

10 days visa-free: a new stage for Belarusian tourism

On 26 December, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka signed a new decree on a 10-days visa-free entry regime for foreigners. It expands upon [last year's decree on 5-day visa-free entrance](#) to the Augustow zone in the Hrodna region. The changes are in tandem with a February 2017 decree, which grants tourists a Belarus-wide, five-day visa provided they fly into Minsk airport.

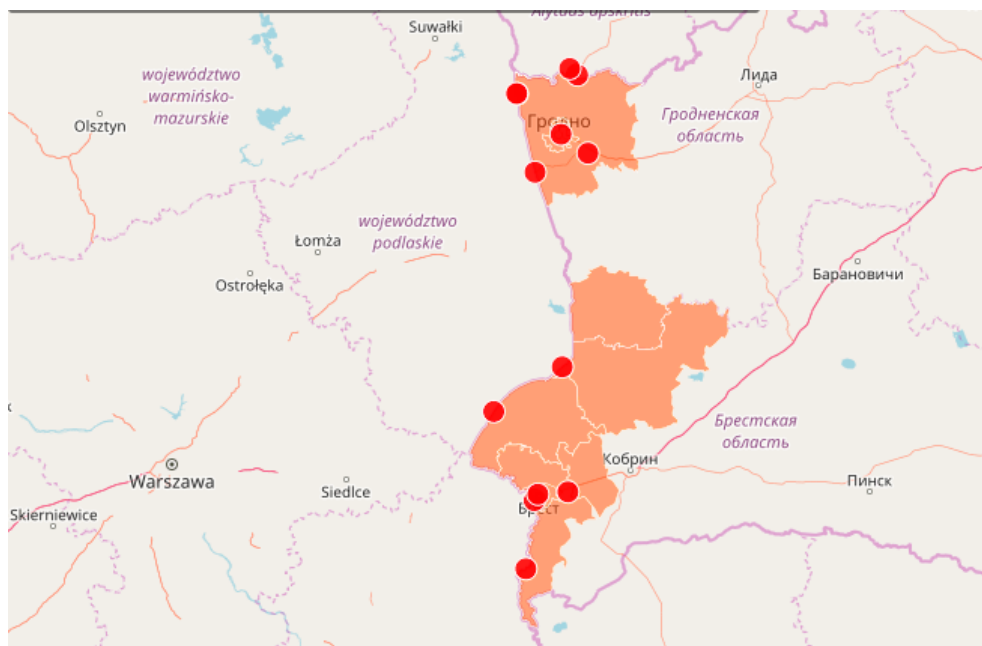
The new visa-free rules are valid from 2018 and allow citizens of 77 countries to spend 10 days without a visa in the Hrodna and Brest regions. No changes have been made for those who enter without a visa into Minsk airport, and as such can still only spend five days in Belarus, but are able to travel anywhere in the country.

The current visa-free regime appears to be a logical continuation of the process of visa liberalisation, which has been taking place within the country. However, the territorial and administrative restrictions on visa-free travel to Belarus still create inconveniences for tourists. Concerns of the KGB and the Internal Affairs Ministry create additional obstacles for the implementation for simpler and longer visa-free regimes.

What does the new 10-day visa-free regime imply?

Since 1 January, citizens of 77 countries have the right to enter Belarus without a visa and stay for 10 days to stay in certain parts of Hrodna and Brest regions. The new visa-free decree extends the area and the type of transport for visa-free travellers. In 2016, President Lukashenka signed a decree

on the 5-day visa-free regime for those who enter the Hrodna region. Now foreigners can visit not only Hrodna but also Brest region for tourism purposes.



The map of the visa-free area in Belarus in 2018. Source: TUT.by

In 2017, to visit Belarus one should have crossed the border by bus or car at the border, or by plane into Minsk airport. Today, visa-free travellers can come to Hrodna and Brest regions by both road and rail. Visitors to Hrodna visitors can also take advantage of the local airport. Starting 2018, the visa-free territory applies to a whole visa-free region, rather than particular tourist sites as in 2017.

