic music](#). Jazz at the Minsk City Hall is replaced on classical music – this year's festival *Classics in the Town Hall* is spread over eight Saturdays – from July 9 to August 27. The open-air concert platform will host six orchestras. The tradition of holding public free concerts in the heart of Minsk was founded by Fond of Ideas four years ago and now picked up by other actors.

[Presentation on the motivation of civil servants](#) was held by

SYMPA/BIPART on 1 July. The study covers 300 people and shows that the motivation of central authorities, local officials and employees of state organisations differ. Among the most effective tools for motivating are career advancement, financial motivation, and increasing personal responsibility.

[First official Vyshyvanka Day in Minsk](#). The first ever Vyshyvanka Day/Embroidery Day event was conducted on July 2 at the state level by the Culture Ministry of Belarus and a pro-governmental youth BRSM. The celebrations combined an art parade, exhibition fair, fashion show, knights' fights, etc. The government plans to make the festival Vyshyvanka Day a new tradition – in the run-up to the Belarus' Independence Day.

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Non-Formal Education in Belarus: Unleashing the Civil Society Potential

Over the past couple of years informal education has witnessed remarkable growth in Belarus. It offers Belarusians possibilities missing at the nation's over-regulated state-run universities.

New grass-roots initiatives such as the European College of Liberal Arts and the Flying University are organising innovative and inspiring courses in Minsk. Although

functioning within a certain limitations peculiar to Belarus, they still manage to appeal to the nation's youth.

Belarus Digest interviewed representatives of the Flying University and the European College of Liberal Arts about what it is like to organise non-formal education in Belarus.

Education in Belarus: a Sensitive Area?

Many people in the West often have a [distorted view of the educational system in Belarus](#) thinking that nothing is impossible in Belarus living under a non-democratic regime. Despite its relatively [strong standing in international rankings](#) for education, academic freedom in Belarusian - universities remains rather limited.

Belarus remains the only country in Europe outside the common European educational space, also known as the Bologna system. The educational system, largely unchanged from Soviet times, is reacting very slowly to the demands of the market. The stagnate system fails to promote Belarusian civil society and often remains out of touch with the new realities of Belarus.

However, the emergence of projects like the European College of Liberal Arts in Belarus, the Flying University, the Belarusian Collegium¹, and a number of [Belarusian language courses](#) show a real demand for new modern forms of education. They also show that education no longer exclusively the domain of the state.

The first serious non-formal education initiative, the [Belarusian Collegium¹](#), dates back to 1997. Its founders gathered a few Belarusian intellectuals and started running evening courses for adults. Despite financial difficulties it continues to function. Aliaksei Lastouski from the Belarusian Collegium told Belarus Digest that they have around 125 students at the moment who study topics such as history, philosophy and journalism. In the 2000s several new

institutions emerged.

The Flying University: Responding to the Need for a National Belarusian University

[The Flying University](#) (*Liatučy Universytet*) was established in 2010 by Uladzimir Mackievich, a civil society leader. According to Tatsiana Vadalazhskaja, a project coordinator, however, the idea to establish an university emerged back in the 1990s. Then many argued for a proper national Belarusian university with a clear mission of raising future generations of the Belarusian intelligentsia and future leaders as well as strengthening Belarusian civic identity. "Then it was absolutely clear that without a [truly national] university neither a nation nor a country could exist", she pointed out.

Much has been changed in education in Belarus since the 1990s. "We can observe the process of squeezing out critically thinking people from academia and education", Vadalazhskaja - told Belarus Digest. Belarus's traditional universities teach, educate, issue diplomas, but they do little to encourage students to contribute to civil society with their own ideas.

The name of the University relates to the underground "Flying University" (*Latający Uniwersytet*) that organised courses to promote the self-education of people in communist Poland. The Flying University offers its courses for free. It does not issue any diplomas and Vadalazhskaja emphasises that the education that the University provides remains largely non-formal.

This year around 300 young Belarusians applied for its courses, and on average around 15 students are attending each course. The University offers 20 different courses and seminars. The most popular courses include the study of the Bible, the "European choice" of Belarus, methodology and design.

34 years old Alexey Konstantinov has been attending courses

and seminars at the Flying University already for three years now. Originally from Ukraine, for over 20 years he has been living in Minsk. He told Belarus Digest he was attracted by the unique learning environment at the University, but also its strong principles of encouraging critical thinking.

Liberal Arts: Belarus Today

Another initiative, the [European College of Liberal Arts in Belarus](#) (ECLAB), launched its courses only this past October. Currently more than 40 Belarusian students are attending various courses at the European College. The most popular courses are in popular culture, media, but also social problems and collective values.

Aleksandr Adamianc, a project director, explains that the liberal arts remain an underdeveloped area of education in Belarus. The idea to establish the College came about as a result of an existing niche in the education market. "Our programme of Liberal Arts is the first in Belarus", he proudly notes.

Adamianc believes that Belarusians should have the opportunity to obtain a modern European education inside the country saying that "many young people neither have the possibility of studying abroad, nor do they want to". He points to "the conservatism of state education organisations" as the main factor impeding the development of liberal arts education in Belarus.

Predominantly young people attend their courses, with ages varying between 19-35 years old. The vast majority of them have already received degrees from higher education institutions, with a third currently enrolled in other university programmes.

Presently, ECLAB offers a free programme of education and issues certificates for its students. Aleksandr Adamianc told

Belarus Digest that they plan to introduce tuition fees at some point.

Non-formal vs Formal Education

Achieving success with new non-formal education initiatives can be challenging in Belarus. The biggest challenge for the Flying University was to find rooms for classes. "First, we rented some space, but in a month we were asked to leave. From there we went on "flying" from one place to another", Tatsiana Vadalazhskaja explains, suggesting that not everyone welcomes their work.

Aleksandr Adamianc from the European College of Liberal Arts told Belarus Digest they did not have difficulties with finding space in Minsk.

The informal nature of these initiatives appeals to many Belarusians, particularly to young people. Tatsiana Vadalazhskaja from the Flying University notes that the project has managed to attract a number of prominent Belarusian public figures, intellectuals and social activists, such as Aleś Smalianchuk, Ihar Babkou and Iryna Dubianieckaja. Another important aspect is maintaining the right atmosphere, or as Aliaksandr Adamianc puts it: "an atmosphere of free, non-hierarchical communication".

Both the Flying University and the European College run attractive and informative web sites and have a strong presence on social media networks, an item that is crucial nowadays. The European College also has ambitious plans to expand and start to co-operate with other European universities so that Belarusian students could obtain dual degrees that would be recognised in Europe.

Non-formal Education's Enormous Potential

Both Belarusian and Russian languages are used for instruction

at the Flying University and the European College. Their representatives emphasised that the language of instruction depends entirely upon the instructors themselves.

“For example, the course on “Mathematics as the Language of Thinking” is taught in Belarusian on purpose, because the instructor, Mr Liavonau, wanted to develop this topic in the Belarusian language”, Tatsiana Vadalazhskaja told Belarus Digest.

The European College and the Flying University prove that these kinds of education projects have great prospects in Belarus helping to unleash Belarusian civil society's own potential. They also suggest that new education initiatives inside Belarus are possible despite the grim political situation.

With very limited resources, especially when compared to state-funded universities, the organisers of informal courses already managed to make attractive education outside the bounds of state-run institutions. With the organisers' mix of idealism, pragmatism and professionalism, their student numbers and the geographical prominence of their activities is likely to grow further.

Paula Borowska