

UBERgiving, feminist debates, Katoŭka clashes – Belarus civil society digest

Awards ceremonies encourage the most prominent civil society leaders and events of 2016.

DisRight Office's study: only one-fifth of tourist attractions in Minsk is fully accessible for disabled. Advertising of underwear sparks the feminist debate. Situation in Belarus still frozen, human rights defenders say.

Almost 5 tonnes of clothing collected by UberGIVING campaign. APB BirdLife launches a wolf blog. MFA Head meets with Baćkaŭščyna NGO.

This and more in the new edition of Belarus civil society digest.

Summarising the civil society activity in 2016

Civil society awards. In the end of December, several awards ceremonies took place to encourage the most prominent civil society leaders and events of 2016. Belarusian [human rights community](#) awarded its annual National prize. A newly-established award [Zrabili!/Done!](#) found the most effective community activists. On 17 December, the youth [RADA Awards](#) ceremony was held. On 23 December, the [Assembly of NGOs](#) for the eighth time delivered its Civil Society Champions Award.

[Top 10 projects of Belarusian crowdfunding.](#) *Nasha Niva* newspaper rates Top 10 of the most successful crowdfunding

projects. The record year is \$35,000 collected for seriously ill children with special needs, due to a sensational story in [Imena](#) magazine. Along with charity projects, crowdfunding campaigns to publish books or CDs, release games, improve the urban infrastructure were also successful in raising funds.

[Bright People of 2016](#). *Naša Niva* newspaper composed a list of the most visible people and events of 2016. The Persona of the Year is named Kaciaryna Siniuk, the founder of *Imena* magazine, which collects money for people in need, the disabled, and orphans. Public activist of the Year is [Andrej Kim](#), who translates foreign films in Belarusian and organises their screenings in the city cinemas.

Human rights

[Only one-fifth of tourist attractions in Minsk is fully accessible for disabled](#). The Office for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities presented the results of the study on the availability of tourism in Minsk. 68 tourist attractions were studied – 36 of them were rendered radically inaccessible, 12 were marked as accessible. The initiative aiming to make tourism accessible was launched in the spring of 2016.

[Feminist debates](#). Centre for promotion of women's rights  *Her Rights* appealed to one of the profit companies with a demand to remove the advertising poster, where a woman in lingerie eats macaroni. The Centre believes that the ads is sexist and degrades women. The correspondence between the NGO and the company provoked heated discussions in social networks.

[Watch DOCs Belarus](#). On 15-18 December, the Minsk venues CECH and TUT.by Gallery hosted the festival of documentary films on human rights *Watch DOCs*. This year the festival focused on such topics as youth struggle for life and dignity, a clash of East-West cultures, and people who are changing the world. A

local NGO *Zveno* organised the festival that was supported entirely from [local sources](#).

[Situation in Belarus still frozen, human rights defenders say.](#)

Certain positive changes have taken place in the sphere of human rights over the past year, but the problem of their protection is still relevant. For example, the number of persons punished this year for holding peaceful assemblies has tripled; fines of \$300-500 are a strain on protesters' incomes.

Social activism

[Almost 5 tonnes of clothing collected by UberGIVING campaign.](#)

On 10 December, for eight hours, *KaliLaska/You are Welcome* fund and Uber taxi collected 4.7 tonnes of clothing from the residents of Minsk. Those who could not participate in the action can bring clothes anytime to *KaliLaska* fund that distributes the clothes to people in need.

[Social Boost Hackathon](#). During 48 hours non-stop (on 16-18 December) Minsk hosts social Hackathon to attract IT specialists to create projects useful to people. The Hackathon plans to create new projects and products in such areas as charity, ecology, education, urban environment, improving the quality of life of people, equal opportunities, etc.

Green and urban activism

[APB BirdLife Belarus launches a wolf blog](#) to allow to Belarusians to observe the life of wolves in the *Bielaviežskaja Pušča* through the Internet. A few wolves have special GPS-collars to monitor the daily life of predators. The initiators believe that such a study may change the stereotypical attitude to wolves as a forest pest and return them a deserved place a significant element of the ecosystem.

[Protection of trees in Katoŭka](#). On 6-7 December, local residents and environmentalists defended the Katoŭka park in Minsk from municipal services, who tried to cut down trees. The confrontation came to the use of physical force. A Catholic church plans to be built in the park so 10% of the trees should be cut down. Environmentalists say deforestation is illegal, as the construction plan has not passed the necessary expertise.

[The City show starts the 2nd season](#). A preliminary acceptance of applications is opened at the project website. The City has a unique format that brings together a professional reality show and implementation of urban projects. The City-2 is a continuation of the similar [project](#) that in 2016 released 11 video episodes demonstrating how grassroots activists are trained and then implement their ideas in local communities.

State-civil society interaction

✘ [MFA meets with Baćkaŭščyna NGO](#). On 13 December, the MFA Head, [Uladzimir Makiej](#), met with the representatives of the World Association of the Belarusians *Baćkaŭščyna/Motherland*, [Aliena Makoŭskaja](#) and Nina Šydloŭskaja. The sides discussed the cooperation between the MFA and the NGO to work with compatriots abroad, as well as the arrangements to the 7th Congress of the Belarusians of the World.

