

# How Women's Rights Play Out on Belarusian Stage

If you happened to be in Minsk on 4 April, you should have picked up your free ticket to the public reading of the play "Seven".

The acclaimed documentary play tells the true stories of seven brave women from around the world who fought and managed to significantly improve the lives of girls and women in their respective countries.

Artistic value aside the production has a very powerful political and social message. In Belarus public servants, experts, business, media and sports stars came together to give voices to the seven characters. And while the settings may be exotic – stories from Guatemala, Nigeria, and Cambodia – the narratives translate well into the Belarusian context: domestic violence, trafficking in persons, fighting for freedom and equality. The performance should ideally resonate with the local audience and lead to rigorous discussions.

## Belarusian Renditions of Seven

Belarus joins 32 other countries who have already staged "Seven" translating the script into their respective languages. Written by American playwrights, produced by a Swede, it aims to raise awareness about women's rights in the world by engaging local prominent people as readers of the monologues. It presents a tapestry of stories that include fighting domestic violence in Russia, rescuing girls from human trafficking in Cambodia, and promoting peace and

equality in Northern Ireland among others.

The first closed reading of *Seven* in Belarus took place on 2 November, 2015. The carefully chosen stellar cast of readers included [Alena Kupchyna](#), Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Aleh Karazei, representing Ministry of the Interior, Aliaksandr Rumak, Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Protection, [Kiryl Rudy](#), Aide to the President of the Republic of Belarus, and His Excellency Martin Oberg, Ambassador of Sweden to Belarus among others.

And this is where the play gets both politically and socially interesting. Amazingly enough rather high-ranking public servants agreed to act on stage. This meant adjusting their busy schedules to accommodate rehearsals. This also implies coming under the guidance of an artistic director, albeit as talented and outstanding as Ivan Pinigin. And on top of it all it may be the [first time since the diplomatic row in 2012](#) that the government representatives of Sweden and Belarus play together, literally and figuratively.

Irina Alkhovka, a recognised expert in the field of gender equality and chairperson of the NGO "Gender Perspectives" took part in the second "expert" reading of the play in March. She comments on her experience,

*It happened so that during the second "expert" reading of the play I spoke with the voice of Marina Pisklakova-Parker, who founded the first hotline for victims of domestic violence in Russia in 1993. My organisation opened such a hotline 20 years later in Belarus with the support from the UN in 2013. However, neither Russia nor Belarus has adopted the legislation on domestic violence prevention yet. It remains a huge issue, which affects women from all walks of life, regardless of their education and place of residence.*

Two more performances will take place until the end of 2016, one of them in Hrodna region.

# Against the Belarusian Backdrop



Belarusian society could definitely benefit juxtaposing and discussing the issues brought up in the play. Domestic violence continues to be [a widespread crime](#). According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) statistics every fourth woman in Belarus experienced some form of violence or aggression from the partner within her lifetime. And yet, only 29% of women survivors of physical or sexual violence choose to tell their story to lawyers, doctors or law enforcement. This low number testifies to the fact that the society has a high tolerance for violence, and women choose to suffer in silence.

The number also reflects the lack of trust that women have towards state-provided services. The Ministry of Labour, responsible for rehabilitation services to victims, claims the existence and availability of 105 'crisis' rooms nationally. In reality, however, very few of them admit domestic violence survivors. The overwhelming red tape, lack of respective protocols, and outright ignorance on behalf of personnel makes such services virtually unattainable for women.

One of the few consistently operating shelters for domestic violence survivors in Minsk receives funding from abroad, namely from a private UK citizen. Altogether four NGO-run shelters for domestic violence survivors in 2014 admitted as many clients as all 105 of the state-sponsored together.

***Table 1. Number of clients assisted by the NGO and state-run shelters for domestic violence survivors (according to Belta.by and NGO data)***

Year	Number of Clients Assisted by 4 NGO Shelters	Number of Clients Assisted by 105 Government-run 'Crisis' Rooms
2012	102 (and 111 children)	124
2013	102 (and 85 children)	150
2014	106 (and 101 children)	130

Another prominent Belarusian women's NGO "Gender Perspectives" operates the only national toll free hotline for domestic violence survivors in Belarus. Since its launch in 2013 it has accepted over 8000 phone calls. They, too, completely rely on foreign and private funding.

## National Priorities

Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs prides itself in introducing international initiatives against [trafficking in human beings](#). Namely, it successfully created a Group of Friends United Against Human Trafficking at the UN in 2010. It also introduced a UN resolution on improving the coordination of efforts against human trafficking. Belarus has capitalised and will continue [to do so on such initiatives](#). Such actions become a potent way of inserting itself into the international arena.

Unfortunately all too often domestic efforts in human trafficking prevention lack lustre. US Department of State 2015 Trafficking in Persons report downgraded Belarus to Tier 3: "Countries whose governments do not fully comply with the minimum standards and are not making significant efforts to do so." The Belarusian government places significant efforts on law enforcement and prosecution components, while the victim rehabilitation services are yet again scarce.

Belarus could definitely do more for women who find themselves in similar situations as the play's seven characters. While a play is a great happening in itself, the ultimate goal should be to use it as a potent tool for driving the changes in

respective areas. It could help spearhead much-needed legislation on domestic violence prevention, or expand the opportunities for women's NGOs, or empower real women. Or alternatively it may sadly remain a great foreign-funded story about women being successful against all odds.

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## **Astraviec Power Plant, Liberalisation of Business – Belarus State TV Digest**

Over the last week, Belarusian state television reported widely on a public discussion on a nuclear power plant in Astraviec. Nearly 200 journalists and activists came from Lithuania to take part in the event. Media covered also a draft bill that will free up business. Among international events, protests in Egypt were widely covered.

