

Supporting EU unity, Bielaja Ruś congress, new unemployment policy, KGB name will remain – Belarus state press digest

Belarus strongly supports EU unity and reiterates that the Eastern Partnership should not become a dividing zone between the European Union and the East. Bielaja Ruś will not become a political party any time soon. The KGB should not change its name, Lukashenka argues.

A new unemployment policy responds to the unpopular 'social parasite tax.' Belarus may rival the Russian energy sector after the nuclear power plant (NPP) opens. Foreign investors reluctant to embrace the heavy social obligations imposed by the government. Belarusian workers disappearing in Russia.

All this in the new edition of the Belarusian state press digest.

Foreign policy and domestic politics

[Belarus strongly support the EU's unity.](#) Alexander Lukashenka met the EU's Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy & Enlargement Negotiations, Johannes Hahn, reports *Belarus Segodnia*. The Belarusian leader expressed his firm support of a strong and unified European Union. 'The European Union is one of the most powerful pillars on our planet, and the destruction of this major pillar in a multipolar world would destroy not only global security but also the global economic

system.'

Speaking about the Eastern Partnership, Lukashenka expressed his wish that it were more practice-oriented. 'We cannot allow the Eastern Partnership to become a purely political organisation, and God forbid it to become a dividing zone between the European Union and Russia, China and the East as a whole.' Lukashenka also thanked the commissioner for assisting in the negotiations on Belarus's accession to the World Trade Organisation.

[The KGB should not change its name, says Lukashenka.](#) Meeting the chairman of the State Security Committee (KGB), [Valiery Vakuľčyk](#), Lukashenka said that retaining the historical name of the Committee was the right decision. The current generation of security officers should not be ashamed of the name, which fully reflects the tasks assigned to the agency, reports *Belarus Segodnia*.

The president especially noted the KGB's contribution to the fight against corruption: 'No one did more than the KGB in the area of large-scale corruption... The ruthless struggle against corruption protects our state from disintegration and internal conflicts. Our people will not tolerate corruption, it will surely lead to disorder.' Lukashenka regrets that other law enforcement bodies do not keep up with the KGB's efforts in combating corruption.



Hienadz Davydzka, the newly-appointed chairman of Bielaja Rus'.
Photo: sb.by

[Bielaja Rus' will not become a political party any time soon.](#)

On 19 January, the Republican Public Association 'Bielaja Rus'', considered the 'association of the establishment,' held its 3rd congress. The organisation summed up its work during 2012-2017 and approved new versions of its charter and programme, writes *Belarus Segodnia*. The congress elected [Hienadz Davydzka](#), the head of state media holding Belteleradiocompany, as Bielaja Rus's new chairman. Attention once again turned to the long-discussed issue of transforming the organisation into a political party.

According to the head of the presidential administration, [Natalia Kačanava](#), this step would not be appropriate at the present time. 'Bielaja Rus' or some other public organisation will become a party when members of the organisation demand it. This we have not seen so far.' The newly elected chairman agreed with her point: 'The goal of any

party is the struggle for power,' said Davydzka. 'But Bielaja Ruś struggles only for the prosperity of our society. It is an army of patriots who work to consolidate and develop civil society.'

Economy and social policy

[Belarus introduced a new unemployment policy.](#) The government issued Decree No. 1 to tackle unemployment in place of the notorious 'social parasite tax.' The decree provides for the establishment of permanent commissions with local authorities. The commissions will approach people individually, study their personal circumstances, and render employment assistance.

The state will strengthen retraining for the unemployed, offer temporary employment, and teach the basics of entrepreneurship. At the same time, the decree provides for the equal social responsibility of all citizens. Those who do not want to work will have to pay full reimbursement of the costs that are subsidised by the state: transport, education, healthcare, housing and communal services, informs *Hrodzienskaja Praŭda*.

[Foreign investors do not accept the heavy social obligations imposed by Belarus.](#) In 2017, Lukashenka approved a list of 10 large industrial enterprises for privatisation by Chinese investors with certain preconditions: preserving the production profile, technical re-equipment and modernisation, expansion of the product range, and maintaining salaries at the level of the region's average.



