

The first Belarusian river cruise: Belaja Ruś – Belarus Photo Digest

In recent years, the Belarusian leadership has been attempting to create a positive image of the country to attract foreign visitors. So far, Belarus seems to appeal mostly [to Russian tourists](#).

Russians perceive Belarus as a nostalgic holdout of the USSR with quality food and good cheap 'Soviet' service. They see tourism in Belarus more as a trip down 'memory lane'. For several decades, most Belarusian health resorts have relied on Russian tourists for business.

However, the launch of the cruise ship Belaja Ruś is a new pearl for Belarusian tourism. This motor ship is a restored and altered OS-2 technical vessel. Its restoration lasted more than five years, as the project was short of funds, and the total cost of the project remains a secret to this day. Local workers at the ship-repair yard jokingly call it the Titanic.

Local water channels still lack interesting and distinctive infrastructure, but hopefully development will gain momentum as more tourists arrive. The cruise's route will run along the Dnieper-Bug Canal on the rivers Bug, Muchaviec, Pina, and Pripjat, from the city of Brest to Mazyr over 8 days. Over the course of the voyage, tourists will relax and visit [tourist attractions](#) during the daytime and cruise the river at night.

✘ The interior of the ship room. Decorations are mostly of Belarusian origin.

✘ Open deck for evening gatherings and fresh air.

✘ The honorary launch of the ship's maiden voyage took place at the Pinsk shipyard. Local officials and plant workers were invited to the ceremony. Speakers expressed their hope that this new tourist itinerary would be profitable enough for the plant to finally regain its former glory and attract new orders for ship manufacturing.

✘ Officials speaking at the shipyard near the skeleton of a new ship.

✘ In accordance with long-standing tradition, a bottle of champagne was smashed against the ship board. The bottle only shattered on the third attempt.

✘ A blessing by an Orthodox priest is an indispensable part of any ship launching ceremony.

✘ Officials did not reveal the final cost of the ships, saying only that the works lasted for many years and it is hard to calculate the costs.

✘ The city of Pinsk has its own river station with distinctive wooden architecture.

✘ View of Pinsk from the Pina river.

✘ Shipyard workers stare bemusedly at the first tourists.

✘ Although many small technical ships sail along the Pina, the appearance of a tourist motor ship has sparked unprecedented interest.

✘ The captain and his crew set out on their first trial voyage.

✘ A notable marketing move: the name of the ship, Belaja Ruś, is the name of an official pro-government public association, which unites Lukashenka's power vertical and is widely referred to in official ideology.

✘ Local officials and journalists were the first to embark on the ship's trial voyage. Tourists have been able to book cruises since 29 April.

About the photographer: Siarhei Leskiec is a freelance photographer whose work focuses on everyday life, folk traditions, and rituals in the Belarusian countryside. Originally from Maladzeczna region, he received a history degree from the Belarusian State Pedagogical University.

Increase in Illegal Migration to EU via Belarus, Cultural Treasures Restitution – State Press Digest

In a time of economic downturn, the Belarusian authorities fear making any changes to the current political and economic model, which is well regarded in the state press. The Belarusian leadership has rejected market reforms and is resorting to administrative measures, increased regulation and strict discipline.

Major state-sponsored organisation Belaja Ruś, dubbed a “party of the nomenclatura”, will not become a political party in the near future. Lukashenka apparently does not want another powerful political entity to emerge in Belarus.

The border committee reports a twofold increase in illegal migration through the Belarus-EU border in 2015. Yet on the Ukrainian frontier it has observed no serious threats so far.

All of this and more in the latest edition of State Press Digest.

Politics

[Belaja Ruś is not ready to become a political party.](#) *Belarus Segodnya* reports on the meeting of Belaja Ruś, a government organized non-governmental organisation (GoNGO) dubbed a “party of the nomenclatura”. Belaja Ruś chairman [Aliaksandr Radźkoŭ](#), speaking on the organisation's future, suggested that it could become a party as the next stage of its development. However, the logic of the whole Belarusian political system

should be taken into account, and hurrying to address this question could harm the organisation.



