

# The Many Faces of Forced Labour in Belarus

On 12 July 2017, a Maladzečna District court tried two teachers for the death of 13-year old high school student Viktoryja Papčenia.

Viktoryja died tragically last September under the wheels of a truck while harvesting potatoes for a local agricultural enterprise. School No. 11 had sent Viktoryja and her classmates to work in the field without parental consent.

The practise of sending students to state agricultural enterprises to work for free during harvest time has its roots in Soviet times. This phenomenon still remains common in modern Belarus, and most Belarusians do not see it as a form of forced labour.

According to the International Labour Organisation, [violations of workers' rights](#) in Belarus go beyond unpaid youth labour. The most notorious examples include forced labour of prisoners, soldiers, and inmates at labour therapy facilities, as well as occasional unpaid work on Saturdays and [mandatory job placements for university graduates](#).

## A deadly potato harvest

In the Papčenia case, the court found the truck driver and the two supervising teachers guilty of manslaughter. However, the officials directly responsible for sending the underage students to do heavy physical work instead of going to class still walk free and keep their jobs.

The chain of responsibility starts with the head of the Maladzečna District Executive Committee, Aliaksandr Jahnaviec,

who organised assistance for the potato harvest. The Local Department of Education and the deputy head teacher of school No. 11, Dzianis Kurec, followed suit and ordered underage students to skip class to harvest potatoes.

Finally, the teachers, who taught physics and French and were not qualified for agricultural work, agreed to supervise the students. Thus, authorities had sanctioned illegal work for minors, without even bothering to ask parents' permission or provide work contracts.

The father of the victim, Aleh Papčenia, was not able to prove that the incident constituted illegal work for the agricultural enterprise Ushod-Agra (formerly called a *kolkhoz* or collective farm). The court took the side of the school, which stated that harvesting potatoes was a part of the 'educational process.'

## **'Nothing to lose but your chains'**

Since 1999, presidential decrees have significantly [weakened workers' rights](#) in Belarus. For instance, Decree No. 29, signed in 1999, transformed permanent work contracts into fixed short-term contracts, endangering job security for over 90 per cent of employees. In 2014, Decree No. 5 further undermined workers' rights, giving employers more powers to fire workers.

Discriminatory labour legislation and continuous suppression of independent trade unions leave workers at the mercy of their employers. According to the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) Global Rights Index, Belarus ranks 5 (the lowest possible mark: 'no guarantee of rights') on a scale from 1 to 5, based on the degree of respect for workers' rights.

✘ The continued existence of [subotniki](#) – another Soviet legacy of unpaid quasi-voluntary work on selected Saturdays of the year – is another symptom of this problem. Some workers have the option of staying at their workplace and contributing some part of their daily earnings to fund various public projects. Those less lucky have to perform menial tasks such as cleaning streets.

By law, participation in subotniki is voluntary. In practice, however, workers have no choice, as the discriminatory fixed-term contract system severely restricts their rights and impacts job security.

Should an employee refuse, the employer could decline to extend his or her contract for the next year. The teachers in the Papčenia case did not deny their guilt, but to a certain degree they were also victimised by the existing system, in which contradicting the boss could mean getting fired.

## A right or an obligation?

According to the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, forced labour practises affect various social groups, including soldiers, inmates of detention facilities, labour therapy centres, and even recent university graduates.

In 2011, former presidential candidate and then political prisoner [Mikola Statkievič](#) broke several ribs and his hand while working at a prison-run sawmill, due to lack of protective clothing. According to the human rights organisation Viasna, no charges were brought against those in charge of the correctional facility.

✘ Along with Turkmenistan, Belarus remains the only post-Soviet state to preserve labour therapy centres, commonly known as LTPs. Originally designed to re-socialise alcoholics and drug addicts, this kind of occupational rehabilitation is

voluntary. However, if a person has committed over three civil offences under the influence of alcohol or narcotics, the authorities can easily commit him or her to such centres.

Other groups at risk of forced labour are individuals who have lost their parental rights. According to Decree No. 18, they must reimburse the custody costs of their underage children to state childcare facilities. Should they neglect their duties due to intoxication, the authorities can place them in LTPs.

