

Belarus opens online registration for foreign visitors

On 2 January 2019, a website for the digital registration of foreigners staying in Belarus for more than five days went online. Until now the majority of foreign nationals [have needed to visit](#) a local Belarusian Citizenship and Migration Department office. The new initiative represents the latest [successful step](#) from the Belarusian authorities to [simplify the entry](#) and stay of foreign nationals in Belarus.

At the same time, some foreigners have already experienced difficulties with online registration. According to the Belarusian Internal Affairs Ministry, online registration requires care and attention. Inaccurate data entry may cause the system to deny a registration. In addition, foreigners travelling to Belarus via the Russian border still have to contact the nearest citizenship and migration office. This also applies to foreigners wishing to prolong their stay in the country.

Online registration for foreigners: a long-awaited relief?

On 2 January 2019, the Belarusian Ministry of Internal Affairs and the National Centre of Electronic Services opened the online registration system for foreigners. Since then, foreign nationals and stateless persons can register themselves on the website portal.gov.by instead of attending a local Citizenship and Migration Department office upon arrival.

The registration remains available free of charge via any PC, a mobile phone, or other devices in possession of an internet connection. In order to register, a foreign national should create an account on portal.gov.by. As soon as he or she receives a confirmation message, a foreign national becomes officially registered at the listed address in Belarus.

A foreign national might not show proof of successful online registration to border officers, although a registration screenshot speeds up the border checking procedures. At the same time, in case a foreign national forgets to register online, he or she might still visit at the closest Citizenship and Migration Department office afterwards.

At the same time, citizens of Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine can stay in Belarus without registration for up to 30 days, and Russian citizens for up to 90 days. As soon as citizens of the above-mentioned countries exceed the allowed period of stay without registration, they must obtain a temporary residence permit.

Problems and limitations of online registration

According to the first statistical data, out of 420 foreigners who used the website portal.gov.by for online registration, 194 failed to pass the registration process. The Belarusian Internal Affairs Ministry analysed the numerous failures and issued an explanation.



In Minsk National Airport. Source: belta.by

According to Uladzimir Kuzura from the Office of the Citizenship and Migration Department, the registration process

requires great care on the part of users.

The most common mistakes include mistyped passport characters, incorrect border crossing dates as well as obligatory fields left blank. In case of a failed online registration, foreigners have to register in person at their local Citizenship and Migration Department offices.

There also exist certain limitations on the online registration. In particular, foreigners entering Belarus via the Russian border cannot register online and their only option remains attending the nearest Citizenship and Migration Department. Apart from that, all foreigners wishing to extend their period of stay in Belarus have to attend a Citizenship and Migration Department as well.

The Belarusian visa-free regime: a success story?

On 24 July 2018, Alexander Lukashenka signed the groundbreaking presidential decree allowing foreign nationals from 74 states to enter Belarus up to 30 days visa-free, provided they cross the border at the Minsk National Airport. Previously, in February 2017, Lukashenka signed another crucial presidential decree, which allowed foreign tourists from 80 states to enter Belarus for up to 120 hours without visas via the Minsk National Airport. Those legislative measures became a turning point in the development of Belarusian tourism.

The 30 days visa-free policy has immediately yielded positive results. In the first month since the extension of the visa-free stay, the number of foreign visitors travelling to Minsk has substantially increased. Specifically, the number of American tourists increased by 48.2%, British tourists by 49.7%, Dutch tourists by 120%, French tourists by 53.4%, and

Italian tourists by 52.6%. In comparison with the analogous five-day visa-free period in August 2017, the total volume of foreign tourists increased by 35%.



Munich Security Conference Core Group Meeting in Minsk. Source: belarus.by

According to Maryna Kandrashova, the head of the tourist company “Around the world”, the visa-free regime has substantially improved Belarus’s attraction for business tourists.

In particular, “Belarus started hosting serious international conferences and congresses, and such events could never happen there before due to the difficulties with visas for international participants.” The number of tourists flying for a city-break to Minsk has also increased, notes Kandrashova, however the growth of business tourists remains higher.

Filip Guly, the Chair of the Republican Union of the Tourist Industry, observes that despite the increase of tourist flows to Belarus, there still exist milestones for growth in the visa regulation. Particularly, numerous tourists unable to visit Belarus from Russia, or *vice versa*, even with a Russian visa in the passport. Such an unpleasant situation persists due to the existing [trans-border agreements](#) between Belarus and Russia. At the same time, Guly praises the improved cooperation between the national tourist services and law enforcement agencies, which grants a high-security level amid the change of the visa regime.

The Belarusian tourism

industry: a soft tool to strengthen independence?

As both Guly and Kandrashova note, the national tourism industry awaits continuous progress. The recent positive changes include the growth of English-speaking staff and the increased international advertising of the Belarusian tourist products. The Ministry of Tourism assigns financial means for popular bloggers and opinion-makers to generate reviews and videos of their stay in Belarus. As for the tasks for future, Guly names the necessity to improve the tourist infrastructure and services as well as to lower tourists' costs.

The recent successive efforts of the Belarusian authorities [to open up the country](#) to the world might also go in line with the government's sporadic attempts to enlarge the manoeuvre space for talks with Russia. As the national tourism industry grows, more and more people across the world discover an independent Belarus, in a way serving to emphasise Belarus's separateness from Russia – at least in the heads of international tourists.