Photo: Belta

Zongsheng Corporation showed interest in purchasing 60-75% of Homsielmaš machine industry plant. However, the Chinese required that the Belarusian government reduced the number of workers by at least a third and paid the plant's debts before the deal. Besides, the corporation insisted on replacing the management at the enterprise with Chinese managers. The Belarusian side suspended negotiations as a result of conditions it considered unacceptable, reports *Respublika*.

[Belarus may become a rival to Russian energy sector after NPP launch.](#) In the pages of *Minsk Times*, the leading analyst at the Centre for National Energy Security, Ihar Juškoŭ, analyses how the energy market will change after the opening of the Belarusian NPP. The first reactor of the NPP will service the domestic market, while the second will export energy to the EU.

Belarus will not compete with Russia as an electricity exporter because Russia does not sell energy on these markets.

However, Belarusian energy may rival Russian gas in both domestic and EU markets. The NPP is expected to replace 4.5bn cubic metres of gas annually – representing a huge loss for Russia's Gazprom.

[Belarusian workers continue to disappear in Russia.](#) In 2017 the Viciebsk regional police received 130 requests to search for Belarusians who disappeared after leaving the country to work abroad. The region has one of the highest rates of labour emigration to Russia. Eleven residents of Viciebsk region died, while the fate of 32 people remains unknown, informs *Sielskaja Hazieta*.

The official police representative, Volha Škuratava, points out that often people bring misfortune on themselves. After earning their first salary, they begin to drink, lose their documents, or stop contacts with their relatives. Finally, some ask for help by trying to contact either relatives or the embassy and thus get out of trouble. However, others turn to drink and begging or fall victim to accidents. People freeze, poison themselves with bad alcohol or become enslaved by criminal groups.

The state press digest is based on a review of state-controlled publications in Belarus. Freedom of the press in Belarus remains restricted and state media primarily conveys the point of view of the Belarusian authorities. This review attempts to give the English-speaking audience a better understanding of how the Belarusian state media shape public opinion in the country.

Against all odds: raising a large family in Belarus

On 27 October 2016, the first Belarusian Nobel Prize winner Sviatlana Alexievič made a donation to the Ravenka family, a

couple in Slonim with six children.

She deliberately made her act public, as discussions of this particular case in the media are telling of the many challenges faced by large families in Belarus.

Despite some state support, large families in Belarus struggle to survive financially. Many also suffer from stereotypes and prejudices: some view families with more than two children as a burden on the social system or, even worse, as intentional parasites.

Moreover, economic insecurity, combined with the [poor housing situation](#), are significant obstacles for Belarusians considering having more children. These hurdles threaten to make large families extinct. Even though the birth rate has grown in recent years, experts anticipate a decrease in the Belarusian population in the future.

Grim demographic scenarios



By October 2016, the population of Belarus comprised 9,505,200 people. On 17 November 2016, the UNFPA Belarus, in cooperation with the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, presented a study on possible demographic scenarios for the country.

Most of them predicted that the economy would continue to stagnate, keeping the birth rate low. According to the worst case scenario, the population of Belarus could fall by half a million people by 2030.

Among the major factors contributing to the negative trends, experts identified depopulation, rapid ageing, low birth rates (which do not guarantee population replacement rates), and uneven distribution of the population throughout the country.

For instance, over the past 17 years, the Belarusian regions have lost about 10 per cent of their population. Currently, roughly 20 per cent of the population [resides in Minsk](#); this is slightly more than 1,900,000 people, not taking into account those who stay in the capital temporarily.

On top of these negative demographic trends, the 21st century is transforming social perceptions of the family structure. People no longer prioritise having children. The recent increase in birth rates is likely a short term phenomenon, as the state will not be capable of supporting such trends financially.

Experts agree that in the long term, negative demographic trends could increase pressure on the social system and contribute to GDP decline. Thus, Belarus still needs to develop an effective approach towards sustaining its birth rate.

