

Big talk with the President, a drop in gambling, armed neo-Nazis – Belarus state press digest

Last week Alexandr Lukashenka spoke for over seven hours to journalists emphasising deep problems with Russia at the press conference “Big talk with the president”. According to him, Russia should not fear an influx of migrants after Belarus’s visa-free regime starts.

Lithuania criticises the Belarusian NPP for solely political and economic reasons, not security concerns. The previously thriving gambling industry in Minsk is in decline since people is now using websites like [████](#). Experts discuss challenges to Belarus’s accession to the WTO in 2017. Brest police detain a group of neo-Nazis with a large stockpile of arms and links to Ukraine.

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

Politics

[Lukashenka holds a “Big talk with the president”](#). On 3 February Aliaksandr Lukashenka held a press-conference which lasted for the record breaking 7,5 hours and gathered an unusually diverse spectrum of participants – journalists, political experts, businessmen, MPs, representatives of civil associations. “There are forces that try to involve us into conflicts, and today we especially need spiritual strength and consolidation. The talk gathered people with diverse views, but we are all devoted to independent Belarus”, he emphasised

before at the beginning.

Belarusian leader commented on all current problems of Belarus. He insisted that the government should guarantee \$500 average salary by any means. He stated that Belarus lost \$15bn due to protectionist policies of Russia within Eurasian Economic Union, and criticised Russia for anti-Belarusian media messages and setting a border control zone on border with Belarus.

Lukashenka said that Belarus can do without Russian oil, however difficult it could be, because independence and history are priceless and cannot be traded. He also revealed that it was Vladimir Putin who advised him to normalise relations with the West.

[Russia should not fear an influx of migrants after the visa-free regime in Belarus starts.](#) *Soyuznoe Veche* published Aliaksandr Lukashenka's response to the emerging concern in Russia over the new policy of [visa-free entry to Belarus](#) for nationals of 80 countries.



This step could threaten Russia's security since the countries have no border, some Russian commentators argue.

The Belarusian side claims that the government had considered the visa-free regulations for a year and a half and examined all the potential risks for Belarus, its allies, and neighbours – including Russia. Lifting visas does not mean removing border control, and any fear of criminals entering Russia is groundless. 'This is our sovereign right. We are not violating any agreements with other states by introducing this regime', the Belarusian leader said.

Lithuania criticises the Belarusian NPP out of envy.

Lithuanian political parties plan to draw up an agreement which would prohibit purchase of energy from the Belarusian NPP, reports *Narodnaja Hazieta*. President Dalia Grybauskaite had stated earlier that the NPP may become an instrument of unconventional pressure on the Baltic states. Quoting the expert [Aliaksiej Dzermant](#), the newspaper writes that the real reasons for Lithuania's behaviour are political, as it plans to build its own NPP together with the other Baltic states and Poland.

However, Lithuania's [neighbours do not support the initiative](#), while the Belarusian plant is looking more and more like a successful rival. The newspaper also quotes the Director of the Division of Nuclear Installation Safety of the IAEA, Grzegorz Rzentkowski, who says that Belarusian government fully realises the responsibility for nuclear safety and has invited a large number of monitoring missions to Belarus.

Economy

[Minsk casinos are in decline.](#) *Respublika* reports on the sunset of the gambling era in Belarus. After Russia restricted the gambling industry to a few special zones in 2010, Belarus decided [to take initiative and become a Las-Vegas](#) for Russia and other countries. Investors flooded into Minsk in order to set up businesses and wealthy Russians appreciated the proximity of the Belarusian capital. However, year by year the government kept adding new taxes on both casinos and gamblers.

