

Belarus Top Civic Actions in 2012

With the New Year celebration just around the corner, it is time to think about the list of top civic actions in 2012. As a disclaimer, the goal of the list is to highlight achievement and recap success, often overlooked in the repressive environment.

Event of the Year: Educators and Researchers

We could not choose between significant events organised by educators, capacity builders and researchers in 2012. Our choice would be the educators, as they managed to conduct both of their national events in Belarus. Nevertheless, researchers gained both in quality and quantity, being at a core of modernization attempt of the Belarus government (at least part of it), as well as of the EU's modernization policy.

On October 12, [the First Capacity Building Fair](#) took place in Minsk. The Fair was organised under the Marketplace project which promotes a market model of consulting services for CSOs in Belarus. The Fair was attended by more than 150 providers and CSOs-customers of capacity building services. On December 7-9, [the 4th Festival of Non-Formal Education](#) took place in Minsk. The Festival was attended by about 250 participants – teachers, trainers and other people sharing the values of life-long learning and non-formal education.

On September 28-30, [The Second International Congress of Belarusian Studies](#) took place in Kaunas, Lithuania. The event was attended by about 300 scholars from around the world involved in studying Belarus and East-Central Europe. The final agenda includes 20 sections in different fields like regional development issues, Belarus relations with other countries, etc.

On May 25-26, Vilnius hosted an international conference "[The Future of Belarus](#)" dedicated to the 20th anniversary of independent studies in Belarus and the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS). The conference was attended by about 100 well-known Belarusian and international researchers, experts, civil society leaders. Following the conference, a book was published titled "The future of Belarus. Opinion of independent experts".

Evidence of the Year: Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS)

The September-October public opinion poll of [Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies](#) (IISEPS) showed the real results of September parliamentary elections – regardless of numerous declarations and evidence of the opposition representatives, they were valid: 17.4% of respondents had voted early, and 49% – on September 23.

Only 9.6% answered they had boycotted the elections, and another 24% said they had not participated in voting due to other reasons. Some Belarusian politicians [expressed distrust in results of the poll](#). In his turn [Oleg Manaev responded](#) that there is a very little difference between both authorities and opposition who manipulate the truth to the same extent.

Watchdog of the Year: Mediakritika

A new analytical media project was launched – [Mediakritika.by](#). Created by a team of Belarusian journalists, it is aimed at comprehensive critical analysis of the media in Belarus. The new project has a slogan "Truth Loves Criticism" and sets the task to improve the quality of the Belarusian journalism by monitoring the quality of news as it is presented in all Belarusian media.

Cross-Sectoral Cooperation of the Year: Mark Chagall Open Air Exhibition

During the summer season, [an open air exhibition of reproductions of works by Mark Chagall](#) worked at the Yakub Kolas Square in Minsk. The exhibition was dedicated to the 125th anniversary of the artist. The project was implemented by the “Fond of Ideas” paid for by Belarus business and opened by the Minister of Culture.

Advocacy of the Year: Social Contracting by ACT

During the year, the law "[On Social Services](#)" passed all levels of approvals and was adopted on July 13, 2012. One of the most important parts of the bill is introduction of the mechanism of social contracting that allows nonprofit organizations to get funding from the state budget. The main advocate for this change was [NGO “ACT”](#).

Political Project of the Year: Election Monitoring

Political parties managed to agree and deliver partisan poll-watching – [For Fair Elections](#) – of the 2012 parliamentary elections in a coordinated fashion and with a clear methodology based on the local conditions. Two additional project were operating in a coordinated fashion. [The interactive platform of monitoring](#) elections resumed its work before the parliamentary elections in Belarus of September 2012. It is an open platform where anybody can share their experience and observations of the election campaign. Electby.org is powered by the platform Ushahidi (which means “evidence” in Swahili).

[The “Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections”](#) campaign is an independent and non-partisan joint initiative of the Human Rights Center “Viasna” and Belarusian Helsinki Committee. From the very first day of the election 95 long-term observers began their work, covering 106 out of 110 election districts. They prepared weekly reports on the course of the election process which were processed, presented and spread as the campaign’s weekly and preliminary reports on all stages of the

election.

Belarusian Language Promo of the Year: AD.NAK! by Budzma

[Festival of Belarusian-language advertising and communication AD.NAK!](#) is a platform that unites the most active professionals in advertising and communications field and aims to interest others to do advertising and create communications in Belarusian. This year the event was held for the third time and attracted over 300 applications from more than a hundred participants. The Festival is organized annually by [Budzma!](#) civic campaign.

