

# **Schengen visa costs to rise in absence of EU agreement**

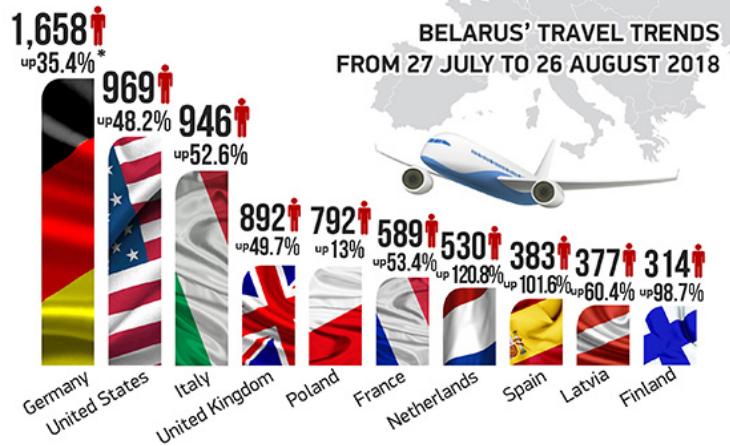
On 22 July Andrea Victorin, head of the EU delegation to Belarus, claimed that Belarus and the EU will sign an agreement on visa regime simplification by 2 February 2020. From February 2020 the cost of a Schengen visa for Belarusians could increase from €60 to €80. However, if the EU and Belarus manage to sign a visa-facilitation agreement before the 2 February 2020, the price could drop to as low as €35.

After many years of visa talks, the potential decrease in the visa costs is the first tangible negotiating success that might increase Lukashenka's support ahead of the 2020 presidential election. However, the dream of a visa-free regime as the next step of EU-Belarus relations is unlikely to happen. Human rights problems and pressure from Russia remain the main obstacles impeding closer cooperation between Belarus and the EU.

## **Visa facilitation agreement for Belarus**

# BELARUS' MOST FREQUENT VISA-FREE VISITORS

One month has passed since the decree to extend the period of visa-free stay of foreign nationals in Belarus up to 30 days came into force. The State Border Committee has provided the information on Belarus' most frequent visitors.



Citizens of 74 states can visit Belarus without a visa for 30 days (including arrival and departure days)



Foreign nationals must fly in and out of Minsk National Airport  
*(the visa waiver does not apply to persons flying in Minsk and out from/to Russia)*

## A VISITOR MUST CARRY



a valid passport



medical insurance in the amount of at least €10,000 (can be purchased on site)



assets equivalent to at least two base amounts for each day of stay (one base amount equals Br24.5)

\* In comparison with the same period in 2017

Source: Belarus' State Border Committee, Belarus' Ministry of Foreign Affairs

© Infographics

Who visits Belarus with visa-free regime, infographics. Source: belta.by PLEASE ADD A DATE OR A YEAR

In 2018 Belarus introduced [visa-free entry for 74 countries in the world](#), allowing citizens of these countries to stay visa-free in Belarus up to 30 days provided they arrive to Minsk's airport. This has resulted in positive changes in the quality of Belarusian services in the main cities (for example: restaurants, entertainment for tourists, English-speaking personnel) and [economic benefits for the country](#). For instance, six new hotels and 28 cafes appeared in the city of Hrodna during the first visa-free year, according to *DW*.

Although the [complicated procedure of visa-free entry](#) caused difficulties for some foreigners, the number of tourists to Belarus has gradually increased. In line with visa-free entry to Belarus, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) negotiated a better price on Schengen visas for Belarusians.

Belarusians remain among very few Europeans who still need a visa to enter the Schengen area. The Schengen is a border-free area comprising 26 European countries where citizens of member countries can move freely within the zone. The application process for getting a Schengen visa currently costs €60.

In 2018 authorities in Brussels amended a decision under which the cost of Schengen visa applications for third-nationals would increase from €60 to €80 in February 2020. Despite this, some signals suggest that the situation is about to change for the better and that the price could drop to €35.