This year, however, a visa-free visit to Hrodna and Brest will become more bureaucratic in comparison to last year. Visa-free travellers at the border must display a permission form, which proves a purchase of service from a Belarusian tourist company. In practice, this means that foreigners must buy either a tour, accommodation or activity from an official travel agency. Foreigners still have to register at the local registration office—either at the Ministry of Internal Affairs, a tourism office near an attraction, or at a

hotel—within 5 days of arrival.

Visa-Free Year: Achievements and Lessons

After the introduction of the visa-free regime, more foreigners have begun to visit Belarus. The *Vechernij Grodno* newspaper writes that many tourists from neighbouring Lithuania speak about low-cost products, medicines, alcohol, as well as the opportunity to visit theatres for just a few euros. Many foreigners also speak positively about the nightlife in Belarus.

The trial year of the visa-free regime has brought tangible material revenues. On 5 January, Belarusian Foreign Minister [Uladzimir Makei](#) said after one year of the visa-free regime, the city of Minsk's profit from tourism increased by 35 per cent, writes news agency *BelTA*. The annual number of tourists reached almost 80,000, which is 12 per cent more than before the visa-free regime. Tourists from Poland and Lithuania are the biggest spenders.

At the same time, it is hard to say whether the visa-free regime has made a significant contribution to the Belarusian economy. According to a report from the World Travel & Tourism Council, tourism in Belarus amounted to only 1.9 per cent of GDP, which is 0.1 per cent more than in 2016 (when the visa-free regime did not exist). The World Travel & Tourism Council has ranked Belarus 139th among 185 countries by share of revenues from tourism to GDP. According to the report, Lithuania and Poland earn on average three times more from tourism services.



Hostel in Hrodna. Source: hrodna.life

Despite this, Belarus continues to develop its tourist industry. Last year tourists to the [first visa-free territory in Belarus, Hrodna](#), mentioned a shortage of hotels and low-cost accommodation. Since then, the number of hostels in the city has increased from one to three, and three more are to open in 2018. In addition, most menus in the local cafes and restaurants now have an English version.

Belarus also continues to improve contact with neighbouring countries for the development of tourism. This year, Ukrainian and Belarusian travel agencies are putting together a joint tour package of Lviv, in Ukraine, and Hrodna, in Belarus, said National Tourism Agency Representative Alena Lihimovich in an interview with online news portal *TUT.by*. In addition, the Polish airline company LOT is considering the launch of cheap flights into Hrodna airport, which has recently become open for visa-free entry.

Touristic Belarus: unclear

cautiousness of authorities

When it comes to visa liberalisation, the concerns of certain state institutions prevent the establishment of a longer, 30-day visa-free regime. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Sports and Belarusian Customs have voted for 30-day visa-free entrance for tourists. The Internal Affairs Ministry and the KGB remain reluctant to agree to such a proposal. Perhaps they are wary of a negative Russian response to the introduction of the 5-day visa-free regime in Belarus. Russian media have expressed security concerns due to the absence of strict border controls between Belarus and Russia.



The map of Hrodna. Source: vgr.by

Belarus continues to expand agreements with many countries to establish a visa-free regime. As of today, Belarusians can enter 70 countries visa-free. In part, Belarus is gradually liberalising its visa policy to coincide with the [European Games, a sporting event that Belarus is to host in 2019](#).

Since the implementation of the visa-free decree, Belarus has attracted tens of thousands of tourists. Tourist services have grown in tandem, providing a wider array choices and staffing English-speaking personnel.

However, by entering Belarus via Hrodna or Brest, foreigners cannot go beyond the visa-free zones in the two regions. Also, tourists have to buy tours to Belarus through Belarusian travel companies. An extra hinderance is compulsory visa registration process. It may take almost half a day to register, because of [bureaucratisation of the process](#). If tourists do follow all the formalities or not register, they may be fined. In sum, despite the updated conditions of the visa-free regime, visa-free tourism to Belarus remains difficult due to territorial and duration limits, as well as to the increasing bureaucratisation of tourist travel.

Belarus Engages with the US, Improves Ties with Europe and Post-Soviet Countries – Foreign Policy Digest

Belarusian diplomacy has been shifting the country's relations with the West into high gear seeking to capitalise on Belarus' newfound importance for regional stability.

