

Losses from Sanctions War, Liability for Extremism, Geely Cars – State Press Digest

The Belarusian authorities are trying to debunk Russian accusations that it is making increasingly nationalist policies. The authorities are tightening legislation on extremism by introducing criminal liability for extremism and fighting in foreign conflicts.

The president has ordered all officials to drive only Belarusian-Chinese Geely cars. The state newspaper blames business associations for weak legitimacy and a lack of support within business circles. All of this and more in this edition of State Press Digest.

Foreign policy

[Belarus has lost \\$1bn as a result of Russia's sanctions war with the West.](#) *Zviazda* newspaper published the words of Belarusian foreign minister [Uładzimir Makiej](#), who spoke in Moscow at a press conference dedicated to Belarus-Russia relations. According to the minister, Belarus-Russia relations are seeing a growing number of myths and distorted interpretations.

Some groups have accused Belarus of increasingly nationalistic and anti-Russian behaviour, but this sounds like “blasphemy in relation to our shared history and the Belarusian people, because we have always seen Russia as our closest friend.” Makiej also attempted to debunk the view that Belarus benefited from the Russia-West food embargo. He said that

Belarus actually lost around \$1bn from these sanctions.

Security

[The authorities are introducing criminal liability for extremism and participation in foreign conflicts.](#) *Belarus Segodnia* reports that parliament has approved amendments to the criminal code which introduce criminal liability for extremism and participation in armed conflicts abroad. Counter-extremist legislation in Belarus has become outdated and the Criminal Code does not currently provide liability for extremism, KGB head [Valier Vakuľčyk](#) said at the parliamentary session. Interestingly, the law will also consider production, storage and sale of Molotov cocktails as extremist activity.



The newspaper opines that Belarusian nationals fighting abroad not only damage the image of the country, but can cause its involvement in the conflict.

Besides, professionally trained fighters sooner or later return home and can use their skills in the interests of certain groups and organisations. Currently the Criminal Code provides liability only for mercenaries – individuals who fight solely for financial reasons. Now the amendments make it possible to try persons who fight for ideas, not just money.

[Belarus will seek responses to growing NATO presence near its border.](#) *Narodnaja Hazieta* interviewed expert [Aliaksandr Špakoŭski](#) on Belarus-NATO relations. Military industry groups,

primarily from the US, are artificially creating the idea of an aggressive Russia in the information space, which threatens the security of NATO members. In this way the US is forcing NATO allies to increase defence spending while being the leader of arms manufacturing and export.

Since Belarus has a military alliance with Russia, it will be engaged in this confrontation and seek responses to the strengthening of NATO capacities near the Belarusian border. There is no direct risk of a conflict as neither Russia nor the West want a war, but the growth in the mood of conflict on both sides also poses a threat to Belarus' security. Therefore the country should remain alert and have an effective, mobile army.

Economy

[Belarusian officials are obliged to drive only Belarusian-Chinese Geely cars.](#) *Vitebskie Vesti* highlights President Alexander Lukashenka's visit to the Minsk Automobile Plant (MAZ) – the Belarusian machine building giant. He noted that the plant will receive loans from the government only if it demonstrates the ability to sell products to concrete markets.

“I can not once again invest hundreds of millions dollars in products that you will dump in warehouses ...MAZ, BelAZ and Motovelo are the face of our country, and we have no right to ruin these enterprises. MAZ will live forever, during my rule and after it”, Lukashenka stated.

The Belarusian leader also ordered all officials, from district heads to ministers, to use only the Geely cars produced at the Belarus-Chinese joint plant BelGee. “Except for the prime minister, his deputies and some high officials no one should use foreign cars during their work”, Lukashenka said.

[The first private hydroelectric power station in Belarus will be built in Hrodna region.](#) *Hrodzienskaja Prauda* writes about the first private hydroelectric power station in Belarus, that will appear in Slonim district of Hrodna region on the Issa river. The projects is worth \$450,000 and the investor plans to build the station by 2017.

It will produce 240 kilowatt-hour of energy annually. The company will sell the energy to the country's general electrical network according to a quota defined by the Ministry of Energy. Currently Hrodna region has the largest hydroelectric power station in Belarus with a capacity of 17 megawatts.

Society

[Belarusian business associations have weak legitimacy.](#) *Respublika* newspaper claims that business associations in Belarus have failed to become mass organisations and unite less than 10 per cent of Belarusian businessmen. Besides, leaders of business associations, instead of promoting business interests of the whole sector, seek connections in the government or lobby their commercial interests.



The newspaper gives the example of an association of entrepreneurs called Perspektyva and its head [Anatol Šumčanka](#),

who became one of the leaders of recent protests of small business owners.

The newspaper was unable to identify how many members there are in *Perspektyva*, and noted that the petitions of the organisation usually gather only a few hundred signatures. It concluded that *Perspektyva* lacks the support of business and therefore cannot represent it in negotiations with the authorities or formulate policy proposals.

[In 2015 the birth rate in Belarus grew as a result of demographic security policies.](#) Reproductive health services in Belarus reached the level of France, Finland and Luxembourg, said deputy prime-minister [Natalia Kačanava](#) in an interview with *Belarus Segodnia*. Belarus is in the top 50 countries in terms of the quality of pregnancy and birth care and is in 26th position for maternity comfort.

Moreover, Belarus occupies 4th place for low infant and maternal death rate. The number of families with many children is also growing and has now reached 80,000. At the same time, Belarus has 21,000 orphans, 80 per cent of whom have living parents who have been deprived of parental rights.

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.