Negotiations between Belarus and the EU on visa regime simplification have concluded for the time being, but it is still too early to say whether the agreement will be reached. Speaking about this issue after their final meeting during the 10th anniversary of the EU's Eastern Partnership Initiative (EaP) on 14 May, both parties could only state that they expected an agreement to be reached soon.

Although the Belarusian MFA has been actively working on reaching the visa facilitation agreement, the EU and Belarus could have signed an agreement long ago. Among other reasons, [Lithuania's strong position on the Belarusian power plant](#) on the border with Lithuania may have played a role.

In May 2019, Belarus's minister of foreign affairs, [Uladzimir Makei](#), blamed Lithuania for blocking the negotiations on a visa facilitation agreement. In his words:

*"We want to move more in the direction of the EU in some matters. But we are not allowed to do it due to the circumstances related to the position of one country. One*

*country makes the whole European Union a hostage”*

However, according to Andrea Victorin, Belarus and the EU will sign an agreement on visa regime simplification (a visa facilitation agreement) before 2 February 2020, most likely in November this year. In the event that the EU and Belarus fail to reach an agreement by the end of the year, the cost of Schengen visa applications for residents of Belarus will significantly increase. Victorin told BelTA:

*“Yes, we will sign an agreement on visa facilitation. I cannot name a specific date, but in fact, all the documents have already been prepared, and both parties go through the necessary legal procedures.”*

## **Belarusians spent €40m for visas**

The Schengen zone remains an extremely popular destination for Belarusians. According to the latest statistics provided by [SchengenVisaInfo.com](http://SchengenVisaInfo.com), during 2018 Schengen embassies in Belarus collected a total of 681,106 visa applications. In financial terms, this meant that Belarusians spent more than 40 million euros on Schengen visas last year (this does not include Belarusians who received a Schengen visa for free).

Poland remains the leader on issuing visas for Belarusians. For example, the three consulates of Poland in Belarus collected 278,214 visa applications in total. In turn, 277,578 applicants had been granted a uniform visa.

Belarusians also receive the fewest denials for Schengen visas among the CIS countries. Of the total visa applications being submitted during 2018, 676,984 applicants had been issued a uniform visa with more than 83% of them being Multiple Entry

Visas, only 0.3% of which were denied.

**Table 1. Visa applications in Belarus during 2018, data from Schengenvisainfo**

Schengen Embassy	Uniform Visas Applied For	Uniform Visas Issued	Share of MEV	Not Issued Uniform Visas
Poland	278,214	277,578	85.2%	603
Lithuania	236,442	234,401	93.9%	582
Latvia	58,897	58,363	79.3%	266
Germany	35,044	34,694	59.8%	327

Schengen visa statistics for Belarusians in 2018 from Schengenvisainfo.com

**Far away from the visa-free regime**



Belarusian passport. Source: Onliner.by

Considering that Belarusians travel the most frequently to the Schengen zone and receive the least visa denials, the probability of increasing the price to €80 would dissatisfy many Belarusians. However, it is unlikely that fewer Belarusians will travel to Schengen countries.

This especially applies to the border regions of Hrodna and Brest. In these areas travel to Poland's Bialystok or Lithuania's Druskininkai for entertainment and shopping has already become a habit for many. Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia already have a visa-free regime, in Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan citizens pay €35 euro as an application fee.

In case visa costs will decrease to €35, the visa-free regime will still remain unrealistic due to the human rights situation in the country and proximity to Russia.

For closer integration with the EU (including the visa-free regime), Belarus lacks democratic attributes. The Belarusian authorities continue to arrest [independent journalists](#), put pressure bloggers and environmental activists who [protested against the dangerous factories](#) in Svetlahorsk and Brest. As long as human rights violations and election fraud in the country continue, the EU is unlikely to discuss an overall visa-free regime.