"The Europeans ... are ready to cooperate with us, including for the sake of security in Europe. We say to them that we're always open to [talking]", President Lukashenka claimed while inspecting a riot police unit on 5 March. And indeed several EU and US delegations have visited Minsk lately.

Belarus also held bilateral consultations with half a dozen European countries last month. However, any tangible result from these talks, besides the obvious thaw in relations, has

yet to materialise.

The foreign ministry also held a series of consultations with post-Soviet countries centred mostly on economic relations. However, the failure to unite most of the former USSR republics around a celebration of the 70th anniversary of the end of WWII has become a telling sign of the group's growing disunity .

Lukashenka Disregards Protocol

On 27 February, Belarusian President [Alexander Lukashenka](#) received Eric Rubin, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs. The same day, a US delegation led by Eric Rubin met with Foreign Minister [Vladimir Makei](#).

Lukashenka: No stability is possible without the Americans

Even keeping in mind the United States' role in global affairs, meetings at this level represent a baffling imbalance. A deputy assistant secretary is strictly a mid-level position in the State Department, roughly the equivalent to a deputy head of a department in Belarus' foreign ministry.

Lukashenka may simply have been excited at the prospect of improving relations with the West, seeking to get a sense of the ongoing negotiations firsthand.

The US envoy expressed his country's appreciation for the positive role Belarus has played in efforts to find a peaceful solution to the conflict in Ukraine. The Belarusian president, as he revealed in his interview to Bloomberg on 31 March, insistently stated during the meeting that "no stability [was] possible in Ukraine without the Americans", so "they must get involved in [the peace] process immediately".

Belarus and the US discussed the possibility for improved

cooperation in trade, non-proliferation, and combating human trafficking. Both parties chose to admit existing disagreements in their press statements. Eric Rubin emphasised long-standing US concerns over human rights and democracy.

Belarus – EU: A Bilateral Track

In late February and March, Belarus sustained the intensity of its interactions with European countries seeking to benefit from a marked thaw in relations while also trying to reformat the existing framework of cooperation.

The talks with Europe have developed simultaneously along two tracks: bilateral cooperation with specific EU countries and cooperation with the EU as an institution focusing on the Eastern partnership, a dialogue on modernisation and visa issues.

Two deputy foreign ministers worked on developing closer ties with Lithuania. While [Alena Kupchyna](#) focused on discussing Eastern Partnership issues with a Lithuanian delegation in Minsk on 27 February, her colleague [Alexander Guryanov](#) went to Vilnius and Klaipeda on 5 and 6 March to look at trade and investment cooperation. Belarus seeks to increase its transit of goods through the Klaipeda seaport, and the Lithuanian authorities are happy to oblige them.

Belarus deftly exploits Hungary's Eastern policy

These very Belarusian diplomats also worked in tandem in building relations with Italy. On 3 March, Alena Kupchyna hosted her Italian counterpart Benedetto Della Vedova for the first bilateral consultations since 2009. Their most important decision was to schedule the first-ever meeting of an intergovernmental commission on trade and economic cooperation in January 2016 in Rome. Alexander Guryanov went to Milan and Rome from 18 – 21 March to prepare for Belarus' participation in Expo 2015 and strengthen cooperation with the Italian

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The Hungarian Deputy State Secretary for Foreign Affairs Csaba Balogh headed his country's delegation on bilateral consultations in Minsk on 4 – 5 March where he spoke with Alena Kupchyna and Vladimir Makei. Belarusian diplomats have exploited to the utmost of their ability Hungary's Eastern Opening strategy, a policy proclaimed by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in 2010, making this country one of Belarus' closest partners in Europe.

Also in March, Belarusian diplomats held working-level consultations with their European colleagues from Belgium and Poland in Minsk and the Czech Republic in Prague.

Belarus – EU: An Institutional Track

On 9 March, Deputy Foreign Minister Alena Kupchyna visited Brussels for a fifth round of consultations on modernisation, mapping out the best form of future cooperation. While few details have emerged, human rights may have been in focus.