Benefits and incentives vs. harsh realities

Belarus has been actively promoting the image of a large family since the early 2000s. A family qualifies for the status of 'large family' if it has three or more children. Currently, there are over 62,000 such families. The state offers them a number of benefits and financial incentives. In 2015, it introduced a [family capital programme](#), offering a one-time allowance of \$10,000 to families who decide to have or adopt a third child.

Other benefits for large families include tax incentives and special low interest mortgage loans. The state also compensates mortgage loan payments, depending on the number of children in the family. For instance, if a family has four and more under-age children, the state covers 100 per cent of

their loan payments.

Currently, more than 4,800 large families live in Minsk. If they decide to build their own house, they qualify for priority in distribution of land plots within city limits. However, in response to recent hotline questions, Head of the Minsk Executive Committee [Andrej Šorac](#) stated that individual construction would not be possible for large families in Minsk anymore.

He justified this by pointing to the lack of available plots. Ironically, only a month ago, the Minsk municipality did not have this land allocation problem when deputy prime minister [Natalia Kačanava](#) decided to build a house in the elite suburb of Drazdy.

Lukashenka has stated that Belarus needs at least 25–30 million people to secure full economic independence

Lukashenka, the president of Belarus, has stated on many occasions that Belarus needs at least 25–30 million people to secure full economic independence. However, large families are not likely to become common in Belarus. Fighting social rejection and bureaucratic hypocrisy is only part of the problem.

Political analyst [Valer Karbalevič](#) pointed out that birth rates are falling all over Europe, and Belarus is victim to the same trends. Moreover, he pointed out that Belarus in particular faces a number of challenges in connecting with specific social factors. These include an uncertain economic situation, unemployment, small salaries, poor housing, and migration. In the long run, these factors can only exacerbate the demographic decline in Belarus.

Callous society and a scrutinising state

Much like the Ravenka family from Slonim, which struggled to find money to make their initial mortgage payment, families with kids often face financial difficulties. On 16 November 2016, one of the leading official newspapers, *Belarus Segodnia*, told the story of Aliaksandr Pastolau, a father of four. After losing his job in Minsk, he decided to downshift and moved to a village in the Dokšycy district (Viciebsk province).

In August 2016, Pastolau found a house to rent and started planning to launch a small family-run farm. However, not more than a month later, social services and the local school authorities started to frequent the house. They claimed that Pastolau's children were not receiving adequate care and attention. Threats of termination of parental rights forced the family to return to Minsk.

state institutions treat large families with a heavy dose of legalism and scrutiny

In the Pastolau's case, safety concerns regarding heating in the house prompted local authorities to choose an overbearing manner of communication with the newcomers. Eventually, this provoked a conflict. This incident illustrates how state institutions treat large families with a heavy dose of legalism and scrutiny. Often, they use the well-being of the children as a justification to interfere in family matters.

Moreover, ordinary Belarusians can be suspicious of large families. Having more than two children may lead to questions about whether the family is deliberately seeking social benefits from the state or is overly religious. Even the ideal large family of famous Belarusian actor Pavel Harlančuk, who

raised five children, gave rise to such commentary from the public.

Having a large family needs to become a more attractive option for wider sections of the population. Ideally, Belarus needs to develop more affordable housing programmes, expand the childcare system, and ensure that families do not feel economically insecure.

Last but not least, the state should also pay attention to the change of attitudes to large families in society. Sweden, for instance, is a good model. It has promoted baby-friendly public spaces and improved the reintegration of new mothers into social life.

Pro-life vs pro-choice in Belarus

On 3 October 2016, women in neighbouring Poland went on a nation-wide strike protesting a notorious law criminalising abortion. This ongoing controversy has also provoked public debate in Belarus.

Unlike Poland, Belarus does not infringe on women's reproductive rights. Its legislation guarantees the right for every woman to decide on motherhood herself.

However, since late September, the Belarusian media have been actively discussing the pro-life and pro-choice standpoints. These debates reveal that society remains divided on the issue of abortion.

