

# Dobry Rovar, Superheroes School – Belarus Civil Society Digest

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## **Seminar and trainings**

[Superheroes School/ Creative City is recruiting citizens to its Summer school](#). Superheroes School is designed for those who want to learn how to implement urban projects and make Minsk most interesting and creative city. The School is designed for 2 months with tuition fee of 2 million rubles (\$130). During the first Superheroes School, [six projects were implemented](#) in partnership with the business and public utilities, including the reconstruction of the stairs, Book Festival, street library, etc.

**Belarusian National Platform's conference to be held on 25 June**. The conference of the EaP CSF National Platform is titled as *Civil Society in Belarus: Challenges of Stagnation and Governmentalizing of the Third Sector*. The key task of the event is to decide whether the Platform should exist as a whole, taking into consideration the crisis of the system of international security and the European Neighbourhood Policy, as well as civic-political apathy in the country.

## Civil society campaign

[Youth educational centre Fialta held subbotnik in one of the Minsk districts](#) on 13 June. Volunteers were equipping the abandoned site together with municipal services. At the same time locals did not attend the event. The activists explain this phenomenon with a legacy of the forced Soviet *subbotnik* and continue to raise awareness among citizens about the benefits of joint efforts for the common good.

[Call for experts to analyse the capacity building sector of Belarusian](#) civil society organisations. Office for European Expertise and Communications (OEEC) recruits researchers to study a capacity building sector for Belarusian civil society organisations. The study continues a series of the sectoral analyses facilitated by OEEC in different fields, like [civic education](#), [gender](#), [regional development](#), etc. and aims to provide evidence-based data for the efficient CSO's activity. The report will be published and available for public feedback.

[The fifth registration Congress of the Belarusian Christian Democracy Party](#) took place on 13 June in Minsk. The Congress was attended by about 300 delegates and guests. Christian Democrats took necessary decisions for the new attempt to obtain legal registration for the party and for the national public association with the name Belarusian Christian Democracy. It is the fifth attempt of the party to get a legal status in the country.

[Small Deeds contest 2015](#). The Assembly of pro-democratic NGOs invites NGOs and civic initiatives to participate in the competition to strengthen civil society in Belarus. Priority is given to activities aimed at the protection of human rights and civil society development; identifying active and motivated people for their involvement in civic life, as well as members of the Assembly. Application deadline is 12 July.

[Book about 187 Belarusian political prisoners presented in Minsk](#). The book is based on materials from the web site [palitviazni.info](#). The book Chronicles of Belarusian Political Prisoners describes the fate of 187 Belarusian political prisoners who suffered for their political views.

## **Interaction between state and civil society**

[Ministry of Information restricted access to the site KYKY.org](#). This is the first case of official and open blocking of the media in Belarus with the relevant publication on the [Ministry's website](#). On 15 June censorship considered that some KYKY publications harm the national interests of Belarus. Now the web site is available at a new domain KYKY.io. Meanwhile [Generation.by](#) made a quick analysis of how the Internet community met the incident and came to the conclusion that the reaction of Belarusians, unfortunately, has been rather summer-relaxed.

[Annual conference of International Labour Organisation debates "Belarusian question"](#). Committee on norms and standards of ILO hold in Geneva on the fifth of June has another round of discussion on violations of rights of workers and trade unions in Belarus. Belarus is still a part of 25 countries short-list who perform systematic violations of labour rights. Trade unions leader Aliaksandr Jarašuk has underlined that "situation is still critical and independent trade unions are in reservation and new decree number 4 does not change it to better".

[Free bike-rent system "Dobry rovar" \(Kind Bike\) will operate in Minsk from 10 June till 1 October](#). The system will be available at 12 bike-points. This year organisers will place about 4 scores of bicycles with special code-lockers. For getting a code one needs to pass through free registration at project's web site, choose a free bike using an interactive map and rent it for a day. A reminding SMS will be sent at the end of renting period.

[Minsk inhabitants protest against construction through dedicated website.](#) Residents of private buildings in centre of Minsk are waiting for demolition of their houses for more than 15 years. Streets of Čarviakova and Uradzhajnaja are in really difficult situation – demolition deadlines are delayed all the time and people neither get new apartments neither start repairing theirs. Inhabitants have created a special web site where they give detailed explanation of their problems and where they place all their steps in struggle with constructors.

[“Art islands” will appear at Kamsamolskaje lake in summer 2015.](#) Unique in its sizes and concept art-project will be realised in Belarus this summer. 10 volume space objects by Belarusian artists will form an exposition at the one of islands of Kamsamolskaje lake water area. “Art islands” project is run by National centre of contemporary arts in collaboration with Ministry of culture, Minsk city council and financial support of Alfa-Bank.

*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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## **Belarus Risks Becoming only State Stripped of EU Trade Preferences**

In response to the country's unprecedented reforms, the European Commission has recently proposed to reinstate EU's

preferential trade for Myanmar.

