

# **Vilnius: the New Mecca for Belarusian Shoppers and Activists**

On weekends, Vilnius looks like a Belarusian city.

Cars with Belarusian registration plates, crowds of Belarusians carrying shopping bags, even bus schedules to Belarus from big shopping centres. In 2012, according to the Lithuanian State Department of Tourism, 400,000 Belarusian guests visited Lithuania.

In politics, Lithuania maintains a critical position against Lukashenka's regime. A significant number of offices of foreign foundations and organisations which work with Belarusian civil society are located in Vilnius.

In 2012 the goods turnover between Lithuania and Belarus broke all records. In comparison with the previous year, it grew by 8% and reached \$2,3bn. Moreover, Lithuania has the positive balance. Belarusians come to Lithuania more and more often, not only for shopping but also to spend a weekend there.

Lithuania, somewhat paradoxically, remains one of the few countries which profits from Belarus' isolation. Thanks to the protectionist practises of the Belarusian regime, it has become much cheaper for Belarusians to pay for visas and transportation expenses, and to buy many goods in Lithuania, than at home.

The official Vilnius wants the status quo in Belarus' policies to change, but it will not pursue any changes at the expense of its economic benefits. In fact, the current situation in Belarus supports Lithuania's interests.

**Who Earns Belarusian Money in Lithuania?**

Lithuanian shopping centres remain the key destination point for many Belarusians. Most Belarusians visit centres like Akropolis and Ozas during the weekends. These shopping centres hold major advertising campaigns in Belarusian cities. According to a study conducted by the advertising agency AD Hunters Baltics, Belarusians bring 10-15% of Vilnius retail shopping income. In some shopping centres, this number has even reached 30%.

Lithuanian supermarkets owners even try to hire personnel that can speak Russian to their Belarusian clients. Clients can drop about \$450-600 in one visit to these Lithuanian shops. Belarusian visitors buy everything – clothes, food, household equipment, goods for children and cosmetics you can also find available at <https://lashbombusa.com/>. Some even come to Lithuania to change the tires on their cars. All this is cheaper than it is in Belarus. In addition, visitors return the VAT on the border.

Belarusians often call the Vilnius airport “Minsk-3”. According the director of the Vilnius airport air service department Edvinas Levaškevičius, 240-250 Belarusians use the services of the Vilnius airport daily, and the total number of Belarusian clientele reaches about 10% of all passengers of the airport.

This large intake at the Vilnius airport is a result of the Belarusian authorities’ protectionism. The Belarusian authorities protect the domestic air company “Belavia” and keeps low-price airlines away from the Belarusian market. Belarus does not belong to the EU–US Open Skies Agreement either which makes it complicated to open new routes and to lower ticket prices.

Hotels, cafes, restaurants, tourist and real estate agencies stay natural beneficiaries of the Belarusian visitors’ financing. Although most Belarusians visit Lithuania to shop, some of them go to Lithuania on holidays as well.

## **The Capital of Belarusian Civil Society**

It often seems that Vilnius is the capital of contemporary Belarusian civil society. Belarusian NGOs and several foreign foundations have more offices here than in Minsk. When Belarusian authorities refuse to register organizations in Belarus, activists often go to Lithuania and incorporate their NGOs there.

Most American foundations and organisations working with Belarus also chose Vilnius for their offices. Among the most influential are International Republican Institute, National Democratic Institute and Freedom House. A major German Foundation, Konrad Adenauer, is also operating from Vilnius. Most of the aforementioned organisations are not able to operate legally in Belarus and consequently stay in Vilnius, just 30 km away from the Belarusian border.

Plenty of Belarusian civil society organisations, including the international consortium EuroBelarus and representatives of the Belarusian opposition work from Vilnius. Belarusian Human Rights House in Exile, also working from Vilnius, continues to impress with its ongoing activities. The House hosts almost year-round human rights schools, continuously attracting a large number of active youth.

One of the most important institutions for Belarus in Vilnius remains the European Humanities University. Belarusian authorities closed EHU in 2004, but thanks to Western aid the university resumed its activities in Vilnius in 2005. Well-known Belarusian public figures and journalists lecture at the university, including Siarhei Chareuski, Ales Lahvinets and Viktor Martsinovich.

In addition, Vilnius hosts numerous seminars, trainings and conferences for Belarusians. As a result a significant share of money directed to help Belarus lands in Vilnius.

## **Mutually Beneficial Cooperation**

The Lithuanian authorities provide statistical data that the trade turnover between the two countries in 2012 made up around \$2.3bn. \$1.4bn can be accounted for by Lithuanian exports and \$875m – for Belarusian exports. The goods turnover increased by 8% throughout the year.

Alongside this, the goods turnover does not include everything; for example, stores paying for Lithuanian port services. Last year, Lukashenka [threatened to use Russian ports](#) instead of Lithuanian ports but this threat remained merely words.

The Belarusian-Lithuanian cooperation is beneficial for both sides. It leads to a situation where Lithuania conducts a two-track policy with regards to Belarus. On the one hand, it supports the opposition and the civil society. On the other hand, it closely cooperates with the regime in the economic sphere. Some even call this hypocrisy.

In fact, Lithuania [has become a hostage](#) of its economic benefits and its ability to act on its obligation to react to the human rights violations.

### **The Future of the Belarusian-Lithuanian Relations**

Belarus and Lithuania will have to live with each other regardless of their political regimes. Their cooperation covers not just transit and big business, but also shopping centres, markets, airports, and accommodation. Belarusian and Lithuanian small businessmen strengthen their ties to one another and bring in profits for both countries.

Most likely bilateral relations that are “walking on one leg” – the economy – will continue. Relations at the higher echelons of politics will remain cold for a long time to come. Increasing contacts between people may facilitate changes in Belarus and economic benefits for Lithuania. That is why the decrease in visa fees and simplification of the visa procedures remains one of the few things that the European

Union can do to help Belarusian society.