

# 10 days visa-free: a new stage for Belarusian tourism

On 26 December, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka signed a new decree on a 10-days visa-free entry regime for foreigners. It expands upon [last year's decree on 5-day visa-free entrance](#) to the Augustow zone in the Hrodna region. The changes are in tandem with a February 2017 decree, which grants tourists a Belarus-wide, five-day visa provided they fly into Minsk airport.

The new visa-free rules are valid from 2018 and allow citizens of 77 countries to spend 10 days without a visa in the Hrodna and Brest regions. No changes have been made for those who enter without a visa into Minsk airport, and as such can still only spend five days in Belarus, but are able to travel anywhere in the country.

The current visa-free regime appears to be a logical continuation of the process of visa liberalisation, which has been taking place within the country. However, the territorial and administrative restrictions on visa-free travel to Belarus still create inconveniences for tourists. Concerns of the KGB and the Internal Affairs Ministry create additional obstacles for the implementation for simpler and longer visa-free regimes.

## What does the new 10-day visa-free regime imply?

Since 1 January, citizens of 77 countries have the right to enter Belarus without a visa and stay for 10 days to stay in certain parts of Hrodna and Brest regions. The new visa-free decree extends the area and the type of transport for visa-free travellers. In 2016, President Lukashenka signed a decree

on the 5-day visa-free regime for those who enter the Hrodna region. Now foreigners can visit not only Hrodna but also Brest region for tourism purposes.



The map of the visa-free area in Belarus in 2018. Source: TUT.by

In 2017, to visit Belarus one should have crossed the border by bus or car at the border, or by plane into Minsk airport. Today, visa-free travellers can come to Hrodna and Brest regions by both road and rail. Visitors to Hrodna visitors can also take advantage of the local airport. Starting 2018, the visa-free territory applies to a whole visa-free region, rather than particular tourist sites as in 2017.

This year, however, a visa-free visit to Hrodna and Brest will become more bureaucratic in comparison to last year. Visa-free travellers at the border must display a permission form, which proves a purchase of service from a Belarusian tourist company. In practice, this means that foreigners must buy either a tour, accommodation or activity from an official travel agency. Foreigners still have to register at the local registration office—either at the Ministry of Internal Affairs, a tourism office near an attraction, or at a hotel—within 5 days of arrival.

## **Visa-Free Year: Achievements and Lessons**

After the introduction of the visa-free regime, more foreigners have begun to visit Belarus. The *Vechernij Grodno* newspaper writes that many tourists from neighbouring Lithuania speak about low-cost products, medicines, alcohol, as well as the opportunity to visit theatres for just a few euros. Many foreigners also speak positively about the

nightlife in Belarus.

The trial year of the visa-free regime has brought tangible material revenues. On 5 January, Belarusian Foreign Minister [Uladzimir Makei](#) said after one year of the visa-free regime, the city of Minsk's profit from tourism increased by 35 per cent, writes news agency *BelTA*. The annual number of tourists reached almost 80,000, which is 12 per cent more than before the visa-free regime. Tourists from Poland and Lithuania are the biggest spenders.

At the same time, it is hard to say whether the visa-free regime has made a significant contribution to the Belarusian economy. According to a report from the World Travel & Tourism Council, tourism in Belarus amounted to only 1.9 per cent of GDP, which is 0.1 per cent more than in 2016 (when the visa-free regime did not exist). The World Travel & Tourism Council has ranked Belarus 139th among 185 countries by share of revenues from tourism to GDP. According to the report, Lithuania and Poland earn on average three times more from tourism services.



Hostel in Hrodna. Source: [hrodna.life](http://hrodna.life)

Despite this, Belarus continues to develop its tourist industry. Last year tourists to the [first visa-free territory in Belarus, Hrodna](#), mentioned a shortage of hotels and low-cost accommodation. Since then, the number of hostels in the city has increased from one to three, and three more are to open in 2018. In addition, most menus in the local cafes and restaurants now have an English version.

Belarus also continues to improve contact with neighbouring countries for the development of tourism. This year, Ukrainian and Belarusian travel agencies are putting together a joint tour package of Lviv, in Ukraine, and Hrodna, in Belarus, said

National Tourism Agency Representative Alena Lihimovich in an interview with online news portal *TUT.by*. In addition, the Polish airline company LOT is considering the launch of cheap flights into Hrodna airport, which has recently become open for visa-free entry.

