

Getting a Belarusian Visa: Easier but More Expensive

Since 22 August 2013 all foreigners can get Belarusian visas through the Minsk National Airport just after their arrival.

However, these and other relaxations in the visa regime on the eve of the 2014 Ice Hockey World Cup still remain incomplete. They leave a number of obstacles on the path to simplifying travel to Belarus and from Belarus which includes low number of no visa treaties with other countries and high visa costs.

Moreover, the government does not want to address the painful issue of the simplification of the visa regime with the EU for purely political reasons. Visa liberalisation will lead to potentially unpleasant consequences for Belarusian authorities such as brain drain and the impossibility to prohibit undesirable Western politicians and activists from entering Belarus.

How to Get a Belarusian Visa?

Naturally, to enter Belarus nearly all of those coming from countries outside of the former Soviet Union must obtain visas. Belarusian legislation provides for three types of entry visas: B – transit visa; C – short-term visa, valid for up to 90 days and D – long-term visa, valid for up to one year with the right to stay up to 90 days. Entry visas may be single-entry, double-entry and multiple-entry.

One can get any of these visas either at a Belarusian embassy (consulate) or in the Minsk National Airport. The law requires foreigners to submit a number of documents such as completed visa application form, a foreign travel document, and other support documents (depending on the purpose of the visit – invitations, confirmation letters, etc).

The process of granting visas normally takes five days (two days for urgent applications for an additional fee). When denying the application a consular officer does not have to explain the reasons.

Beginning 22 August 2013 all foreigners can also obtain visas in the Minsk National Airport in accordance with a newly adopted regulation of the Council of Ministers. However, this relaxation of the visa regime has failed to release foreign visitors from all bureaucratic obstacles. Visa support documents must be submitted to the Foreign Admissions Division (FAD) of the Consular Directorate of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in advance: for short-term visas – no later than 3 business days before the expected date of arrival (5 days – for long-term visas).

Number of "No Visa Partners"

Belarus	Russia	Ukraine	Moldova
22	63	34	63

Belarus has concluded a limited number of treaties establishing no visa regime. For now Belarusians can travel freely to 22 countries, a figure which appears to be a relatively low figure in comparison with its neighbouring states.

In addition, Belarusian authorities have recently announced that they will allow all foreigners to stay in the country during the Ice Hockey World Championship in May 2014 without visas, given they have bought one ticket to any hockey game of the tournament.

By relaxing the visa requirements at the airport and during the upcoming Ice Hockey Cup, the Belarusian government is taking steps in the right direction. For Moldova, Ukraine and Russia, for example, foreigners do not have the possibility of obtaining visas at the airport, only in consulates and embassies.

Type of Visa	General Price*	United Kingdom	United States	Poland, Baltic States	Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia
C (single-entry)	119	342	480	99	238
C (multiple-entry)	238	342	570	238	238
D	291	1098	810	595	595

*The figure should be doubled if the applicant's citizenship country has a Belarusian consulate on its territory

However, moving towards less bureaucracy should be accompanied by cancelling visa regimes with other new states.

Visa Costs: Selectively High

The cost of entry visas in Belarus varies much depends not only on their term but also on the citizenship of the applicant. The latest rise in prices occurred in 2010 when [visa costs increased](#) by 50% to 200% depending on the place of issuance (airport or embassy).

The official web site of the Belarusian Ministry for Foreign Affairs explains that the difference in the visa costs by the “reciprocity principle”. In other words, Belarus applies the same tariffs to foreigners as those countries apply to Belarusian citizens.

Type of Visa	General Price	United Kingdom	United States	Poland, Baltic States
C (single-entry)	79	114	131	33
C (multiple-entry)	158	114	131	79
D	198	366	350	198

If the authorities were to become serious about attracting foreign travellers, businessmen or students they would lower the visa prices. The actual figures indicate that the Belarusian government has chosen not to go this route.

Politics Hinder Visa Regime Relaxation with the EU

The strict [EU-Belarus visa regime](#), however, remains one of the

most crucial problems for Belarusian civil society, business and youth with regards to visa affairs.

In 2012 Belarus became [a world leader](#) in the number of Schengen visas issued per capita (74 visas per 1,000 citizens). Most of those visas are short term and single-entry. Belarusians have to pay €60 (\$79) for these visas (the highest price in Europe), while Moldovans, Ukrainians and Russians pay only €35 (\$46).