### **Domestic Politics**

[Astraviec nuclear power plant: politics and economy behind Lithuanian protests, not environmental concerns](#). Belarusian TV commented on the public discussion in Astraviec with two hundred Lithuanian journalists and activists who came to the event. They emphasised that the Belarusian side has done a lot to satisfy Vilnius with regard to the planned construction. The media added that even the official documents regarding the nuclear power plant's ecological compatibility are freely available on the Internet and in the Lithuanian language "for the convenience of our neighbours". A number of Lithuanian nationals were hoping to work on the Ignalina nuclear power plant, but since it will not be built, they sent their job applications to the Astraviec plant and are ready to work.

Television noted the absence of Lithuanian representatives and diplomats, who spoke about the alleged secrecy of the Belarusian project. The reality of the situation is rather different according to Belarusian television. It emphasised free visas for Lithuanians, and the translation of official documents into Lithuanian, demonstrating the openness and transparency of the project.

The state media also drew attention to the well-represented segments of the Lithuanian press and activists attending the event. It asked them why Vilnius so vigorously opposed the construction of the first Belarusian power plant. Oleg Davidiuk, from the Lithuania-based centre Kron put it bluntly: "We are jealous of Astraviec." A journalist from Lithuania, Alexander Ivanov from Litovski Kurier newspaper, argued that "Lithuania is losing the nuclear race". The state media also focused on this as the real reason why Vilnius is still opposing the Belarusian project.

TV also featured Alexander Lukashenka, who in March lectured about the importance of the project: "our power plant together with the Russian one in Kaliningrad gives more to the EU and the Baltic States. They did not manage to construct their own power plants. (...) They will have to buy both our and Russian energy". The report concluded that "Astraviec is not an island, but a significant archipelago in a sea of huge, ecologically-minded, safe and still-growing European power engineering".

### [Advanced Armed Forces to protect independence of Belarus.](#)

Recently Lukashenka chaired a meeting on the development of the Belarusian armed forces. In his words, "In this new reality, our armed forces should be ready to defend our sovereignty and territorial integrity". He also argued that some countries, particularly the Western ones and the NATO bloc, including the US, continue to apply pressure to some "unwelcomed countries", later explaining that Belarus remained such a state. Lukashenka ordered the Ministry of Defence to

carry out and fully realize the agreement with Russia regarding its air force and anti-aircraft warfare.

## **Economy**

**Liberalisation of business.** Lukashenka held a meeting on how a series of legal amendments stimulate business in Belarus. Belarusian state TV emphasised that the authors of a draft bill considered changes that would facilitate business and remove barriers to its further development. The journalists covered a number of tools which could liberalise the business environment; among them, the optimisation of the terms of punishment, to include fines and deposits instead of imprisonment. Lukashenka emphasized that the “interests of our citizens should be the basis of any reforms”.

**Uralkali guilty of Belaruskali troubles.** TV drew attention to the difficult situation surrounding a Belarusian company producing potash. It commented that a “Russian company ceased to sell its products via the Belarusian company”, which had hindered its position.

Valery Kirpienko, the executive of Belaruskali, explained that “it will not only be we who will suffer from negative consequences, but Uralkali too, and most important of all – our customers”. State television reported that the Belarusian company would take a few steps to become more independent and would have its own port terminals. So far it holds a 30 percent shares in the Lithuanian port terminal in Klaipeda, and is now planning to have one in Brazil also. The company’s management is also considering seeking a market in Africa.

## **International Affairs**

**Egypt submerged in bloody protests.** Belarusian television reported on the recent bloodshed in Egypt. It showed scenes of violent struggle sweeping the country, and also reached popular resorts. The Belarusian media commented on this, citing “hundreds of victims. The number of deaths over these

days is simply incomprehensible". They also added that the international community had already criticised the events and called upon Egypt to start peace talks.

[Belarus praised for its initiative in combating human trafficking](#). Minsk hosted a five-day seminar on combating human trafficking and slavery. State TV reported that the representative of the United Nations to Minsk praised Belarus and confirmed its further support for Minsk in its activity in the area.

The state channel highlighted that the Belarusian authorities initiated the establishment of a group of countries, now composed of 22 states, which will deal with the problems of human trafficking and other related issues. Minsk proposed combatting the issue on a global scale. The Belarusian media mentioned, however, that worker exploitation of Belarusian nationals in Russia remains a serious problem.

Further, they repeated the words of Lukashenka who in May said, "12-13 years ago we started to deal with the problem of human trafficking very actively in all its forms. We have experience in it. We are proud of this fact".

## **Society**

[The youngest pensioners in the world](#). Television reported that Belarus, together with Russia and Ukraine, remains the country with the lowest age for retirement. Belarusian men can retire at the age of 60, and women at 55. "In our Western neighbouring countries people need to work for much longer," it said, and mentioned countries such as Poland, Latvia, but also Germany. The reports stressed that among the EU countries, only France still "maintains these social guarantees".

[No medals, no money](#). Lukashenka announced that only athletes with high achievements would receive significant funds from the state. State TV stated that, "the state loses a huge



amount of money in this sphere and has a right to demand an appropriate output". He referred to the unsuccessful performance of Belarusian athletes during the recent World Athletics Championship in Moscow. In Lukashenka's words, "an athlete will receive a basic salary for high achievements, not for getting 21<sup>st</sup> or 41<sup>st</sup> place". He concluded that "sport, like entrepreneurship, should earn money".

*Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials available on the web site of Belarusian State Television 1 (BT1). Freedom of the press in Belarus remains restricted and state media convey primarily the point of view of the Belarusian authorities. This review attempts to give the English-speaking audience a better understanding of how Belarusian state media shape public opinion in the country.*