## **Touristic Belarus: unclear cautiousness of authorities**

When it comes to visa liberalisation, the concerns of certain state institutions prevent the establishment of a longer, 30-day visa-free regime. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Sports and Belarusian Customs have voted for 30-day visa-free entrance for tourists. The Internal Affairs Ministry and the KGB remain reluctant to agree to such a proposal. Perhaps they are wary of a negative Russian response to the introduction of the 5-day visa-free regime in Belarus. Russian media have expressed security concerns due to the absence of strict border controls between Belarus and Russia.



The map of Hrodna. Source: [vgr.by](#)

Belarus continues to expand agreements with many countries to establish a visa-free regime. As of today, Belarusians can enter 70 countries visa-free. In part, Belarus is gradually liberalising its visa policy to coincide with the [European Games, a sporting event that Belarus is to host in 2019](#).

Since the implementation of the visa-free decree, Belarus has attracted tens of thousands of tourists. Tourist services have grown in tandem, providing a wider array choices and staffing English-speaking personnel.

However, by entering Belarus via Hrodna or Brest, foreigners cannot go beyond the visa-free zones in the two regions. Also,

tourists have to buy tours to Belarus through Belarusian travel companies. An extra hinderance is compulsory visa registration process. It may take almost half a day to register, because of [bureaucratisation of the process](#). If tourists do follow all the formalities or not register, they may be fined. In sum, despite the updated conditions of the visa-free regime, visa-free tourism to Belarus remains difficult due to territorial and duration limits, as well as to the increasing bureaucratisation of tourist travel.

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## **Hrodna is learning to handle more foreign tourists**

Around 1,100 tourists, a record number, visited Hrodna Region between 26 March and 2 April 2017, according to Belta news agency. Since October 2016, it is possible to visit the region for five days visa-free.

This growth in tourism has occurred despite inconvenient entry procedures: the authorities restrict visits to five days, limit where tourists can go, and prohibit entering the country via certain modes of transportation.

Over the last months, infrastructure, food services, and lodging in Hrodna Region have been developing. However, attracting more foreign investment and modernising housing, air, and railways would do much to increase the capability of the city to host more tourists.

# Tourism Development in Hrodna

The amount of tourists in Hrodna continues to grow. In total, more than 7,500 tourists have come to Hrodna [since October 2016](#) thanks to the new visa-free regime.

The majority of visitors come from Lithuania or Poland. Lithuanian and Polish travel agencies are popularising weekend trips to Belarus through package deals. For instance, Beta, a Lithuanian travel agency, offers single-day tours called 'Royal Hrodna' for \$20. The tour includes visits to churches and historical places with buses departing from three Lithuanian cities: Vilnius, Kaunas, and Alytus. Since October, Hrodna Region has also been attracting visitors from Latvia, Germany, Italy and 35 other countries.



Augustow Canal is gradually becoming one of the most popular destinations. In response to increased interest, authorities plan to open new border checkpoint at the territory of Augustow canal on 28 April.

Liasnaja-Rudavka will become a border checkpoint for boats, pedestrians, and bicycles. Starting in late April, several new 50-km bicycle routes will be built along the canal.

Belarus can also expect increased tourism in other parts of the country as well. In February 2017, authorities [announced visa-free entrance](#) for nationals of 80 countries if they arrive via Minsk airport.

Moreover, according to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Belarus plans to introduce 12/14-day visa-free entrance instead of five. Belarusian minister of tourism and sports [Aliaxandr Šamko](#) reported an increased demand at health resorts. This factor may also contribute to extending the legal length of visa-free visits.

# Travel Restrictions for Tourists

While travelling around Hrodna, tourists are restricted to car and bus travel. Several factors could explain this: Lithuania decommissioned the railway connection to Druskininkai after the fall of the USSR. The future of the Hrodna-Warsaw and Hrodna-Bialystok connections was also called into question in late 2015. The instability of rail connections may explain the decision not to include rail travel in the visa-free zone.



Recently, customs officers in Hrodna stopped Polish producer Piotr Dudanowicz and two German musicians at the border and forced them to return to the nearby Polish town of Kuznica. The three foreigners had travelled by train to Hrodna instead of taking the bus. The musicians had to wait more than 10 hours for the next bus in order to come back to Belarus.