Calls for visa regime relaxation filled numerous memos sent by Belarusian civil society groups to European institutions. The civil coalition "Visa Free Travel Campaign: Go Europe! Go Belarus!", established in 2011, became one of the most remarkable initiatives of its kind. They regularly launch various activities from essay contests to making movies and photo albums, all of them related to campaigning for a visa free regime. The Council of the EU has inserted a visa liberalisation clause in a number of its documents on Belarus during the last years. Yet, no visible progress has been achieved.

A [part of the problem](#) is that the EU Visa Code is binding for all the Schengen member-states – countries cannot unilaterally address the visa issue: any progress must be based upon the reciprocity principle. On the other hand, the Belarusian government links this issue to EU sanctions, which cannot be lifted without [advances in human rights](#) in Belarus.

Though not admitting to it, the Belarusian regime has some other problems with a possible visa free regime (or its relaxation) with the European Union.

Independent polls show that a huge number of Belarusians want to leave the country for various reasons. The Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS) gives a figure of 28% for those who wish to emigrate and the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) has the

number at 41.4% (53.7% – for temporary migration). Relaxation of the visa regime with the EU will surely foster this process. Bearing in mind that about 350,000 Belarusian citizens already work abroad, as the BISS survey has shown, the government will unlikely be interested in stimulating [further migration](#).

Secondly, more Belarusians travelling to the West means more democratic sentiments and ideas, poisonous for the autocracy – ideas that could penetrate Belarusian society.

Moreover, maintaining a visa regime with the EU enables Belarusian authorities to prevent undesirable western politicians and civil activists from visiting the country by simply rejecting their visa applications. In September 2012 this happened with European MPs Emanuelis Zingeris and [Marieluise Beck](#).

Thus, the Belarusian government may take some measures to simplify its visa regime, especially for the sake of the image of events like the [Ice Hockey Championship](#). But the authorities will hardly venture to remove their [last protective barrier](#) from the EU because they place their political interests above the needs of Belarusian society.

David Marples: the Nation Built on the World War II Myth

Professor David Marples the University of Alberta who was banned in April from travelling to Belarus is finishing his new book on historical memory and World War II in Belarus.

At an Anglo-Belarusian Society event in London last week, he was speaking about the "military" mentality of the Belarusian society, the nation-building process in Belarus, and the West's policy against Lukashenka's regime, including sanctions and the ice hockey championship.

The Canadian historian and political scholar has long been known as one of the best Western experts on Belarus and already published several books including the most recent "The Lukashenka Phenomenon: Elections, Propaganda, and the Foundations of Political Authority in Belarus" (2007). Last year, he became the president of the North American Association of Belarusian Studies.

"First time I visited Belarus in 1992, and since then I travelled to the country every year," says Marples. However, this April the researcher was denied a Belarusian visa. "That was the first time I applied to the Belarus consulate in Canada, but not in the US. The explanation he received from the embassy was very brief: "You have been denied entry to the Republic of Belarus. Best wishes, Igor."

Marples apparently ended up on the black list of foreigners who were denied entry to Belarus

Marples ended up on the black list of foreign politicians, public figures, human rights activists and scientists who were denied entry to Belarus. In contrast to the official list of Belarusian officials who are banned to travel the EU countries, Lukashenka's regime imposes restrictions quietly and secretly. Marples himself assumes that officials of the embassy were just afraid to issue a visa the man who could cause some problems in the current political relations between Minsk and the West.

Lukashenka's War

For the last three years, Marples has been studying historical memory and World War II in Belarus. In other words, the historian examines how the state's control over historical memory in Belarus affects formation of the Belarusian nation.

While collecting the data for his book, Marples travelled across Belarus extensively, met a wide range of people, and studied Belarusian sources. From the catalogues of the National Library of Belarus, he learned that as many as 1,500 book titles on WWII were published in Belarus between the years of 2005 and 2010. "It is a huge figure," says the researcher.

He highlights that an anti-Soviet sentiment is gaining strength in both Baltic States, and Ukraine (especially the Western part). Crimes of the Soviet regime have become exposed, and those who stood against the Communists are glorified as national heroes. Belarus demonstrates a totally different trend. "The Great Patriotic War" is the defining element of historical memory and the basis for the formation of modern collective identity in Belarus," Marples points out.

