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In their letters to Father Frost, children and adults entrust their deepest desires and dreams, seek support and compassion, and share their successes, joys and achievements

Happy New Year!

New Year is a time of miracles, magic and fulfillment of desires, when every person expects something special and unforgettable and believes that the next year will be better than the previous one. This is a holiday that unites us all. It reminds us that we should be kinder and more caring to each other, and that there are many things in life that are worth appreciating. So let's celebrate the New Year together, smile at each other and give joy and happiness to our loved ones and friends. Let this holiday become for us a symbol of new opportunities and hopes for a better future.



Utmost partner of Belarus in Russia

The President of Belarus, Aleksandr Lukashenko, met with Moscow Region Governor Andrei Vorobyov

The Head of State noted that this is Andrei Vorobyov's first visit to Belarus in the capacity of the Governor and praised the professionalism of Andrei Vorobyov's team, thanks to whom Moscow Region has been performing consistently better than other Russian regions across various social and economic indicators.



For Belarus, the capital region of Russia is a strategic partner, the Head of State said. The Moscow Region ranks first among the federal subjects in terms of trade volume. Thus, over the 10 months of 2023, trade turnover increased by almost a quarter and exceeded \$9 billion.

“These are colossal volumes of our foreign trade. This is a significant achievement given that the base was already high last year when the trade expanded [by over 25 percent]. This year the trade is projected to considerably exceed \$10 billion. This is the best result throughout the entire history of Belarus’ co-operation with your region,” the Belarusian leader concluded.

Trade goes on in nearly everything we produce, mostly household appliances, foodstuffs (butter, cheese), metal products, medicines, equipment, spare parts and many more.

“Such a robust trade is largely attributed to the favourable location of Moscow Region, which makes the region a kind of logistics hub and a central point for further supplies to other Russian regions. Dealership and trade are good. They, however, are too dependent on the current state of the market. As an experienced person, you know well that the task of any leader is to ensure employment and wellbeing for people. To this end, we need a serious foundation which is the joint production of goods with

high added value,” the President explained.

Aleksandr Lukashenko named a number of specific areas where there are prospects for development and strengthening of interaction.

“First. You are actively engaged in road construction and public utilities (amazingly). I have been briefed that you have

plans to invest significant funds in the renewal of the public transport fleet and purchase Belarusian-made vehicles.

Our specialists will soon determine the necessary specification together with you. I give you my word that we will do everything necessary to ensure that shipments start on schedule and we fulfil all the obligations that will be stipulated under the contract,” the President assured.

Belarus' second proposal, outlined by the Head of State, is related to concrete production, “I know that there are plans to set up the production of dry building mixes based on Belarusian cement in your region. I propose to add the production of concrete.”

According to Aleksandr Lukashenko, this product has a higher added value. Its production can be organised in areas where large housing and road construction projects are implemented. The Belarusian Architecture and Construction Ministry is ready to work out logistics and possibilities of concrete mixing facilities location together with Moscow Region.

The third area is maintenance, supply of spare parts, warranty, and financial instruments.

“We have a lot of experience in these areas in Russia. With the help of your region, we would like to secure a firm foothold by creating a large-scale service and logistics hub for this part of the Russian Federation,” the Belarusian leader explained.

Medical services and rehabilitation is the next area of mutual interest for the two parties, the President said. Many residents of Moscow and Moscow Region have already visited Belarusian health resorts and used the services of healthcare facilities. At the same time, the Head of State drew attention to the availability of medical products and medicines in terms of the price factor.

“We should make sure that the cost of components, if we are talking about medical equipment and services, does not hit the pockets of ordinary people,” the President emphasised. However, the costs of the certification of medical products in Russia are much higher than, for example, across the EAEU. The President has instructed Belarusian Ambassador to Russia Dmitry Krutoi to look into the issue.

The development of co-operation ties and new production chains to replace imported products is the fifth area discussed at the meeting. Import substitution is a priority for Moscow Region. More than 200 projects with a total investment of about 200 billion Russian roubles are being implemented in the region.

These tasks are also of paramount importance for the Belarusian economy, Aleksandr Lukashenko emphasised.

“We have accumulated good experience in this regard. We often discuss these issues with the President of the Russian Federation. I would like to note that we probably work best of all [in terms of import substitution development] with Moscow Region,” the President said.



Terminal and logistics centre Elektrougli — one of the so-called dry ports of the Moscow Region

Co-operation in agriculture is also among the promising areas of joint activities. According to Aleksandr Lukashenko, Belarus and Moscow Region can successfully complement each other in the agro-industrial complex.

It is no secret that Belarus

is among the world leaders in exporting meat and dairy products. The country is constantly modernising its enterprises, introducing modern technologies and equipment.

“We have opportunities to assist you in developing meat and dairy production, supplying elite seeds of Belarusian selection, high-yield fodder and premixes, and also fertilisers. I know that you have companies that are very successful in this respect, and their experience will be very important for us,” the President suggested.

The Head of State also emphasised a significant potential for builders to participate in the implementation of housing, social infrastructure and road construction projects.

“Moscow Region has one of the largest scientific and technical complexes in Russia, and Belarus is interested in expanding co-operation on various issues of scientific and technical activities. I think we can develop a plan of scientific and technical co-operation, or a roadmap for co-operation between our National Academy of Sciences and Moscow Region,” Aleksandr Lukashenko outlined another direction.

Furthermore, the Head of State mentioned the development of cultural and humanitarian ties, work with the youth.

“I am convinced that for the sake of the future of our peoples it is necessary to provide all opportunities for communication and mutual trips for Belarusian and Russian youth. Unite the young generation through joint

all the issues outlined, “I would like to assure you that if we agree on some issues, the agreements will be fulfilled.”

According to the President, Moscow Region is of utmost importance for Belarus. After all, it is not only the largest region of Russia, but also a significant hub for the supplies to all other Russian regions.

Governor of the Moscow Region Andrei Vorobyov, in turn, noted that Russia in general and the Moscow Region in particular understand and appreciate the importance of co-operation with Belarus.

“Thank you for the invitation, for the reception, for the preliminary work that we have the opportunity to conduct with your team. We want to say today that we respect and appreciate your position, your attitude. We understand the importance of co-operation with Belarus and value this co-operation in all respects,” the Governor said.

Andrei Vorobyov noted that Belarus and China are the two largest trading partners of Moscow Region in terms of export and import.

“Before the meeting, we had already discussed construction projects with our colleagues. This includes the cement industry, dry mixes. The region is large. Moscow and Moscow Region are growing by almost 200,000 people a year, and our construction projects are pretty big. This includes social facilities, road infrastructure; all this needs materials. Of course, we are interested. And our colleagues have already selected a number of locations for launching such production,” the

head of the Moscow Region said. He also expressed interest in the issue of supplies of mechanical engineering equipment from Belarus.

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‘The EAEU should become one of the global poles of economic attraction’

In the last week of the outgoing year, the President of Belarus, Aleksandr Lukashenko, took part in two large international events in St. Petersburg: a meeting of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council and an informal meeting of CIS leaders

During the EAEU summit, the Presidents of Belarus, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Armenia discussed more than two dozen issues, including key areas for the further development of integration processes. Aleksandr Lukashenko called the current meeting of the leaders of the member states of the union to a certain extent significant. Next year the EAEU will celebrate its tenth anniversary. The EAEU has already proven its effectiveness, our enemies have not been able to separate us, and the participating countries must now, without losing momentum, reach a higher level of development. The President spoke about this in an interview with journalists. In particular, he answered the question about the prospects of the EAEU as follows,

“Very good. Better than other associations. There is more politics, and here there is more economics. Just what we need. And any political issue can be threaded onto an economic skewer. We are the most advanced. Neither the SCO nor the BRICS have such close ties, they do not speak the same language, like the rest of us, without translators. In addition, most importantly, the economy does not have this single economic space... Amid the development of a new highly competitive geopolitical environment, we would like to see the Eurasian Economic Union, if not by 2030 then by 2045, as one of the main global poles of economic attraction.”

The President Vladimir Putin, as host, greeted his guests one by one at the Boris Yeltsin Presidential Library, where the summit took place. Media representatives were looking forward to the arrival of the Belarusian leader with special impatience: they prepared a lot of questions, hoping that the President of Belarus, as always, would not pass by. An impromptu press conference of the Head of State took place right on the porch of the Presidential Library building. What did journalists ask Aleksandr Lukashenko about?

On the prospects for Armenia’s participation in the EAEU

The main question was in the air long before the start of the summit and had a certain intrigue: whether Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan would take part in the meeting. After all, Yerevan has recently distanced itself somewhat from its allies. Nikol Pashinyan refused to participate in the November CSTO summit in Minsk, and in October he missed the CIS summit in Bishkek. Until recently, it was unclear whether he would come to St. Petersburg. Hence, the interest of journalists: isn’t it a shame for the Belarusian leader that the Prime Minister of Armenia flew to the EAEU summit in St. Petersburg, but did not come to the CSTO summit in Minsk.

