

10 most-read stories on Belarus Digest published in 2017

In 2017 Belarus Digest readers particularly interested in our articles on Belarus visa issues, security as well as the relations of Belarus and Russia.

Belarus Digest team wishes its readers a healthy, productive and happy new year!

Here we compiled our top 10 most read stories published in 2017.

1. [Visa-free travel and registration in Belarus: not so simple](#) by [Yarik Kryvoi](#).

Starting 12 February, citizens of 80 states, including 39 European countries, will be able to enter Belarus visa-free through the Minsk National Airport. But unlike Kazakhstan, which allows foreigners to stay in the country for up to 30 days, Belarus introduced a much more tricky visa-free regime.



Foreign travellers should be prepared for strict penalties should they fail to understand or abide by the rules. The current practice of registering people with Belarusian visas staying for longer than five days sometimes creates an impression that Belarusian migration authorities view tourists as cash cows.

2. [The Belarus-Russia conflict through the lens of the Gerasimov Doctrine](#) by [Arseni Sivitski](#).

The recent visit of Alexander Lukashenka to Sochi on 15 – 26 February 2017, which did not include an audience with Vladimir Putin, casts the relationship between Minsk and the Kremlin in an ever more ambiguous light.



Tensions between Belarus and Russia have been mounting over the past months, as the Kremlin puts more and more pressure on Minsk. The nature of this pressure is perfectly encapsulated by the so-called Gerasimov Doctrine of hybrid warfare. According to the doctrine, Belarus and Russia have entered the 'pre-crisis' stage of the conflict.

[3. Belarus at the centre of Russia-NATO wargame simulation](#) by [Arseni Sivitski](#).

On 23 – 26 January 2017 a Baltic security wargaming simulation took place in Warsaw. Two defence and security think tanks, the Potomac Foundation and the Casimir Pulaski Foundation, hosted the event.



The wargaming initiative focused on the scenario of a Russia-NATO conflict and analysed the nature of the Russian military threat to the Baltic States and Poland. As a result, Belarus was found to be a key contributor to regional security and stability by containing Russia's aggressive strategy. The author of this piece also took part in the simulation.

[4. Putin expects Belarus to boycott ports of the Baltic States](#) by [Siarhei Bohdan](#).

On 16 August, at a conference on transportation in Northwest Russia, Russian president Vladimir Putin demanded that Belarus stop exporting its oil products through Latvian and Lithuanian ports. Instead, Moscow wants Belarus to reroute through Russia's Baltic ports. This way, Putin intends to put even more pressure on the Baltic states.



The next day, the Belarusian state-affiliated news agency BelTA published an interview with the acting director general of Belarusian Oil Company, Siarhei Hryb. The article made clear that Minsk wishes to continue its cooperation with the Baltic states.

It seems that Russia and Belarus are heading towards another oil dispute just months after ending the [previous one](#). Minsk refuses to blindly follow the Kremlin's policy of strangling the Baltic states, if only for pragmatic reasons. To survive as a sovereign state, Belarus needs good relations with [all its neighbours](#), not just Russia.

[5. Will the Kremlin topple Lukashenka?](#) by [Ryhor Astapenia](#).

On 20 January, Alexander Lukashenka described the reactions of Russian officials to the introduction of the new five-day visa-free regime in Belarus as 'groans and wails.'



Recently, the rhetoric surrounding Russian-Belarusian

relations has become so sharp that some journalists and analysts believe the Kremlin plans to overthrow Aliaksandr Lukashenka or occupy Belarus.

However, off and on conflict remains a fixture of Belarusian-Russian relations. Despite the belligerent grumbling, Lukashenka mostly upholds the Kremlin's interests, promoting cooperation between the two countries.

[6. The West-2017 Belarus-Russian military exercise: smaller than anticipated](#) by [Siarhei Bohdan](#).

During a meeting with defence minister Andrei Raukou on 20 March, president Alexander Lukashenka demanded 'absolute transparency' at the forthcoming West-2017 Belarusian-Russian military exercise. The Belarusian government is working to counter the negative repercussions of such a massive show of military force in the region.



These repercussions have certainly been felt. On 9 February, Lithuanian president Dalia Grybauskaitė stated that during the West-2017 exercises 'aggressive forces are concentrating in very large numbers, this is a demonstrative preparation for a war with the West.'

Moscow would apparently like to increase the fog of uncertainty surrounding its military moves. The Russian military previously published the numbers of railway wagons needed for troop movement. In the absence of proper explanations, this created a threatening impression. Yet it is now clear that the exercises on Belarusian territory will [be smaller](#) than in 2009.

[7. Moscow erects border with Belarus, undermines its links with Ukraine and the Baltics](#) by [Siarhei Bohdan](#).

On 16 February, Dmitry Peskov, Vladimir Putin's press secretary, announced that the Kremlin does not plan to introduce a visa regime with Belarus. His statement comes in a context of increasingly harsh measures on behalf of Moscow towards Belarus over the past half year, beginning when Russia decided to partially reinstate its border with Belarus, which had been abolished in 1995.



The Kremlin is also working to undermine economic ties between Belarus and its other neighbours, paying special attention to the energy and transportation sectors. Results have been tangible: Belarus has already decided to stop importing Ukrainian electricity. Moscow is also doing whatever it can to convince Minsk to use Russian ports rather than [ones in the Baltic countries](#).

Russia accuses the West and its allies in the region of undermining links between Eastern European countries. However, its own policies pursue exactly the same aim. Minsk must fight hard to resist these efforts by the Kremlin.

[8. Belarus prepares to expand its visa-free zone](#) by [Alesia Rudnik](#).

In October-December 2016, almost 2,000 tourists took advantage of new visa-free regulations to visit Hrodna Region. In response to the increasing amount of foreign tourists, Hrodna Region has started working on two important initiatives: visa-free



railway voyages and launching low-cost flights to Hrodna airport.

However, making railway services and the Hrodna airport accessible visa-free will not attract many more tourists if more tourist services are not first developed. Extension of the visa-free territory to the whole of Belarus and investment in the development of services would significantly improve the popularity of Belarus for tourists.

[9. Anarchists, the avantgarde of social protests in Belarus](#) by [Alesia Rudnik](#).

On 15 March, Belarusian authorities detained dozens of citizens protesting against the social parasite decree. Anarchists were one of the most noticeable movements at the protests in Brest and Minsk, causing an immediate reaction from the police.



Anarchists in Belarus, who have a long history, tend to participate only in particular political events. Their creativity and integration distinguished them from other groups during the last two weeks of protests.

The regime has put considerable effort into diminishing the influence of any uncontrollable and integrated group of dissidents, including anarchists. Independence Day on 25 March will show whether the anarchist movement in Belarus is ready for social and political protest or whether it will continue to operate mostly underground.

[10. Belarus's new Russian arms: what Minsk has given in exchange](#) by [Siarhei Bohdan](#).

In an interview published on 23 February, Belarusian defence minister Andrei Raukou announced the forthcoming purchases of state-of-the-art Russian weaponry.



He specifically mentioned the Su-30SM fighter aircraft and 120mm Nona-M1 heavy mortars. Earlier, on 4 February, armament director of the Belarusian armed forces Major General Ihar Latsyankou said that Minsk would purchase these systems this year.

In other words, despite its dependence on Moscow, Minsk has prevailed in its dispute with the Kremlin over defence issues. Moscow initially did not wish to provide Minsk with weapons, intending instead to replace Belarusian with Russian troops. However, it has conceded one position after another. Minsk has thus emerged victorious in this spat.

The Belarusian army: scaled down but better trained and autonomous