

# **Inbound Tourism in Belarus: Rosy Plans, Feeble Measures**

Belarus aspires to attract half as many foreign tourists by 2015 as in 2011 and to create over hundred regional tourism brands. However, so far, official plans are restrained by procrastination and poor practical moves. Without proactive measures such as visa facilitation and tourism liberalisation, the adopted plans will remain unrealistic.

Dynamics of Poland-Belarus border crossings serves as a good illustration of the negative consequences of visa regime which Belarus maintains for the EU citizens. Since 2003 the difference in numbers among the Poland citizens' entries to Belarus and Ukraine rose many times. Ukraine kept visa-free regime for the EU citizens and helped attract more foreign visitors. Intensification of people-to-people contacts at the Poland-Belarus border is further hampered by the stalled small border traffic agreement.

## **New Zealanders Are Coming**

According to Belarus National Statistics Committee, in 2011 the number of arrivals of foreign citizens to Belarus reached almost 6 million. The figure does not include crossings of Russia-Belarus border and arrivals for permanent residence. According to the official statistics, circa 60% of total arrivals are usually made for private reasons and about 30% make transit trips. Business and tourism purposes account only for about 7% and 2% correspondingly.

Russia traditionally tops the list of the countries that give the biggest share of foreign tourists to Belarus. Interestingly, in 2011 New Zealand with 3,085 tourists followed Russia (83,843) and Turkey (3,596) and left Lithuania (3,170) and Poland (2,983) behind.

New Zealand's leadership seems even more inconceivable if one takes into account that only 18 tourists from these remote islands visited Belarus in 2010. These odd figures underline shortcomings of the official Belarusian statistics which counts as tourists only those individuals who come with tourist visas.

Earlier, trips of New Zealanders who came to Warsaw airport and headed to Moscow via Belarus were counted as transit. A sudden change may well have occurred due to the national agencies' play with statistics in order to comply with the official tourism development five-year plan.

According to the State program on tourism development for the years 2011-2015, the number of foreign tourists (it was 130 thousand in 2011) is to increase annually and reach 190 thousand by 2015. Export of services by the foreign tourists is planned to reach half a billion USD (it was USD 138 mln in 2010).

### **Main destinations of inbound and outbound tourism**

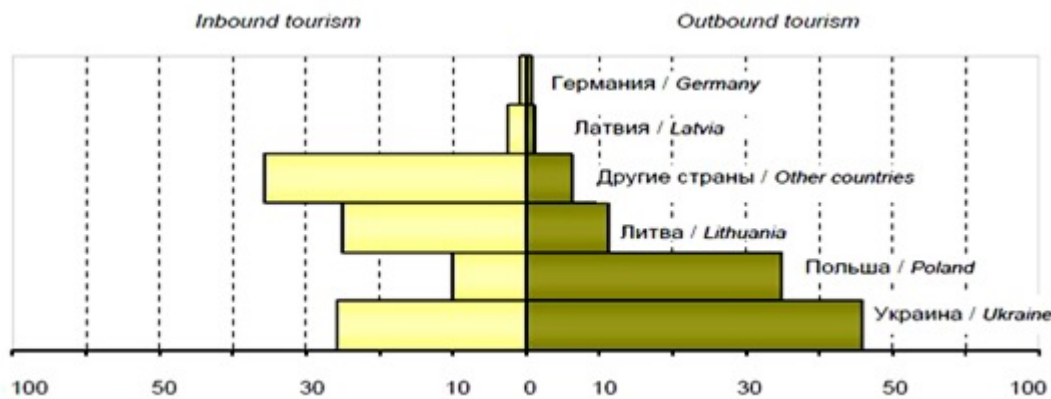
As noted above, tourism figures are very relative as no permanent monitoring is in place and merely individuals with tourist visas are taken into account. However, official statistics roughly illustrates the main tourism destinations.

In 2011, only 10,6 thousand Poles, 3,2 thousand Lithuanians and 600 Latvians came to Belarus with tourist visas. Other countries (besides Russia, Turkey and newly emerged New Zealand) whose citizens relatively often visit Belarus with the purposes of tourism include Great Britain, Germany, and Italy. The number of Italian tourists is gradually going down from year to year, with less than 2 thousand Italians in 2011 compared to more than 4 thousand in 2007.

Countries most frequently visited by Belarusian tourists in 2011 were Russia, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Egypt, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Turkey and Czech Republic. They hosted 87% of all

outgoing Belarusian tourists.