“Why?! These are different formats. He said, ‘This is a different format, an economic one. We are upset with the military-political CSTO’. That’s why I knew that he would fly to St. Petersburg. I supported him in this then, and I support him now,” Aleksandr Lukashenko was sincerely surprised by the question.

“Won’t we lose Armenia as our friend?” the reporters continued.

“If Armenia wants to ‘die’ economically, then we can lose it. But I don’t think Armenians are stupid people. They are smart people. So no, I don’t even worry about it. I am sure that Armenia is not going anywhere. What, she didn’t see how people fell in Afghanistan — they clung to the chassis. Remember when the Americans left? They will use Armenia in the same way and leave them behind...”

On tactical nuclear weapons

The Head of State commented on the question of whether all planned Russian nuclear weapons were delivered to Belarus, “It was delivered a long time. I talked about it when the delivery was completed. Back in September, I think, or in October. Everything is in its place and in good condition.

When asked when the next military exercises will be, the President noted, “We are learning something new



Before the summit, Russian President Vladimir Putin warmly greeted the President of Belarus, Aleksandr Lukashenko

every day. Even the former Wagner fighters who have stayed with us are now working in our units, passing on their experience.”

On the prospects for resolving the conflict in Ukraine

Aleksandr Lukashenko noted that in the coming year there is a chance to make progress on this issue, “I think it’s the best chance. We will work with them more closely so that they understand that this is the only chance. If they do not use it, they will face a collapse... Politicians are beginning to understand. The military are putting pressure. As I have always said, the military see what is happening. The pressure is already very strong. You probably noticed from Zelensky’s press conference that he is beginning to understand too.”

About the EAEU as a centre of attraction

According to the President, the military operation in Ukraine taught us a lot and pushes us to move further in terms of integration, “But we froze. We need to move, the base is solid. No organisation has such a base.”

The Head of State gave a specific example of the SCO, which is a powerful organisation and a good platform for bilateral negotiations. In particular, Belarus strives to gain full membership in it. Nevertheless, the



During an informal meeting of the CIS leaders

MAIN RESULTS OF THE SUMMIT

- ▶ The Heads of State approved the Declaration on the Further Development of the Eurasian Economic Union until 2030 and for the Period Until 2045.
- ▶ One of the decisions concerns the creation of a new legal institution in the field of customs regulation — an e-commerce operator that will provide logistics and customs clearance of transactions with goods purchased by individuals via the Internet.
- ▶ An agreement on a free trade zone was signed between the EAEU countries and Iran. It will significantly increase the competitiveness of goods from EAEU member states and thereby increase exports to Iran. It is expected that overall trade turnover will more than double, and cooperation and investment cooperation will also intensify.

policies of many major SCO participants are different.

“India and China have different policies. There is more unity in the EAEU. We need to work further in this respect. We will be a centre of attraction then,” said the President.

The President continued the theme of economic attraction at the summit, noting that the EAEU has much more opportunities, since the SCO and BRICS have not advanced as much in the economy as our union,

“And the main thing for us now is not to lose momentum! We need to move in this direction so that we are a leading not only regional, but also global economic organisation... Amid the development of a new highly competitive geopolitical environment, we would like to see the Eurasian Economic Union, if not by 2030 then by 2045, as one of the main global poles of economic attraction.”

The President of Belarus also spoke about opportunities in the EAEU in his speech at the summit. The main achievement of the Eurasian Economic Union over almost ten years of its existence was the stable functioning of the common internal market and the common customs space. Over the last seven years, the EAEU’s trade with foreign partners has increased by more than \$340 billion in absolute terms. Mutual trade has doubled to exceed \$85 billion. This year Belarus’ trade with Russia will reach some \$50 billion. The EAEU countries hold second place in the world in oil and gas production and production of mineral fertilizers, third in the production of wheat, potatoes, and livestock products, and fourth in coal production.

Aleksandr Lukashenko again emphasised the relevance of the further movement of the EAEU member states in the wake of the ‘integration of integrations’ initiative, “It is worth working more actively on the development of the institution of an observer state in the union, making more efforts towards the real integration of the integration potentials of the EAEU, SCO, BRICS. It is necessary to take advantage of participation in such dynamically developing associations with Russia, which works in them as one of the key founding countries. We will fully support the Russian Federation in this important collective work.”

The President of Belarus held a bilateral meeting with the President of Azerbaijan in St. Petersburg

As known, a telephone conversation took place between Aleksandr Lukashenko and Ilham Aliyev on December 24th. Then the Head of the Belarusian State warmly congratulated his Azerbaijani colleague on his birthday. The Presidents discussed the main issues of development of bilateral relations, the situation in the region and the topic of joint work within the framework of multilateral platforms. The current meeting in St. Petersburg was a development of what was discussed in the telephone conversation. The agenda is purely work-related. “We are waiting in Azerbaijan!” Ilham Aliyev invited the Belarusian leader.

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There will be personal responsibility for everyone



The President of Belarus convened a meeting to discuss the state of things at the Belarusian National Biotechnology Corporation (BNBC) and matters related to land reclamation. Taking part in the meeting were government members, heads of government agencies, governors, and scientists. Aleksandr Lukashenko noted that such a composition of participants usually means that the most pressing, strategic matters of the state development are brought for consideration.

“It’s already been a year since the unique large-scale production was solemnly launched at BNBC. We are still proud of this kind of production. All conditions were created to launch these operations. And we agreed that we would support the project in every possible way,” the President recalled.

At the same time, according to the Head of State, things at the enterprise are proceeding not exactly as planned.

“The State Control Committee that was instructed to carefully examine the situation at BNBC reports that there are

significant shortcomings and problems with the utilisation of the facility’s capacity and the sale of finished products. All this negatively affects the financial performance of BNBC (sure thing!). I would like the government to put forward a clear algorithm for eliminating all existing shortcomings and maintaining financial stability at the enterprise,” the President said. “I want you to understand: this project is vital for our reputation, it is a very important technological project for our country. You know how much it cost not only me, but also the state,” the Belarusian leader noted.



The results and decisions of the Head of State on the issue of the work of the BNBC were announced to journalists after the meeting by Deputy Prime Minister Leonid Zayats. The most important point is that the problems of strengthening leadership have been resolved. A representative of the state will appear at BNBC, who will have to thoroughly delve into the activities of the corporation and who will have the right to hold managers accountable for their performance. The relevant Deputy Prime Minister described his tasks as follows, “A representative of the state is entrusted with the function of monitoring the operation of the enterprise so that it reaches its designed capacity and ensures that it earns money to repay borrowed resources.”

During the meeting, the President harshly criticised the government’s work on land reclamation and gave specific instructions. The Head of State recalled that a year ago, at the republican seminar-meeting on the restoration and use of reclamation lands, quite understandable tasks were identified.

“We have agreed on the need to triple the volume of land reclamation activities from 2023 to 2025 in comparison with 2021. Deputy Prime Minister Leonid Zayats reports to me that the volume of works has been tripled this year. Is it true?” the President clarified.

Leonid Zayats confirmed the information.

The Head of State said that he was alarmed by the work of the government in some areas, with some principal instructions of the President remaining unfulfilled.

“Is this becoming kind of a habit for the government? This is unacceptable. This will not work here,” The President warned.

Returning to the topic of land reclamation, Aleksandr Lukashenko stressed that governors pledged to put 110,000 hectares of land into agricultural use in 2023. Necessary decisions at the level of the Head of State on financing land reclamation works and the purchase of equipment were taken in the middle of the year.

“We have collected money resources from all sectors and industries for land reclamation efforts. I receive reports, however, that the situation

with the implementation of these plans in some regions is far from being ideal,” the President emphasised.

To correct it, the government and regional executive committees are initiating a change in the structure of the work performed, concentrating resources on cultural and technical reclamation. To this, Aleksandr Lukashenko noted that cultural technology and land reclamation, although similar, are different things. In the first case, we are simply talking about putting agricultural land in order, for example, cutting down the forest. Therefore, the President is perplexed as to how land reclamation can be replaced with this type of work.

The Head of State also expressed dissatisfaction with the land reclamation works in some regions. According to him, a lot of money has been invested in it, but the necessary results have not been achieved.

The Council of Ministers complains about the high degree of deterioration of trenchers and the lack of project documentation for the entire area of land reclamation systems.

“Is it a problem to take the old documentation? I am not pushing you to develop new reclamation systems. We need to restore the ones that were developed in Soviet times. That is it. There is no need to go deep into forests and swamps! Restore these half a million hectares, and then we will decide what to do next. We need to take a wise approach. If in April these

trenchers do not start working, all responsible will go to prison. I warn you in public,” Aleksandr Lukashenko demanded.