Is Belarus turning pro-life?

In 2013, Belarus revised its [abortion legislation](#), yet it still remains very liberal in comparison to Poland; women can decide for themselves whether they want to become mothers. Current laws allow abortions until up to the 12th week of pregnancy. Under certain conditions, such as rape, it is also possible up until the 22nd week of pregnancy.

Since the 2000s, the number of abortions in Belarus has declined steadily. According to the National Statistical Committee, the current abortion rate in Belarus is about 24.7 abortions per 100 live births. This is a significant improvement compared to 2000, when the rate was 128.7 abortions per 100 live births. Belarus's neighbours display similar trends of declining abortions.



Since 2014, psychological consultations have been a requirement for all women who wish to terminate their pregnancy. Currently, such counselling leads to around 20 per cent of women changing their minds about having an abortion. Doctors in Belarus can also refuse to perform the procedure, reserving the right to redirect women to a different medical professional.

Concerned about the [negative demographic trends](#) and low birthrate in Belarus, the state also supports other pro-life initiatives. Besides counselling, it has introduced incentives for families with children and sponsors awareness campaigns. For instance, in 2015, the National Programme of the Demographic Safety of Belarus organised events such as “a week without abortions” at selected hospitals across the country.

Facing the choices

In the pro-life camp, Belarusian conservative forces have been teaming up with religious institutions to protest abortions. In recent media debates on abortion, the Belarusian Christian Democrats in particular have reiterated their uncompromising position as the country's major pro-life advocates.

On 23 September 2016, Volha Seviarynec, married to leading Belarusian Christian Democrat [Pavel Seviarynec](#), publicly shared her personal story about deciding against having an abortion under circumstances in which a majority of people would have opted for one.

✘ During the 12th week of pregnancy, Volha's child was diagnosed with a serious genetic disease known as Patau syndrome. Even though doctors strongly advised them to terminate the pregnancy, the couple refused. After the birth, their child survived for only eight days. Volha acted in this ordeal according to her faith, and her going public with the story sent a powerful pro-life message.

A few days later, tut.by published a series of interviews with Anna Gerina, coordinator of the charitable organisation Genom. The foundation was established by the families of terminally ill children with rare genetic neuromuscular diseases. Anna's story is also a tragic one, as she turned her life around fighting for her daughter Yana, diagnosed with spinal muscular atrophy at the age of eight months.

According to Gerina, there are no statistics available on the number of people suffering from this disease in Belarus. Moreover, the country does not have a single doctor specialising in such cases as her daughter's. The life expectancy of these children remains low and the state does not invest resources into programmes that could help them.

Anna too believes in God, yet she is on the pro-choice side.

In her opinion, no mother with prior knowledge of the diagnosis would consciously choose to give birth to a child with this kind of genetic disease: “It is not for the sake of the woman, but for the sake of the child.”

Why abortion?

According to Sviatlana Prakapenka, chief of the maternity centre in Polatsk, two of the major reasons for having an abortion in Belarus are social and material insecurity. For many, it still remains one of the main forms of birth control, as about 50 per cent of unplanned pregnancies end with an abortion in Belarus.

Husbands and partners often shy away from responsibility, refusing to take part in the decision to terminate the pregnancy. Thus, the woman alone bears the pressure of family planning.



The Belarusian media regularly report gruesome cases of discarded and abandoned babies. Just recently, on 19 September, a 28 year old mother dropped her newborn daughter down the garbage chute of a residential building in the Minsk suburb of Machulishchy. The child, who was just three hours old, miraculously survived falling from the seventh floor.

Hospitals still do not offer baby-boxes, which could help save the lives of unwanted newborns and give their mothers a way out. On 21 September, the newly elected Belarusian parliament declared its intention to discuss introducing such an initiative, which already exists in Russia and Ukraine. Civil society activist Nasta Dashkevich pointed out that along with baby boxes, the state could also guarantee the right to anonymous childbirth, ease adoption laws, and foster a more child-friendly mentality.

