

# Socially Oriented Mobile Applications – Digest of Belarusian Civil Society

Belarusian civil society and NGOs engaged in a whole plethora of activities – from developing socially-oriented mobile phone applications to preparing books on organic farming.

[Socially oriented mobile applications](#): Mobile company Velcom under its contest of applications for Android gave the first two places to socially oriented projects. First place went to the application [GreenMap Belarus](#), which allows finding on the map places of collection of different species recycling. Second place went to the [mobile application in Belarusian](#), which allows identifying a user's location next to the object of historical architecture. The authors got respectively \$5,000 and \$4,000 awards.

## Culture

[Interactive map of Kalinouski's rebellion](#): To the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the rebellion led by Kastus Kalinouski, the initiative Belarusian national memory composed a map with illustrations and texts of Belarusian areas related to the rebellion, its leader and participants. The map is made using the service [maps.google.com](http://maps.google.com); it allows not only viewing information but also to complement and refine it.

[Budzma! events in regions](#): On January 18, in Gomel, Budzma! campaign conducted a talk show *Cultural climate in Gomel: Cold or Hot?* attended by 35-40 Gomel residents affiliated with cultural topic. The event was the last in a series of the similar events titled *Culture Improves Life!* held in all regional cities. On January 25, in Mogilev, Budzma! organizes [the Fair of projects](#) to find promising ideas for Mogilev as the cultural capital of Belarus and the CIS in 2013.

[Alternative brand concepts of Minsk](#): Belarusian designer Alexei Latinnik offered two brand concepts of Minsk and their visual solutions. To remind, at the end of 2012 [the official logo](#)

[of Minsk](#) developed by Instid, received mixed public feedback and made many designers to think about creating an alternative brand of Minsk.

[Cultural lectures in Homel](#): Since February, Homel activists launch a series of cultural lectures on the local wooden architecture. Meetings are a part of the campaign to preserve Homel historical heritage and will take place at the Vetka Museum of Folk Art. The first out of six meetings is to be held on February 2; entry is 2,500 rubles (about \$0.3).

[Fair of Projects in Mahileu](#): On January 25, Fair of Projects was held in Mahileu. Initiated by the campaign Budzma! and supported by the Mogilev city executive committee, the event was to find interesting cultural ideas to enrich Mogilev as the Cultural Capital of CIS countries and Belarus in 2013. For the first time in the history of Belarus project ideas' discussion happened in the format of public debate.

## Workshops and Conferences

[Study visits to Tallinn](#): E-Governance Academy and Pact, Inc start a new series of study visits for Belarusian activists to get to know with information communication technologies for civil society development. The first visit is to take place on February 24 – March 2, in Tallinn.

[BOSS teaches leadership](#): Brotherhood of Organizations of Student Self-Government (BOSS) conducts a series of trainings and workshops under the project *Golden Lessons of Leadership*. The closest session *Negotiations* is to be held on January 27; the cost of participation is 30 thousand rubles (about 3.5 USD).

[Training course on Mediation](#): Center for Effective Communication Feedback in cooperation with Education Center POST invites to participate in the training course *Mediation as a method of effective conflict resolution*. The training course will be implemented in January-October 2013, and includes 10 thematic modules. The first workshop will be held on February 22-24, 2013; participation is for charge.

[Gender likbez](#): A brochure on the informal gender education *Gender Likbez* was published in Vilnius. The brochure is the outcome of the project *Development of gender sensitivity as a*

*prerequisite for gender equality in Belarus*, implemented for two years by the Belarusian Human Rights House in Vilnius, EHU Center for Gender Studies, Legal Initiative, Belarusian Association of Journalists, Third Sector Centre, International Center for Gender initiatives Adliha.

**International conference on elderly issues in Grodno:** Third Sector Centre invites to take part in the conference *Intellectual, physical and social revitalization of elderly*. The event is to be held on March 29-31, in Hrodna. The conference will be attended by experts, scientists, and practitioners from the public and governmental organizations of Belarus, Poland, Russia, Lithuania, Moldova and Ukraine. The event is held in the framework of the project *The Golden Age University*.

## **Other**

**Achievements in political science will be awarded in memoriam of Vitali Silitski:** Vitali Silitski Commemoration Committee launched the *Award For Contribution in Development of Political Science in Belarus* to maintain the memory of a Belarusian political scientist and the first director of BISS. The nomination lasts from January 15 till February 28. The Award Ceremony will take place at the beginning of April 2013.

**Conversation with Günter Verheugen:** On January 24, Liberal Club together with the Minsk International Education Center, German Society for Foreign Affairs, Robert Bosch Foundation held a meeting with the former Vice President of the European Commission, Günter Verheugen. Prof. Verheugen shared his vision of economic and foreign policy challenges currently facing the EU, and responded to questions from participants.

**Meetup event GMOs – For and Against:** On February 1, the Academy of Sciences hosts the first public meeting on the issues of actual genetics and biotechnology *GMOs – For and Against*. The meeting is held in an informal "meetup" format

which enables live discussions on concern issues. The organizer is the community Meetup.by with the support of the Institute of Genetics and Cytology.

**First scientific book on organic farming:** Center for Environmental Solutions supported by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, Ministry of Agriculture published a collection of scientific papers *Organic farming in Belarus: prospects for development*. The book provides practical recommendations how to start organic agriculture and how profitable this field is. The electronic version is available at the Center's website.

**Monitoring of a barrier-free environment – presentation of results:** The Office for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities invites to the presentation of results of the project *Monitoring of a barrier-free environment*. The speakers will present Guidelines for monitoring the availability of architectural sites and buildings for people with disabilities and a developed tool to survey the availability of objects for people with disabilities. The event is to take place on February 6, at the venue of the Office.