The President asked the Prime Minister how he sees the state of affairs in the field of land reclamation. The Head of State noted that he often gets acquainted with the pace of work on the ground from the air. According to Aleksandr Lukashenko, if everything is in order around his small homeland, in the Shklov District, then in other regions there are many problems.

Roman Golovchenko stated that he had a heavy impression of the situation in the sector. In his words, for the past ten years land reclamation has not been given due attention, and as a result the subdivision in the Agriculture and Food Ministry, which supervised these issues, was disbanded, and the regional land reclamation or-

ganisations were left alone. Now the government is in the process of restoring this entire system.

“The first thing we faced was strengthening the material and technical base of the organisations. In some of them everything was ruined. There was no work, and workers left,” the head of government said.

“Who was held responsible for this?” the President asked.

According to the prime minister, about 100 officials were brought to disciplinary responsibility, ten people were dismissed for discreditable circumstances, and criminal cases were opened against 13 people.

“You fired them – that was your punishment. They have already found jobs in private structures, earn three times as much and laugh at you. Is this possible?” Aleksandr Lukashenko asked.

“It is,” Roman Golovchenko agreed.

“This is the style of your work. We have made a decision here and what is done there? This is called ‘temporary workers’,” the President emphasised once again.

Aleksandr Lukashenko was also interested in the opinion of the State Control Committee. According to Vasily Gerasimov, falsification of figures remained the main problem, and this problem was typical for every region.

“The worst thing is, you have talked about it, and the relevant criminal cases were opened: that land reclamation works were conducted in some places and everything overgrew there with time. We simply buried our investment. Both we and the prosecutor’s office are taking the toughest measures here,” the chairman of the State Control Committee said.



Following the meeting, Deputy Prime Minister Leonid Zayats spoke about the main tasks in the field of land reclamation.

According to the Deputy Prime Minister, this year the goal was to bring 110 thousand hectares of land into agricultural production. And in all areas it is confirmed, “As much as 8,700 hectares of seasonal work will roll over into 2024. The construction of drainage in 2023 increased by 1.6 times in comparison with 2022. It is now necessary to reclaim

all the lands in need of reclamation by 2025. The country should be up to this task. The lands in need of crop engineering amelioration will be covered at the expense of agricultural enterprises. They own these lands, and they have to put right the part that they can handle. The state will lend a helping hand where special machines are necessary. Resources have been allocated for 2024, and we will work within limits of these resources.”

According to Leonid Zayats, the President criticised those land users to whom lands were transferred after reclamation, and they are used ineffectively, “There must be personal responsibility for everyone who received such lands from the state, let’s say, as a gift. It is necessary to sow these fields and get a harvest no worse than from all other areas.”

In addition, the Deputy Prime Minister emphasised, all reclamation equipment that is currently on the balance sheet of reclamation organisations must, at the request of the President, be repaired before April.

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A successful year on the Silk Road

25 new residents, an increase in export revenue by 40 percent, the construction of innovative production facilities: the head of the Great Stone administration — about the results of the project in 2023

The outgoing year 2023 has been positive for China-Belarus Industrial Park Great Stone. Despite the sanctions restrictions for Belarus, the project actively used the areas that had opened up for work, found new partners in the far arc and in the EAEU. As the Head of the Great Stone Park Administration Aleksandr Yaroshenko noted, high achievements set an even higher bar for the park in terms of development dynamics for the next year.

By Ilya Kryzhevich

Confident course for export

— The year 2023 is coming to an end. Could you already sum up the preliminary results of the work of the Great Stone: how did the residents perform this year, what are the expectations for the main economic indicators?

— In 2023, we will see dynamic work by our residents. This is confirmed by preliminary final statistics. We expect that this year the revenue of our residents will exceed Br1 billion. As for the output of industrial products, this figure is also growing dynamically: this year it increased by 40 percent compared to the previous one.

Moreover, supplies of products abroad have increased by 40 percent since the beginning of the year, because all our projects are export-oriented. We expect export revenues for this year to be at least \$130 million. Currently, our residents supply products to 16 countries around the world. The EAEU space is the main sales market today. But our residents also ship products to the EU, the USA, and there are also clients in other countries of the world.

Significant projects

— What is the dynamics of the increase in residents over the year? What are the most significant projects you can highlight?

— At the moment, 120 residents are already registered in Great Stone. In 2023, despite the fact that it is not yet ended, 25 residents were added. This is the largest number of residents ever attracted to the project in a year. But the geography of attracting projects has shrunk. Today these are Russia, China and India. At the same time, the quality component of projects is only increasing.

For example, this year we received a project in the field of high-tech machine tool construction. These are computer-controlled machines that are in demand primarily in Russia. Our resident Rontek Machine Tools and a partner from Shandong province jointly began producing products in rental premises. Construction of a plant for the production of machine tools has already begun. We expect that this plant will be erected and begin operation in 2024.



Aleksandr Yaroshenko

This year, a major investor came to us by the standards of not only our park, but also the country as a whole. This is the Russian company Wildberries. The new resident will build his project on a large plot of 27 hectares. In addition, a plant for the production of veterinary drugs by the Russian company Belagrogen is already under construction. We expect that this project will also be launched next year.

This year, the CarbonTechBel company from Hong Kong also came to us, which works in the field of production of carbon fibre products. This is a new type of material that we will use in the future. A landmark project for us in terms of technology.

Representatives of a large Chinese company who work in the field of medicine, actively developing 3D technologies, have joined the Great Stone.

HAIHONG is a subsidiary of SINOMACH Corporation and plans to promote advanced adaptable medical projects in the field of 3D printing of medical products, including for dentistry, in Belarus.

Impetus for the development of medical services

— This year, Great Stone has noticeably intensified its work to improve conditions for the development of the medical cluster. There have also been more new residents in this sector. What are the park's plans for 2024 in terms of simplifying legislation in the field of medicine to attract new residents?

— Previously, we analysed the legislative framework regarding the production of medical equipment, drugs, as well as the provision of services and came to the conclusion that in order for residents to come to this sector, we need to improve it. We carried out this work with the Health Ministry. The Head of State also supported us — he has already signed two Decrees, thanks to which the registration procedures for medical devices have been significantly simplified.

Currently, the medical cluster in Great Stone has 26 residents. They work in the field of scientific research, production of medical drugs and products. Now, taking into account the new legislation, we plan to develop the provision of medical services on the basis of the park. This year the Centre for Expertise and Testing in Health-

care was registered as a resident. A government agency came to us with a project to create a medical centre, where it is planned to provide services in various areas, inviting patients from other countries.

It is also worth noting that citizens of our country will also soon be able, if they wish, to comfortably come to the Great Stone to receive medical services. The project for the construction of a high-speed railway from Minsk to the airport with a stop at the Great Stone is already under consideration by the state examination body. In 2024, the active stage of construction of this project will begin, which will significantly expand the city's transport links with the industrial park.

Increase the number of residents to 140

— According to your words, we can conclude that 2023 has become a fairly positive year for the development of the industrial park. But did the Great Stone manage to achieve all its annual goals? And what are the plans for attracting residents and for the project in general in 2024?

— We completed most of the tasks and were able to ensure the necessary growth dynamics. It can be stated with confidence that this year was quite successful for the Great Stone, even despite external factors. We attracted 25 residents and achieved good economic indicators. Over the first 9 months of this year, we have created more than 2,600 highly productive and highly paid jobs. We expect this figure to grow. According to investment projects, it is announced that 14.5 thousand jobs will be created, attracting investments of almost \$1.5 billion.

At the same time, such results set before us an even higher bar for the development of the park. Our project should develop precisely as an environmentally friendly city of the future with innovative production of the fifth and sixth technological structures. Therefore, attracting anchor investors is one of the key tasks set for us by the Head of State and the Government. We have already attracted 4 such residents. Two of them have already exceeded the \$50 million investment mark. It is important to move in the area of attracting and developing high technologies and innovations. We set such tasks for ourselves, they are being realised. In 2024, we must maintain this momentum. We also plan to increase the number of residents of the park to 140. And most importantly, to launch key production facilities that began construction this year.



Our doors are open to kind guests

The President supported proposal to extend visa-free regime for residents of Lithuania, Latvia and Poland for 2024

The President of Belarus, Aleksandr Lukashenko, has supported the proposal of the Council of Ministers and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to extend the visa-free entry regime with Lithuania, Latvia and Poland for 2024, the Belarusian leader's press service reports



By Ilya Kryzhevich

On April 15th, 2022, a visa-free entry procedure was introduced for citizens of Lithuania and Latvia, as well as for persons with the status of a non-citizen of Latvia. On July 1st, 2022, the same regime came into force for Poles. In December 2022, it was extended to 2023.

