



# ABSTRACT

## *Situation of companion animals in Belarus*

*Ella Lassonczyk*

Co-Founder NGO “Faithful Heart”, Grodno, Belarus

*Sviatlana Kharevich*

Deputy Chairman, Lawyer, Public Association for Animal protection Agida, Minsk

Geographically, Belarus is the closest Eastern neighbor of the European Union. However, Belarus is far from European standards, especially regarding animal rights. As many countries it is confronted with a large number of abandoned and stray animals in all places, from small settlements to large cities. Unlike other countries, Belarusian authorities do not have a strategy for handling these animals other than catching and killing them.

Obtaining facts and figures on pets and stray animals is complicated. They have to be estimated due to lack of official data. In Grodno, for example, about 6000 dogs and 2000 cats are registered in this city of 320.000. However, most people do not register pets. Many dog owners do not want to pay the required tax. This tax is used for financing stray animals catching teams.

State shelters do not deserve the name as they are almost always used for merely housing captured animals before they are killed.

Because of this, many individuals unite as volunteers and care about stray animals by feeding them or taking them in privately. Rented houses, basements and other makeshift places are the closest one can find in terms of animal shelters in Belarus.

Therefore, the numbers of stray animals in Belarus can only be estimated. According to the 2008 Ministry of Housing and Communal Services report, almost 70 000 neglected animals were captured inside Belarus and only 2500 of them could be saved by volunteers. In 2009 this number already amounted to 80 000 animals. These are official numbers. Animal protectors suspect that the real numbers are much higher.

The Ministry of Housing and city administrations claim not to have the funds necessary to build animal shelters. Paradoxically they have funds to finance the mass killing of stray animals - about 10 Dollars are spent in Grodno on capturing and killing an animal.

There is no law concerning the treatment of animals. In Belarusian Civil Law, pets are described as objects. The law prescribes the maximum number of animals per household and registration of dogs and cats with housing authorities. No preventive rules on animal cruelty are included.

Treatment of animals is declared unlawful only in administrative law. Citizens may report acts of cruelty against animals to their respective local government, adding certain evidence. A protocol

should then be written and on decision of the city government is forwarded to the court where the case may be tried.

Citizens have the right to obtain information on such issues such as how many stray animals were captured and killed in the past.

By law all animals caught by the city's waste disposal department have to be kept for a period of at least five days in order to find the original or new owners. Except for Minsk, this regulation is not observed at all. For Grodno the 'shelter' is located 17 km away from town on the site of a large municipal garbage dump and consists of only six (!) cages while by statistics there are around 20 animals caught every day. Whenever visited, this so-called "shelter" has been always found empty even when the trucks of animal catchers had just before been registered fully loaded at the front gate. Activists report that in other towns caught animals are put into buildings without windows, heating, water and feed.

The already weak legislation on pets and stray animals in Belarus is not enforced. Required registration and payment of taxes are not being checked. Freedom of information is not practiced. In 2010 it took me three months and eight court sessions to force local authorities to disclose the number of caught animals in Grodno. This data had been denied claiming that it represented a commercial secret of the organisation contracted by the city administration to handle animals.

Attempts to have authorities pursue cases of animal cruelty are hindered by lengthy investigative procedures unwilling city governments to receive, handle and forward according complaints. As police and courts only act on successful complaints, city governments may block any such complaints. Only public pressure and insistence result in legal consequences, albeit very rarely. In 2010, an activist filed 20 cases of animal cruelty in Minsk. Only one of them was tried in court and resulted in a 100-Dollar fine. Three other cases are described on the homepage of Minsk NGO of animal protection.

To establish an animal protecting organization poses a big problem in Belarus. Although the constitution allows for founding interest groups, in reality such initiatives are not supported but rather blocked in any possible way.

Public awareness for animal-related problems is very weak in Belarus. Because of this it is hard to form animal welfare groups and put pressure on authorities. The legal situation is equally weak. Changes and improvements in this matter are not expected for the near future.

Animal activists see their mission in improving stray animals' situation in the country through sterilizing and caretaking activities and the prevention of mass killing. Furthermore we want to increase public awareness for the issue, educate and inform through fundraising rallies, information stands and internet activities.

The most pressing issue in animal matters in Belarus is the ever increasing number of stray animals and their handling by authorities.

As abandoned animals live around the houses of residential districts, they are subjected to the competence of the Ministry of Housing and Communal Services, precisely its waste management department. The ministry's main goals are to regulate the number of stray animals and to prevent dissemination of infectious diseases dangerous for people and animals alike (microsporidia or rabies).

The main method of regulating the number of abandoned animals in Minsk and the other regional centers is trapping and euthanizing them. Largely this is done in a cruel way - by shooting, using high-voltage current, drowning or poisoning animals, injecting T-61. Sometimes animals are not

caught but simply bricked up in the basements of the apartment blocks where they have their night and winter shelters.

However, all of that clearly does not represent a solution to the dilemma of constantly increasing numbers of such animals due to missing measures of birth control, the small number of organizations which could compensate for the state's ignorance and the limitations which authorities place before them.

Ethically even more problematic is the fact that captured animals in Minsk are sold off to laboratories for experiments. In this manner, stray animals indeed are turned into an economic asset.

#### **To Do List**

- Consistent laws on animal treatment and welfare;
- Establishment of shelters and their accessibility to the public;
- Facilitation of establishing interest groups;
- Support of such groups by giving them access to media, helping them with finding places for shelters, providing funding.