Airplane travel to Hrodna is also impossible. Hrodna airport, like all other airports in Belarus, has failed to introduce budget flights. Moreover, authorities did not include the airport in the visa-free zone. Officials still voice doubts about introducing budget airlines in the Minsk airport due to the 'discrepancy of low-cost flights with the rules of Minsk National Airport', according to chairman of Minsk national airport Dmitry Melnikian.

The number of tourists increased but complicated procedures and small print create inconveniences for travellers. Customs officials count the day of arrival and departure as whole days. Experienced tourists advise crossing passport control after midnight if the flight arrives several hours before. In March, two Canadian musicians were fined \$3,000 for counting the days wrong, reports KYKY.org.

# Can Hrodna Accommodate More Tourists?

Although the amount of tourists continues to grow, services for tourists remain limited in variety and quality. Only 8 hotels and one hostel function in Hrodna, according to Booking.com. In cities with comparable populations in neighbouring countries, the numbers differ significantly. The Polish city of Bialystok has 19 hotels and nine hostels, Lithuanian Kaunas has 24 hotels and seven hostels, and Ukrainian Lviv has 20 times more hotels.



However, over the last months, Hrodna has been developing infrastructure for tourists. The second hostel with cheap prices (around \$5 per night) opens in May. However, both hostels can only accommodate 100 tourists. Recently, Burger King announced the opening of a facility in Hrodna, making it the first international fast food chain in the city.

The lack of English-speakers continues to be a significant problem for tourists. Polish and Lithuanian tourist groups often travel on guided tours and have a guide who speaks their language. However, for tourists from other countries, communication remains a challenge. Recently, around 15 waiters in central cafes and restaurants enrolled in special English courses.

Some tourist activities are not well suited to foreigners. The number of tourist agencies in Hrodna dealing with inbound tourism has increased compared to last year, from 10 to 70. Nevertheless, the city currently lacks a tourist information centre. While Augustow canal is preparing several bicycle routes, bicycle infrastructure in Hrodna remains inadequate, according to the cyclist organisation Vela Hrodna.

Additionally, there are few possibilities to rent quality bicycles close to the bus station.

A recent journalistic investigation conducted in Minsk by Alena Vasiljeva claimed that certain unique traits of Belarus could be turned into national brands. Safety and the relative absence of racism, as some travellers have noticed, makes Belarus different from many countries. Foreigners have also picked up on the Soviet nature of architecture and even daily life. Lithuanian tourists have praised the quality of Belarusian underwear and coffee.

Even though Belarus has made important strides in improving the tourism sector, more work is necessary. The first step should be increasing the number of hotels, at least to the level of neighbouring Kaunas or Bialystok. Another vital step would be improving the level of English for staff in hospitality industries, improving tourist centres, and working on bicycle infrastructure. Another option to make foreign visitors feel more welcome could be creating an English-version of video guides. The project 'Tourism without a bag' could provide a fitting example.

Simplifying investment opportunities for foreigners would also contribute to the development of the city. This would allow Hrodna Region to handle an increasing amount of tourists and reach a higher level of development.

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## **US investments, arrest of**

# anti-Belarusian journalists, corruption – Belarus state press digest

Belarus aims to expand its cooperation with Malaysia and hosts another high-level visit from Poland. The Belarusian delegation visits the US to discuss economic cooperation and investment with state agencies and corporations.

The authorities arrest three Belarus-based journalists from the Russian media on charges of propagating extremism. The KGB discloses large-scale corruption schemes within the state procurement system.

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

## Foreign policy

[Belarus expands its cooperation with Malaysia.](#) *Zviazda* reports on Lukashenka's meeting with Speaker of the House of Representatives of Malaysia Pandikaram Amines Mulia. The Belarusian leader stated that Belarus is interested in developing relations with Malaysia 'because it does not attach conditions to relations as some other countries do. Belarus will likewise refrain from putting forward any conditions'.

Lukashenka also stressed the need to increase trade between the two countries and develop inter-parliamentary political cooperation. During the meeting, the representatives of Belarus and Malaysia discussed possible cooperation in high-tech, industry, tourism, and education. Lukashenka also announced his intention to pay an official visit to Malaysia.

✘ [Another high-level official visit from Poland.](#) Aliaksandr Lukashenka and Stanisław Karczewski, the Marshal of the Polish Senate, conducted negotiations in Minsk. *The Minsk Times* reports that Karczewski emphasised that Belarus is a place of stability and security in Eastern Europe, although some countries have previously overlooked it. The officials discussed the importance of shared history, and agreed that political interaction should follow the business interests of the countries.