[BAJ meet Information Minister to discuss distribution of independent press](#). On 7 December, Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) representatives had a meeting with Information Minister [Lilija Ananič](#) to discuss the burning issues of journalistic community, namely, unequal conditions for state and independent mass media, the influence of Russian media content, etc.

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.

Can Uber Become a Success in Belarus?

On 23 March Evgenia Shipova, official representative of Uber Technologies in the CIS region, announced that Minsk was developing faster than in any other city in Europe, Africa or the Middle East. Within four months, 80,000 city residents used this online taxi service.

Feeling threatened by the competition, regular taxi drivers have requested that the government investigate Uber activities. In contrast, most customers seem rather content with Uber. People are enjoying the high quality of service and hope it will promote a client-oriented framework which will influence the market as a whole.

Uber, however, will hardly conquer the Belarusian cabbng market, considering that old habits of ordering cabs by phone or catching them in the street remain extremely prevalent. For example, most people over 40 do not use Internet capable mobile devices and therefore cannot become potential Uber clients.

What is Uber?

Uber is a mobile application, which allows consumers with smart phones to submit a trip request which is then routed to Uber drivers who use their own cars. It spots a client via GPS and finds the closest driver who would be able to pick them up. The consumer can initially see the route price, choose a driver according to his rating and watch him approach the pick up location. Uber clients cannot pay in cash as it accepts only bank cards.

Currently, the company operates in 400 cities worldwide with their main office in San Francisco, USA. The company claims that it creates an innovative competition environment among drivers and thus raises quality of service.

However, governments and taxi companies across the globe challenge the legality of Uber because it does not follow proper consumer and labour laws. The use of drivers who are not licensed to drive taxicabs is unsafe and illegal.

Uber comes to Minsk

Uber officially opened its service in Minsk on 5 November 2015. The Belarusian media widely discussed the new service and social media highlighted user's riding experiences. since this will likely increase the traffic flow delivering kids to schools and for those many who have to work, you may want to have a contact for a [parking lot accident attorney](#) who can help you in case your car gets damaged.

To mention a few problems, taxi drivers often use old uncomfortable and sometimes dirty cars and cheat on trip prices.

In February 2016, Uber launched a cheaper UberX service which led to a mass use of their service by Minsk residents. Those

who heard about Uber earlier or used it abroad were quite excited. They hoped that Uber would raise competition and quality of taxi service.

Regular taxi drivers in Belarus often use old uncomfortable and sometimes dirty cars and cheat on trip prices. Taxi drivers in the post-Soviet space have been associated with music called criminal chanson, which is regarded as the music of criminals and people of low socioeconomic status. They are often involved in shadow market like trading i.e. illicit alcohol or prostitution deals.

In contrast, Uber drivers undergo strict control; they cannot have a previous criminal conviction, minimum three years of driving experience, a car no older than 2010 year and, moreover, pass a psychological test.

Minsk taxi drivers protest

On 6 February, Minsk taxi drivers from major taxi companies  organised a spontaneous rally to discuss the “growing chaos on the market, where Uber became the last straw”. They claim that Uber has far more favourable conditions of operation: “We have to pay taxes, insurance, road tax, dispatcher service, taximeters, deal with controlling state bodies, and Uber does nothing of that!” drivers said with outrage.

Drivers threatened to “take to the roads and halt the city” if the authorities do not find a solution to Uber’s activity. Less radical ones urged others to organise a trade union that will lobby taxi interests in the bureaucrat’s offices.

Uber does not breach law,

partners do

On 8 February head of Minsk city [Andrej Šorac](#) ordered to investigate Uber operation in the city. "Taxi drivers complain that the service puts them in the unfair working conditions. We need to study the subject and inform the stakeholders on the results", the official said.

After an investigation, state transport inspection reported that companies and individuals cooperating with Uber in Belarus have special licences for cabbing and do not need to have all attributes of taxis, like taximeter and lamps. They pay taxes and insurances like taxi services, but do not need to pay for dispatching office services since the online application does this job. However, this type of cabbing supposes signing a contract with each client, and the inspection doubts that Uber drivers do that properly. They also violate legislation by not using yellow car number plates.

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After the investigation the transport inspection stopped the licence of Molberg company, one of the Uber partners and filed a case against another one. The reason was violation of contracting procedures with the clients. Meanwhile, Uber says the authorities punish partners who violate the rules, not the company who runs the online platform itself. Uber also claims that pressure from authorities came as the result of rivals' campaign to oust Uber from the market.

Getting rid of rivals or

promoting competition?

Despite the unfriendly environment and emerging rivalry, Uber has recently announced its success in Belarus. According to Evgenia Shipova, official representative of the company in Minsk, Uber has developed more rapidly than in any other city in Europe, Africa or the Middle East. Within four months, 80,000 people have used the service. However, Uber does not yet seem to have an interest in entering other Belarusian cities.

The reaction of taxi companies to a new and unusual market player is understandable. They have operated in a familiar environment for years and have met any innovative trends with enmity. Uber, if operating in compliance with law, will definitely make the market more client-oriented and quality of service will grow.

Regular taxies should not worry much – if companies introduce high standards of service, the clients will see no major difference. Customers are deeply rooted in the habit of calling dispatcher offices or catching a cab in the street. This will last for years. Moreover, most people over 40 do not actively use Internet capable mobile devices in Belarus, and will retain their old way of cabbng. All this offers taxi companies enough time to adopt to higher working standards. Belarusian companies can finally realise what competition on the market is.