***Distribution of inbound and outbound tourism in 2010 by countries, percent of total***



*Source: National statistical committee of the Republic of Belarus*

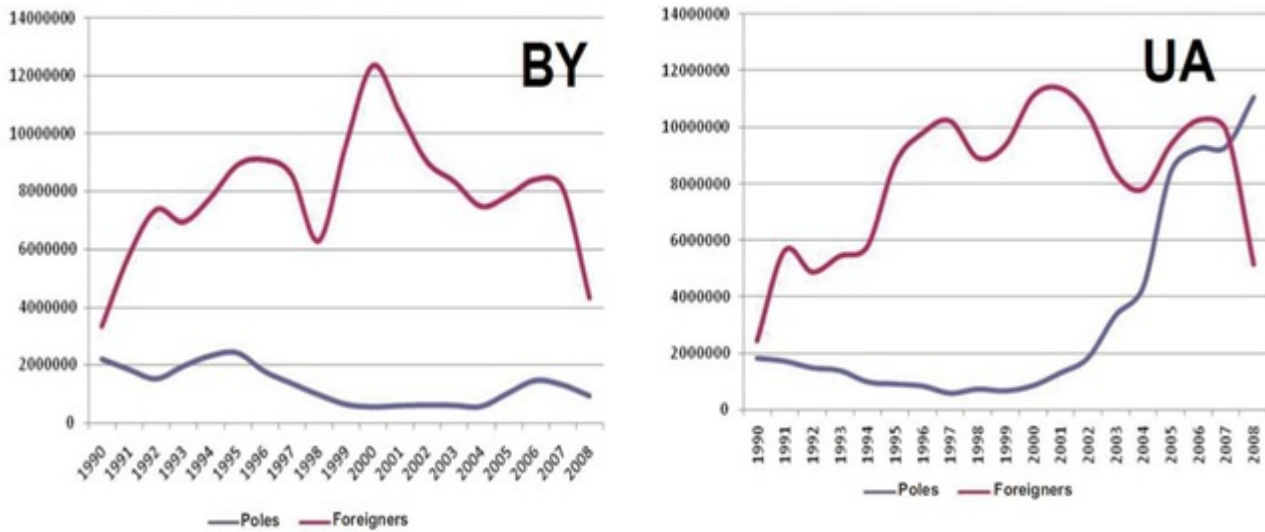
Poland-Belarus border crossings are a manifest illustration of the negative consequences of visa regime between Belarus and EU countries. Belarusians cross the Polish border nearly as often as Ukrainians do, as the graphs show below.

At the same time, the number of travels of Poles across the Belarusian border is many times lower than in Ukrainian case. As we can see, between 2002 and 2008, Poles' crossings of the Ukrainian border increased more than five times.

In 2007, the share of Poland's citizens that crossed Poland-Belarus border was only 13%, while it reached 48% for Poland-Ukraine border.

The striking difference in the crossings of the border with Belarus and Ukraine by Poland's citizens is the result of visa regime in the former and absence of visa requirements for short-term trips in the latter. It also is worth keeping in mind that the crossings of Poland-Ukraine border further intensified with the launch of the local border traffic regime in mid-2009.

## Graphs: Number of Poland-Belarus and Poland-Ukraine border crossings, 1990-2008



**Source:** Polish Border Guard. **Note:** The absolute majority of the crossings under the “Foreigners” category means Belarusians or Ukrainians correspondingly, with some share of other nationals in transit.

### Tourism Brands Plans Frustrated

Belarus is a promising place for development of several kinds of inbound tourism. First, it has transit tourism potential because many Russian citizens travel to the European Union by bus. Second, Belarus has much to offer in recreational tourism with its good quality-price ratio to offer. Third, Belarus can develop rural tourism and thematic tours development across the places of Jewish, Polish and Lithuanian heritage.

The state tourism program required regional executive committees to develop tourist brands for each of the 118 Belarus's districts, 6 regions and the capital by the first half of 2011. In fact, as late as by half-2012 a winner of a tender to develop the city brand for Minsk was announced. The Britain-based company INSTID was awarded a contract to create a logo and the signature style of Belarusian capital by the end of the year. No news about regional brands so far.

The state program also aims at setting up tourist information centers abroad to complement the only centre of this kind in Warsaw. Besides a need to develop informative work, there is much to do about tourism infrastructure inside the country. Belarus has only a handful of good camping sites and hostels. If you decide to visit one of them, you should check out this online catalogue with [camping gears](#).

So far, the government appears not to be serious about visa facilitation for EU citizens. Belarus has not yet replied to the invitation to launch negotiations on visa facilitation that European Commission sent in June 2011. Official Minsk is allegedly suspicious of the readmission agreement with the EU that is linked to the visa facilitation negotiations.

In the absence of visa facilitation, Belarus adopts measures that only partly improve business climate for tourism industry. The recent example of such include the July presidential decree that introduces preferential tax system for the tourist companies and widens the list of tourist services that are granted VAT exemption.

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