

IKEA Uses Slave Labour of Prisoners

Belarusian anarchist Piotr Markielau, who protested in an IKEA store in Prague on Friday, November 18th, provided an interview for AF.

Piotr Markielau, Anarchistická federace

November 27, 2022

Why have you decided to protest in this IKEA in Prague?

I was outraged by the report on IKEA's ten year long cooperation with Belarusian companies and its use of unpaid forced labour in Belarusian penal colonies, including the labour of political prisoners and of prisoners of conscience. It has already been a known fact, that prisoners produce furniture intended for export. The final receiver of these commodities in the production chain, however, has not. It turned out to be IKEA, among others. This is not the first time IKEA has been guilty of using slave labour for production.

First I researched the legislation and I found out, that neither the EU, nor any member state has laws, which would establish responsibility of a company for human rights abuses in its supply chain. For this reason it would be difficult to hold IKEA legally responsible. Thus I opted for direct action, in order to show, that Belarusians will not tolerate international companies' support of an authoritarian regime responsible for the mass exodus of Belarusians in the years 2020-2022, torture in prison factories and political assassinations. Such collaborationist companies must be made aware, that even if they will not face any legal repercussions, their reputation will be damaged. IKEA must pay. I contacted the company management and I listed various human rights organisations which need their help. It is okay to make mistakes as long as they are corrected afterwards. We will see, if IKEA will wish to correct its mistake. In case of a refusal to do so, their firm will be forever stained with the blood of innocent Belarusians.

How did police treat you? Why did they publish such an addle-brained statement right after the action, claiming you wished to turn the attention onto yourself, when in fact it was about IKEA's collaboration with the Belarusian regime?

Police (special units, the counterpart of the Belarusian OMON) in the Czech Republic does not differ all that much from the Belarusian riot police. Immediately after the action I let IKEA security know that my action was over and that I would not resist; I was not aggressive. I raised my hands above my head and security pepper sprayed my eyes. Apparently he must have waited his entire career for this. When police arrived, they treated me with disproportional violence. I repeated many times that I was not resisting and would not do so either. I was constantly repeating „I am not resisting” in English and they were replying in Czech „If you resist, we will use physical force.” And use force they did. They handcuffed me so tightly I still cannot properly

use my fingers. They damaged my nerves; I lack sensitivity in my hands. They were very rude to me in the car, they put a covid mask on me because I, and I quote, „smelled like a pig.” At the police station, they refused to give me water for a long while. They forced me to sit and stare at the ground, they threatened me with deportation and called me an agent of the KGB. When I asked for a translator into Belarusian, they started discussing in surprise. I do not speak Czech, however, in their conversation I heard the word „dialect”.

Already in IKEA I explained the point of my action to them multiple times. There were flyers with a clear description of the recent report and a QR code, with which one could read it. Czech police decided to instead write the nonsense they did on Twitter.

Are you content with the Czech media’s coverage, which initially claimed you „running amok”? What about other media, including independent Belarusian media?

The action was prepared very quickly and thus I did not manage to send a text to Czech media. That was an oversight on my part. I fenced off the space with security tape in order to show that this was a performance, that I was not a maniac. The video did not capture my distribution of leaflets. Many media corrected or added to their news stories when they received additional information. Belarusian media reported on my action sufficiently, as they are already aware of me and my activism.

You carried out the action in front of the Belarusian embassy in Ukraine in connection to the tragic death of the political prisoner Vitold Ashurak. Who is the primary target audience of your actions and are they successful in fulfilling their purpose? Will you keep on carrying them out in the future?

Every such action has its own message and audience. Generally speaking, the purpose of every action is to point out a particular problem. They also aim to show, that the Belarusian people are willing to fight for their freedom and rights until the bitter end. And this is not aimed only at other nations. Centuries of oppression have taken their toll on the Belarusian mentality. The people are scared to stand up for themselves, to talk about their oppression, instead burying their heads in the sand or leaving the country, ultimately forgetting their roots and attempting to assimilate. The favourite action of the Belarusian diaspora around the world is to stand in front of their embassy with candles. This stance is rather weak. I want to have my own homeland, where I would have my rights, where I could realise myself in my community. For freedom I will fight on. Belarus shall be free.

You are a member of the initiative Legalize Belarus. Did your organisation face repression after 2020? Were your friends imprisoned?

In 2017 I founded the organisation Legalize Belarus with a few friends. This is partially the reason why the report about IKEA’s collaboration with Belarusian prisons infuriated me to the extent it did. About a third (roughly 10 000 people) of Belarusian prisoners were sentenced in accordance with paragraph 328, for the possession of illicit substances. Eight years in prison was the typical penalty for 1 gram of cannabis a few years back. I know many who faced such repercussions. We have been handling this issue for more than five years now, so I know very well what I am talking about. Young people, twenty-year-olds, are locked up in penal colonies for ages, it destroys their psyche, it destroys their youth, it destroys their life. And IKEA is profiting from this. Because slave labour is cheap.

How can we help the situation in Belarus from here in the Czech Republic? Do you recommend anything, apart from boycotting IKEA?

I do not believe, that a boycotting campaign against IKEA would work. Their products are high-quality and cheap after all. Such campaigns rarely work, if ever. A much better approach would be to target their reputation, to alert the public that this brand is stained with blood. Nobody would want to wake up in their bed and know that this very bed was made by political prisoners under slavish conditions. My message to IKEA could not be clearer: send a sum of money to Belarusian human rights organisations, namely the International Committee for Investigation of Torture in Belarus, the Viasna Human Rights Centre (the founder of which, Aleś Bialiacki, received the Nobel Peace Prize) and other organisations which aid Belarusian prisoners. If IKEA declines my appeal, I will do everything in my power to tarnish the image of this company as much as I can. We will file a lawsuit, even though we will not have much of a chance to win, we will pay for an ad on social media, we will approach rival companies. In the long run, IKEA will have to pay either way. However, I believe in their openness. War should be waged elsewhere. The best thing for all would be if they acknowledged their mistake, sent money to Belarusian human rights organisations and kept on attending to their business while also respecting human rights not only in countries, where their goods are sold, but also in those, where they are manufactured.

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