



PRESS RELEASE  
(for immediate release)

## **European Business: workers and minorities at the sharp end of human rights abuse**

***A harsh reminder for Europe & Central Asia that governments and companies must  
do more to prevent & redress human rights abuses by companies***

(London/Kiev, 1 May 2014) – Two briefings issued in parallel by Business & Human Rights Resource Centre find business respect for human rights remains a challenge in Western Europe and in Eastern Europe & Central Asia.

[Click here to access the briefings](#)

Released to mark International Workers' Day, the briefings serve as a harsh reminder that despite key international standards and guidance, many people living and working in Europe and Central Asia continue to be subjected to human rights abuses caused by companies' activities.

According to the International Labour Organization, 880,000 workers in Europe are being pushed into forced labour. Most of these people are migrants and minorities left vulnerable and exploited at the bottom of labour-intensive supply chains. Equally, there is evidence that forced labour is rife in a number of Eastern European & Central Asian countries – cotton picked with the use of state-sponsored forced labour in Uzbekistan is an example of a product that allegedly enters supply chains of major retailers in Western Europe and elsewhere.

In too many European countries, workplace discrimination remains a blight on companies' human rights record – the briefings cover examples of discrimination based on ethnicity, race, religion, disability, gender, and sexual orientation. Studies and reported cases in Bulgaria, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Hungary, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovakia, Sweden, and the UK have found employers discriminating against job applicants of certain ethnic or religious groups.

Since the endorsement of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights in 2011, only Denmark, the Netherlands and the UK have adopted national action plans on business and human rights. Russia, one of the core sponsors of the UN Human Rights Council resolution endorsing the Guiding Principles, appears to have taken very few steps to implement the Principles. Business has been just as slow in driving progress with only a few European-based companies undertaking rigorous initiatives to implement the Guiding Principles. Several implementation tools are readily available for companies; the EU has released guidance for the oil & gas, recruitment, and internet & communications technology sectors.

Phil Bloomer, Resource Centre's Executive Director said:

*"There is a wicked symbiosis of labour abuse across Europe. Many of the 880,000 people in forced labour in Europe are trafficked from Eastern Europe by unscrupulous gang-masters, and into supply chains that give us our cheap food and clothes. Governments East and West must act to enforce the most basic human rights of the most vulnerable – freedom from slavery."*

Eniko Horvath, the Resource Centre's Western Europe Researcher said:

*"We continue to see reports of grave abuses including forced labour, discrimination, and deaths or injuries related to employment. Minorities and migrants are particularly vulnerable to abuses in Europe. More companies and governments ought to take advantage of existing tools and resources to guide their approach to human rights due diligence."*

Abuses of core labour standards in the form of poor labour conditions, lack of freedom of association and workplace discrimination are documented through numerous cases in both briefings. Roma people are repeatedly subjected to abuses in Eastern Europe while religious and ethnic minorities, especially Muslims, face similar obstacles in countries including the France and the UK.

Ella Skybenko, the Resource Centre's Eastern Europe & Central Asia Researcher said:

*“On workers’ day it’s imperative to remind ourselves of the multiple deaths and safety abuses that still happen every week in mines across Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Moreover forced labour is rife in cotton fields in Central Asia, workplace discrimination is commonplace in construction and textile sectors, and the oil & gas industry is reportedly harming people’s health across the region. While civil society remains threatened in many countries, their role in supporting the implementation of the Guiding Principles and reporting on human rights abuses by companies is invaluable.”*

Courageous NGOs and trade unions such as Crude Accountability in Kazakhstan, the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) in France, and the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) in Belgium play a vital role in raising concerns about serious human rights abuses by companies and advocating for change for victims, including through judicial and non-judicial grievance mechanisms. The briefings summarise some of these complaints and lawsuits. The briefings also include examples of positive human rights practices by companies.

When invited to respond to human rights concerns by Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, companies based in Western Europe responded 75% of the time, while those headquartered in Eastern Europe responded 50% of the time. Our average global company response rate is just over 70%. In Western Europe, companies headquartered in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Greece, Ireland and Sweden responded 100% of the time, while those in Luxembourg, Portugal and Spain had the lowest response rates. In Eastern Europe, companies based in Uzbekistan had a 0% response rate. While the quality of company responses varies, responding to allegations of negative impacts is an important indication of companies’ transparency and a willingness to address human rights issues raised by civil society; the figures show that Eastern European companies should do more to engage on human rights issues.

Each briefing concludes with a concrete set of recommendations for companies, governments, international organizations and civil society to ensure protection and respect for human rights.

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*Access briefing materials in other languages:*

Eastern Europe & Central Asia briefing:

- Press release: [English](#) - [Russian](#)
- Executive summary: [English](#) - [Russian](#)
- Full briefing: [English](#) - [Russian](#)

Western Europe briefing:

- Press release: [English](#) - [French](#) - [Spanish](#)
- Executive summary: [English](#) - [French](#) - [Spanish](#)
- [Full briefing](#)

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*Business & Human Rights Resource Centre tracks the human rights impacts (positive & negative) of over 5600 companies in over 180 countries. We seek responses from companies when*

concerns are raised by civil society. The response rate is over 70% globally. Advocates thank us for bringing global attention to their concerns and for eliciting responses from companies. Companies thank us for providing them the opportunity to present their responses in full. This process often leads to real improvements on the ground. We also provide guidance materials to assist NGOs, companies, governments and others.

Mary Robinson chairs our 70-member International Advisory Network. Our 23 Academic Partners include leading academic institutions in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and North America.

For further information about the Resource Centre, see the "[About us](#)" section of the website.

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