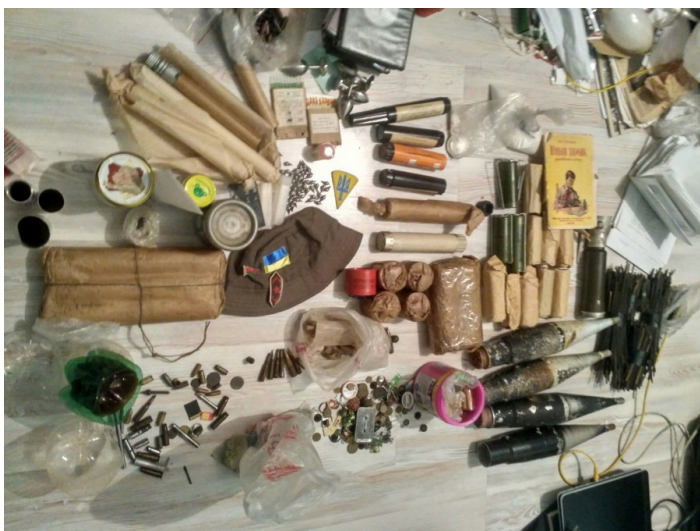
Casino owners complain that they are completely mistrusted by Belarusian officials, who think that gambling cannot be unprofitable. Moreover, plummeting oil prices have significantly reduced Russians' appetite for gambling. On top of this, Russia is planning to open a new gambling zone in Sochi, which will definitely entice Russian clients. Many businessmen in Belarus are now simply hoping to close shop

without losses or conflicts with the authorities.

[Experts discuss the challenges to Belarus's accession to the WTO.](#) By the end of 2017, after a long delay, Belarus may finally join the WTO. *Respublika* asked experts about the challenges and opportunities membership in WTO could bring to Belarus. Director of the National Centre for Marketing Valier Sadocha thinks that in the middle and long-term period, WTO membership could lead to some industries reforming and others closing. More transparent legislation, compliant with WTO standards, could attract more investors to Belarus.

Growing competitiveness on the market would also result in lower prices. [Uladzimir Karahin](#), head of the National Confederation of Entrepreneurs, believes that Belarusian businesses should learn how to defend themselves in courts and participate in anti-dumping investigations. According to World Bank estimates, WTO accession would increase real income of Belarusians by 8.2 per cent.

Society



[Brest police detain a group of neo-Nazis selling arms and drugs.](#) A group of men were detained during the sale of a gun and 1.5 kg of TNT, according to *Belarus Segodnia*. A search of their apartments revealed a large stockpile of arms and arms components, as well as amphetamines and marijuana.

The arms included guns, rockets, bombs, ammunition, and explosives. They amassed the arms by accumulating remains from World War II as well as purchasing and smuggling them from Ukraine.

The men confessed that they planned to make money through arms sales, but during the interrogation they also admitted that they wanted to defend their land in case of invasion. According to the police, the group's motivations consisted of a grab bag of various radical ideologies: racism, Slavic paganism, hatred towards Russia and Donbass, and support for far-right organisations.

Architectural heritage decays because of bad regulation.

Narodnaja Hazieta inquired why old castles, palaces, and manors continue to moulder in Belarus. The state is largely unable to finance their restoration. There are around 600 such sites in the Hrodna Region alone. These buildings have remained state property since Soviet times, but they need private owners regardless of what functions they are to fulfil. This will at least prevent further decay.

However, the conditions for purchasing such buildings remain unacceptable for investors. The state demands very short terms for restoration and exorbitant prices. Besides, the legislation on protection of cultural heritage is outdated and needs to be comprehensively overhauled.

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.

Lukashenka in Italy, WTO, NASA, Bielavieža Forest –

State Press Digest

This May state newspapers highlighted President Alexander Lukashenka's first journey to the EU in seven years. They also reported on the launch of works on the logistics centre in the Belarusian-Chinese industrial park, and an EBRD programme for water supply reform in Belarusian cities.

Belarusian IT geeks made headlines again, this time for reaching the final of the NASA innovative ideas contest, and green activists launch the second season of free bike rental in Minsk. Read about this and more in the latest edition of our State Press Digest.

Politics

[Lukashenka chose Italy and the Vatican as his first EU destinations after a seven year break.](#) *Belarus Segodnya* highlights Lukashenka's visit to Italy and his meeting with the Pope and Italian president Sergio Mattarella. This was the first visit by the Belarusian leader to the EU in seven years. Lukashenka explained that through this visit he aimed to thank Italy for its role in normalisation of relations with the west.

