

Visa-free stay increases, cooperation with China intensifies, and Slavianski Bazaar – Belarus State Press Digest

Belarus increases the term of visa-free stay of foreign citizens to 30 days. Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makei meets Latvian Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkēvičs to discuss the expected visit of Alexander Lukashenka to Latvia.

Belarus boosts economic cooperation with China and continues petty trade disputes with Russia. Meanwhile, the Russian ambassador to Belarus praises economic cooperation between Belarus and Russia. He also blames Russian counterparties of assisting re-export of sanctioned goods from the European Union to Russia through the Belarusian border.

Alexander Lukashenka demands reforms at the Academy of Management under the President of the Republic of Belarus. Vitebsk hosts an annual Slavianski Bazaar festival.

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

Politics

[Latvian Foreign Ministry prepares for the visit of Alexander Lukashenka](#), reports *Belarus Segodnya* newspaper. On July 19-20, Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makei met his Latvian counterpart Edgars Rinkēvičs in Riga and conducted talks on inter-state visits and economic cooperation between Belarus and Latvia. According to Makei, joint projects in IT might

become “ground-breaking” for Belarussian-Latvian collaboration.

[Belarus increases visa-free stay of foreign citizens from 5 to 30 days](#) provided they enter and leave via the National Airport Minsk, reports *Belarus Segodnya*. Alexander Lukashenka signed the corresponding decree on July 24. For visa-free entry to Belarus, foreign citizens have to provide a valid passport, financial means (at least \$25 for each day of stay), and a medical travel insurance with a minimum medical coverage of €10,000. The visa-free entry rules do not extend to any other international border checkpoints or airports of the country.

[Alexander Lukashenka denies false rumours about his stroke.](#) On 1 August, Alexander Lukashenka observed the grain harvesting campaign in Minsk district and talked to field workers and journalists, thus demonstrating being in good health, according to the report of *the official Internet Portal of the President of Belarus*.

Economy

[Alexander Lukashenka praises economic cooperation between Belarus and China](#) during the meeting with Chang Zhenming, the Chairman of Board of Directors of Chinese CITIC Group, reports *Belarus Segodnya*. According to Lukashenka, Belarus should establish a similar state company functioning in accordance with the CITIC’s principles.

CITIC Group Corporation Ltd. remains a state-owned investment company of the People’s Republic of China since 1979. CITIC’s major aims include attraction and utilization of foreign capital, an introduction of advanced technologies, and adoption of the advanced international practice in operation and management. CITIC Group has already implemented several projects in Belarus, including the creation of the first

Belarusian automobile plant. Recently CITIC Group has invested into the creation of a high-tech agro-industrial production in Belarus.



The new Vitebsk hydroelectric power station built with the help of China's investment.
Source: Vitebskenergo

On 31 July, [the Chinese contractor handed over the symbolic key from the Vitebsk hydropower station to Belarusian engineers](#), reports *Belarus Segodnya*. The construction of the Vitebsk hydroelectric power station, the most powerful in the country, began in 2012 after the agreement between China's National Electric Engineering Company and Vitebskenergo. The Vitebsk hydropower station started its operation in 2017. According to Mikhail Luzin, the General Director of Vitebskenergo, the new hydropower station will help to ensure Belarusian energy security.

Meanwhile, [Belarus and Russia continue petty trade disputes](#). On 24 July, the Russian regulator Rosselkhoz nadzor banned the import of Belarusian champignons, reported *Soyuz* newspaper. The Russian regulator uncovered the cheating scheme of marking Polish-grown champignons as Belarusian ones during the

inspection. Belarus, on the other hand, restricted the import of pork from several Russian regions due to the African swine fever.

[The Russian Ambassador in Belarus acknowledges trade disputes, yet calls for further economic integration.](#) In an interview to *Soyuznoe Veche* newspaper, Alexander Surikov blamed Russian counterparties of assisting re-export of sanctioned goods from the European Union through the Belarusian border. At the same time, Surikov maintained that the Belarusian side illegally provided them with fake supporting documents. Still, Belarus remains Russia's fourth major trade partner. Hence, according to the Ambassador, the countries should "engage in deeper economic integration" and "push their joint enterprises into Eurasian and world markets".

Education

[Alexander Lukashenka demands reforms of Belarusian higher education.](#) In particular, Lukashenka expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of graduates of the Academy of Management under the President of Belarus, reports *Belarus Segodnya*. According to Lukashenka, no "unsuitable people for a career in management" should enter the Academy after the 1st of September this year. The Academy's rector Gennady Palchik reported on the conducted optimization of curriculum and the number of students.



Marcel Rosca, the winner of Slavianski Bazaar 2018 annual song contest. Source: BELTA

Culture

[The XXVII International Festival of Arts “Slavianski Bazaar in Vitebsk”](#) announced winners of the annual pop contest, reports *Vitebsky Kurier newspaper*. The Grand Prix won a tenor from Romania Marcel Rosca. Amre (Ernar Sadirbaev), Kazakhstan’s contestant, received the first prize, despite obtaining a similar score with the winner. Mila Nikitic, Ukraine’s contestant, took the second prize.

[Hrodna’s women launch “Femininity flashmob”](#), reports *Evening Hrodna newspaper*. On 1 August, a group of well-dressed female participants gathered in the city centre and spread out flowers to passing by women. The flashmob intended to raise awareness about gender issues in Belarus and encourage women to share the burden of domestic work with men more actively.

The State Press Digest is based on the 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.

