A visit from Erdogan, investments from the Gulf, labour migrants – Belarus state press digest

Lukashenka expresses concerns over the ‘growing antagonism’ in EU-Russia relations during a meeting with a delegation from the Political and Security Committee of the Council of the EU. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, together with a delegation of Turkish businessmen, pays his first official visit to Minsk.

Belarus seeks to establish closer cooperation and attract investments from the UAE and Qatar. The VIII International Investment Forum 'Melnitsa Uspekha' in Mahilioŭ results in investment deals totaling $250m. 24,000 labour migrants came to Belarus in 2015, working mainly in construction, education, and trade.

This and more in the new edition of the state press digest.

Politics

Belarusian President expresses his concerns over Russian-EU relations. On 21 November Lukashenka met with a delegation from the Political and Security Committee of the Council of the EU, writes Belarus Segodnya. Lukashenka mainly focused on the ‘growing antagonism’ in EU-Russia relations. He stressed that Belarus prioritises neither the EU nor Russia, and strives to develop relations with both parties.

The president also pointed out that Belarus remains the only country among the Eastern Partnership members not dealing with a military or frozen conflict. Belarus and the EU have already
taken the first steps towards normalising relations by establishing a Coordination Group.

Aliaksandr Lukashenka holds a press-conference for Russian regional media. On 17 November the Belarusian president spoke with more than 100 journalists and bloggers from 46 regions of Russia, reports Zviazda. The conference covered many topics ranging from media freedom in Belarus to Belarusian migrant workers in Russia.

Over the last year Lukashenka has experienced difficulties in relations with Russia, primarily due to the economic crisis in the region. However, he promised that the average salary in the country would reach $500 in the next year. Lukashenka believes that Belarus has a sufficient level of media freedom. Although the state gently urges journalist to support the government, generally the official media produce unbiased materials. Lukashenka also highlighted that the government prioritises human rights and justice.

Turkish president pays his first official visit to Belarus. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, along with a delegation of Turkish businessmen, came to Belarus to discuss bilateral relations. Although this was the Turkish leader's first visit to Belarus on the highest level, Aliaksandr Lukashenka affirmed that the two leaders have had ‘kind relations for almost a decade’, reports The Minsk Times.

The Belarusian-Turkish forum, which took place in Minsk during the visit, attracted around 200 Turkish and 300 Belarusian businessmen. Lukashenka and Erdoğan also took part in the opening ceremony of the new Cathedral Mosque in Minsk, the construction of which Turkey financed.
In a joint communiqué, the two heads of state mentioned machine building, the agricultural industry, transport and logistics, textiles, and science as priorities for economic collaboration. They also stressed their determination to coordinate their foreign policy and provide mutual support in international organisations. The two parties outlined a concrete plan of cooperation for 2016-2017.

**Economy**

**Belarus seeks investment from the Gulf Countries.** Lukashenka's recent visit to Qatar and the UAE is evidence of Belarus's interest in cooperating with these countries. The strong economic and energy positions of Qatar and the UAE are the main factors motivating Belarus to establish closer cooperation and attract investments from the Gulf states, writes Zviazda.

Although Qatar and the UAE invest mainly in the hotel industry, logistics, and banking, Belarus expects the two states to consider investing in other areas as well. Belarus will continue to export dairy products and machinery to Qatar and the UAE, while the timber industry and the high-tech field are two other fields in which future cooperation may be possible.

**VIII International Investment Forum 'Melnitsa Uspekha' in Mahilioŭ gathers around 500 businessmen, officials, bankers.** Representatives of 32 countries, including Poland, Russia, China, Germany, and Japan came to Mahilioŭ on 4-5 November, writes Mahilioŭskija Viedamasci. The investment portfolio of the
Mahilioŭ region proved one of the central events of the forum. As a result of the forum, the region initiated projects totaling $250 million.

At the opening ceremony, permanent UNDP representative Sanaka Samarasinha noted Belarus's success in decreasing the poverty rate, although she also mentioned that Belarus needs to make improvements in its education and healthcare spheres. Belarusian Minister of Economy Uladzimir Zinoŭski highlighted the significant role of Belarus in linking the Eurasian Union with the European Union.

**Head of Rosatom Aleksei Lihachev visits the Belarusian nuclear power plant.** He affirmed that the Belarusian NPP has a high level of safety. Rosatom recently introduced a similar system at the Novovoronezh NPP, writes Soyuznoye Veche. The company noted that it bears full responsibility for the safety of the Belarusian NPP. Currently, the Belarusian side takes care of around 70% of construction, while Russian organisations deal with the remaining 30%. In total, 5,000 workers are employed in the construction of the Astraviec NPP.

**Society**

**Chinese lead among labour migrants in Belarus, Ukrainians second.** 24,000 migrants came to Belarus in 2015. Currently, a total of 1,827 migrants in Minsk region have a work permit. According to Belarusian legislation, employers have to publish an official call for any position. If the company cannot find a Belarusian candidate within 15 days, it has the right to hire a foreigner.

*Narodnaja Hazieta* cites expert Kaciaryna Barnukova: ‘People are afraid of migrants because they are perceived to rely excessively on social benefits. However, social benefits in Belarus remain inaccessible to migrants’. The majority of labour migrants come to Belarus from China (6,413 in 2016).
Ukrainians hold the second position, with 4,754 workers in 2016. However, external migration is not the only way to fill gaps in the workforce. Internal migration of people living close to big cities should also be considered as an option.

The state press digest is based on review of state-controlled publications in Belarus. Freedom of the press in Belarus remains restricted and state media convey primarily the point of view of the Belarusian authorities. This review attempts to give the English-speaking audience a better understanding of how Belarusian state media shape public opinion in the country.