The founder of the Belarusian news portal TUT. by, Yuri Zisser, commented on the negotiations on visa-free Belarus and the EU:

*“But why do Belarusians have to be punished for the authoritarianism of our government? What makes Belarusians worse for Europe than Ukrainians or Georgians? If the EU is striving to make Belarus more democratic, not in words but in deeds, it would have opened a visa-free entry for us long ago, so that Belarusians can see themselves what democracy should look like<...>.”*

[The resignation of the Russian ambassador to Belarus](#) Mikhail Babich on the 30 April and ensuing discussions on cooperation within the Union State with Russia can both restrain Belarus from facilitating the discussion on a visa-free regime. Lukashenka has to maintain a sufficient level of loyalty to Putin in return for economic benefits and the country's sovereignty. Despite recent [pro-independent statements made by Belarusian officials](#) and [Freedom day celebrations](#), Lukashenka would unlikely accept the EU's conditions for closer cooperation.

Despite the democratic improvements that Belarus would have to make to reach agreement on a visa-free regime, many believe that the [Belarusian government might be afraid of possible emigration](#). In this situation, the active work of MFA to decrease visa costs to €35 looks like an attempt to win-over Belarusians, especially on the eve of the presidential election in 2020, while the visa-free project remains unnoticed.

*Granit Sadiku, Alesia Rudnik*

*Alesia Rudnik is an analyst at the Ostrogorski Centre*

*Granit Sadiku is the Chief Editor at SchengenVisaInfo.com. He holds a Masters Degree in International Relations and has a*

*rich experience in journalism. Granit's major focus is Schengen visa policies applied to non-Schengen members.*

---

# **Balancing on Crimea, Merchants' Diplomacy, Protecting Traditional Values – Belarus Foreign Policy Digest**

Belarus Digest is launching Belarus Foreign Policy Digest which will overview the most important foreign policy developments related to Belarus.

Igar Gubarevich, who served as Counsellor at the Belarusian embassy in Paris in 2003 – 2006 and held several other positions of responsibility at the Belarusian Foreign Ministry will prepare the digest.□

The first issue will deal with the Belarusian authorities' attempts to walk a fine line during the Ukrainian crisis. Minsk managed to take the side of both parties without really offending or alienating either of them and endangering the country's immediate economic and political interests.

However, the regime's top priority in its foreign policy remains obtaining hard currency from its exports, by any means possible. Ambassador Latushka received a strong rebuke from President Lukashenka for casting doubt on the



quality of Belarusian goods and the efficiency of the nation's existing foreign trade mechanisms.

### **Ukraine and Russia: Staying Friends with Both**

The situation surrounding Ukraine has clearly dominated Belarusian foreign policy throughout March. The Belarusian authorities understand quite well the potential implications of any statement made on its behalf or practical step taken in the context of the current conflict between Ukraine and Russia. And they have carefully avoided making hasty comments or decisions and cautiously weighed their every word and action.

Lukashenka, usually eager to give two cents in any debate of much lesser importance decided to wait several days before taking a public stance on the issue. His own foreign ministry, while also not rushing to clarify the country's position, even managed to preempt his announcement with one of its own.

The Belarusian Foreign Ministry excels in verbal gymnastics and political manoeuvring. The MFA carefully worded its only official statement on the Ukrainian topic on 19 March, making it extremely ambiguous. Each sentence in this statement remains open to interpretation. Obviously, the Ministry had clear intentions to make it work out precisely this way. Its press service stubbornly refused to make any clarifying comment on the document after its publication.

Even when the foreign ministry had to vote against the Ukrainian resolution on the matter, they immediately downplayed their official decision. The head of the permanent mission to the UN, Andrei Dapkiunas, eloquently abstained from attending the meeting. The voting diplomat basically admitted that Belarus had acted against this resolution purely on a technicality ("Belarus supports the use of mechanisms that are less representative than those made afforded to it by the UN General Assembly").

Lukashenka, in his public appearances, and especially in his interview to Savik Shuster (a Ukrainian TV talk show host), spoke much more openly and made a number of powerful statements. However, even he remained unusually cautious in his remarks and made a visible effort to please both parties. He recognised that Crimea now belonged de facto to Russia. At the same time, his subsequent meeting with acting Ukrainian President Turchinov, to a great extent, provided a counter-balance to this unpleasant statement.