Specifically, the parties agreed on the importance of trade intensification. The senator also visited the Council of the Republic, where the two sides signed an agreement on education. [Michail Miasnikovič](#), the Chairman of the Council, noted that the successful cooperation between the Belarusian and Polish parliaments this year will have a positive impact on the Belarusian parliament's contacts with other parliaments across the EU.

## Security

[The authorities arrest three Russian media contributors based in Belarus for 'incitement of racial, ethnic, religious, or other social hatred or discord.'](#) *Zviazda* reported that the three writers worked for the Russian publications REGNUM, LENTA.RU, and Eurasia Daily. The Investigative Committee analysed 500 materials and found elements of extremism in 120 of them, according to Belarusian Minister of Information [Lilija Ananič](#).

Ananič said that the publications question the sovereignty of Belarus, and were insulting to the authorities, nation, history, language, and culture of Belarus. They repeatedly claimed that 'Belarus is moving to the West' and that 'the Belarusian government conducts anti-Russian policies'.

Belarusian authorities had earlier sent requests to explain

the situation to the Russian Ministry of Communications and the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications. Russian officials replied that these publications 'are produced by marginalised authors and in no way represent the position of the Russian leadership, which consistently strives to deepen Russian-Belarusian cooperation'. The readers and authors of such articles are obviously trying to sow discord between Belarus and Russia, Ananič concluded.

[The State Security Committee \(KGB\) of Belarus uncovers a large-scale bribery scheme.](#) The company BelABM, which specialises in IT and business process automation, organised a corruption scheme involving government officials, reports *Belarus Segodnia*. The scheme was uncovered on 15 December when the CEO of BelABM Dzmitry Ronin gave a bribe of \$20,000 to the manager of the Social Protection Fund of the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, Liudmila Bačyla. In doing so, Ronin intended to secure his company's win of a state procurement tender.

On the same day, the KGB detained Alieh Vieramiejčyk, the chairman of the non-bank financial institution Single Settlement and Information Space. They also detained representatives of the National Bank Anatol Maroz and Kaciaryna Paŭloŭskaja on the same charges: corruption deals with BelABM in the area of state procurement.

## Economy

[A Belarusian delegation visits the United States to discuss investments and loans.](#) On 6-10 December a Belarusian economic delegation visited Washington at the invitation of the Congress of the United States, writes *Zviazda*. The delegation included deputy head of the Presidential Administration [Mikalaj Snapkoŭ](#), head of the Ideology Department of the Presidential Administration [Usievalad Jančeŭski](#), and representatives of the National Bank, Ministry of Finance,

Ministry of Economy, and other ministries.

The Belarusian delegation held talks in a number of key US governmental agencies: the State Department, the Department of Commerce, the Office of the US Trade Representative, the Federal Communications Commission, the Ministry of Agriculture, and the US Agency for International Development (USAID).

The delegation held working meetings with the leadership of  the Emerging Market Private Equity Association and the US corporations Microsoft, AGCO, Case New Holland, and others. The sides discussed investment projects to be implemented in Belarus. The delegation also held talks with Deputy Managing Director of the IMF Mitsuhiro Furusawa concerning preparation of the IMF programme for Belarus.

[Mahilioŭ introduces the first 2nd generation energy-efficient apartment complex in Belarus.](#) As *Mahilioŭskija Viedamasci* notes, the building heats water with solar power as well as wastewater, while air can be heated with a special conditioning system. This allows savings of up to 40% for water and 60% for apartment heating.

The house was designed by Belarusians specialists with financial support from UNDP and the Global Ecological Fund. Funding from international organisations totalled \$1mn, or 15 per cent of construction costs. The apartment complex will soon house 160 large families.

## Other

[Belarus and Poland negotiate the development of the Augustow Canal.](#) The first meeting of a joint working group of the authorities of Hrodna region in Belarus and Podlasie voivodeship of Poland took place in Bialystok, writes *Hrodzienskaja Praŭda*. The group discussed the development of

Augustow Canal, which shares a border legacy with Belarus and Poland. They discussed simplifications of cross border movement of tourists and joint technical regulation of the canal's operations.

The group considered the possibility of allowing water vessels to move between the Polish town of Augustow via the canal and the Nioman river in Belarus. The sides agreed to jointly promote the tourist potential of the Augustow Canal and exchange information and provide media support to each other.

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.