

Social Initiatives Inside Belarus and Political Conferences Outside – Civil Society Digest

Despite unfavourable environment, Belarusian NGOs continue to launch various initiatives and campaigns in Belarus. Most of initiatives relate to education, human rights and social issues. However, conferences on political issues have to take place outside of the country – in Vilnius and Brussels because often authorities prevent them from taking place in Belarus.

International Events

US Secretary of State meets with Belarusian civil society delegation. United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton [met](#) with a delegation of Belarusian civil society in Vilnius on December 06, on the sidelines of a meeting of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Ms Clinton said that the United States and the European Union would fight Lukashenka's regime through sanctions and travel bans.

In attendance there were Natallya Radzina, editor of charter97.org; human rights defenders Valyantsin Stefanovich and Tatsyana Ravyaka; Aleh Hulak, BHC Chairman; Syarhey Matskevich, leader of the Assembly of NGOs; Zhanna Litvina, BAJ leader; and Hanna Herasimava, director of the Vilnius-based Belarusian Human Rights House. ([Photos](#))

Civil Society Conference in Vilnius. On December 04-05, Vilnius hosted the Civil Society Conference held in parallel with the 18th session of the OSCE Ministerial Council. The OSCE

Civil Society Parallel Conference [adopted](#) a Resolution "On Reaction of the OSCE and the International Community to Human Rights Crisis in the Republic of Belarus".

In particular, the resolution urges the international community to stop all cooperation with the authorities of Belarus that provides for the transfer of funds to the Belarusian authorities either directly or through companies their control. The document also suggests discussing the prospects of suspending the voting rights of the representatives of Belarus authorities and even suspending the membership of Belarus in the OSCE.

'Transforming Belarus: Ways Ahead' in Brussels. On December 07, Carnegie Europe, BISS, and the Office for a Democratic Belarus with the support of Pact [hosted](#) in Brussels an expert forum "Transforming Belarus: Ways Ahead". The forum discussed the European Union's policies on Belarus in the context of the latest developments in the country and provided recommendations from Belarusian experts on how to change the existing status quo in Belarus according to the will of the country's citizens. ([Photos](#))

In particular, EU Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy Štefan Füle [underlined](#) that the EU's 'multi-dimensional' approach to Belarus had two strands, namely "a tough line towards the current repressive regime" complemented by the policy of engagement "with all those in Belarus who support reform and modernisation."

Initiatives and Campaigns in Belarus

Public Bologna Committee established. The expert community and a number of NGOs have decided to [establish](#) a Public Bologna Committee on the basis of National Platform of Eastern Partnership CSF. The Committee's aim is to develop "road map" of integration of the Belarusian higher education in the

Bologna process. On December 13, the Committee's founders will hold a press conference on the integration of the Belarusian higher education in the Bologna process.

Video and Talk Show about Social Contracting. Promoting the mechanism of state funding of NGOs, ACT has [released](#) a video about the state social contracting and a talk-show "Social Partnership" [produced](#) by Gomel TV. Activities are supported by the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

BRCS Initiates a Law on Volunteering. Belarusian Red Cross Society (BRCS) which [conducts](#) a significant work with volunteers [initiates](#) the development of a draft law on volunteering. Earlier a bill on volunteering was prepared and introduced to the Parliament, but it wasn't adopted. A new attempt to draft a bill is scheduled for 2012.

New Campaign "1%". International foundation "Idea" is [launching](#) a public campaign "Project "1%". The campaign aims to enact a law on charity and making changes and additions to the Tax Code of Belarus, namely to develop a "rule of one percent."

Manual on New Media. The new [manual](#) is the result of the 2-year Belarusian-German project, in which 10 Belarusian NGOs took part. They learned to shoot video, work with Google program resources, use social networks in order to increase NGOs' capacity.

"Human rights activists against the death penalty". It was announced at a joint press conference of human rights activists on December 9 in Minsk that more than 165,000 petitions for the abolition of the death penalty in Belarus were [sent](#) to the Presidential Administration by mail.

Winners in the field of human rights. On December 13, human rights NGOs will [announce](#) the names of a journalist, a human rights activist and a lawyer, which have gained exceptional achievements in the field of human rights in 2011. The

competition was established by Human Rights Alliance.

The fourth BCD attempt to register. On December 17, in Minsk party "Belarusian Christian Democracy" will [hold](#) the fourth founding congress. Since 2009, for three times BCD held the founding congress and filed registration documents to the Ministry of Justice, but so far the state registration has not been received yet.

Coalition of "Six". Belarusian Popular Front, United Civic Party, "Fair World" Party, Belarusian Christian Democracy, the Movement "For Freedom" and the campaign "Tell the Truth" – Coalition of the "Six" – will [participate](#) in the Parliamentary elections in 2012, but they have not yet defined the format of participation.