Branding of the Year: Tsmoki-Minsk

At the beginning of 2012 [Budzma! launched](#) a pilot addition to their campaign – Searching for Tsmok – which aimed to provoke wide public discussion of ‘cool’ Belarusian cultural heritage and the country’s brand. Tsmok is a mythical Belarusian dragon, friendly to people, who represents richness in every sense of the word. As a result, the most popular Belarusian professional basketball club Minsk-2006 was [renamed to Tsmoki-Minsk](#) (Цмокі-Мінск).

Local Fundraising of the Year: MaeSen project

In December 2012, [the project MaeSens](#) transferred 40 million BYR to charity, and this means that the mutual assistance to children has increased \$100,000. One-year-old MaeSens project raises funds for the treatment of seriously ill children and orphanages by organizing the online auction of meetings, where anyone has the opportunity to set a meeting with him/her or to buy a meeting with a person he/she liked. In 2012, the project was awarded as a "Best Startup of the Year" by [Bynet users](#).

Pro Bono of the Year: Minsk United Branding Team

Self-organized Minsk United Branding Team offers to design alternative brands for Minsk. Minsk United Branding Team, a

voluntary mixed group of creative professionals and civic activists with a [dedicated page on Facebook](#), starts designing city brand, alternative to INSTID proposal. [The team is open for anyone interested](#) and declared its three main principles as: Professionalism; Inclusivity; and Love to city/country and self-respect.

New Topic of the Year: Working with the Elderly

The issues dealing with intergeneration interaction and non-formal education accessibility for older people became the main topic of Festival of Non-Formal Education of 2012 "[Non-formal education for all generations](#)". The Grodno-based NGO "Third sector" for 3rd year implements a project "[Golden Age University](#)" for Grodno residents of pension age; this year the University is attended by 140 people.

Effective Cooperation with State Authorities of the Year: RAIK

Due to the RAIK's initiative, the National Airport Minsk approved a policy to adopt the quality standard of service for persons with reduced mobility. In addition, from January 26, "Kind Button" was launched in Belarusbank ATMs all over Belarus. The initiative of [Republican Association of Wheelchair Users](#) (RAIK) provides an opportunity for users of plastic cards transfer the money to the charity for the Association. From April 14, RAIK launched a charity project "Kind Call". Every resident has the opportunity to make a paid call from local phone and donate for the rehabilitation of disabled persons in wheelchairs. Also,

Last but not least...

Rural citizen of the Year: "Village Girl"

Kseniya Degelko's 'I am from the village' song [gathers over one million views on youtube](#) in a few weeks period and spark heated debate. Produced by a GONGO, it is characterizing what kind of (civil) society our partners are operating in and

trying to influence.

This overview has been prepared by Pact and published by Belarus Digest. It 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.

Non-Formal Education, Minsk Brand, Gender Conference – Belarus Civil Society Digest

Festival of non-formal education, National Gender Platform approval, discussion of Minsk brand and human rights defenders of the year were among the most notable civil society events in Belarus last week.

Festival of Non-Formal Education. On 7-9 December, [the 4th Festival of Non-Formal Education](#) took place in Minsk. The Festival was attended by about 250 participants – teachers, trainers and other people sharing the values of life-long learning and non-formal education. The Festival format included various activities: a panel talk, more than 60 master classes and presentations, exhibition boxes, discussions, contests, etc.

The largest number of awards went to the [Grodno-based NGO Third Sector](#), including the top prize for the best educational website Golden Age University. For the Festival, The Association Life Long Education released a special issue of [Adukatar](#) magazine.

Minsk brand discussion. The past week was marked by hot public

discussion around a new symbol of Minsk "[Think Minsk](#)", which turned out to be very similar to a London one. Alexander Zimovsky, former chief of state propaganda in Belarus, [dismissed it as flawed](#). [TUT.BY hosted a large talk show](#) among various advertising and creative groups to discuss the brand. A group of Belarusian marketing professionals announced that they are going to create [an alternative original brand](#).

Human rights defenders marked anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. On 10 December, [human rights defenders](#) and representatives of civil society celebrated the date in different ways in different parts of the country, mostly going out onto the streets and handing out brochures with the text of the Declaration and other human rights publications.

Human Rights Defenders of the Year. On 10 December, representatives of human rights organisations announced the winners of [the Belarusian human rights prize of 2012](#). This year the lawyers of the year were Alina Shostak and Alvira Drygo, human rights defender of the year was Liubou Kavaliova, and journalist of the year was Andrei Poczobut.

Intellectual conference in Minsk. On 14-15 December, The Flying University held a conference titled "[Intellectual situation in Belarus: the circumstances and self-determination of thinking](#)." The purpose of the conference was a joint discussion of the contemporary intellectual situation in Belarus. The conference was attended by Valentin Akudovich, Vladimir Matskevich, Mikhal Anempadystav, Valeria Kastsyugova, Alexei Pikulik, and other researchers, intellectuals and cultural figures.