LTPs remain under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which limits access to the facilities of the public and journalists. Since 2003, the number of LTPs in Belarus has grown from two to nine. Human rights activists at Viasna estimate that the overall number of inmates exceeds 6,000.

Even recent university graduates can fall victim to a form of forced labour. Although the law guarantees free higher education, scholarship holders must submit to mandatory job placement after graduation. The Belarusian authorities are reluctant to abandon this programme, even though it [has proven ineffective](#).

The Belarusian Constitution guarantees every citizen the right to work in safe and secure conditions. Nevertheless, it appears that for many in modern Belarus, the right to work is more of an obligation. As the recent [‘social parasite’ protests](#) have demonstrated, continuous implementation of Soviet inspired labour practises can result in unpredictable consequences for the regime, mobilising the protest potential in society.

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# Is Belarus Turning away from the Socially-Oriented State Model?

On 5 August 2016, Andrei Labovich, First Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Protection of Belarus, said that the new Law on Employment would tackle the problem of the 'professional' unemployed.

Simultaneously, in August 2016 the National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus released data on employment figures in the sphere of industry for 2011-2016. According to this information, during the last five years this sector alone has witnessed nearly 150,000 job cuts.

Such a clear contradiction raises a question about the future of the Belarusian social model. Does it mean that Belarus plans to give up on its artificially created 99.5% employment rate and what would the state do with those who lost their jobs in times of deep economic crisis?

## Being unemployed in Belarus: nothing to envy

Belarus has one of the strictest systems of social protection for unemployed people in Europe. Unemployment benefits remain ridiculously low (near \$20 per month) and not every jobless person is even eligible for them.

The country has always prided itself on its [artificially low unemployment rate](#) (near 0.5%). Employment in state sector, which dominates the economy, has played a significant role in maintaining political and ideological control over the people.

It also served as an additional channel for allocation public resources for the local elite and so called 'red directors' of state enterprises. A large amount of people working in Russia, as well as a developed informal economy, have helped promote such a policy.

## **The economic crisis changed everything**

Experts claim that since 2015 Belarusians have been looking to find jobs in the EU rather than Russia. According to Yandex data, the number of job requests in Poland by Belarusians in 2015 grew fivefold compared to 2014. However, due to language barriers, visa regulations and legislative peculiarities, the EU has failed to become a full-pledged substitute for Russia when it comes to employment.

Unfortunately, the official statistics fail to demonstrate the real number of Belarusians employed in Russia. However, staffing companies and many individuals claim that salaries for Belarusians in Russia fell threefold or more.

The Belarusian authorities continue to hide real unemployment figures, reporting one percent at the end of 2015. Moreover, numerous reports exist that local authorities prevent (or prohibit) unemployment registration in order to maintain 'good' statistics.

Nevertheless, even the official statistics have recognised two major changes: the number of job vacancies are now half as much as even the number of registered unemployed, and the number of job cuts significantly exceeds the number of new vacancies.

But will this become an engine for social unrest? This seems unlikely.

# Less fear of social protests, more support for security agencies

After the crisis of 2011 the authorities faced a dilemma. Maintaining the same number of employees became too expensive, while growing unemployment risked causing social protests and even riots. However, two main changes occurred after this crisis.

Firstly, the Belarusian authorities are much less wary of possible riots after the successful suppression of the so called '[silent protests](#)' in summer 2011. Authorities believe that people's standard of living means much less than number and welfare of security forces. The fact that these agencies faced no serious cuts – neither financial nor personnel – in 2011-2016 proves this point.

Secondly, the government has started to pay much more [attention to the informal economy](#) by considering it a source of additional revenue.

## Deus ex machina – tax on unemployment

In April 2015 the president signed his famous Decree '[On preventing social sponging](#)' as a further step towards the rollback of total employment policy. □Some experts believe that the document aimed to prevent dismissals from state enterprises because of low salaries, as well as to struggle against 'shadow' business activities.

