

# Cooperation with Podlasie, Union of Poles, IT Startups, Chernobyl Myths – State Press Digest

On the 30th anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster government officials are trying to dispel some common Chernobyl myths circulating in Belarusian society.

The authorities are preparing for the All-Belarusian Assembly in June – an event that aims to add legitimacy to various political initiatives.

Belarus is working on the abolition of energy subsidies and is calculating the possibility of popular discontent resulting from rising tariffs. Belarusian IT geni are winning global startup contests but do not want to set up companies at home. All of this and more in the latest edition of the State Press Digest.

## Politics

### All-Belarusian People's Congress will unite power and people.

*Zviazda* newspaper talked to Marat Žylinski, rector of the Public Administration Academy and MP, about the significance of the All-Belarusian People's Congress scheduled for June. The assembly is a forum in which the government talks to the representatives of people, tells them frankly what has been achieved, what has failed, and why.

The delegates should understand clearly where the country is heading, and then transmit this vision to their constituencies. According to Žylinski, although Belarus has

low wages and a deficient public administration, the preservation of peace and unity should come before everything. The All-Belarusian congress has become one form of legitimisation of President Alexander Lukashenka's rule. It allows the authorities to appoint delegates who “represent” the grassroots and who will approve government strategy for another five years.

### [Hrodna region intensifies cooperation with Podlasie Voivodeship \(region\) of Poland.](#)

*Hrodzienskaja Praŭda* highlighted a visit of the delegation of Hrodna region leaders to Podlasie Voivodeship of Poland at the beginning of May. The Poles called the visit “a historic



event”, since the last visit of Hrodna officials to their Polish neighbours took place 10 years ago. The visit included a joint cycle, a tour of Bielavieža forest, the Augustow channel and some other spots, as well as informal negotiations.

According to the head of Podlasie region Erzy Leszczynski, the sides have a particular opportunity to cooperate in walking and cycling tourism, the more active joint use of the Augustow channel, opening of new border crossing points, expanding the areas of visa-free visits, and cultural exchange. Hrodna region head Uladzimir Kraŭcoŭ announced that the Hrodna authorities plan to apply for EU funding for around 50 projects in the area of cross-border cooperation.

### [Tax inspectorate fines the leader of the unofficial Union of Poles.](#)

The tax inspectorate of Hrodna city ordered that Anžalika Borys, head of the unofficial Union of Poles in Belarus, pay a fine of \$6,000, wrote *Belarus Segodnya*. Borys owned a private company called Polonica that specialised in

cultural and educational events financed by the Polish government. The newspaper claims that the company often organised fake events and engaged in other forms of deception to secure funding from Poland.

The Belarusian authorities qualified it as a misuse of funds and issued a fine. The company subsequently went bankrupt and now its head has to pay the fine herself. Borys heads the unrecognised group of Poles' Union, which emerged after the breakup of the organisation in 2005 as a result of conflict with the authorities. Since that time the unofficial organisation has been facing pressure in a number of ways.

## Economy

[Belarusians win global startup contests, but do not set up companies at home.](#) *Narodnaja Hazieta* described a number of successful IT startups created by Belarusians in 2015. Arciom Stavienka and Kiryl Čykiejuk found success at the Pitch to Rich contest with their screen that makes holographic 3D projections. Their company Kino-mo won a £150,000 prize for advertising and marketing, and received partnership requests from 40 countries. Their device also featured on all top lists of the famous CES exhibition in Las Vegas, along with LG, Samsung, and Toshiba gadgets.

Jury Birčanka won \$220,000 at prestigious British competition The BIG Awards. He presented a wireless networking platform that enables low-cost and low-power communication between devices and clouds. Siarhiej Churs and Dzmitry Marozaŭ won a Grand Prix and a prize of \$100,000 at the innovative startups contest, the Wolves Summit in Warsaw. They presented a portable scanner to detect dental problems at early stages. However, the newspaper noted that all these IT-breakthroughs are registered in the EU and the US, and tried to explain why startups cannot effectively develop in Belarus.

[Removal of energy subsidies will cause 2.5 fold price rise for households.](#) *Respublika* called attention to an overview of the Belarusian energy sector prepared by the OECD with the support of the EU and the UN. The report states that energy subsidies for the population and industry grew from \$1bn in 2010 to \$1.7bn, or about 2.2 per cent of GDP, in 2014. However, due to the fact that gas, heat and electricity tariffs are exempt from VAT, in 2014 the national budget lost \$199m from subsidy policies.

A full cessation of subsidies in the energy sector would imply that Belarusians have to pay 2.5 times more than the current price. In terms of money this will mean an increase from about \$60 to \$150 per person annually. The average monthly fee for a family will reach \$38 and increase to \$58 during the cold season.

## Society



[Belarus will gradually be freed from radiation.](#)

*Belarus Segodnia* interviewed Head of Contaminated Areas Department of Emergency Ministry Dzmitry Paŭlaŭ, who dispelled a number of myths about Chernobyl that are still widespread among the Belarusian population.

The radiation in Belarusian lands will not last forever, as the 30-year half-life of cesium and strontium has now passed. In 2046, affected areas in Minsk and Hrodna regions will become clean.

However, the area in the immediate vicinity of Chernobyl, which was also contaminated with plutonium, will remain

dangerous for hundreds to thousands of years. The government is not in a hurry to return contaminated areas to cultivation, despite what many think. Out of 250,000 hectares of contaminated land only 17,500 have been returned to agricultural use in the past three decades.

**Homiel region continues to suffer from a high rate of alcohol-related deaths.** *Homielskaja Praŭda* presented data from the State Committee of Court Expertise on deaths caused by drinking alcohol. Within the first three month of 2016 in Homiel region 75 people fatally poisoned themselves with alcohol. In 2015 the death toll from alcohol poisoning reached 254 people, 15 fewer than in 2014. The victims usually consume excessively large quantities of legal alcohol, and many drink highly toxic technical spirits which easily cause death or serious health damage.

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.