Statement of the National Platform. On 12 December, members of the National Platform of the Civil Society Forum of the Eastern Partnership [adopted a statement](#) expressing deep concern regarding the repressive actions of

the Belarusian authorities. In particular, the statement condemns the confiscation of the Viasna premises, the practice of criminal prosecution of journalists, independent media and youth organisations, and the denial of visas for foreign partners of Belarusian organizations.

Gender conference in Minsk. On 8 December, in Minsk, participants of the conference "[Women's movement in Belarus: challenges, achievements and perspectives](#)" approved the National Gender Platform (NGP) and adopted an appeal to the National Gender Council under the Council of Ministers of Belarus. NGP suggests introducing basic provisions guaranteeing gender equality in Belarus, as well as hope for equitable cooperation of civil society with state structures. The conference initiated by [the Women's Independent Democratic Movement](#) was timed to the 20th anniversary of the women's movement in Belarus.

Legal Transformation Center (Lawtrend) issued invitations to the press conference "Non-freedom of associations in Belarus after December 19, 2010: Facts, trends, and recommendations". The event is to take place on 17 December in Minsk. The press conference speakers will present two unique publications on administrative and criminal proceedings on the events of December 19, 2010, as well as an analytical report of the monitoring group Lawtrend on administrative cases in 2012.

Presentation on Poverty and Social Inclusion in Belarus. IPM Research Center and the Center for European Transformation invite to the presentation of the study [Poverty and Social Inclusion in Belarus](#). The presentation will be held on 17 December in the Minsk IBB. The [survey's text](#) is available on the IPM website.

Monitoring of barrier-free environment. On 7 December, [the members of the "Accessibility" coalition](#) went on to conduct regular tests to study the availability of architectural objects and buildings. This time the research was conducted at

newly opened Minsk underground station Petrovschina and the Berestyie cinema. The project titled Monitoring of barrier-free environment initiated by the Office for the Rights of People with Disabilities aims to create a barrier-free environment monitoring tool and its pilot implementation.

Essay competition on Accessibility and Disability. [The Office for the Rights of People with Disabilities](#) has announced the essay competition, Accessibility and Disability, aimed at increasing knowledge about the issues of disability rights in Belarus, the promotion of the ideas of equal participation, etc. The winner will be awarded with a laptop.

New website to help in cases of domestic violence. A [New website](#) has been launched to help people – both victims and aggressors – in situations of domestic violence. Online consultations are conducted by experts of 19 CSOs dealing with domestic violence. The website is coordinated by the Belarusian Association of Young Christian Women.

Belarus Press Photo Multimedia Winners. The awarding ceremony of the [Belarus Press Photo – Multimedia](#) contest took place on 9 December, in Minsk's Знята photo studio. First place went to a clip dedicated to the presidential elections in 2010; second place to the Food not Bombs project; and third place to Andrei Liankevich for a multimedia-clip called Paganstva.

Meetings in Washington. BAJ Chairperson Zhanna Litvina, wife of political prisoner Ales Bialiatski Natalya Pinchuk and activist Tatiana Revyaka are [visiting Washington DC](#), where they have a number of meetings at the Senate, the State Department and the US Security Council. The main topic of the visit is the freedom of speech and the situation of political prisoners in Belarus. The Belarusian guests took part in the event with Congressman Christopher Smith dedicated to the 2nd anniversary of the events of December 19, 2010.

Belarusian photo-exhibition in Brussels. On 18 December, the

Office for a Democratic Belarus and the Secretariat of the Steering Committee of the EaP CSF will host the opening of the [Discovering Belarus: Images of Today and Beyond](#) exhibition by the Belarusian photographer Siarhei Balay, which will be followed by an informal presentation of the EaP CSF Secretariat and a Christmas cocktail reception.

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.

Inbound Tourism in Belarus: Rosy Plans, Feeble Measures

Belarus aspires to attract half as many foreign tourists by 2015 as in 2011 and to create over hundred regional tourism brands. However, so far, official plans are restrained by procrastination and poor practical moves. Without proactive measures such as visa facilitation and tourism liberalisation, the adopted plans will remain unrealistic.

Dynamics of Poland-Belarus border crossings serves as a good illustration of the negative consequences of visa regime which Belarus maintains for the EU citizens. Since 2003 the difference in numbers among the Poland citizens' entries to Belarus and Ukraine rose many times. Ukraine kept visa-free regime for the EU citizens and helped attract more foreign visitors. Intensification of people-to-people contacts at the Poland-Belarus border is further hampered by the stalled small border traffic agreement.

New Zealanders Are Coming

According to Belarus National Statistics Committee, in 2011 the number of arrivals of foreign citizens to Belarus reached almost 6 million. The figure does not include crossings of Russia-Belarus border and arrivals for permanent residence. According to the official statistics, circa 60% of total arrivals are usually made for private reasons and about 30% make transit trips. Business and tourism purposes account only for about 7% and 2% correspondingly.