The visa-free regime in 2022-2023 has shown a steady interest of residents of the neighbouring countries to visit the Republic of Belarus, despite obstacles and restrictions on the part of the leadership of Lithuania, Latvia and Poland.

The visa-free regime makes it possible to demonstrate Belarus' openness to restore normal equal-right interaction with its neighbours, to maintain ties with the Belarusian national minority and to overcome the information blockade from political elites of the neighbouring countries through interpersonal communications.

The foreign policy of Belarus has always been aimed at good neighbourliness and strengthening ties with those states that are ready to sincerely be friends with us and co-operate on an equal basis. Therefore, even in pre-Covid times, the Belarusian side allowed citizens of 80 countries to fly to Belarus without a visa for a period of no more than 5 days when entering through the state border checkpoint at Minsk National Airport. This was addressed by Presidential Decree No. 8 of January 9th, 2017 'On the Establishment of a Visa-Free Procedure for the Entry and Exit of Foreign Citizens'.

And yet, despite the obstacles and restrictions from the leadership of Lithuania, Latvia and Poland, residents of neighbouring countries are showing increasing inter-

est in visiting Belarus. Numerous positive reviews from guests about the situation in our country are recorded on social networks, contrasting with the negative propaganda of the official authorities. Moreover, in addition to visa-free travel, the leadership of the regions of Belarus bordering Poland, Lithuania and Latvia has lifted restrictions on the export of food products from Belarus for personal use for individuals in these countries. As a result, an image of attractive Belarus is broadcast to its neighbours, which completely breaks the negative stereotypes created in the West.

For many of our neighbours, especially pensioners and the poor, trips to Belarus have become a sustainable source of obtaining necessary goods and medicines. And although the Belarusian visa-free regime is to a certain extent associated with economic goals, its main benefit is public diplomacy.

The policy of openness distinguishes our country favourably from the EU, which limits the rights of Europeans to freedom of movement and acts to the detriment of its interests with only one goal — the artificial isolation of Belarus. But people see everything with their own eyes. And the Belarusian side has always expressed its readiness to resume constructive interaction. The Belarusian leader firmly adheres to the principle that neighbours are not chosen, they are from God, and has openly stated this more than once.

Since April 15th, 2022, according to presidential decree, visa-free entry into Belarus was established for citizens of Lithuania and Latvia (as well as persons with the status of non-citizen of Latvia), and from July 1st of the same year — for citizens of Poland. The openness and hospitality of Belarus was not affected by the pandemic, the difficult political situation, or the hostile attitude of the authorities of neighbouring countries, who began to openly prevent their citizens from leaving for Belarus.



The President of Belarus, Aleksandr Lukashenko,

"We will restore our ties with both Lithuania and Poland. It is unavoidable. The main principle is that neighbours should not be at odds with each other. I always say that neighbours are given to us by God, we cannot pick our neighbours. Disagreements happen, but they are all temporal. Time will come when we will live together as we always have, including the Soviet times."

During a meeting with representatives of the personnel and builders of the Belarusian NPP and residents of Ostrovets on November 3rd, 2023

How often can one enter Belarus without a visa?

One can use the right of visa-free entry into Belarus an unlimited number of times during the entire period of validity of this procedure. The number of days of stay in Belarus without a visa should not exceed 90 days in a calendar year.

Which territory of Belarus can be visited with visa-free entry?

Citizens of Lithuania, Latvia (as well as persons with the status of non-citizen of Latvia) and Poland have the right to visit and move throughout the country.

What documents are required to cross the border without a visa?

- ▶ valid document for traveling abroad,
- ▶ green card (if traveling by car),
- ▶ medical insurance.

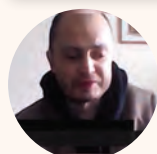
How to visit Belarus without a visa?

Citizens of Lithuania and citizens (non-citizens) of Latvia can travel (enter and exit Belarus) through international checkpoints only on the Belarusian-Lithuanian or Belarusian-Latvian sections of the border. Citizens of Poland can enter and exit Belarus through any Belarusian international checkpoint on the border with the European Union.

COMMENTS

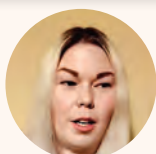
Andrei Kozhan, Head of the Main Consular Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus,

"Since the beginning of this initiative, the total number of those who have visited our country using the visa-free regime is already approaching 800 thousand. This year alone we accepted approximately 405 thousand residents of neighbouring countries on a visa-free basis. Moreover, this is despite all the obstacles that exist at the border, taking into account the closed border crossings [on the part of Belarus's western neighbours] and the artificial containment of queues. There was, is, and continues to be an interest. Somewhere in September of this year, we began to receive requests from citizens and diaspora associations with a request to extend the visa-free regime for another year. We did not leave such letters unnoticed and drew up our appeal on behalf of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Head of State with a request to extend this wonderful undertaking until 2024. Our initiative was supported."



Latvian resident Janis Kuzins notes on TikTok, "We add chemicals and all sorts of soy to our products... Belarusian products are more respected because they contain real meat. Thanks to you, our opportunities are open."

The Lithuanian citizen visited Belarus many times without a visa and



thanked Aleksandr Lukashenko for such a gift, "I respect your President very much. I am very grateful to him for making the visa-free regime possible."

"Are your stores and you ready? Poor Belarus!" another TikTok user sneers at the an-



ti-Belarusian propaganda accepted in his homeland, demonstrating the abundance of goods in Belarusian retail outlets.

A resident of the Latvian Daugavpils, having arrived in Minsk, posted an enthusiastic video on TikTok, "We went out for a walk — let's go,



walk, have fun, enjoy the beauty of Minsk... We go to the shops of Belarus — very cool. Good choice, there is everything."

"Shops in Belarus are better stocked with products than shops in Poland," a Polish tourist who visited our country on a visa-free basis concludes.



Citizens of Lithuania, Latvia and Poland coming to our country for vacation or treatment greeted Aleksandr Lukashenko's decision to extend visa-free travel for another year with enthusiasm. Of course, they were worried whether Belarus would remain a territory of free entry, because recently (despite the artificial obstacles built by the 'other side') foreign guests have become accustomed to being greeted here, on Belarusian land, with brotherly warmth. That's why they come here with joy. So, if 70 citizens from the Baltic countries rested in the sanatoriums of the Vitebsk Region in 2021, then in the past there were already about 1000. And this year there were more than 1500 people!



The number of guests from border countries is growing in health resorts in Belarus

Belarus feels like home

By Yelena Begunova

They knew: Lukashenko won't forget

...Despite the fact that it's not New Year's rain outside, there are whole snowdrifts here, in the Lettsy sanatorium, under the thick crowns of pine trees. It's as if winter is reliably holding its position to the delight of numerous vacationers. Daugavpils resident Olga Staikova also admires the New Year's nature. She says that while planning her fifth trip to the Vitebsk Region, she tried to track Belarusian news on the Internet, but it didn't always work. And she confesses,

"Honestly, in my heart I was sure: Batka would not forget about us. Yes, yes, we also call your President 'Batka'. But it was difficult to predict how the 'near-political' situation would turn out. My friends came here in November and were completely shocked when Latvian banks, without warning, suddenly stopped servicing their cards in your country: you can't pay for procedures or buy gifts."

Riga resident Antonina Streltsova has her own story: "I came for 12 days. If I had known that the visa-free regime would be extended, I would definitely have celebrated the New Year here... But I was haunted by a feeling of anxiety: they would suddenly refuse me, and then there would be problems with going back. So, I looked at the Belarusian news: hurray, everything remains the same! When I come, I'll tell my family and friends — we don't have Russian-language TV channels, people are in the dark. I know that many expected such a decision from the President of Belarus..." the guest shares her experience.

Antonina Dmitrievna is a chiropractor, so she can appreciate the professional level of Belarusian doctors. She has already visited many of our sanatoriums: Lesnoye, Borovoye, Priozerny, Naroch... She claims that

everything is of high quality, and the price is cheap. For example, a 12-day tour here, to Lettsy, cost only €355. That's why she recommends Belarusian health resorts to her patients. You won't be able to relax anywhere in Latvia for this price. However, there are very few sanatoriums left there: almost all of them built during the USSR are closed.

"I pay a lot of attention to health. This is in order to stay in service and continue my travels through the mountains. Yes, this is my hobby... This year I climbed Kazbek, a little earlier I conquered Kilimanjaro..." the Latvian resident explains.

This time in Vitebsk, Antonina Streltsova was met by matchmakers. They also helped with paying for the tour — it's not easy to do this from Latvia. How did matchmakers end up in Belarus? We also once came to the sanatorium to relax. And a month and a half ago, having been convinced more than once of the hospitality and good nature of the local residents, we decided to move here for good. They sold an apartment and a house in Latvia and are planning to build a cottage in Vitebsk. Everyone is happy.

