How the EU and Lukashenka Keep Belarusians Out of Europe

Belarusians are the most travel-restricted nation in Europe. Both their own government and the European Union seem to be determined not to let them out.

The Belarusian authorities prevent leading opposition activists, students and state bureaucrats from travelling to the neighbouring EU states. The European Union also restricts Belarusian citizens by keeping the most restrictive visa policy in Europe and blacklisting top Belarusian officials and businessmen.

The malicious motivation of the Belarusian authorities is not surprising. Why the European Union keeps its visa rules so strict is much more difficult to understand.

Belarusian Authorities v the Opposition

Following the last round of EU sanctions in February 2012, the Belarusian authorities banned over a dozen opposition activists from travelling to the EU. The authorities say that this is their response to EU sanctions. Perhaps they also hope that some activists will decide not to come back to Belarus to avoid future problems. The more political refugees abroad, the safer they feel at home.

In the past Belarusian opposition activists could travel to the West via Russia. There is no border control between Belarus and Russia which makes it easy. But last week the head of the Russian Border Service pledged not to prevent Belarusian citizens blacklisted by their own government from leaving Russia. If this threat materialises, many activists
would be kept within the borders of the so-called Union State of Belarus and Russia.

**Belarusian Authorities v Students**

Another group which the Belarusian authorities want to keep a close eye on is students. Full-time students can travel abroad during term periods only if they get permission. In the past, they had to seek permission from the Minister of Education. Now it is enough to secure permission at a university level.

In the Soviet Union the harshness of laws was balanced by their non-compulsory nature. This is also true for Belarus today — most students can travel abroad without any problems and their universities know about it. However, the student travel ban can sometimes be used as a pretext to expel politically active students as it has been used to do so in the past. That was the case with politically active students Tatsiana Khoma in 2005 and Tatsiana Shaputska in 2009.

**Belarusian Authorities v Belarusian Officials**

A number of categories of state employees are unable to travel abroad without special permission. For instance, most officers of the Belarusian police or KGB have to seek permission from their superiors when they want to travel abroad.

According to Moscow-based website *Belaruski Partyzan*, this April the Presidential Administration issued a new classified instruction in which senior officers of KGB and police were asked not to approve requests to travel abroad. It is was presented as a "temporary measure" but it did not specify how long it would last.

Belarusian legislation also prohibits those who have access to "state secrets" from travelling abroad without special permission. In the era of the internet, this restriction seems obsolete but it still makes the lives of some people more complicated.
European Union v Belarusian Officials

Some Belarusian officials suffer not only from their own bosses but also from EU sanctions. In other words, they are under a dual travel ban.

In February 2012, EU foreign ministers added 21 Belarusian citizens to their travel ban list, bringing the total number to more than 200 individuals. The list includes judges, prosecutors, senior police officers and those responsible for the falsification of elections. This year the EU also began adding the most influential businessmen who, in their view, support the Lukashenka regime.

But some of the blacklisted officials can still travel to the European Union to attend official meetings of various international organisations. In January 2012 Minister of Interior Arkady Kuliashou travelled without any problems to attend an Interpol meeting in Lyon. In March the KGB chief Vadzim Zaitsev reportedly travelled to Rome as part of an official delegation.

European Union v Belarusian Citizens

In any event, the restrictions discussed above affect only a limited number of people. The travel restrictions imposed by the EU on millions of Belarusian nationals are a much more serious problem.

It often takes months for Belarusian citizens to get a visa for an EU country. This includes waiting for an appointment, preparing thick packages of documents, and spending many hours queuing outside the consulate regardless of the weather. The procedure is very expensive too – a simple visa costs €60 – the highest price in Europe. To put it into context, the average monthly salary in Belarus is around €270.

What is worse, many consulates deliberately issue singly-entry visas valid for several days only. The German consulate is
notorious for this. In practise this means that Belarusian nationals have to undergo this humiliating and expensive procedure again and again. No wonder that the pro-rata number of Schengen visas issued for Belarusians is the highest in the world.

Consulates of EU countries in Belarus are overloaded with visa applicants who cannot get long-term visas. According to the Coalition for EU-Belarus Visa-Free Movement, EU regulations allow visas to be issued for a period of up to five years.

Why So Many Restrictions?

One can understand why the Belarusian authorities want to keep their citizens locked inside the country. Lukashenka and other top officials are already on the EU travel ban list and have no desire to help their fellow citizens. In January 2012, the spokesman for the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs admitted that the main reason why visa prices were so high was because Belarus was unwilling to sign a visa facilitation agreement with the EU.

It is more difficult to rationally explain why the EU treats Belarusian citizens so badly in terms of visas.

Is this policy a useful tool to keep away potential illegal immigrants? No. Issuing short-term one-entry expensive visas does not help. Even a one-day visa would be enough to enable a potential illegal immigrant to stay in the host country.

Is it a legal requirement to give visas only for several days? There is no such requirement. Each consulate is different in their treatment of Schengen visa applicants. For instance, Polish consulates often issue multiple entry visas for six or twelve months, while the German consulate in Minsk more often issues one-entry visas valid for a few days only.

Perhaps consulates of EU countries are just interested in earning money by charging €60 for a little passport sticker?
That sounds like a possible but immoral explanation. Belarusians already have one the lowest salaries in Europe. It is wrong to make those who already suffer from the most repressive political regime in the region to pay the highest visa fee in Europe.

Time to Introduce "White Lists"

It is time for the European Union to adopt not only blacklists for "bad Belarusians" but also whitelists for "good Belarusians". The whitelisted categories of Belarusian nationals should be entitled to long-term, multiple-entry visas free of charge.

These whitelists should go beyond the opposition leaders and include thousands of Belarusians: students, academics and teachers, political and human rights activists, those working for NGOs and various community initiatives.

When Belarusians travel abroad, the benefits of democracy and market economy speak for themselves. These people would become the best advocates of European values in their own country.

Rather than hoping for a quick regime change in Belarus, the West should patiently work to integrate rather than isolate Belarusian citizens from the rest of Europe.

If Europe wants to have a stable and democratic neighbour tomorrow, it needs to plant the seeds of change today.