This seems only partly true. First of all, the Decree failed to prevent further dismissals. Moreover, the national

Statistical Committee confirms that the total number of jobs cut in the country has even grown in December 2015 – June 2016. The table below demonstrates this idea:



These figures illustrate the growing rates of job cuts within a relatively short period of time. For example, in these seven months the sphere of industry witnessed 21% of all job cuts during the last six years.

Secondly, the Decree failed to struggle against 'shadow' business activities. Authorities claim the number of unofficially employed people to be 400,000 – 500,000, while up to July 2016 only 4,000 people registered to pay this tax. The actual number of eligible tax-payers remains unclear till now.

## Modern slavery?

Unemployment in Belarus threatens authorities in two different ways: possible social protests and 'brain drain' from vitally important spheres. While the first risk is proving to be less real and significant, the second one is much more concerning for Belarusian officials.

Thus, according to the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, only Minsk city requires more than 1,500 doctors and nurses, and the staffing level at first aid services amounts to only 67%. The number of vacancies exceeds the number of registered unemployed in the sphere of medical care by 81 times.

Lack of professionals may result in a further degradation of more or less profitable enterprises, export-oriented plants, strategic infrastructure etc. Moreover, such specialists have more opportunities to find a job in the informal sector or abroad. The Decree could become an effective instrument to prevent such dismissals.

It seems that Belarusian authorities are set on a course to further toughen the conditions of employment. Completely bankrupt enterprises risk being closed, which would result in people having no chance to obtain appropriate social security. Employees at relatively successful or important enterprises have to put up with lower salaries, longer working hours and more control.

## Crushed hopes

The World Bank in its Belarus Economic Update for April, 2016 confirms that: 'The labour market is under stress due to weak performance of the construction, industrial and agricultural sectors. State-owned enterprises as a whole did not shed labour, but rather shortened the working week.'

Many experts have proposed that authorities promote more support for the unemployed, in particular by raising the amount of employment insurance to at least around \$80 per month. These experts argued that given the increasing job cuts and lack of financial resources it would be cheaper for the government to support the unemployed than to sustain economically ineffective enterprises.

The new Law on Employment crashed these hopes of liberalisation of unemployment protection policy. Moreover, the authorities chose the worst of both worlds – no jobs, no opportunities for self-employment, no social protection, but strong police and security agencies always ready to suppress any protests and feeling no lack in financing or vacancies.

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# Labour Market in Belarus: the Demand for Workers is Increasing

A recently published report by the HeadHunter recruiting agency and TUT.by portal shows that the labour market in Belarus is starting to recover. Increasing demand for skilled workers in the entire country has stopped the stream of labour emigration of Belarusians to Russia and the West.

However, the recovering labour market has not cured itself of its old illnesses. The state-run economy uses its financial and human resources inadequately and limits potential growth. While building industry demands people, many manufacturers need to fire some.

Employment services in Belarus work so inefficiently that unemployed people do not even bother applying to them when searching for work. The average unemployment benefit in Belarus is 10 times lower than in neighbouring Poland – with Belarus offering only €15 a month.

The Belarusian economy requires modernisation in its legislation and the create of a linkage for wage growth and production growth. According to the Ministry of Economy in 2013 the gap between the growth in productivity of labour and wages was about 16.4 per cent.

The authorities should pay particular attention to the state's employment services and vocational training institutions. The experience and assistance of the European Union would greatly relieve the long overdue, painful economic reforms that

Belarus has yet to undertake.

## **Labour Market Recovery**

According to the study by the HeadHunter Recruiting Agency and TUT.by portal, the number of vacancies in Belarus grew by 40% in 2013. The demand for workers is still growing and not only in Minsk, but also at the regional level. This indicates that the labour market is beginning to recover after years of crisis.

The data shows that most Belarusian companies need skilled workers in sales and employees in the branches of transport, logistics or finance. Belarus is still experiencing a boom in programming, and as a result many [IT companies](#) are still looking for new employees. Not only programmers but also other staff: administrators, accountants and copywriters.

Companies have unexpectedly had a large demand for workers with experience of one year or less. Typically, these workers would be willing to work for wages less than \$500, a figure that is attractive to potential employers.