BISS vacancies. Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies [announces](#) new vacancies of an analyst and a public relations specialist. The deadline for applications is December 20.

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.

Kremlin's Plan of Taming Lukashenka Goes Ahead

After June's gas dispute and Russian enforcing Belarus to join

the Customs Union, political tension between Minsk and Moscow persists, taking ever new turns and twists. Belarusian leadership retaliated for the film about Lukashenka shown on Gazprom-controlled NTV by meetings with conspicuous nemesis of Russia – president Mikheil Saakashvili of Georgia.

Furthemore, Saakashvili was invited to explain evil nature of Kremlin on Belarusian state TV. Reaction of Russian side was immediate – the same Moscow's channel showed second film about Lukashenka. At least the first film really reached general audience – something that Polish-based TV channel Belsat did not manage to do since three years despite all efforts and hopes of Lukashenka's opponents. Ordinary people discussed the NTV film, though quite few watched it by themselves.

It was a hard blow for Belarusian president, because it made clear how susceptible his people are to Russian propaganda. After all, it cannot be seriously deemed as Russian concern for lack of human rights or democracy in Belarus. Of course, there are these problems under Lukashenka's reign yet Moscow channel, critisizing Minsk for human rights violations and disappearances while silently omitting much grosser abuses in the own land, resembles not so old times of USSR lashing out at USA for American racism.

Weak national identity and nonexistent civic and political consciousness of Belarusians aggravate the situation, while assisting Russian attempts to tame if not to oust Lukashenka altogether. A bulk part of Belarusian opposition facing the problems with Western support are inclined to turn to old Eastern comrades and this week proved that Moscow can count not only on popular reaction to anti-Lukashenka propaganda but also look toward collaboration of many politicians left for years without access to power in the country.

Thus, following the Russian film which mentioned disappearances of four persons in 1999-2000, the issue of disappearances was raised again with explicit references to

Russia at Friday's press conference by "European Belarus" Coordinator Andrei Sannikau, leader of Social Democratic Party Stanislau Shushkevich, leader of United Civic Party Anatol Lyabedzka, leader of the former Communist party Siarhiej Kaliakin, deputy chairman of Belarusian People's Front (BNF) Ryhor Kastusiou and head of the Minsk City Organization Of BNF Viktor Ivashkievich – the whole range of political opposition for the first time.

Shushkevich – sometimes considered to be a moderate National Democrat – said that spin doctors of Belarusian regime are trying to begin in Belarus an anti-Russian PR campaign. Yet, Russia cannot be our enemy, we are neighbours. We are told that Lukashenka is a guarantor of our independence, but a person which does not know Belarusianhood, language and history cannot be such guarantor. Such leader cannot bring us to independence.

Such statements one time were monopoly of the Belarusian president, but now the situation seemed to be contrary – Lukashenka is struggling with Kremlin and opposition seeks Russian friendship! They have to hurry, since Moscow possibly have already made up its strategy and put its agents in action.

New public campaign "Tell the Truth" – widely believed to have at least some deals with Russia and favorable stature toward it – demonstrates a high professional level in both installing control over oppositional political and NGOs' structures and buying up most active oppositional organizations. Actually, there are almost no critical materials about that campaign in non-governmental media anymore, while all steps of Lukashenka in confrontation with Russia are accompanied by new waves of attacks on him in both press outlets and public statements of oppositional politicians.

A leader of the campaign – the famous poet Uladzimir Niakliajeu – declared last week his intent to participate in

presidential elections. Apart from Russian support supposed by many, the campaign has a lot of funding, and at the same time it is clear that this time Western gave opposition no major resources. The campaign first denied Russian origin of its money. However, one time Niakliajeu got tired of questions about money and rhetorically asked,

“Why it is bad to say the truth for Russian money?”

The explicitly pro-Kremlin position of campaign's representatives during the gas conflict with Russia has only increased suspicions of campaign's Russian link. Very illustrative was Niakliajeu's statement on 600th anniversary of the Grunwald Battle, as he proclaimed that

“The Battle of Grunwald is a genuine symbol of cultural and political unity of Belarus, Poland, Lithuania and Russia”.

One can hardly find anything Russian to this battle except for later pan-Slavic and anti-German speculations of Russian imperial ideologues.

There is another bad news for Lukashenka. The campaign “Tell the Truth” regardless of its Russian connections, enjoys good relations with Western politicians. Niakliajeu began his international tour de force by visiting Canada but ended with meeting the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton!

It means that Belarusian regime cannot count on West while facing the most extensive and intensive Russian intrusion in its history. And Minsk is showing first signs of weakness – always obedient to Lukashenka Belarusian judges this week did not even dare to close a facade organization of the campaign “Tell the Truth”.

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