According to *Belarus Segodnya*, the organisation should address more acute problems, such as working with youth to prepare new leaders. Belaja Ruś was founded as a GoNGO aimed at supporting President Alexander Lukashenka, but the latter is resisting its attempts to transform into a political party. Lukashenka apparently fears that a party of bureaucracy such as this could become a strong rival in the Belarusian political arena.

[Special police soldiers love art and hate the opposition.](#)

Specnaz journal publishes an interview with Minsk AMAP (special police forces) commander Dzmitry Balaba. The commander tells the story of the AMAP's development since the 1990s, and its role in the elimination of crime and mobs, then widespread in Belarus. He praises Lukashenka for bringing order to the 1990s chaos. Further, he claims that Belarusian police treats offenders very humanely compared to western countries.

The interview rapidly spread across independent media and became a subject of jokes. Balaba said that 70 per cent of AMAP servicemen “have higher education, know foreign languages, and among them are ardent theatregoers, historians, and lovers of 19th century academic painting”. He said he recently found two officers debating on plot lines in Bulgakov’s *Master and Margarita*. AMAP is known for its [rude and sometimes violent](#) treatment of citizens, especially opposition and civil activists.

[Brest region will apply for EU funding.](#) Brest region is eligible for the EU-financed programme of territorial cooperation titled Belarus-Ukraine, writes Brest regional newspaper *Zarya*. The programme has been established in the framework of the EU's Eastern Partnership and has a budget of

€3,3m. It will target cross-border projects, small and medium enterprises, tourism, sport, and the culture and environment spheres. Two regions of Belarus and five regions of Ukraine are eligible for the programme and no partner from the EU is required for its implementation.

Deputy Chairman of Brest Regional Executive Committee Michail Siarkoŭ stressed that the authorities should make every effort to get hold of the funding. They already have a package of proposals in place, aimed particularly at economic development in Brest region.

Economy

[The government should stop reforms and manage the economy manually during the crisis.](#) *Belarus Segodnya* daily reports on Lukashenka's meeting with the government to discuss economic issues. Due to decreasing oil prices Belarus is losing one of its major income sources – oil refining. Moreover, the subsequent shrinking of the Russian market makes export of Belarusian goods at the previous level impossible.

In this situation, however, Lukashenka is not going to change his economic policy. He thinks that any reforms will destabilise the country and that the population will reject them. “The government should not become a kind of firm. It must govern the current difficult situation in a manual mode and demand irreproachable implementation of decisions from all levels of state officials”, Belarusian leader said.

✘ [Belarus and Russia develop geological technologies to reduce dependence on the West.](#) *Soyuz* newspaper reports that a road map for Skif-Medra, a project of the Union State of Belarus and Russia, has finally been presented. It is a joint \$17m Russian-Belarusian project to develop technology capable of advanced identification and evaluation of hydrocarbon stocks. The Russian side of the project argues that it will

alleviate dependence on western technologies in the era of sanctions and import substitution, and ensure the technological security of the Union State of Russia and Belarus.□

Society

[Illegal migration through Belarusian border doubled in 2015.](#)

Soyuznoe Veche newspaper interviewed Deputy Chief of the State Border Committee Ihar Butkievič on the situation on the Belarusian part of the border of Eurasian Economic Union. 8,000 people committed border offences and 900 illegal migrants to the EU were detained in 2015 – a 50 per cent increase compared to 2014. The committee detected 44 channels and detained 79 members of international gangs dealing with illegal migration – again, a twofold increase since 2014.

There have been no serious incidents on the border with Ukraine, but the committee is taking additional measures to prevent penetration of weapons and extremists from Ukraine. Smuggling remains a thriving business on the border. In 2016 the Belarusian border authorities will be equipped with an electronic queue system and continue to create infrastructure for [local border traffic.](#)

Culture

[The problem of restitution of cultural treasures remains on the agenda.](#)

The new Code on Culture will include norms on cultural restitution, *Belarus Segodnya* announces. The government has created a commission to find and return national cultural treasures which were brought out of Belarus illegally, or temporarily evacuated during armed conflicts. In 2015 the authorities created online database [viartannie.by](#) which lists cultural treasures moved abroad. According to

Ministry of Culture official Ihar Čarniaŭski, this worldwide practice shows that unfortunately countries do not return treasures to their places of origin.