The rapid growth of salaries, with the huge gap between it and the growth in productivity, made many Belarusians reconsider their plans to leave Belarus for working in neighbouring countries. While in 2011-2012 many construction workers, doctors and managers [left to work](#) in Russia, today many people are able to stay and find comparable work for a reasonable wage.

The weak competitiveness of the Belarusian labour market contributes to this. According to TUT.by, at any given time in Minsk two people are competing for one position, while in Moscow, the destination point for many Belarusians, has around three people applying for each opening.

## **Skewed Labour Market**

Although the labour market is starting to recover from the financial crisis of 2011, it contains the same diseases it had before the crisis. The state-run economy, with its inadequate assignment of the financial and labour resources across sectors, dissuades employees from using their full potential. It limits their professional growth and as a consequence, the growth of the manufacturing and production in the country, read about the [flir one gen 3](#) to start your next adventure !

While many sectors of the economy require more workers, some of them are facing a rather different problem, as they need to lay off many of their employees to improve competitiveness. For one thing, Belarus needs more construction workers, as many of them have moved to Russia where work was readily available and wages were higher.

On the other hand, state-run companies do not need nearly the number of administrators that they currently possess, especially when it comes to redundant positions such as those that are part of the ideological staff.

Work in Belarus remains a social tool whose purpose is to maximise employment and preserve the ideology of equality between all people. A kindergarten teacher, who has a great amount of responsibility on their shoulders and works hard, earns about the same as an electrician who works a few hours a day, changing light bulbs and doing simple routine repairs.

The Gini coefficient in Belarus, the index of the  inequality of income distribution in society, remains better than in all its neighbouring countries and approaches its Scandinavian counterparts.

Many Belarusians appreciate the domestic economic model, but it is difficult to question the fact that, overall, the economy remains very inefficient.

Belarusians who work for government-run enterprises remain immobile and unmotivated, though private businesses tend to do

better. Which is the reason why young people primarily look for jobs in the private sector.

Although the official [unemployment rate](#) hovers at around 1%, many people remain reluctant to appeal to state-run employment services. These institutions require lengthy registration and carrying out public work, akin to community service, by the unemployed.

The Employment Service of Belarus offers meagre financial benefits, sitting at €10-20, and are generally of little help to the unemployed. Consider, for example, that the average unemployment benefit in Poland is about €150.

The matter is compounded by the fact that many Belarusian enterprises require restructuring, and employment services remain unprepared for a large influx of the unemployed. This is to say nothing of the fact that vocational training institutions are in dire need of modernisation themselves.

Belarus' [demographic situation](#) does not differ from situations in other European countries. The population is ageing and a labour force shortages are on the rise. The reduced number of available labourers among the entire population will force the Belarusian authorities to reconsider their approach to the labour market.

### **How to Improve the Labour Market**

Many economists seem to be tired of saying that Belarus needs structural reforms. However, Belarusian authorities keep trying to reinvent the wheel, hoping to save the current economic model, which can eventually drive Belarus into a deep crisis.

To avoid this fate, the Belarusian authorities should reform the Belarusian economy. That is not to [buy a new machine](#) for individual enterprises scheme, but a fundamental change of the rules of the Belarusian economy.

The authorities have to tie wage increases to production growth, based on a market mechanism, and to create favourable conditions for business development. Most of the companies posting losses in Belarus, like the Barysau meat processing plant or Vityas TV set plant, should be privatised.

In the event of the liberalisation of the labour market, the authorities should improve the quality and capacity of vocational training institutions and the state-run employment services. These organs institutions should be prepared for an influx of unemployed Belarusians eager to work. They should be able to propose something substantial to Belarusian citizens and be able to teach, retrain and improve their skill sets.

The European Union could play a large role in the modernisation of the labour market. Countries, such as Poland and Lithuania, have already gone through many of the difficult struggles that Belarus faces today.

The new Europe could transmit its knowledge to its neighbour and help it initiate and carry out these reforms. While the West and Belarus are still in the preparatory stages for a new dialogue, Brussels could define its agenda and priorities with Minsk. The labour market can be one of them.