When this happens, Belarus will remain the only country deprived of EU trade preferences system because of labour rights violations.

With historical changes taken place in Myanmar for the last two years, Belarus occupies discreditable ratings previously held by the South-East Asian country.

The EU's Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) is a preferential trade regime that provide tariff preferences when selling on the EU market. The GSP scheme can be suspended, however, for serious violations of core human rights or labour rights conventions.

Until 2007, when Belarus made Myanmar a company, this South-East Asian country was the only developing country that the EU stripped of its preferential trade benefits for gross violations of labour rights.

In 1997, the EU punished Myanmar this way for the wide-spread use of forced labour. A decade later, [Belarus followed the case](#) for violations of trade union rights. The decision came after nearly three years of monitoring of freedom of associations for workers and the government's reluctance to implement the International Labour Organisation recommendations.

### **Quarter Billion Dollars of Direst Economic Loss Since 2007**

The GSP suspension resulted in an EU tariff increase of up to four per cent on Belarus-made goods and affected around ten per cent of Belarus exports, including the country's lumber, textile, and metal works industries. According to some estimates lost trade revenues reached \$300 mln annually. However, more accurate estimations indicate that the GSP suspension inflicted the direct overall annual loss at \$40-50

mln.

This makes a quarter billion loss since mid-2007 when the GSP suspension became effective, quite a big money for the Belarus's economy. The indirect damage as missed foreign investment opportunities for the GSP suspension-related country's gloomy image may have been as much.

The government's hopes to reverse the suspension by fulfilling the ILO recommendations fell short, despite numerous trips of the Belarus officials to Geneva and a couple of legal initiatives that the ILO officials found empty gestures.

Minsk occasionally flopped in its attempts to look conscientious about improving the situation even during the ILO's Executive Director Kari Tapiola's visit in 2007. The main state newspaper "Sovetskaya Belarus" then blamed leaders of independent trade unions in "stealing money from Belarusian children with a cheeky grin".

Tapiola had to react asking the Belarus officials not to transfer the responsibility over the GSP suspension onto the trade unions leaders' shoulders.

### **What's Wrong With Trade Unions in Belarus?**

Tough treatment of the trade unions in Belarus finds its traces in the Soviet system when trade union were the 'social pillars' of the state. Currently, they function under the direct control of the presidential administration. Ironically, the head of the pro-government Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus (FTUB) Leonid Kozik was a deputy head of the presidential administration before occupying a seat at the FTUB in 2002.

Independent trade unions face significant legal hurdles in Belarus and little has changes since 2007, despite initial Minsk intention to bring the EU's GSP back. In Belarus, trade

union registration is compulsory and registration procedure is burdensome and complicated.

To register a trade union has to provide the official headquarters address. Since the law does not allow register the home address of their leaders as the trade union's legal address and commercial rent is high, the premises of the enterprise left as an option.

However, this makes an association completely dependent on the good will of the employer that, in turn, is subservient to the executive. Besides, the minimum membership requirement levels are too high, especially when seen against the background of dominating fixed-term work contracts that discourage workers from joining independent trade unions.

If a trade union fails to register, its activities are banned and the organisations has to be dissolved. The ILO views the registration process as the most important indicator of Minsk willingness to fulfil the ILO recommendations.

However, no tangible progress was made by Minsk. The restricting legislation remained in place and compulsory dissolution of independent trade unions on the grounds incompatible with the international standards, continued.

### **Myanmar and Belarus Moving in Opposite Directions**

In mid-2012, the ILO recorded a significant progress by Myanmar in eliminating forced labour, although the problem still persists. Quite opposite, Belarus not only failed to change its laws incompatible with core ILO conventions, but additionally aggravated the situation by recently adopted legislation.

Seemingly, official Minsk fully gave up the attempts on bringing the freedom of association closer to international norms. The latest report of the ILO's Committee on Freedom of Association of November 2012 is deeply concerned by the

government's lack of cooperation and regrets that no progress has been made in improving the situation of trade union rights in the country.

Belarus even stopped sending formal replies to the Committee's recommendations and to the new allegations of violations of freedom of association.

The decree of December, 2012 on the employment at woodworking companies was labelled by some as a '[return to serfdom](#)'. The law requires all employees to sign fixed-term labour contracts which afterwards shall be prolonged by the maximum possible period.

Employees cannot quit a job without the employer's consent and those fired for performing their duties improperly will have to repay all of their monthly bonuses. Although no formal complaint over the controversial law was yet lodged to the ILO, Kari Tapiola suggested that the decree could run counter to the 1930 Forced Labour Convention that entitles workers to the right to accept and reject a job.

Without necessary political will, Belarus remains far from fulfilling International Labour Organisation nine recommendations of 2004. Moreover, Belarus may soon face a new ILO inquiry. This makes the reinstatement of the EU's trade preferences unfeasible in the near future.

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