However, presidential decree Nr. 18, adopted in 2006, might obstruct the baby-box initiative. It imposes certain obligations for women considering leaving their newborn in the care of the state: she must reimburse the costs of the child's upbringing and education. Thus, women with low incomes are more likely to choose abortion over preserving a life.

Offering counselling for women who are considering terminating their pregnancy remains a short-term fix. In the long run, the state should invest resources in promoting a healthy lifestyle and responsible family planning. Demystification of modern hormonal contraceptives could also help women avoid difficult choices. Ideally, these topics should also become a part of the educational system.

Is Belarus Turning away from the Socially-Oriented State Model?

On 5 August 2016, Andrei Labovich, First Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Protection of Belarus, said that the new Law on Employment would tackle the problem of the 'professional' unemployed.

Simultaneously, in August 2016 the National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus released data on employment figures in the sphere of industry for 2011-2016. According to this information, during the last five years this sector alone has witnessed nearly 150,000 job cuts.

Such a clear contradiction raises a question about the future of the Belarusian social model. Does it mean that Belarus

plans to give up on its artificially created 99.5% employment rate and what would the state do with those who lost their jobs in times of deep economic crisis?

Being unemployed in Belarus: nothing to envy

Belarus has one of the strictest systems of social protection for unemployed people in Europe. Unemployment benefits remain ridiculously low (near \$20 per month) and not every jobless person is even eligible for them.

The country has always prided itself on its [artificially low unemployment rate](#) (near 0.5%). Employment in state sector, which dominates the economy, has played a significant role in maintaining political and ideological control over the people.

It also served as an additional channel for allocation public resources for the local elite and so called 'red directors' of state enterprises. A large amount of people working in Russia, as well as a developed informal economy, have helped promote such a policy.

The economic crisis changed everything

Experts claim that since 2015 Belarusians have been looking to find jobs in the EU rather than Russia. According to Yandex data, the number of job requests in Poland by Belarusians in 2015 grew fivefold compared to 2014. However, due to language barriers, visa regulations and legislative peculiarities, the EU has failed to become a full-pledged substitute for Russia when it comes to employment.

Unfortunately, the official statistics fail to demonstrate the real number of Belarusians employed in Russia. However, staffing companies and many individuals claim that salaries for Belarusians in Russia fell threefold or more.

The Belarusian authorities continue to hide real unemployment figures, reporting one percent at the end of 2015. Moreover, numerous reports exist that local authorities prevent (or prohibit) unemployment registration in order to maintain 'good' statistics.

Nevertheless, even the official statistics have recognised two major changes: the number of job vacancies are now half as much as even the number of registered unemployed, and the number of job cuts significantly exceeds the number of new vacancies.

But will this become an engine for social unrest? This seems unlikely.

Less fear of social protests, more support for security agencies

After the crisis of 2011 the authorities faced a dilemma. Maintaining the same number of employees became too expensive, while growing unemployment risked causing social protests and even riots. However, two main changes occurred after this crisis.

Firstly, the Belarusian authorities are much less wary of possible riots after the successful suppression of the so called '[silent protests](#)' in summer 2011. Authorities believe that people's standard of living means much less than number and welfare of security forces. The fact that these agencies

faced no serious cuts – neither financial nor personnel – in 2011-2016 proves this point.

Secondly, the government has started to pay much more [attention to the informal economy](#) by considering it a source of additional revenue.

Deus ex machina – tax on unemployment

In April 2015 the president signed his famous Decree '[On preventing social sponging](#)' as a further step towards the rollback of total employment policy. □Some experts believe that the document aimed to prevent dismissals from state enterprises because of low salaries, as well as to struggle against 'shadow' business activities.

This seems only partly true. First of all, the Decree failed to prevent further dismissals. Moreover, the national Statistical Committee confirms that the total number of jobs cut in the country has even grown in December 2015 – June 2016. The table below demonstrates this idea:



These figures illustrate the growing rates of job cuts within a relatively short period of time. For example, in these seven months the sphere of industry witnessed 21% of all job cuts during the last six years.

