

Is Belarus Willing to Help People with Disabilities?

On 15 June, Belarus ratified a National Plan for the protection of people with disabilities. The document is a big step for Belarus towards achieving a more compassionate society. Nevertheless, the conditions under which most people with disabilities in Belarus live remain difficult.

NGOs and initiatives created by disabled people themselves are having greater success in changing infrastructure. For instance, the first beach for people with disabilities in Belarus appeared thanks to the initiative of a single person, Alexandr Audzevich.

In contrast, the state's approach is somewhat more 'formal': although it signals its intention to improve disability policy by signing international documents, it generally fails to actually implement the programmes, as it proved in 2011-2015.

The status of people with disabilities in Belarus

In 2015, Belarus became the last country in Europe to sign the Convention on the Rights of Disabled Persons, ratifying it in November 2016. The ratification guaranteed the creation of an additional monitoring body to oversee reforms associated with the rights of the disabled.

Officially, 556,000 people in Belarus receive a disability pension. This is about 6% of the total population. At the moment, the pension ranges from \$12 to \$112 per month, depending on the degree of disability. This amount is several times less than the [average salary of Belarus as of May 2017](#).



The first fashion show featuring models with disabilities. Source: nn.by

On top of small pensions, the situation is complicated by the lack of appropriate infrastructure for people with limited mobility capabilities.

According to unofficial data, about 70% of wheelchair users never leave the house. Therefore, a barrier-free environment is becoming one of the central focuses of campaigns involved in protecting the rights of persons with disabilities.

The first step towards improving the conditions for disabled people in Belarus, announced in June of this year, has been the introduction of free assistance to those with severe disabilities and disabled children. The state will now provide persons with disabilities with necessary medicines and equipment.

However, despite certain positive changes, Belarus is already proving that it cannot follow through on its promises. For example, in 2011-2015, the Belarusian authorities pledged to make local environments more barrier-free. However, in reality, structures meant to make life easier for people with disabilities are [not functioning as they should](#). It is not clear whether the signing of the National Plan will lead towards measurable improvement of the situation of disabled people in Belarus, or if it's just another formality.

Civil society as an engine of change



Siarhei Drazdouski.

Source: Spring96.org

Today, those most actively promoting implementation of the provisions of the Convention are not the state, but NGOs and individual activists. Thus, the Office for the Rights of People with Disabilities, which is actively engaged in advocacy of the rights of persons with disabilities, presented a detailed plan at the end of 2016 for reform of disability policy. The reforms have yet to take effect.

The state seems to have few intentions of protecting people with disabilities. Even the Head of the Office for the Rights of People with Disabilities, Siarhei Drazdouski, has encountered problems with the authorities. He and his wife were threatened with eviction from the dorm where they live. Thus, instead of providing social support, the authorities are putting Drazdouski at risk of ending up on the street, writes radio *Svaboda*.

In 2014 in Hrodna, a small group of people, both with and without disabilities, tested access to various city facilities for wheelchair users. During their investigation, they revealed many violations and were able to pressure certain

public institutions into improving their accessibility. However, it is often up to activists to fix accessibility problems themselves.

Some Belarusian organisations receive international support because they lack the protection of the state. For example, USAID has financed the activities of BelAPDIiMI, an organisation advocating for the right of young people with disabilities.

One campaign in particular, which aimed to draw attention to the plight of people with disabilities, attracted a significant amount of attention both at home and abroad. Alexander Audzevich, a wheelchair user from Lida who initiated the campaign, began his activism in 2013, after a motorcycle accident in 2011 left him partially paralysed. This prompted Audzevich to begin advocating for disabled rights.



Alexander Audzevich.

Photo: TUT.by

In 2016, he cycled around Europe in a handbike; his aim was to raise funds for the construction of a multi-purpose centre for wheelchair users in Lida. During his journey, Audzevich was able to raise awareness not only among the Belarusian media but also in the foreign press.

This year, Audzevich won the television show The City, which broadcasts interesting projects aimed at improving infrastructure. Due to his activism, the authorities built the

first inclusive beach in Belarus, located in Lida.

Activists of the Republican Wheelchair Association have been independently arranging integration camps for people in wheelchairs for many years now. The state is not doing enough to rehabilitate these people or ensure they can participate in society. At the camps, people learn to serve themselves, to swim, to engage in other types of physical activity, and even the basics of sex life.

Is there any real improvement?

Many projects for the rehabilitation, integration, and socialisation of people with disabilities are carried out in Belarus using money from international donor organisations. This support amounts to several million dollars a year. However, an 18% tax is levied on the cost of office rent, utilities, and staff salaries.

On 31 August 2015, the authorities further complicated the rules for [obtaining foreign sponsor money](#). Many donors are finding it difficult to fund projects in Belarus. For instance, the foundation Erinnerung, Verantwortung and Zukunft has frozen the finances for the large project 'The venue is dialogue'. The donors explained that there were too many obstacles to transferring money to Belarus, according to the organisation Vzaimoponimanije.

Belarus has signed the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, but people with disabilities still have to rely on themselves to fight for their rights. The issue of accessibility is just one step on the way to a tolerant and convenient society.