"What Belarusian goods will you take home?" I ask.

"Unfortunately, we are prohibited from importing your products, so our choice is limited. I usually take medications: cheap and very effective, like mucosate. But only three packages of

several types are allowed through. But as soon as the matchmakers met me on Belarusian land, I immediately ordered: bring me some sausage! I love your milk and meat products. While I'm here, I'll eat myself off," Antonina laments.

From vacation to permanent residence

The director of the sanatorium, Aleksei Moiseichenko, joins the conversation,

"By the way, the holiday at Lettsy also influenced the change in the fate of another family — the Schneiders. Two years ago they stayed with us and eventually moved to the Senno District. They got a job and are grateful that this is where their fruitful acquaintance with Belarus began."



Aleksei Moiseichenko

In general, the manager notes, the sanatorium has many regular clients from the Baltic countries. They come year after year, bringing their friends. And they also become guests for a long time.

The manager's story is continued by cosmetologist Yelena Tarasova: she has many 'fans' in Latvia. In advance, they discuss online the programme for a future stay at the health resort, a list of cosmetic procedures: spa massages, skin cleansing, body wraps...

"Foreigners are happy to visit the beauty parlors of the sanatorium. After all, health and beauty are inseparable things. And it's cheap, if you take it by European standards," the specialist explains.

Aleksei Moiseichenko gives figures:

Since the beginning of this year alone, almost 5,000 foreigners have rested at the health resort — half of the total number of guests. Latvians also occupy a significant share.

"We are now testing new methods of working with citizens of this country. Together with foreign travel companies we organise so-called familiarisation tours. People come for two days, the necessary procedures have already been booked for them, and, if desired, excursion programmes and shopping tours. True, it's not always possible to do everything according to plan, there are also force majeure..." Aleksei Moiseichenko shares the details.

What problems might arise? Foreigners on vacation say: the last study tour almost failed due to the fault of the Latvian side. The bus that was going to the sanatorium was held at the border for about 12 hours! As if to discourage Latvians from using the services of Belarusian health resorts next time. Latvian border guards only took about three hours to ask the bus driver for an explanation...

"For our part, we tried to alleviate the situation as much as possible. The staff was understanding and sympathetic. The procedures were released until 21:00 so that the Latvians received everything they wanted. But I would really like, of course, that such nuances would not arise in the future," the head of the sanatorium explains.

We'll come again!

Riga resident Tatiana Puchova is happy with everything in Lettsy. She arrived on vacation with her husband. It was their first time in Belarus, but the couple had already appreciated the delights of Belarusian nature and the hospitality of doctors and nurses, "We took bus tickets from Riga to Vitebsk and are very grateful to the managers of the sanatorium for their advice and online support. They explained everything to us, told us everything. They reassured me that the medical card could be issued on the spot. Then together we decided how to get there, how much money would be needed for taxi fare. Thanks to them for this!"

A complete list of necessary procedures, good living conditions — and these guests will also definitely return to Belarusian land again. Like all Latvians who relax in sanatoriums in the border Vitebsk Region. By the way, today about 30 more Latvian citizens are undergoing a health improvement course at the Lepel military sanatorium, and since the beginning of the year about 850 people have already been here.



Anton Stepanishchev



TO THE POINT

The news about the extension of the visa-free regime for entry into Belarus was also enthusiastically received by regular guests of the Verkhnedvinsk Region — Latvians and Lithuanians get here through the international automobile checkpoint Grigorovshchina. Many of them regularly visit the territory of Belarus to purchase medicines. Yulia Gribanova, pharmacist at the Verkhnedvinsk Central Pharmacy No. 67 of the Pharmacy Unitary Enterprise, said that painkillers and cold medicines, medicines for stomach pain, and cardiovascular medications are in particular demand. Every day, this pharmacy alone serves up to ten foreigners. And in local stores, the Baltic states, taking advantage of the visa-free regime, are actively buying food and other Belarusian goods.



Belarus among top 10 world's smartest countries

The Republic of Belarus is placed 7th in the world and 1st in Europe in the global ranking of countries with the highest average IQ level of residents for 2023, according to the results published by the World Population Review independent organisation



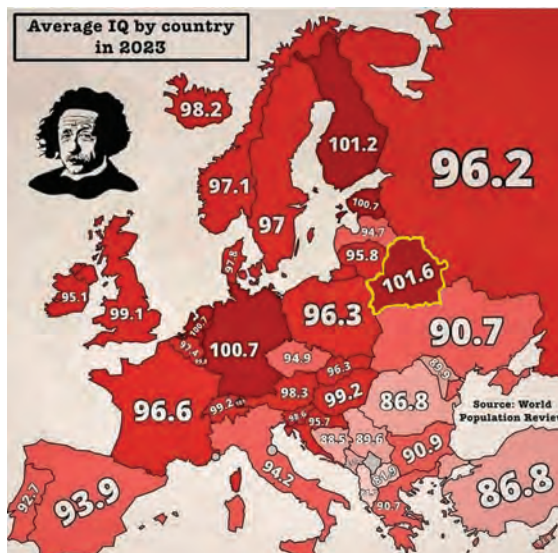
The World Population Review has released a list of countries with the highest average IQ. According to this list, the majority of people in the world (about 68 per cent) have an IQ between 85 and 115. Those with an IQ above 140 are considered geniuses.

The average IQ is measured in almost every country in the world, which makes it a useful tool to compare a country's population intelligence to another. But more than just assessing a population's intelligence, the average IQ also plays a role in understanding the overall well-being of a nation.

The smartest countries are largely those that have invested heavily in education or have a high standard that is maintained constantly. Countries where education is a priority and where a culture of studying and self-improvement is permeated also tend to do well on such lists. As such, the top-5 smartest countries in the world can all be found in Asia, where education and learning are prioritised from an early age.

The ten smartest countries in the world are:

1. Japan — 106.48, 2. Taiwan — 106.47, 3. Singapore — 105.89, 4. Hong Kong — 105.37, 5. China — 104.1, 6. South Korea — 102.35, 7. Belarus



— 101.6, 8. Finland — 101.2, 9. Liechtenstein — 101.07, 10. Germany — 100.74.

Settled in the heart of Eastern Europe, Belarus emerges as a nation of analytical thinkers, boasting an average IQ of 101.60 and a literacy rate of 99.72 per-

cent. Beyond its historic charm, Belarus has channelled its energies toward education and innovation, carving a path that celebrates intellectual curiosity and problem-solving.

Belarus's education system forms the bedrock of its cognitive prowess. Rigorous academic programmes, especially in science and mathematics, lay the foundation for analytical thinking and logical reasoning. The nation's schools foster an environment that encourages students to delve into complex subjects, stimulating intellectual growth from an early age.

Belarus's commitment to science and technology has led to notable advancements in various fields. The nation's investment in research and development has given rise to innovations from agriculture to IT. This culture of innovation extends to its citizens, who display a penchant for creative problem-solving.

Moreover, Belarus' history and cultural identity have played a role in shaping its intellectual landscape. The nation's appreciation for literature, arts, and music has cultivated a population with diverse intellectual interests. This intersection of culture and intellect contributes to a well-rounded cognitive tapestry.

Economic predictions for 2024

S&P Global Market Intelligence — a leading provider of actionable intelligence on the global financial markets and the companies and industries that make up those markets — has prepared its own global 2024 forecast

1. Inflation will moderate further

The sharp initial decline in global consumer price inflation from late 2022 stalled in mid-2023, reflecting a rebound in energy prices and sticky core inflation, particularly for services. The downward trend has resumed and is expected to continue through 2024.

2. Growth in North America and Western Europe will fall short of its potential

This is consistent with the goal of bringing inflation back to target rates. Weaker annual real GDP growth rates are forecast across all the largest regions in 2024 compared with 2023.

3. Mainland China's economy will recover slowly

Mainland China's economy will be supported by more accommodative policy, a gradual improvement of private-sector confidence, and an expected bottoming out of the housing market downturn.

4. Policy rates will be cut in advanced economies from mid-year

With confidence building that consumer price inflation rates will fall back to target, monetary policy pivots are predicted by mid-2024. Rate cuts will begin once concerns about underlying price pressures have abated.

5. Emerging markets will get an earlier start on easing cycles

The central banks that are already easing generally tightened their monetary policies relatively early, keeping inflation expectations stable and second-round effects in check. Easing cycles that are already under way in Chile, Brazil and Peru are forecast to continue in the period ahead.

6. The US Dollar will depreciate

The depreciation will be reinforced by a relative slowing of both US real economic growth and inflation as well as the overhang of a current-account deficit which, as a share of US GDP, is unsustainably high.

7. Financial headwinds to growth will persist

We expect the lagged impact of higher interest rates and the quickly waning effect of COVID-19-related support measures to weigh more heavily on debt servicing capacity in 2024.