“Italy and the Vatican supported us in the toughest times and I have thanked them for that”, he said. As for the Pope, Lukashenka once again invited him to visit Belarus, and according to Lukashenka the Pope agreed to do so in the future. Lukashenka wants him to meet Orthodox Church leaders in Belarus and engage them in Belarus’ peacemaking efforts in Eastern Ukraine.



Economy

[The first cargo train from China delivered materials for development of the Belarus-Chinese industrial park.](#) The first train shipment of 41 containers with metal construction materials has travelled from China to Minsk, *Belarus Segodnia* reports. Currently the first residents of the park – China Merchants Company – are building a logistical centre. The centre will require 9,000 tonnes of metal, of which 5,500 will be purchased in Belarus and 3,500 shipped from China. The Chinese representative of the company explained that the railroad shipping took 16 days, while a sea route would have taken at least 45. “This is our first experiment of cross-border railroad shipping. This route is one of the logistic corridors of the New Silk Way”, he said.

[European Bank for Reconstruction and Development \(EBRD\) will finance modernisation of water supply systems.](#) The bank will finance water purification projects in Slonim, Viciebsk and Baranavičy, *Respublika* reports. This is a part of a water

reform project, in which Nordic investment bank, Northern Dimension Environmental Partnership and SIDA are also participating with a joint budget of €65m.

The reforms aim to make Belarusian water systems self-repaying and abolish subsidies for water supply to the population which make the system ineffective. By 2017 Belarusians are expected to pay the full price of the water service. The reforms include making communal service independent companies with their own decision making powers and business plans independent from local authorities. EBRD plans to expand the list of cities where such projects will be financed.

[Belarus accelerates WTO accession efforts.](#) *Sielskaja Hazieta* highlights developments on Belarus' path to WTO membership. Recently, the Belarusian delegation took part in the meeting of the WTO Council in Switzerland to discuss foreign trade regulation. Belarus is already forced to work according to the rules and regulations of the WTO, since a number of its Eurasian Economic Union partners are already WTO members. At the same time, however, the country does not receive the benefits that the fully-fledged members of the organisation enjoy.

Companies and industries subsidised by the state remain one of the key problems of Belarus' entry into the WTO, as it prohibits state aid to specific enterprises. Besides, Belarus has identified 1,500 production items that are at particular risk from WTO accession. However, the potential advantages will outweigh these risks, the newspaper believes.

Society

[Belarusian programmers' start-up ranked in the top-5 best innovative ideas for the American National Aeronautics and Space Administration \(NASA\).](#) The international competition brought together 1,300 start-ups from 160 cities worldwide,

writes *Znamia Yunosti*. In Minsk, the hackaton Space Apps Challenge was held in the business incubator of the Hi-Tech Park.

The Belarusian IT-project Wake Up NEO came in the top 25 in the People's Choice category and later reached the final. A quartet of programmers and the head of the Minsk planetarium within 48 hours developed a unique service that helps to calculate and estimate the orbit of an asteroid and determine the danger it poses to the Earth. The winners of the competition will have the opportunity to personally observe the launch of the NASA spacecraft from Cape Canaveral.

[Green activists organise free bike rentals in Minsk.](#)

Respublika reported on the Dobry Rovar (Good Bicycle) project that is entering its second season in Minsk with support from green activists. Volunteers gathered old bikes and bike parts from all over the city and soon created a fleet of 50 bikes. This was the first such project in a former Soviet country and in the first season 3,000 people used the service. Twelve spots with bikes are located at the junction of the city's main streets. To take a bike, one must register via an online system and retrieve a bike from a nearby rental spot.

Environment



[Animal Planet documentary on Belarus' primeval forest hailed.](#)

Holas Radzimy tells the story of the film *The Primeval Forest of Belovezhskaya Pushcha*, made by the TV channel Animal Planet in 2015. Over a month the film crew wandered the primeval forest with the assistance of biologists

from the national park. According to biologist Mikalaj Čarkas, this was the best film in the history of Bielavieža forest filming, as it managed to show the full diversity of its flora and fauna.

The film also recounts the vast conservation works which employees of the National Park are busy with daily. In 2015, a presidential edict granted visa-free three-day entry to foreign citizens if they provide documents confirming the order of tourist services in the Bielavieža National Park.

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