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According to the researcher, Lukashenka is trying to build the nation around the thesis of the Great Victory over the Nazis gave Belarusians freedom and independence. Moreover, the regime is seeking to fulfil nation-building process on the basis of political rather than ethnic principles.

The historical experience of the "first Belarusian state" the Grand Duchy of Litva (Lithuania) along with national values such as the Belarusian language are defiantly ignored. On the other hand, Lukashenka's ideologists attempt to rehabilitate [Joseph Stalin](#) and to level crimes of the Soviet regime which damaged Belarus more than any other Soviet republic.

Marples emphasises that even the current rulers of Russia have condemned Stalin's repression and paid tribute to the victims. Lukashenka has not done anything like that for 18 years of his reign. On the contrary, Belarus authorities use the tragic events of 1941-1944 (according to different calculations, Belarus lost from one third to one fourth of its population due to WWII) to replace the monstrous crimes of the totalitarian system in the public memory.

Memorials and monuments to Soviet heroes, state-financed film production, the shift of the Independence Day's date, rewriting of school textbooks are all designed to strengthen the propaganda which is a very close in its nature to the Soviet one. Moreover, says Marples, the regime uses WWII issues as a weapon against political opponents – Lukashenka calls the opposition "collaborators" and "public enemies" – and means for positioning its geopolitical interests – "brotherly Russia" and a hostile image of the West and NATO.

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David Marples predicts the Soviet military myth will dominate in the collective consciousness of the Belarusians as long as Lukashenka stays in power. At the same time, he does not think that the majority of Belarusians believe the history of their country began in 1944. But many still do not know who they are. It takes time to implement a new consolidating myth based on national and democratic values in the collective consciousness of the nation."

Will Belarus survive without its mother tongue?

In his most famous book "*Belarus: A Denationalized Nation*" Marples wrote, "For Belarus, national development without the native language, especially under the shadow of a much larger Slavic neighbour with a lengthy historical

tradition as an empire, was virtually impossible." Is there any future for a sovereign Belarusian state without the Belarusian language as the core element of the state's ideology?

"I think it is possible. First of all, on the ground of civic nationalism," answers Marples.

He is convinced that the pursuit of national movement put the issue of Belarusian language in front of the democratisation process was premature in the early 1990s. Even the fact that the Belarusification of started with an absence of all necessary teaching materials, it did not contribute to its promotion among the population. As a result, the Belarusian Popular Front's leader Zianon Pazniak is still seen as a radical and a threat to all Russian speakers in the collective consciousness of Belarusians.

I am impressed by the number of people who use Belarusian language on the Internet and social networks

However, the researcher believes that there are no reasons to "bury" the Belarusian language. "I am impressed by the number of people who use the Belarusian language on the Internet and social networks. This is mostly a younger generation of the 1990s," he says. But in order to seriously improve the prestige and the popularity of the Belarusian language in Belarus, political conditions are needed.

"Every Canadian knows that it is impossible to build a career in government system without knowledge of two languages — English and French. Belarusian parents should also know that the Belarusian language, which their children learn in school, will be needed in the university and for further career."

Why do the Western sanctions harm?

According to Marples, an interest in Belarus has increased

significantly in the West over recent years. Moreover, researchers and experts represent a wide spectrum of opinions: from the policy of tough sanctions against the Lukashenka's regime and its isolation to the maximum possible dialogue with the official Minsk. Marples himself believes that the strategy of sanctions regarding Belarus is harmful, because it isolates the Belarusian society and pushing the country towards Russia.

The former British Ambassador to Belarus Brian Bennett who was also present at the Anglo-Belarusian Society event disagreed: "This is Lukashenka who isolates Belarus, not we. He wants to benefit and to keep a distance from both the West and Russia at the same time."

"Yes", replied Marples, "but there are many layers in the Belarusian society with whom we should speak and whom we should help. Recent studies of IISEPS show a decrease in pro-European and the growth of pro-Russian sentiments in the society because Belarusians do not see any real help from the West."

I am looking forward to thousands of foreigners flooding the lonely Minsk airport

The researcher adds he is sceptical about the campaign aiming to suspend plans to hold the 2014 Ice-Hockey World Championship in Belarus. "I am looking forward to thousands of foreigners flooding the lonely Minsk airport."

He points out the more contacts, information, and experience exchange will take place between Belarusians and the West the more chances Belarus will have to become a part of the civilized world.

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This article originally appeared in Belarusian on svabodaby.net.