Eastern Belarus: What To See And Do

The capital city Minsk generally marks the limit of ambition for many first-time visitors to Belarus. Last month, however, we took a glimpse at some of the delights awaiting discovery in Western Belarus beyond the boundaries of the M9, the Minsk orbital motorway.

This article, the second of a two-parter, introduces the visitor to the Eastern half of the country. Here stand the cities of Homieĺ (Gomel) and Viciebsk (Vitebsk), famed for the richness of its arts and culture heritage.

Elsewhere lie the historic settlements of Polack (Polotsk, the oldest town in Belarus and one of the oldest in all of Eastern Europe) and Turaŭ (Turov, spiritual heart of the Paliessie), as well as the small town of Vetka with its superb Folk Arts Museum.

Cities: the arts, parks, rivers and vistas

With a population close on 500,000, **Homieĺ** can justly claim to be the second city of Belarus. 300 kilometres from Minsk and close to the borders with Russia and Ukraine down in the south-eastern corner of the country, its location high above

the western bank of the Sož river gave the city significant importance during the Great Patriotic War. Today, all is hustle and bustle as befits its status.



Yet oases of calm do exist, chief among them being the lovely **Rumiancaŭ-Paškievič Park**, behind the statue of Lenin at the top of Savieckaja Street. Whatever the season, the opportunity to promenade here should not be missed.

The sumptuous 18th century [palace](#) designed by Count Rumyantsev stands in 25 hectares of beautiful parkland, from which extensive elevated views east over the river afford a fine panorama. Within the park also look to find the early 19th century **Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul** and nearby the **Rumiancaŭ mausoleum**, an excellent photo opportunity.

270 kilometres north-east of Minsk on the banks of the Western Dzvina river stands the elegant city of **Viciebsk**, birthplace and long the home of artist **Marc Chagall**. The excellent [museum](#) devoted to his works holds a lofty position on the river's eastern bank, just across a pretty square from the 18th century **Russian Governor's Palace**.

A few moments' walk south brings the visitor to the magnificent **Uspenski Cathedral of the Assumption**, one of the city's highlights. The view from the balustrade takes in the whole of the lower city, including the site of old **Jewish Viciebsk**.

Little of the original architecture survived the horrors of the Nazi occupation, though one notable building that remains is the **House of Marc Chagall**, now a lovely museum telling the story of the artist's life. Just a few hundred metres along Pakroŭskaja Street from here stands the **Chagall monument** in the old market square.

The popular and much-loved [Slavianski \(Slavic\) Bazaar](#), an international song and culture festival that takes place annually in the open air in late July and early August, beautifully articulates the city's relationship with the arts. For one glorious week in high summer, the city morphs into a gigantic street party, with 5,000 artists performing at the purpose-built domed amphitheatre on Frunze Street, as well as (seemingly) on every street corner.

'The city of all Belarusian cities': walking in the footsteps of history

No visit to Vitebsk should pass without an excursion to **Polack**, the oldest and one of the most attractive towns in the entire country. Only 105 kilometres to the north-west and birthplace of famed poet and teacher Simeon of Polack, as well as the great humanist and translator of the Bible Francysk Skaryna, a single walking tour presents the visitor with an opportunity to explore the town's riches on foot. One such tour is described in the third edition of my [Bradt Travel guide](#) to Belarus

However you do it, be sure not to miss the stunning [Cathedral of St Sophia](#), first built in the 11th century, the magnificent **Convent of St Euphrosyne**, with its cathedral and two churches, and finally the statuary and monuments to be found the length

of **Francysk Skaryna Avenue**. Bring your walking shoes and luxuriate in a slow meander through this beautiful town.

Icons, manuscripts and rušniki

At first sight, the small town of **Vetka** appears unremarkable. Founded in 1685 by “Old Believers” (the religious group disenfranchised and persecuted by Catherine the Great and others for failure to accept significant reforms within the Russian Orthodox Church), it stands on the eastern bank of the Sož river, just 22 kilometres north-east of Homiel ☐.

But this sleepy provincial town is home to the splendid [Folk Arts Museum](#), where exhibits of the highest quality recount the story of the unique culture and history of the region. Ancient artefacts, icons, manuscripts, traditional costumes and woven ‘rušniki’ (embroidered towels with deep ritualistic and ceremonial significance) fill each room.



Old Believers crafted many of the icons in the 17th century, while the rushkini come from the villages of the region. At the school in the nearby village of **Niehliubka**, pupils still learn to weave on wooden looms made to the exact design of those dating from the 1600s. The headteacher is always glad to welcome visitors.

'The land of fogs and bogs'

The area to the south of the M10 motorway linking the cities of Homiel and Brest (the mysterious, mystical and fabled **Paliessie**) holds considerable appeal to lovers of nature and the great outdoors. Known colloquially as 'the land of fogs and bogs', the fragile balance of the eco-system of the marshy lowlands here has been difficult to maintain over the centuries, but work now undertaken at **Prypiacki National Park** helps to maintain its unique biological diversity.

Do visit **Turaŭ**, the main town and spiritual heart of the Paliessie. First mentioned in chronicles in 980, some historians place its importance in Old Russia second only to Kiev. The fine **nature museum** here explains all the visitor needs to know about the history and ecology of the Paliessie.

Visitors from outside the country will always find that the attractions of the capital city Minsk are many and varied. But as with Western Belarus, those with an instinct for discovery who venture East beyond the boundary of the Minsk orbital road will uncover many treasures. Be bold and inquisitive. You will not be disappointed.

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