

# Most Popular Articles on Belarus Digest in 2013

In 2013 Belarus Digest published over 250 articles. We selected top ten most viewed articles published this year.

## 1. [Getting A Belarusian Visa: Easier But More Expensive](#)

Since 22 August 2013 all foreigners can get Belarusian visas through the Minsk National Airport just after their arrival. However, these and other measures to relax the visa regime on the eve of the 2014 Ice Hockey World Cup still remain incomplete. They leave a number of obstacles on the path to simplifying travel to Belarus and from Belarus which includes low number of no visa treaties with other countries and high visa costs.

Moreover, the government does not want to address the painful issue of the simplification of the visa regime with the EU for purely political reasons. Visa liberalisation will lead to potentially unpleasant consequences for Belarusian authorities such as brain drain and the impossibility to prohibit undesirable Western politicians and activists from entering Belarus.□

## 2. [Snow Storm Xavier Paralyzes Belarus](#)

Large parts of Belarus and the Belarusian capital Minsk have spent this weekend under exceptional circumstances. The cyclone Javier has paralysed large parts of the country for almost two days. While similar weather conditions in the USA would make it to the top news in Europe, there has been no mentioning of the storm in Belarus in Western media.

It started as simple snow fall on Friday morning, but approximately 20 cm of snow fell in the following 24 hours.

The wind was 22 metres per second according to the Belarusian hydro-meteorological centre. Sight was limited to 100 metres in the Minsk region on Friday afternoon because of the heavy snow falls. Although the country is used to severe winters and well equipped to deal with large amount of snow, public life has come to a halt at this weekend.□

### **3. Vilnius: The New Mecca For Belarusian Shoppers And Activists**

On weekends, Vilnius looks like a Belarusian city. Cars with Belarusian registration plates, crowds of Belarusians carrying shopping bags, even bus schedules to Belarus from big shopping centres. In 2012, according to the Lithuanian State Department of Tourism, 400,000 Belarusian guests visited Lithuania. In politics, Lithuania maintains a critical position against Lukashenka's regime. A significant number of offices of foreign foundations and organisations which work with Belarusian civil society are located in Vilnius.

Lithuania, somewhat paradoxically, remains one of the few countries which profits from Belarus' isolation. Thanks to the protectionist practises of the Belarusian regime, it has become much cheaper for Belarusians to pay for visas and transportation expenses, and to buy many goods in Lithuania, than at home.□

### **4. Belarus And Russia Prepare For The West – 2013 Military Drill**

The planned Belarusian-Russian joint military drill, “West 2013”, has stirred up NATO member countries. The armed forces of both countries will hold the drill in the autumn, while some Polish and Lithuanian politicians have already discussed the threat of war.

Alexander Lukashenka said on 21 February that “Belarus and Russia are not going to threaten anyone”. This time he is telling the truth. A war in the centre of Europe remains

beyond contemporary perception of reality, while the mentioned military drills seem to be an attempt to satisfy Russia's imperial complex. The Belarusian regime uses intensive military cooperation as a pretext for getting more financial aid from the Kremlin.

## **5. EHU: How Belarusian Is The Belarusian University In Exile?** □

The European Humanities University, also known as Belarus's university in exile, is struggling to find its identity. It is torn apart between being the Belarusian university in exile and a "normal" European university based in Lithuania. Some say, it has lost its Belarusian character and gave up on its original mission. Others say that moving away from the Belarusian language and Belarus-focused curriculum is a sign of a truly international university, which the EHU should be.

If the EHU is to remain loyal to its original mission as a Belarusian university, it should seriously think about offering what is not available in Belarus or at Western universities. In addition to greater academic freedom (which some say exists in Belarus too), it should keep Belarus-focused courses and language at the forefront of its activities.□

## **6. Belarus Wants New Russian Fighter Jets But Without Russian Pilots**

Last week, Russian defence minister Sergei Shoigu discussed with Alexander Lukashenka establishment of a Russian air force base in Belarus. A few days later, Lukashenka dismissed the claims that Russia will have a military base in Belarus. The news came as media of neighbouring countries continue to discuss the significance of Belarus-Russian military drill West-2013 (Zapad-2013) scheduled for autumn.

Belarusian and Russian officials insist that the West-2013

drill does not threaten anyone, and remind that last year NATO conducted a dozen of drills of different scales in neighbouring countries. Despite various speculations in Belarusian and Western media, little evidence exists to support that is Belarus threatening anyone military, together with Russia or on its own. □

## **7. Higher Education In Belarus: Burdened By Soviet Traditions**

Belarusian Minister for Education Siarhei Maskevich on 28 January 2013 expressed his hope that students will convert the Belarusian science "into the main factor of socio-economic and mental development of the country". But does the government really foster the progress of students' education in Belarus?

The lack of academic freedoms, mandatory and old-fashioned study plans have become the main defects of the Belarusian higher education. While government makes certain steps to approach these issues, the progress is rather slow.

## **8. Four Western Myths About Belarusian Higher Education**

The Minister of Education Syarhei Maskevich announced on 3 May 2013 that "Belarusian universities enjoy a high level of autonomy". Considering the fact that Belarus remains the only European state outside of Bologna process precisely because of its lack of academic freedoms, top Belarusian officials may not be completely honest.

However, many myths about Belarusian higher education exist in foreigners' minds as well. For example, the government neither owns all the universities, nor educates people free of charge. Political expulsions happen only very rarely and usually students can travel abroad without any problems.

## **9. Minsk Police Cracks Down On Prostitution In Elite Clubs**

On 20 August, a special police unit arrested two employees of

the famous Shangri La Casino. Investigators suspect them of organising a prostitution services to the casinos' VIP clients. A similar case happened in 2012, when employees of the elite entertainment centre Dankoff Club were arrested on the same accusations and soon the owner himself also appeared in jail.

Belarusian authorities officially consider prostitution a blatantly illegal activity. Yet despite the high capacity of the state, they are still unable to do away with the problem. The reason may be quite simple: such networks could exist under the "roof" of high officials who have direct or indirect interest in this business.□

## **10. [Do Belarusians Want To Join The EU?](#)**

On 2 March, the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies presented a report on geopolitical preferences of Belarusians. The media paid little attention to the document presented by an influential Belarusian think-tank, although the conclusions of this report could be important for Belarus.

Despite the crisis in Europe, the regime's anti-European propaganda and the EU's weak informational policy inside Belarus, the number of Belarusian euro-enthusiasts continues to grow, slowly, but still. At present moment, 17 % Belarusians consistently support the idea of European integration. Moreover, if we held a referendum on Belarus' joining the EU tomorrow, 38,2% Belarusians would have said "yes".

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**Happy New Year!**