Secondly, the Decree failed to struggle against 'shadow' business activities. Authorities claim the number of unofficially employed people to be 400,000 – 500,000, while up to July 2016 only 4,000 people registered to pay this tax. The actual number of eligible tax-payers remains unclear till now.

Modern slavery?

Unemployment in Belarus threatens authorities in two different ways: possible social protests and 'brain drain' from vitally important spheres. While the first risk is proving to be less real and significant, the second one is much more concerning for Belarusian officials.

Thus, according to the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, only Minsk city requires more than 1,500 doctors and nurses, and the staffing level at first aid services amounts to only 67%. The number of vacancies exceeds the number of registered unemployed in the sphere of medical care by 81 times.

Lack of professionals may result in a further degradation of more or less profitable enterprises, export-oriented plants, strategic infrastructure etc. Moreover, such specialists have more opportunities to find a job in the informal sector or abroad. The Decree could become an effective instrument to prevent such dismissals.

It seems that Belarusian authorities are set on a course to further toughen the conditions of employment. Completely bankrupt enterprises risk being closed, which would result in people having no chance to obtain appropriate social security. Employees at relatively successful or important enterprises have to put up with lower salaries, longer working hours and more control.

Crushed hopes

The World Bank in its Belarus Economic Update for April, 2016 confirms that: 'The labour market is under stress due to weak performance of the construction, industrial and agricultural sectors. State-owned enterprises as a whole did not shed

labour, but rather shortened the working week.'

Many experts have proposed that authorities promote more support for the unemployed, in particular by raising the amount of employment insurance to at least around \$80 per month. These experts argued that given the increasing job cuts and lack of financial resources it would be cheaper for the government to support the unemployed than to sustain economically ineffective enterprises.

The new Law on Employment crashed these hopes of liberalisation of unemployment protection policy. Moreover, the authorities chose the worst of both worlds – no jobs, no opportunities for self-employment, no social protection, but strong police and security agencies always ready to suppress any protests and feeling no lack in financing or vacancies.

Aliaksandr Filipau

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Belarus – No Longer a Heaven for Mothers?

On 13 January 2016, Kiryl Rudy, an economic adviser to the Belarusian president and a representative of a young cohort of a [pro-reform current](#) within the Belarusian political milieu, suggested a decrease in the duration of maternity leave.

Currently Belarus allow mothers to take time off work for three years, with their workplace secured. This is the longest

paid maternity leave in the post-Soviet space. Rudy argued that reducing the paid maternity leave to two years instead of three would lead to annual growth of GDP by 2.3 per cent.

Considering the challenges that the Belarusian [economy is facing in 2016](#), with falling oil prices and the ongoing recession, the state is trying to find ways to optimise the inefficient social security system as a means of stabilising its expenditures.

Rudy's suggestion sparked a lively discussion in the media. It reflected the negative reactions of most Belarusians to the proposed amendment.

Motherhood and benefits

Mothers and babies in particular receive a number of benefits. The one-time family allowance for the birth of a child is about \$750, while the average salary is around \$340 per month. The state guarantees a maternity allowance (about \$70) to every woman, provided she reports her pregnancy before reaching her 12 week term and follows medical advice. Finally, women receive 100 per cent paid maternity leave of 126 days during the final months of pregnancy and following childbirth.

✘ New mothers can stay on paid maternity leave for up to three years. In this case, the monthly allowances for the newborn depend on the average salary in the country. Currently, the monthly allowance for the first child equals 35 per cent of the average salary, or slightly over \$115. The monthly allowance for each subsequent child lies at 40 per cent, or about \$130.

According to the UN, maternal mortality rates in Belarus are among the lowest in the world. Mothers can also be confident that they will not lose their jobs after having a baby. However, the family-friendly image of the country is not

entirely reflective of reality. Child allowances barely cover basic needs, leaving families with babies in a disadvantaged position.