Oddly formatted EU delegation visits Minsk

Three days later, Belarus and the EU held a third round of talks on [visa facilitation](#) and readmission agreements in Minsk. Again, officials from both sides have refrained from leaking much information. Rumor has it that both parties are very likely to ink the agreements at the Eastern Partnership summit in Riga. However, due to technical reasons (e.g. translations into all EU languages, etc.) there is no chance that they will have the documents ready to sign by May.

On 19 March, Alena Kupchyna received a delegation of high-level diplomats from Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovakia, Sweden, and the Czech Republic. This unusual grouping of diplomats resembled a reconnaissance mission to help the EU understand how far Belarus is ready to

go in its relations with Europe in the context of the latest developments in the region. Discussion was confined to the forthcoming summit in Riga.

Post-Soviet Relations: Emphasis on Bilateral Component

Minsk has also focused on strengthening ties with its post-Soviet partners. On 12 March in Tashkent, Belarus and Uzbekistan held the fourth meeting of an intergovernmental commission on bilateral cooperation, with an emphasis on trade.

On 18 – 19 March, Deputy Foreign Minister [Alexander Mikhnevich](#) went to Tbilisi to prepare for Alexander Lukashenka's visit to Georgia. His colleague Alexander Guryanov visited Kyiv on 23 March to discuss how to support trade ties that have suffered as a result of the conflict in Ukraine.

Post-Soviet countries are no longer united on commemorating WWII

Finally, on 10 March, Alexander Lukashenka received Yaqub Eyyubov, the Azerbaijani First Deputy Prime Minister. They focused on investment opportunities. Belarus has a few joint ventures in [Azerbaijan](#), which manufactures trucks, tractors and lifts. However, Minsk is also interested in attracting Azerbaijani capital to Belarus.

Yet, former Soviet Union republics are quickly growing apart. Their common history is increasingly less binding. This year, only eight post-Soviet countries out of fifteen (Belarus, Russia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) supported various efforts to commemorate the 70th anniversary of WWII, such as a film screening in New York or a joint statement at the Human Rights Council.

In this shifting reality, Minsk's decision to emphasise a

bilateral track in its ties with these post-Soviet countries, which are no longer interested in Moscow-centric relations, should finally pay off.

Ice Hockey Diplomacy in The Desert, Sanctions and Human Rights Criticism – Belarus Foreign Policy Digest

Alexander Lukashenka spent five days in Abu Dhabi meeting with local officials at various levels, managing to get in a game or two of hockey and some sightseeing as well.

A UN report presented on 28 October harshly criticised the human rights situation in Belarus. Two days later, the EU extended its restrictive measures against many Belarusian officials and businesses.

However, these events failed to dissuade the Belarusian authorities from seeking further rapprochement with the West through a series of working meetings with European officials.

Breakthrough Visit or Working Holiday?

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka paid a working visit to the United Arab Emirates during the last week of October. However, the trip looked more like a little sunbathing holiday than a work trip, though he managed to squeeze in some officials meetings to justify the travel.

The trip conveniently coincided with the autumn vacation of

Lukashenka's youngest son Mikalai, who accompanied his father during the trip. Father and son played a couple of hockey games with a team of local veterans – both sporting the number 1 on their jerseys – and visited the Emirates' largest mosque.

On 21 – 22 October, Foreign Minister [Vladimir Makei](#) preceded his boss in the UAE with a large official and business delegation. It looks like Lukashenka's trip was more improvisational than appearances might suggest, or it was only agreed upon during Makei's visit.

Alexander Lukashenka spent five days in the Emirates, from 25 to 29 October. However, his first and most important meeting took place only on his third day in the country. The Belarusian leader met with Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces. The sheikh is *de facto* running the country as his brother Sheikh Khalifa, the UAE President, is still recovering from a stroke.

The state-run news agency BelTA called the visit a 'breakthrough' and claimed that "the entire country, and beyond, [was] closely following the events of President Lukashenka's working visit to the UAE".

In fact, there is nothing that would appear to suggest that Minsk and Abu Dhabi are on the verge of a major upgrade in their ties. Arab leaders love to please their guests and make abundant promises. However, [these pledges rarely live beyond the day they were made](#).

