



Workers and Minorities Bear the Brunt of Abuse

Business & Human Rights in Eastern Europe & Central Asia

May 2014

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Executive summary

This briefing highlights key business & human rights issues and developments in Eastern Europe & Central Asia over the last year (from April 2013 through April 2014). It provides examples of how companies through their operations continue to make both positive and negative impacts on people's lives. Sadly, the majority of reports we see detail negative impacts of business operations. These reports include breaches of workplace health & safety, impact of pollution on health, discrimination and labour rights abuses. We have also seen reports on positive initiatives by companies, including steps to protect environment and health as well as initiatives promoting education, civil and political rights.

Over the last year, 71% of companies operating in Eastern Europe & Central Asia responded to concerns about human rights impacts when approached by Business & Human Rights Resource Centre. Even though this figure is slightly higher than our average global response rate of 70%, if we look closer, we will see that the response rate of companies headquartered in the region is only 50% (4 responses out of 8 invitations). And the response rate of companies headquartered outside the region is 89 % (8 responses out of 9 invitations). Companies based in the USA received the highest number of invitations (4 invitations total) and responded 100% of the time, while companies based in Uzbekistan had the lowest response rates (0 responses out of 3 invitations).

In 2012-2013 the correlation was very similar with 91% response rate for companies headquartered outside the region versus 55% response rate for companies headquartered in the region. There are a lot of factors that contribute to this gap, including governments' reluctance to implement their duty to protect against human rights abuse by business enterprises, lack of awareness about UN Guiding Principles among companies headquartered in Eastern Europe & Central Asia, and a lack of pressure on companies from civil society that is relatively weak in many countries of the region.

The briefing also highlights important legal, policy and regulatory developments, including lawsuits and formal complaints as well as laws and regulatory actions. In addition, it provides an overview of issues to expect over the coming years in the region, including the oil industry's impacts on the environment and human health in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, discrimination in employment in most countries of the region, concerns related to possible negative impacts of shale gas exploration in Ukraine, abuses of the rights of migrant workers constructing the infrastructure for the 2018 World Cup in Russia, potential environmental & health hazards related to new controversial mining projects in Armenia, continuing use of child & forced labour in the cotton industry of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, and others.

Based on the key concerns and developments in the region, the briefing proposes some recommendations to companies, governments and civil society in Eastern Europe & Central Asia. The briefing refers to most countries in the region: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Georgia, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan. Our [Western Europe briefing](#) complements this coverage.