2015 Family Capital program

To improve the [demographic situation](#) in the country, in 2015 Belarus launched a 5-year family capital program. It supports families raising more than two children, providing them with a one-time cashless allowance of \$10,000. By January 2016, the government had approved 11,600 families for this program.

It is too early to tell whether this new initiative will be successful. For the government it is a good publicity move. However, it does not provide an immediate solution for people who choose to become parents.

The experiences of pregnant women, particularly in provincial Belarusian hospitals, indicate a number of problems, often discouraging women from giving birth. Inadequate facility conditions along with rude and callous personnel turn childbirth into a traumatising ordeal, as in the [recent case](#) of Maryna Michnievič from Babrujsk which went viral on social networks in Belarus last month.

Realities of the Belarusian social state model

In 2015 Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenka promised full support to mothers and babies. However, with the October 2015 presidential elections in the past and the economy in recession, the government is now more willing to reconsider the system of social support, including the terms of the maternity leave.

Experiences of young families also show that many women return to their work duties sooner in order to keep their families afloat. The monthly child allowance combined with the salary of the partner (provided the woman is not a single mother) is not sufficient to guarantee subsistence.

[The housing issue](#) adds to the financial struggles of young families: many do not own any real estate and are forced either to live with their relatives or to rent an apartment. Renting expenditure can range from \$100 to \$400 per month.

Finally, those women who use up their full maternity leave allowance face challenges in reintegrating into work life. If they choose to have a second child within this period, they are most likely to lose their professional skills and qualifications, becoming less competitive on the labour market.

Unfortunately, Belarus does not promote the option of [parents dividing the leave](#) and having fathers taking care of the baby. The legislation also allows close relatives to take leave from work for childcare purposes. Neither the state nor society actually discusses these alternatives.

Stay-at-home moms vs. neglected daycares

At first sight, reducing maternity leave from three to two years appears to be a rational and timely reform. However, it needs to be accompanied by a corresponding overhaul and expansion of the existing pre-school facilities. Currently the state lacks the necessary infrastructure to organise adequate childcare.

Another problem is the underpaid and insufficient staff at daycare facilities, leaving doubts about the quality of these

institutions. The news site Tut.by recently published a story of a former daycare worker who highlighted low incomes, hiring of random people, and a lack of professionalism. According to official statistics, the average salary in the education sector in 2015 was only about \$200.

Finally, Belarusian society is not yet ready to accept that existing maternity leave might become shorter by a year. The prevailing view is that children need to stay with their mothers until they turn three and are more independent and less prone to fall sick, thus not forcing their mothers to take sick-leave.

It is evident that maternity leave reform will also require changes in mentality – society will need to free itself from patriarchal stereotypes. Women preferring to remain housewives after their children grow older should stop relying on state benefits. Shorter maternity leave should be accompanied by guarantees of good care in nurseries. Time will tell whether the Belarusian economy will be able to afford this.

Successful Foreign Policy, EEU Decline, Cross-Border Projects – State Press Digest

According to Belarusian state-controlled press, 2015 was a successful year for Belarusian foreign policy, as the country strengthened its position in international affairs and relations with key western actors.

The national budget for 2016 reflects the impact of the ongoing economic crisis and will see the government support

only the most vulnerable categories of society, *siloviki* in particular.

Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) trade continues to fall because of the regional economic crisis and protectionist policies of the bloc's members. Belarus is gradually abolishing subsidies in the energy sector as part of market reforms.

The regions of Belarus are actively engaging in cross-border cooperation projects financed by the EU. All of this and more is discussed in the latest edition of State Press Digest.

Government considers 2015 foreign policy a success

[In 2015 Belarus led a successful foreign policy.](#) *Belarus Segodnya* presents the annual Review of the Foreign Policy Outcomes and Activities of the Foreign Ministry. During presidential elections, which the Ministry sees as the main event, it managed to organise constructive cooperation with international observers. These observers' reports had a significant impact on further positive development of relations with foreign, and especially western, partners.