In fact, the UAE is clearly oriented towards western goods and technology. The country is willing to pay premium prices for top-notch products and services and never compromises when it comes to quality. This leaves a majority of any Belarusian products that Belarus would like to sell to the wealthy nation out of the running.

There are certainly a few exceptions. Recently, the Abu Dhabi police placed an order for full body x-ray scanners manufactured by [ADANI](#), a private R&D company based in Minsk. This decision was based on the product's reputation and its assessed quality rather than politics. Indeed, no top-level political exchanges could influence the UAE to make such a purchase.

Sanctions Extended but Contacts Developed

On 30 October, the European Union [extended](#) for another year a package of sanctions, including travel bans and asset freezes against individuals and companies linked to the Belarusian government. At the same time, the EU removed 24 individuals and seven companies from its black list. It has been the largest reduction seen since the sanctions were introduced following the violent crackdown on opposition in December 2010.

Despite regular signals of a thaw emerging in Belarus' relations with Europe, the EU insists on the release and rehabilitation of all political prisoners and significant improvements with human rights and rule of law as a precondition for a complete revocation of the restrictive measures currently in place.

The Belarusian foreign ministry reacted rather calmly to the EU's decision to extend the sanctions. While expressing their ritual 'regret' about the 'inertia of the past' in the EU's policy towards Belarus, the MFA called the abridgement of the sanctions list "a step in the right direction, albeit an insufficient one".

Meanwhile, Belarus continues to engage European countries in extensive consultations on a bilateral level. In the second half of October, Foreign Minister Makei and his deputies [Alena Kupchyna](#) and [Alexander Hurjanau](#) met with senior diplomats and government officials from France, Poland, Slovenia, Latvia and

Switzerland. During these meetings, Belarusian diplomats emphasised Belarus' advantages as a gateway to the much larger and more lucrative Russian market.

France even chose Minsk as a venue for a regional meeting of its envoys to post-Soviet countries. Uladzimir Makei met with the ambassadors and Eric Fournier, the French MFA's Director for Continental Europe, on 31 October to brief them on Belarus' policy towards the EU, CIS and the Eurasian Economic Union.

On 20 – 23 October, a team of EU officials visited Minsk in the framework of putting together a cooperation programme for 2015. The delegation focused on environmental issues.

At the same time, there is a certain level of stagnation surrounding visa regime liberalisation negotiations between Belarus and the EU. Belarus agreed to hold these talks back in November 2013 and the first round took place in June 2014.

In her recent interview with state-run Belarusian TV channel *Belarus-1*, Deputy Foreign Minister Alena Kupchyna expressed her disappointment with the fact that the EU had thus far failed to react to Minsk's proposals that were made back in June. The Belarusian authorities are looking to establish travel rights with the EU that are analogous to many of their CIS neighbours.

Human Rights Pariah Still

Belarus continues to get its regular share of criticism from international bodies concerning the human rights situation in the country.

On 28 October, Miklós Haraszti, Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Belarus, introduced his [report on Belarus](#) at a meeting of the UNGA Third Committee in New York.

The Hungarian human rights advocate has found in Belarus

"systemic violations of human rights, committed with the help of a governmental mechanism of laws and practices, purposefully constructed over the last two decades".

The report describes a highly dissuasive regime that practically prohibited the exercise of all public freedoms, which are essential in any democratic society.

A Belarusian representative, speaking at that meeting, reminded the assembly that the government of Belarus rejected both the Special Rapporteur's mandate and his report, describing them as politically motivated. Miklós Haraszti has long been a persona non grata in Belarus.

Another tactic of Belarusian diplomats is to downplay civil and political rights by trying to shift the emphasis to economic and social rights. Iryna Vialichka, a Belarusian delegate in the Third Committee, even suggested on 22 October that the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights should redirect the available funds "to fight hunger, poverty and disease, thus contributing to the real advancement of human rights".

Belarus is the only European country under the Special Rapporteur regime while [many CIS countries have similar or worse human rights situation](#). Simply put, this indicates a failure of the country's leader and his diplomatic service to get rid of its pariah status by finding a mutually acceptable arrangement with the democratic forces of the world.