Russia traditionally tops the list of the countries that give the biggest share of foreign tourists to Belarus. Interestingly, in 2011 New Zealand with 3,085 tourists followed Russia (83,843) and Turkey (3,596) and left Lithuania (3,170) and Poland (2,983) behind.

New Zealand's leadership seems even more inconceivable if one takes into account that only 18 tourists from these remote islands visited Belarus in 2010. These odd figures underline shortcomings of the official Belarusian statistics which counts as tourists only those individuals who come with tourist visas.

Earlier, trips of New Zealanders who came to Warsaw airport and headed to Moscow via Belarus were counted as transit. A sudden change may well have occurred due to the national agencies' play with statistics in order to comply with the official tourism development five-year plan.

According to the State program on tourism development for the years 2011-2015, the number of foreign tourists (it was 130 thousand in 2011) is to increase annually and reach 190 thousand by 2015. Export of services by the foreign tourists is planned to reach half a billion USD (it was USD 138 mln in 2010).

Main destinations of inbound and outbound tourism

As noted above, tourism figures are very relative as no permanent monitoring is in place and merely individuals with

tourist visas are taken into account. However, official statistics roughly illustrates the main tourism destinations.

In 2011, only 10,6 thousand Poles, 3,2 thousand Lithuanians and 600 Latvians came to Belarus with tourist visas. Other countries (besides Russia, Turkey and newly emerged New Zealand) whose citizens relatively often visit Belarus with the purposes of tourism include Great Britain, Germany, and Italy. The number of Italian tourists is gradually going down from year to year, with less than 2 thousand Italians in 2011 compared to more than 4 thousand in 2007.

Countries most frequently visited by Belarusian tourists in 2011 were Russia, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Egypt, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Turkey and Czech Republic. They hosted 87% of all outgoing Belarusian tourists.

Distribution of inbound and outbound tourism in 2010 by countries, percent of total



Source: National statistical committee of the Republic of Belarus

Poland-Belarus border crossings are a manifest illustration of the negative consequences of visa regime between Belarus and EU countries. Belarusians cross the Polish border nearly as often as Ukrainians do, as the graphs show below.

At the same time, the number of travels of Poles across the Belarusian border is many times lower than in Ukrainian case. As we can see, between 2002 and 2008, Poles' crossings of the Ukrainian border increased more than five times.

In 2007, the share of Poland's citizens that crossed Poland-Belarus border was only 13%, while it reached 48% for Poland-Ukraine border.

The striking difference in the crossings of the border with

Belarus and Ukraine by Poland's citizens is the result of visa regime in the former and absence of visa requirements for short-term trips in the latter. It also is worth keeping in mind that the crossings of Poland-Ukraine border further intensified with the launch of the local border traffic regime in mid-2009.

Graphs: Number of Poland-Belarus and Poland-Ukraine border crossings, 1990-2008



Source: Polish Border Guard. **Note:** The absolute majority of the crossings under the "Foreigners" category means Belarusians or Ukrainians correspondingly, with some share of other nationals in transit.

Tourism Brands Plans Frustrated

Belarus is a promising place for development of several kinds of inbound tourism. First, it has transit tourism potential because many Russian citizens travel to the European Union by bus. Second, Belarus has much to offer in recreational tourism with its good quality-price ratio to offer. Third, Belarus can develop rural tourism and thematic tours development across the places of Jewish, Polish and Lithuanian heritage.

The state tourism program required regional executive committees to develop tourist brands for each of the 118 Belarus's districts, 6 regions and the capital by the first half of 2011. In fact, as late as by half-2012 a winner of a tender to develop the city brand for Minsk was announced. The Britain-based company INSTID was awarded a contract to create a logo and the signature style of Belarusian capital by the end of the year. No news about regional brands so far.

The state program also aims at setting up tourist information centers abroad to complement the only centre of this kind in Warsaw. Besides a need to develop informative work, there is

much to do about tourism infrastructure inside the country. Belarus has only a handful of good camping sites and hostels. If you decide to visit one of them, you should check out this online catalogue with [camping gears](#).

So far, the government appears not to be serious about visa facilitation for EU citizens. Belarus has not yet replied to the invitation to launch negotiations on visa facilitation that European Commission sent in June 2011. Official Minsk is allegedly suspicious of the readmission agreement with the EU that is linked to the visa facilitation negotiations.

In the absence of visa facilitation, Belarus adopts measures that only partly improve business climate for tourism industry. The recent example of such include the July presidential decree that introduces preferential tax system for the tourist companies and widens the list of tourist services that are granted VAT exemption.

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