8. Declines in residential house prices in Western Europe have further to go

Tight credit conditions and rising borrowing costs will continue to drive prices down in 2024.

9. A busy electoral calendar will create policy uncertainty

Geopolitical factors will remain an important source of risk and uncertainty surrounding economic forecasts, potentially aggravated by important elections taking place across an unusually large number of countries.

10. The energy transition will support growth in the US and Canada

US fiscal policy has turned somewhat stimulative again, boosting production of US fabrication plants. These policy initiatives are one of various factors leaning against a US recession. In Canada, climate initiatives have already been in place in Alberta and Saskatchewan with the existence of eight operational carbon capture facilities.



Scientists of the year 2023

Each December, the *Nature* journal chooses ten people who figured prominently in some of the year's most relevant science stories

Nature's 10 is an annual listicle of ten 'people who mattered' in science, produced by the scientific journal *Nature*. Nominees have made a significant impact in science either for good or for bad. Reporters and editorial staff at *Nature* judge nominees to have had 'a significant impact on the world, or their position in the world may have had an important impact on science'.

On the 2023 list published, the journal included a non-human entity for the first time: ChatGPT — a robot capable of answering questions and holding conversations in a more or less intelligent way. Although a machine is recognised as one of the scientists of the year, *Nature's* list also includes one of its creators. Ilya Sutskever, the chief scientist and cofounder

of OpenAI, the organisation that created ChatGPT, is one of the minds at the forefront of generative AI.

When Chandrayaan-3 successfully landed on the moon, India became the fourth country after the US, the USSR and China to achieve that feat. Kalpana Kalahasti, the associate project manager, played a leading role in the mission.

In addition to them, the scientists of the year were Brazil's Environmental Minister Marina Silva, who managed to stop deforestation of the Amazon; biochemist Svetlana Mojsos, who participated in the development of weight-loss drugs; the creator of the malaria vaccine R21 Prof. Khalido Tinto, as well as Thomas Powles, who developed a new method for treating a deadly bladder cancer.



Who can be happy and free on the planet

Experts analysed global threats and the degree of their impact on the quality and standard of living of people in different countries. How does Belarus look on the world risk map?

In the context of the constant escalation of geopolitical tensions in various regions of the world by the West, information resources on assessing risks in certain countries for tourists, employees, investors and business people are becoming increasingly popular. One of these popular platforms is the [travelriskmap.com](https://www.travelriskmap.com) project of the international company AEA International Holdings, Pte. Ltd. (located in Singapore). The country risk assessment project was launched by the company in November 2015, and since then its popularity has been constantly growing. So we decided to look at the situation in different countries and evaluate the place of Belarus in the security rating, or the so-called international SOS rating.

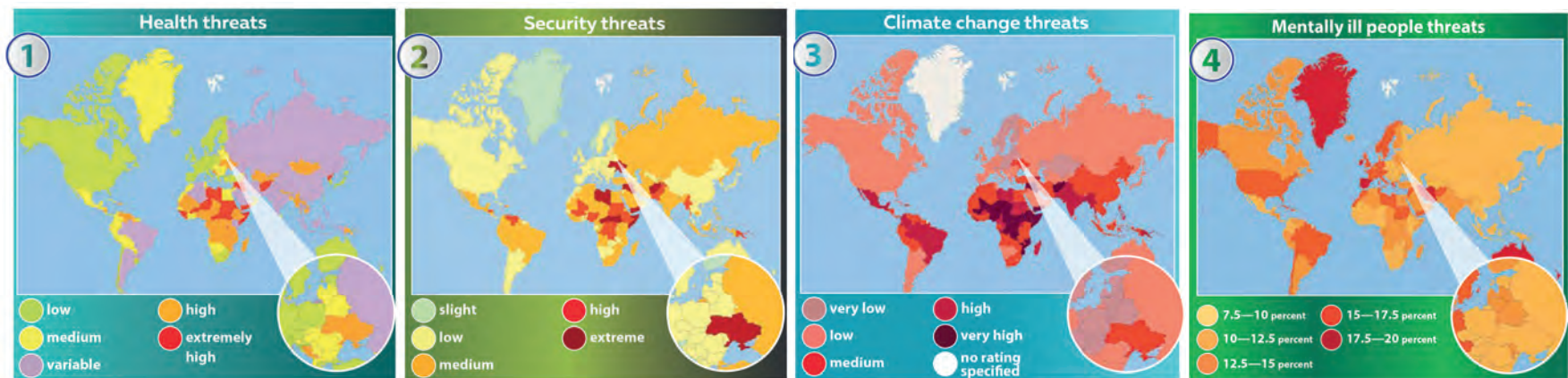


Egor Ermalitsky

The President of Belarus, Aleksandr Lukashenko,

“We were under close attention from the international community. We were watched, assessed, sometimes, and even often, labelled and placed under conditions of economic and political blockade. But through the thorns of sanctions and the trials of global crises, we reached our intended goals. They created their own country in the centre of Europe — peaceful, stable and very beautiful. Belarus. A country for human life!”

In the Address to the Belarusian people and the National Assembly on April 19th, 2019



In a low risk area

So, according to expert research, all countries are graded according to four threat groups:

- 1 Health threats** (due to climatic conditions (low/high temperatures, humidity, pressure, etc.), the spread of pathogenic bacteria, viruses in certain countries, as well as the level of medical care).
- 2 Security threats** (level of political violence, social tension, epidemic/pandemic and organised crime).
- 3 Climate change threats** (the presence and frequency of natural disasters: earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, floods, hurricanes, storms, etc.).
- 4 Mentally ill people threats** (the level of mentally unhealthy people in society: people under stress, depression, bipolar behaviour, overeating, schizophrenia).

In each group, threats are divided into five levels: 'low', 'medium', 'variable', 'high risk', 'extremely high (extreme)'.

In the first group ('Health threats'), Belarus is at an average level (Fig. 1). The highest health risk is observed in the countries of North and Central Africa, as well as the Middle East (Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan).

In the second group ('Security threats'), Belarus has a low level, which means the absence of political violence, social tension, uncontrolled morbidity (epidemics/pandemics) and organised crime in our country (Fig. 2). Extremely high security threats were noted in Ukraine, Libya, Iraq, Syria, Israel, Jordan, Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia, Central African Republic, and South Sudan. The lowest security threats are identified in Greenland, Iceland, Finland and Norway.

According to the group 'Climate change threats', Belarus is in the zone of the lowest negative impact of natural disasters on society and infrastructure. Our country actually has extremely comfortable living conditions: we do not have seismic or volcanic activity, excessive drought, floods, tornadoes, and so on. In fact, one can say 'peace and harmony' compared to other regions of the world (Fig. 3).

It is interesting that in the group 'Mentally ill people threats' (Fig. 4), Belarus, like the Baltic countries and Finland, is at the average level — 10-12.5 percent. This is the proportion of mentally ill people (depression, bipolar behaviour, overeating due to stress, schizophrenia) of the total population. At the same time, the countries of old Europe, together with the United States, are at a high level of risk (15-17.5 percent). At the same time, Spain, Portugal and Ireland have the highest level (17.5-20 percent).



By **Aleksei Avdonin**, an analyst with the Belarusian Institute of Strategic Research (BISR)

The wormy fruits of capitalism

Based on the above assessment of the state of mental health of society in Western countries, we can safely state that *this map of risks and threats is very relevant, since it takes into account and reflects the impact of current negative socio-economic processes on society.*

Thus, according to a Fox News poll dated December 19th, 2023, almost 80 percent of Americans

called the current state of the national economy bad. This is 9 percent more than it was at the beginning of Joe Biden's presidency.

All this leads to an excessive increase in stress and depression in Western countries, which is partly due to the lack of proper support from the state, since they simply do not have a model of a socially oriented state in our minds.

Rational solutions

We, Belarusians, are in an extremely good position — the above international ratings are evidence of

this. You can safely come to us for work, business and travel.

Destructive media tried to discredit Belarus and show that according to security ratings in our country everything is bad. But in reality, the above review demonstrates: Belarus holds its positions well in international rankings and looks decent.

Our country maintains a high level of security and comfortable life for the population thanks to the ability to find rational solutions in difficult situations, rebuild and catch trends.



Holiday sparkle and shine

Sanctions cannot destroy a miracle: we visited the only Christmas tree decoration factory in Belarus

Bunnies and bears strewn with glitter, cartoon dolls and cars — in the first minutes it seems that you are in a fairy tale. Moreover, at the Grai enterprise they are sure that this is just like that. The thing is that the products produced here are timed to coincide with the most favourite celebration of most adults and children — the New Year. Which means it creates a mood. The country's only factory of Christmas tree decorations is now working hard to fill store shelves with the symbol of the coming year — the Dragon. And these are not all new items. We saw with our own eyes what will appear on the Christmas trees of Belarusians on New Year's Eve, and met those who create this beauty.



