

Belarus is The World's Schengen Visa Champion

On January 23 Lithuanian Foreign Minister Audronis Ažubalis stated that the EU should be more open towards ordinary Belarusians and increase pressure on the Belarusian regime. A year ago EU Commissioner Štefan Füle announced a “balanced approach” to overcome the harsh consequences of the 2010 post-election opposition crackdown in Belarus. However, in practice the EU [imposes](#) additional sanctions against Belarusian officials, but fails to offer new positive incentives to bring Belarusians significantly closer to the rest of Europe.

Belarusian citizens have to undergo the most cumbersome and expensive procedure in Europe when they apply for EU visas. This is ironic because according to recently released data from the European Commission, in 2010 Belarus was the absolute world leader in the per capita number of Schengen visas. That would seem like a good reason to trust Belarusians in visa matters and to abolish the EU visa regime completely or at least to dramatically liberalize it.

Champion Despite Difficulties

The recently published data show that the EU countries issued 428,000 C-type short-term Schengen visas for Belarusian citizens in 2010. In comparative perspective, Indians, a population of 1 billion, received only 406,000 Schengen visas. Turkish nationals obtained 522,000 visas despite the population of Turkey being seven times greater than that of Belarus. Moreover, every third Schengen visa issued to Belarusians was for multiple entry. If the EU trusts Belarusians so much, what is the purpose of imposing on them the toughest and the most expensive visa regime in the whole of Europe?

In order to obtain a EU visa, Belarusians must pay a €60 non-refundable fee and prove that they have a good reason to visit the EU. In most cases they first need to obtain a special written invitation from an EU citizen or organization. Moreover, if the invitation does not contain information about the financial sources of the applicant, they must prepare official documents to show they have at least €40 per day for their stay in the EU. Not every family in Belarus is ready to confirm the availability of €240 in order to spend two days with a child in Vilnius, a city situated just 170 km from Minsk.

Belarusian applicants need to bring official documents showing that they have a stable job and good income. They also have to purchase health insurance, book and pay for tickets and accommodation in advance, and persuade visa officers that they plan to go back to Belarus. Many consider collecting such a huge pile of documents not only meaningless but also humiliating.



Submitting a visa application is still much more difficult than receiving a positive decision on the visa. New PACE President Jean-Claude Mignon recently stated that “for Europeans to obtain the Belarusian visa is as difficult as the flight on the Moon”. Many ordinary Belarusians have the same feelings about EU visas.

Given that the average monthly salary in Belarus is now about €190, the €60 fee and other conditions for obtaining a EU visa look truly draconian. In comparison, Russia and Ukraine finalized their negotiations with the EU on the facilitation of the visa regime in 2007-2008 and now their citizens pay only €35 for each visa, the number of documents they need to submit is much more reasonable and the percentage of multiple entry visas is much higher.

Free Visas = More Democracy?

Belarus refused to conduct negotiations with the EU on visa liberalization. They refer to misunderstandings on the conclusion of the readmission agreement as the main reason for that. On January 23 the Belarusian MFA spokesman Andrei Savinykh clarified the government's position, saying that Belarus does not want to accept other countries' illegal migrants which have come to the EU from the Belarusian territory.

Nevertheless, many experts doubt that this is the frank reason for refusal and say that the Belarusian authorities are just trying to isolate the country from western influence. Member of the Lithuanian Sejm Foreign Committee Piatras Austriavicius shares this point of view. He thinks that the impact of an open Belarus-EU border on the democratization of the country would be far greater than the effect of hundreds of seminars organized for this purpose.

When Belarusians travel to European countries, they can see the real life of other Europeans and clear their minds of the TV propaganda that constantly brainwashes them about the alleged serious problems in the new EU countries such as Poland and Lithuania. Propagandists forget to inform Belarusians that the average monthly salary has reached €620 in Lithuania and €1300 in Poland, while the level of living costs is almost the same in these countries as in Belarus.

Lots of Discussions Without Concrete Improvements

Belarusian civil society campaigning and lobbying in Brussels and other European capitals started a widespread public discussion on the issue. Unfortunately, the visa regime has not yet been facilitated. Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Poland and Germany began to issue no-fee national visas for Belarusians in accordance with Fule's approach after the presidential election in 2010. But Belarusians only very

rarely request this type of visas; this measure therefore looks like a symbolic gesture. Besides, other EU countries have not joined the pioneers.

Lithuania, Poland and Germany grant more than 99% of Belarusian applications for EU visas. Lithuania refuses only 0.17% of Belarusian applications – quite logical, given that residents of the 2 million Belarusian capital Minsk can travel to Vilnius in just 2 hours for \$10 and shop in local supermarkets such as Akropolis. Belarus has nearly three times more consumers than Lithuania, Belarusian shoppers can significantly benefit the Lithuanian economy.

Towards Europe Undivided by Visa Barriers

Even if the European Union hesitates to unilaterally abolish visas for Belarusians, official Minsk's plans to allow visa-free entry for EU citizens in 2013 as an experiment before the 2014 World Ice Hockey Championship could be a good starting point for successful negotiations.

As a response, the EU could begin by reducing the visa fee for Belarusians to the same level as for Russians and Ukrainians (€35). Then it could accelerate visa proceedings (from 10 days to 5 days as in Russia) and simplify the procedure of applying for a visa. The next step could be to remove visas altogether.

Many citizens of non-democratic countries have a right to enter the Schengen area for 90 days without visas. Nationals of countries like Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Venezuela benefit from this right. These countries are not particularly democratic and much more poor than Belarus. If nationals of Albania can travel visa-free in Europe, why can't Belarusians?

By taking simple visa liberalization steps, the EU can assure Belarusians that they have a European alternative to the Eurasian Union. And the complete abolition of the EU visa regime with Belarus would more effectively facilitate openness

and democracy in Belarus than another round of declarations and visa sanctions from Europe.