*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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**PM Myasnikovich Reveals**

# Collapse of Belarusian Agriculture

In 2011, Belarus lost more than a quarter of its cows. Prime Minister Mikhail Myasnikovich, revealed this sad fact a week ago. He was bluntly exposing his country's illusory economic successes at a meeting with his colleagues. One of the core myths of Lukashenka's regime is its ability to maintain a viable agricultural sector. The truth is that the agricultural sector in Belarus is highly inefficient and barely survives only thanks to gigantic state subsidies.

The government has been trying to preserve the Soviet *kolkhoz* system of collective farming and at the same time to ensure national food security. But now, a top official in the regime has admitted that the government's Rural Revival Program implemented in recent years has been a huge failure. Despite Lukashenka's initiatives such as 'the revolution in pig farming', Belarusian agriculture currently needs not only huge subsidies but also new technologies and markets.

## **Belarusians Want to Buy Food, Not Grow it on Weekends**

'Over the [last] year we have lost 381,000 cows, or 28.7 per cent of the total,' said Myasnikovich on 31 January 2012. Many of those cows were purchased from abroad which makes the loss particularly damaging. How could so many cows die? The main reason was simple: a poor diet.

It took the Ministry of Agriculture several days to come up with some explanation for the lost cows. Yesterday the Deputy Minister Nadzieya Katkaviec announced that the cows had not 'died' but were culled to produce meat, as though this could justify the terrific scale of losses.

Belarusian agriculture has been in dire straits for

decades. Even huge funds assigned by the government to support agriculture do not compensate for the perverse logic of state plans with fixed output targets. As one expert, Kanstancin Skuratovich, notes on [nmnby.eu](http://nmnby.eu), agriculture is an untrustworthy partner that threatens the whole Belarusian economy.

The authorities like to skew the statistics to make bad things look better. Some years ago, the government set the task of producing 6m tons of grain. Already at that time the experts doubted the necessity of this increase, because it would force the farms to give up production of other cash crops. As a result, the output targets and corresponding production of grain have risen each year, while the production of other commodities has fallen. In 2011, official statistics claimed that Belarus was producing a stupendous 10m tons of grain. But experts were very skeptical about the accuracy of this figure.

Agricultural production in Belarus reached its peak in 1990. Since then, the rural population has declined by more than a quarter, especially those of working age. Currently around 25 per cent of the Belarusian population lives in rural areas. This outflow reduced private production of vegetables, fruits, milk, and meat. At the same time, the urban population has increasingly renounced the old Soviet habit of producing some food for subsistence by working on their *datchas*. The urban dwellers no longer [grow their own potatoes](#) as they used to do in the past.

In a country with the largest per capita consumption of potatoes in the world, decline in potato output is a serious problem. The negative results of agricultural support for grain are becoming more egregious. Last August, Alexander Lukashenka stated that the government would provide less subsidies to agriculture than in the past. But with more [Russian subsidies](#), he could reconsider his decision.

## **Revolution in Pig Farming**

Lukashenka used to start each new campaign to revive agriculture with bombastic slogans with references to Soviet traditions. In the mid-2000s, he launched a campaign to build 'agricultural towns' throughout the country. While this involved urbanization of larger villages, it also kept agricultural wages at about 40 per cent below the national average wage. Focus on agricultural towns also left agricultural management reform untouched.

In 2004, Lukashenka ordered the sale of all bankrupt collective farms to private or state firms. He argued that added investment would revive the farms. That resulted in the coercive handover of impoverished farms to firms that support them only to avoid punishment by the state. Even the National Bank of Belarus was ordered to manage its own *kolkhoz*.

In 2009, Lukashenka publicly launched a 'revolution in pig farming' by establishing pig farms on par with the latest Danish and Dutch standards. Like most campaigns by the Belarusian regime, the undertaking ended in silent failure. Indeed, under Lukashenka, Belarus has lost 720,000 hectares of arable land – more than 10 per cent of the total available.

### **Can Belarus Export Food to the EU?**

Prime Minister Myasnikovich recently reminded the government about the tasks set by the president to export \$7bn worth of agricultural commodities by 2015. According to the Agriculture Ministry, that means that potato exports by 2015 should increase 14 times from the current level. However, the current acreage allotted to potato fields can produce only about 1m tons of market quality potatoes, just enough for the domestic market. In order to export, it needs more fields, and of course, more investment.

The same equation applies to cattle breeding and dairy products. At 70kg per capita, meat production in Belarus has failed to return to the levels of the 1990s. That means there

are few export opportunities. Export opportunities for dairy products are also limited; indeed, recent increases in dairy exports have constrained domestic supply. Of course, Belarus can also sell its rye and sugar abroad. But it has much more to import than export, like wheat, seafood, and vegetables. That means it can hardly use agricultural exports to boost the export performance of Belarus.

Belarusian agriculture, if properly managed, can feed the country and export its surpluses. The climatic conditions are no worse than in Denmark or the Netherlands. The leaders of the then newly established Belarusian Soviet Republic in the 1920s aimed to make Belarus the world's major agricultural producer alongside Switzerland or Denmark. Stalin and his successors stifled this goal and [murdered](#) its proponents. But it still has merit today.

One of the best ways to achieve this would be to open European markets to Belarusian products, including agricultural commodities. Most of them – 89 per cent – are currently exported to Russia. It could coincide with more European investment and technology transfers into Belarusian agriculture.

At the moment Belarus has negligible investments in agriculture with two of the most successful projects being implemented (somewhat ironically) by Israel and Iran. Foreign investments and new technologies could seriously boost production. Reviving agriculture, in turn, would help relieve the national economy of and cure the negative trade balance.