CREATION

By Olga Nevmerzhitskaya

Baubles instead of magnets

Most workshops are quiet, everyone is busy with their own things at the Christmas tree decorations factory. Everything is clear, harmonious, and results-oriented. The enterprise itself can be called young: it is only eight years old. But it turned into a monopolist in a relatively short time. At the same time, the quality is at its best, which is why no one dared to compete.

We manoeuvre around the workshops, and Director Andrei Begun talks about the brainchild. The idea didn't just come out of nowhere. Many years before this, a Minsk resident brought New Year's decorations from different countries. The collection grew to such a scale that he wanted to show it to the world. Now, every December, visitors to the National History Museum are introduced to exhibits from the Congo, Peru, Indonesia, New Zealand, Australia and dozens of other countries.

Seeing that New Year's decorations arouse genuine interest, the decision to create domestic production came naturally. So, in 2015, the Grai factory appeared. Now they produce more than 300 thousand units of products per year. And this is just the beginning.

"If you count, about 1,500 decorations come out per day. Each one is unique in its own way. There are things that have been popular for years, for example, bullfinches. And there are decorations that seem to be selling out, but we don't see any obvious excitement. Then we come up with something new. After all, if you don't surprise the consumer, he will find an alternative," Director says.

What are they going to do this year?

Firstly, a symbol of the coming year. According to the eastern calendar, the Dragon dominates the coming 12 months. They decided to release it in several variations. Such things are made mainly from polyceramics. It takes a professional about five minutes to cast the product.

Brilliant finale

When ready, the semi-finished products are sent to the varnishing shop, where they are painted with an airbrush. This is where the fun begins — decorations gain individuality. The main outline is drawn along which the artist will subsequently work. Vitaly Mikhasev shares the wisdom of the craft. Together with other specialists, he applies a certain composition to the decorations and leaves them to dry, "I mix the varnish and hardener in a one-to-one ratio and spray it through a gun. I hold the decoration with tongs away from my face; if anything happens, I have a protective helmet. When everything is done, the decoration dries. After 10 hours it can be transferred to the art workshop."

This is where the real magic happens. The craftsmen have dozens of identical New Year's products in front of them. They are painted by hand. All you need is a brush, special paints and... training. Coming to the workshop, artists first get their hands on simple decorations — those that do not have an abundance of parts. Then they take on more difficult jobs.

In general, artists at an enterprise are worth their weight in gold. As a rule, these are graduates of the Minsk College of Crafts. They go to the factory for the first

time through practice, and after training, the most talented ones are invited to join the staff.

We'll leave the trends for others

The ideal formula by which you can calculate a popular decoration has not yet been invented. Andrei Begun explains,

"It makes no sense to chase trends in other countries, because Belarusians have a different mentality. We are closer to Father Frost, not the foreign Santa Claus. Many people are impressed by decorations reminiscent of Soviet childhood: houses, cones, snowmen. It's difficult to change this, and is it even necessary? Therefore, we make good decorations, understandable and relatable images. And we'll leave the trends to those who are chasing immediate success. We work for a long time — for quality and results."

New markets

Of course, it all starts with an idea. Without it, you won't be able to create a worthwhile decoration. First, a new product is developed using 3D modelling. Afterwards, special silicone moulds are made for it, into which the workpiece will be cast. But the company does not disclose the recipe for the solutions. Just like they don't talk about some equipment.

They supply decorations throughout Belarus; products are available in any major department store in the country.

Now the company has more than 500 individual items — these are decorations made of polyceramics, glass and plywood, and corporate gifts. The products are popular on marketplaces and are sold in Russia. Moreover, the

largest consignments are sent there. The demand for Belarusian Christmas tree decorations has always been high there. It increased even more when Ukraine refused supplies. Russians liked Belarusian products so much that they will be presented in Moscow's GUM in the new year. This is a success!

What about sanctions? There are some difficulties — now they have to pay more for paint. On the other hand, domestically produced wooden packaging now costs less, so you can save money on its purchase. Moreover, there are plans to increase co-operation, in particular, together with the Bellesbumprom concern, the company plans to make paper filler for boxes to ensure the safety of products. There are also immediate plans to build our own heat-blowing production facility in Russia. It will be launched next year.

New Year's wish

Despite the fact that Christmas tree decorations are bought closer to the New Year, the business cannot be called seasonal. In fact, such products are produced all

the time. The only difference is that at the beginning of the year, in-line products are made, including for export, and at the end, more corporate orders arrive and gift sets are prepared.

Some technologies that were developed at the factory are trying to be borrowed by enterprises with a similar focus. Director adds, "I have been asked many times whether the business is worth the effort I put in. I always answer that I love my job. Not everyone can take on New Year's decorations: the niche is too narrow. Bringing such production to a high level so that, with all the variety of choice, they buy our products is an ambitious goal. When I meet Santa Claus, I will definitely ask you to fulfil your dream in the new year: so that the factory continues to develop and give people joy."

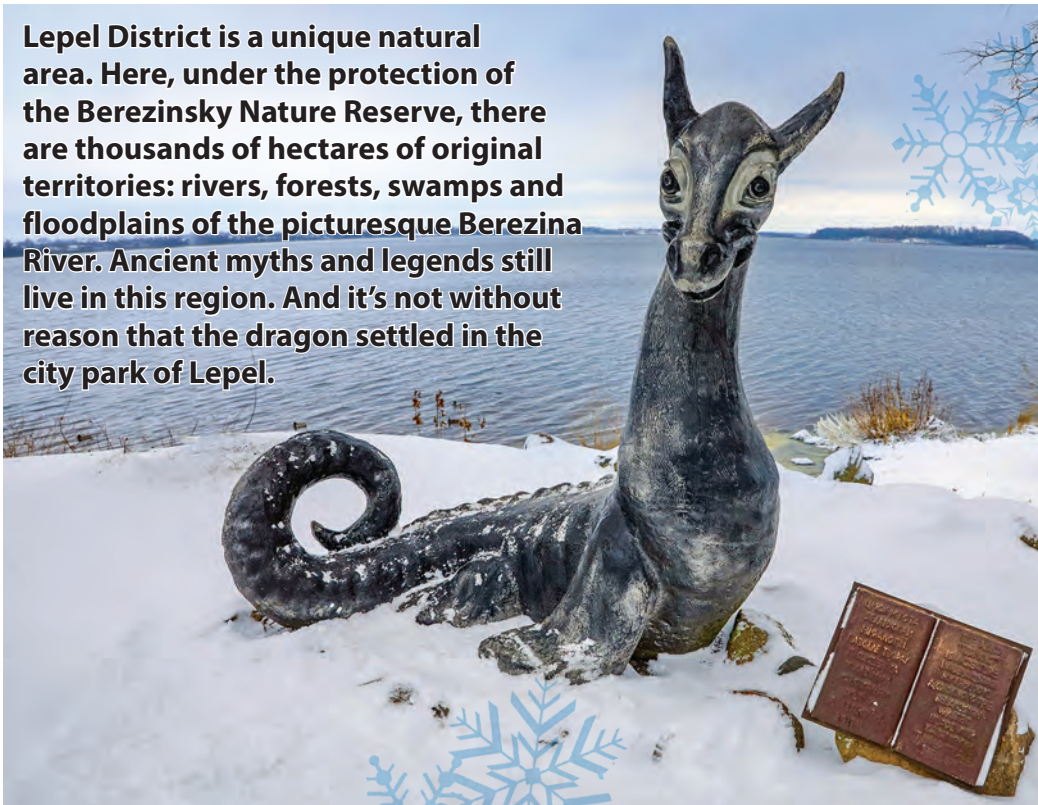


The Minsk Times
Friday
December 29
2023

10

In the footsteps of the Belarusian dragon

Lepel District is a unique natural area. Here, under the protection of the Berezinsky Nature Reserve, there are thousands of hectares of original territories: rivers, forests, swamps and floodplains of the picturesque Berezina River. Ancient myths and legends still live in this region. And it's not without reason that the dragon settled in the city park of Lepel.



By Yelena Begunova

Maybe he's real...

Father Frost, with whom we are going on a tour of iconic Lepel places, makes an appointment in the city centre, on the shore of the lake. From here the fabulous Tsmok views the surroundings. His bronze figure was erected in 2013. The surface of the lake has not yet frozen into ice — it feels as if a funny little dragon has just emerged from the abyss and froze in surprise at the snowdrifts around.

Despite the good-natured appearance of the sculpture, some residents avoid this place — they believe that Tsmok actually lives in the lake.