However, a good solution to this problem is cooperation and exchange of museum collections with other countries and long term deposit of these collections in Belarusian museums. For example, this February Belarus' national museum will host a Lithuanian-Polish exhibition of the Radziwiłł family, and Vilnius museum in 2015 displayed a belt of Great Duke Vitaŭt from Belarusian collection.

The State 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.

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.

Traffic standstill during Friday rush hour

By the time most Belarusians were trying to go home, the situation was at it worst. This led to a chaos that is extraordinary for Belarus. "The last time I have seen something similar was in the 1980s" says Sasha, who has reached home by walking from the metro station to his homes. Buses stopped running during the afternoon and have not re-started until Saturday evening.

Getting home during rush hour was very difficult for all people and impossible for many. "My colleague left the office at lunch time and got home at 4a.m.", says Vasili. Indeed, circulation on the Minsk beltway came to a standstill during rush hour.

☒ Thousands of cars were stuck in traffic jams. More than 650 traffic jams were registered in Belarus on Friday evening according to Nasha Niva. This is twice more than on a usual day, according to the road police. 3 people died in accidents. In several cases, more than 20 cars were involved in mass accidents.

For some time, the roads out of Minsk were completely closed. It was impossible to get from towns to the periphery of the capital such Dziarzhinsk and Fanipol' to Minsk or back. Circulation on the main street in Minsk, the prospect, came to a complete still-stand during the rush hour.


Many people had to sleep at work or were forced to stay overnight with friends in the centre. As there were no buses running, the metro had to be temporarily closed because it was so overcrowded. Those who could, left their cars at works and tried to get home by public transport. This turned out to be

difficult, however, when only metro and regional trains could operate.

Thousands forced to spend the night in their cars

The roof of a car park near Hotel Minsk in the very centre of the capital fell down on account of the masses of snow covering it. The plastic roof buried around 30 cars but fortunately did not hurt a single person.

While in Minsk, inconveniences consisted mainly in perturbed traffic and the impossibility to reach home, by Friday evening more than 530 villages and towns in Belarus were left without electricity. Up to Saturday evening, 26 villages are still without electricity in Brest region. This region suffered especially from heavy snow falls and wind: 82 cars were freed from snow drifts. 320 persons, among them 37 children were in the cars. None of them was injured.

On Saturday, although the snow fall had stopped, Minsk was  quieter than ever before. Around 20 000 employees and parts of the army that were called to support the city administration to clean the roads. The news agency BelTA informs that more than 900 snow clearing vehicles were employed to clear the capital.

Most people had to stay at home in the "sleeping districts" during the day. While even the courtyards and central parks had been cleaned from snow during the day, there were still no buses running or streets cleared in the suburbs.

Some shops stayed closed, as for example the Central Fashion Market. However, fresh bread and meat was delivered to the shops in the centre of Minsk.

Public life had to be postponed as well. All Maslenica events (Maslenica is the holiday of winter farewell) as well as football, hockey and basketball matches are to take place on Sunday instead of Saturday. The soccer team of the "Football

Club Homel" had to spend 28 hours on the way to the quarter finals of the cup of Belarus that was supposed to take place in Minsk on Saturday. The players spent the night in their coach and finished their journey by regional train on Saturday morning.

International airport closed on Friday

While international airport Minsk II was closed for several hours on Friday, all passengers that were supposed to land in Minsk on Friday arrived there on Saturday morning. As planes could not touch down in Minsk, they had to be directed to Homel or Kyiv.

700 passengers had to to spend the night at the airport in Minsk. During the day, around 2,000 people were waiting to fly to their destinations. Unfortunately, the Belarusian national carrier Belavia did not accept that flying would not be possible on Friday and refused to inform passengers about what was going to happen according to a news report on tut.by.



According to the Minsk city executive committee, the roads leading out of Minsk were opened only for a limited circulation in order to allow the vehicles to clear away the snow. This is also true for the majority of roads in the Minsk region. On the M4 from Minsk to Mogilev, there were still more than 30 km of traffic jam on Saturday evening.

For the upcoming days, the weather forecast promises less snow fall but still icy temperatures. The Minsk city administration did a remarkable job in clearing the centre from snow. But next time they should clean the roads on the outskirts of Minsk before clearing the parks and courtyards of privileged houses in the centre.

Nadine Lashuk