In 2015 Belarus made a significant contribution to de-escalation of the Ukraine conflict and maintenance of stability in the region. Belarus also continues to promote the concept of “integration of integration” – convergence of the European and Eurasian integration programmes. However, the review regrets that the key problem within the EEU – trade exemptions and protectionism – has not been overcome.

Eurasian Economic Union demonstrates trade decline

[The new budget will prioritise financial support for police and army personnel.](#) *Narodnaja Hazieta* publishes an interview with MP and member of the standing committee on budget and finance of the Belarusian parliament Valier Baradzienia. According to the official, the fast economic growth of previous years is over, Belarus is losing markets and its GDP is falling, leading to a budget deficit.

The authorities will cut expenses, but this will not apply to social commitments such as education and healthcare. Salary growth can be expected in the public sector, but it will vary according to each sphere. Teachers may receive additional income from private tutoring and healthcare workers can offer paid services to citizens, while such possibilities are not open to police and army personnel. The state is therefore obliged to protect them, the MP said.

[Eurasian Economic Union \(EEU\) demonstrates decline in mutual trade.](#) In 2015 trade within the EEU decreased by 25 per cent, writes *Sielskaya Gazieta*. However, trade within the union has in fact been falling ever since the launch of its predecessor, the Customs Union, in 2011. Stumbling oil prices and sanctions against Russia are only part of the problem. Members of the union continue to put national economic interest above the integration ideal and retain protectionist policies.

In the last year bans on imports of certain categories of goods became standard practice for EEU members. For Belarus this concerns primarily food products, which Russia constantly claims do not meet EEU standards. Moreover, Kazakhstan's accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) further limits Belarus' export possibilities to the EEU.

[Belarus plans to completely abolish cross-subsidies to the energy sector by 2018.](#) Today enterprises in fact pay for a large part of the population's energy consumption, *Zviazda* newspaper reports. Belarusians pay 72 per cent of electricity costs, 55 per cent of gas costs and only 17 per cent of heating costs. These subsidies have been a part of the state's social policy throughout independence and received much criticism from Belarus' international creditors who promote market reforms.

✘ [The estates of noblemen of Hrodna region are sold off to investors.](#) The 18th century estate of the Umiastoŭskija noble family located in Iŭje district has been sold at auction to a Jordan businessman for \$55,000, *Respublika* newspaper reports. According to the auction conditions, the investor has promised to restore the buildings to their original form and turn them into a hotel and a restaurant.

The estate until the auction belonged to a local collective farm and is in a dire state. The authorities have no funds for restoration of architectural heritage, and many similar estates are slowly crumble as a result. Twelve estates in Hrodna region acquired new owners in recent years, but some of them are in no hurry to carry out restoration works and the government even plans to take some of the estates back.

Belarus engages in cross-border projects with the EU

[Hrodna region actively participates in EU cross-border cooperation projects.](#) The local authorities of Hrodna region have prepared around 50 projects for EU-financed cross border cooperation programmes with Poland-Belarus-Ukraine and Latvia-Lithuania-Belarus, *Hrodzienskaja Praŭda* reports. The projects mostly concern healthcare, education and culture.

The programmes require partnership from both sides of the border, and half of the projects already have foreign partners. To present the other half for potential partners, the authorities plan to organise a forum in Bialystok. The Poland-Belarus-Ukraine programme for 2016-2020 will allocate about €180m for cross-border cooperation projects.

[Belarusians will not have to take Russian language exams to receive work permits for Russia.](#) As *Soyuz* newspaper reports, the Russian State Duma passed a law exempting Belarusians from the obligation to confirm their command of the Russian language and knowledge of Russian history and law as a requirement for obtaining a residence or work permit. The norm became effective in Russia on 1 January 2015 and concerned all foreign citizens, including Belarusians.

The regulation caused much opposition in Belarus, where Russian is one of the two official languages and in fact dominates all spheres of life. The problem was widely discussed, and Lukashenka personally lobbied on it during his visit to Russia in December, ultimately receiving approval from Putin.

The State Digest 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.