But the little one from the nearest kindergarten is not the least bit afraid. The kids rode the mythical hero in the blink of an eye. Everyone unanimously says: Belarusian Tsmok is very kind! Santa Claus supports the children: our dragon, unlike the monster, does not offend anyone and does not breathe fire. Therefore, in his honour, the Tsmok's Way annual festival of Slavic mythology is held in the Berezinsky Nature Reserve.

"If you believe the myths, our dragon periodically swims into the Essa River, visits Bereshcha Lake and even the Berezinsky Canal. He does this in order to receive food from the wedding table from the residents of the surrounding villages. They say that in the old days, at exactly midnight, newlyweds threw pickles into the deepest pool and poured out moonshine: so that Tsmok would wish them a happy family life. And then he, tipsy, allegedly raged for a long time in the pool, rejoicing for the young," Father Frost is paving the route.

Hunting for the water cow

We together decide to change the route a little — to stop by Bereshcha Lake. We can hardly see such beautiful landscapes as here anywhere.

"Bereshcha is a unique forest lake. This is part of the Berezinsky Water System, built at the beginning of the 19th century and connecting the basins of the Black Sea and Baltic Sea. The depth of the structure is one and a half metres. But sapropel, valuable for health, is apparently invisible here! Yes, and fish too. By the way, paid fishing is allowed here — the lake is not located



on the territory of the Berezinsky Nature Reserve, but nearby," says Father Frost, testing the road ahead with his staff.

How the bears shook the apple trees

Our guide talks interestingly about Tsmok and the history of the reserve itself. After all, he has fifteen years of Father Frost experience. But this is not a record. Labour veteran Vasily Staver from the village of Domzheritsy is almost the same age as the reserve itself, he is 95 years old. He devoted his entire working life to local farming. He also heard about Tsmok — he told his two daughters and two sons about the mythical water creature. Now Vasily Staver lives alone; a social worker helps him manage the housework. Children and grandchildren often visit and call, but the pensioner does not want to leave the protected land. He states: there is nothing better in the world than the unique beauties of the Berezinsky reserve.

We went to visit him. The house is warm, the stove is new. Santa Claus hands the villager fruit and suggests: 'Maybe we should chop some wood?' The owner is happy — firewood never hurts. He readily arms the guest with an ax and shows the block: warm yourself, Father Frost! He

worked hard, got excited, flushed, and then a new meeting — pensioner Lydia Belaya is eager for an audience. She is concerned, "Why don't bears sleep? The other day we were walking around the old collective farm garden again, looking for food. You should somehow call them to order, grandfather!"

Frost smiles, "Don't worry — the bears are already falling asleep in their dens."

But there is nothing to be afraid of — there has not been a single case of aggression towards humans from clubfooted animals in the entire hundred years of the history of the reserve. Although they are seen often. After all, here, in the reserve, the king of animals feels safe. Scientists say: at least 70 individuals live in the Berezinsky Biosphere Reserve.

Frost trusts, but will try

Well, we didn't meet Tsmok — apparently he doesn't want to show up before the New Year. But we visited a real forest zoo and learned how those who were sheltered here would celebrate the holiday. Even from a distance, a funny plush slide on white snow attracts attention. This three-year-old bear Vasilisa is childishly enjoying the white flakes. Vaska is clearly not expecting guests. No matter how much Fa-

ther Frost offered treats, she, like a spoiled child, played hide and seek, showing real acrobatic performances.

It's different with wolves — they are not averse to profiting from something.

"Soon we will hear wolf calls. In January-February, marriage romances begin to be sung, and wild relatives respond to them in chorus from the forest. It's fun... And here comes Savely — he's 'serving his time' with us," zoo workers joke.

The sad bison Savely is offended by everyone, he doesn't even get up from his bed. Why should he be happy? They were sent here, albeit to a spacious, but 'solitary cell' from Belovezhskaya Pushcha. So what, he was a little naughty... He eliminated three rivals in the battle for his beloved. People decided: before the entire herd of bison has been destroyed, they need to isolate him.

"Savely is friends with people. He is still young, he is six years old. But he decided to rashly seize power in the tribe. Now he will live in captivity, there are no other options," Father Frost notes.

Nyusha, the oldest resident of the zoo, happily accepts a treat from Father Frost. Everything suits her. Wintering goes well, there is plenty of food, the enclosure is large, and in the neighbourhood there are playful deer with ornately curled antlers. In general, each pet here has its own history of permanent registration in the zoo. Someone was shot, someone lost their mother in infancy... But Moroz is calm: the main thing is that now the animals are doing well — the bins are full of goodies, people are caring.

At the end of the excursion we go to an ancient swamp. Despite the snowdrifts, cranberries are still visible here in a red scattering between the hummocks. It shimmers under the sun, like a necklace of scarlet pearls in the snow. They say that the berries are especially sweet after frost... We try them and they are truly delicious. And around there are many animal tracks. Like an open book with many fascinating pages still unread. Maybe among them, on the eve of the New Year, someone will be able to find a path with paw prints of that same mythical Tsmok? Miracles happen if you believe in them...

P.S. Tourism specialist Aleksei Bogovets played the role of Father Frost on our New Year's trip. We thank the Berezinsky Biosphere Reserve for their assistance in preparing the report.

LEGEND



The Minsk Times
Friday
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Photo of the week



Alekssey Matish

According to the eastern calendar, the coming year 2024 will be the year of the Green Wood Dragon. Dragons are mythical creatures of amazing strength, beauty, wisdom and grace. Lizards are called their little copies.

DATES. EVENTS. PEOPLE.



On December 22nd, 1858, Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924) was born, a great Italian composer. He is the author of the *Manon Lescaut*, *Tosca*, *La Bohème*, *Madama Butterfly* operas and others. At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, Giacomo Puccini became the most popular composer in the world, whose operas were performed on 4 continents.

December 22nd is Power Engineer's Day in the Republic of Belarus — a professional holiday of all industry workers, covering the generation, transmission and sale of electrical and thermal energy to consumers. It is celebrated on one of the shortest daylight hours of the year. The uninterrupted operation of industrial enterprises, government agencies, schools, hospitals, and the warmth and comfort of any home depend on the work of power engineers.



December 22nd is Winter Solstice Day. The position of the sun has always been sacred in pagan cultures. The winter solstice was most often associated with rebirth, as it marked the beginning of daylight hours and a reduction in darkness.



December 22nd is International Day of Bard Song. A long winter evening is perhaps the best opportunity and time to gather friends and listen to your favourite songs, remember the names of departed bards, and remember new names. 'Good Songs — Good People' is one of the unofficial mottos of the holiday.

On December 22nd, 1938, coelacanth was caught near the southern part of Africa — the oldest fish on Earth. The discovery of coelacanth caused a sensation in the scientific world. The fish belongs to the coelacanth order, which belongs to the ancient order of the lobe-finned fish, which scientists considered extinct in the Cretaceous period. However, this is more than 70 million years ago!



On December 23rd, 1918, the country's main news agency, BELTA, will celebrate its 105th anniversary. Then, in 1918, the Belarusian news agency worked as one of the departments of the Russian Telegraph Agency, and received its modern name only in 1931. Today BELTA publishes up to 250 news stories a day, and in terms of citations in the world media it is among the leaders among news agencies in the CIS countries.



On December 24th, 1801, an English mechanic-designer Richard Trevithick demonstrated the first steam car. It became known in history as the London Steam Carriage, the first self-propelled vehicle powered by a steam engine to carry passengers. Trevithick's car was designed for eight passengers and was driven by a steam engine. The fireman standing on the back threw coal into the boiler. In 1829, steam engines became the fastest transport for passengers — the speed of spacious omnibuses reached 24 km/h.

December 25th is Christmas for the western Christians. Christmas is one of the most important Christian holidays and a public holiday in more than 100 countries around the world. The first information about Christians celebrating Christmas dates back to the 4th century. Over many centuries, many traditions of its celebration have formed — traditional Christmas trees, nativity scenes, divine services and feasts.



On December 26th, 1948, the Soviet La-176 fighter (Semyon Lavochkin Design

Bureau), piloted by Captain Oleg Sokolovsky, broke the speed of sound for the first time in the world. Breaking the sound barrier became a landmark event in the history of world aviation.



December 28th is International Cinema Day. On this day in 1895, the Lumière brothers presented to the public the world's first short film, *The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station*, in a Parisian cafe on the Boulevard des Capucines. Since then, cinema has come a long way in development and has undergone major changes: from silent films to sound films, from black and white to colour, from film to digital.

On December 28th, 2018, the first Republican New Year's ball for youth took place at the Palace of Independence in Minsk. The President of Belarus Aleksandr Lukashenko danced a waltz with Miss Belarus 2018 Maria Vasilevich. Almost 300 students and high school students who had achieved particular success in their studies, creativity and sports, scientific and social activities were invited to the New Year's ball at the Palace of Independence.