The regime has played its hand extremely well in this very delicate situation. Minsk has managed to take the side of each party without really offending or alienating either of them or endangering the country's immediate economic and political interests. The brief recall of the Ukrainian Ambassador to Belarus from Minsk was largely a symbolic gesture.

Without a doubt both Ukraine and Russia (and especially Russia) would have preferred much stronger support from their neighbour (and ally). However, these two countries need Belarus' support quite desperately. They only take notice of statements and actions that speak in their favour and disregard (at least, publicly) those that do not suit them.

Russia was definitely pleased with the fact that Belarus recognised the de facto annexation of Crimea and voted, among a handful of other countries, against the UNGA resolution on the territorial integrity of Ukraine. As Moscow's military ally, Minsk spoke out against the strengthening of NATO's military presence in neighbouring countries and responded positively to the increase of Russia's military presence in Belarus.

To Russia's satisfaction its Western neighbour described the regime change in Ukraine as an armed unconstitutional coup, presented the current Ukrainian authorities as weak and incompetent, and also spoke in favour of supporting language

rights and other rights of the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine.

Minsk also spoke out very strongly against the federalisation of Ukraine. The de facto recognition of the country's new authorities, confirmed by Lukashenka and Turchinov's official meeting, and an agreement on the development of bilateral transit projects that bypass Russia remain the strongest gestures of support towards Ukraine among any of the CIS countries.

Belarus has clearly established a balance in its position, but even the balance that it has achieved would seem to favour Ukraine as the weaker party in the conflict. However, the situation is developing rapidly and time will tell whether either of the two sides will manage to tip this balance in its favour.

### **Merchants or diplomats?**

Promoting national trade and commercial interests remains among the top priorities of the diplomatic service of any nation. However, Belarusian diplomats, like few other countries, have to become deeply involved in following up on the most petty of commercial interest inquiries. In carrying out their service to the state, Belarusian diplomats readily serve as substitutes for sales departments from both big and small domestic factories.

The ultimate (presidential) authority on the matter regularly greets its diplomats with strong rebukes and even the cautious attempts by professional Belarusian diplomats to rebel against such irrelevant duties have led to nothing. On 19 March, Lukashenka harshly criticised his ambassador to France, Pavel Latushka, for his remarks a few days prior on Belarusian state TV.

Latushka complained about the inferior quality of Belarusian goods and the fact that domestic manufacturers overburden

foreign missions with their ill-prepared requests to push their products on foreign markets. Lukashenka, for his part, accused the former minister of culture for favouring the more bland and peaceful rhetoric of diplomacy.

Latushka has managed to remain active when it comes to promoting trade and investment. In his efforts to follow international standards, he has approached the issue at the appropriate level by making investment presentations at international business forums and speaking to trade-promotion agencies.

Latushka even plans to incorporate trade and investment presentations to the Days of Belarusian Culture even programme. However, nobody can go unpunished for casting doubt on the efficiency of the Belarusian economic model and canonical omnipresence of the government, even in foreign trade.

Most of Latushka's colleagues perfectly understand what the government expects from them. Thus, the predominant topic of the foreign minister's news feed in March remained trade and investment at the ministerial or ambassadorial level.

The MFA's press releases covered trade-related meetings with representatives of more than two dozen countries from all over the world. The inauguration of a campaign for the launching of assembly plants for Belarusian tractors in Cambodia became the major event of Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei's visit to Southeast Asia.

### **Protecting traditional family: without much effect**

Belarusian diplomacy is trying to capitalise on its long-standing experience in United Nations matters. Few UN bodies meet without Belarus trying to promote or defend its position of a specific issue of multilateral diplomacy. The recent 58th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women was no exception.

Not being recognised as a champion of gender equality, Belarus used this opportunity to promote traditional family values. Belarusian diplomats propagated conservative views of the country's official leader, which enjoy strong support in Belarusian society.

At this session, Belarus teamed up with the Holy See, Indonesia and Qatar, among other countries, in pushing through, what they considered, the relevant wording for the session's agreed conclusions. Contrary to the claims made by the Belarusian mission to the UN in a press release issued after the session closed, these attempts failed to bring about real change. The session's final document did not even mention the term "traditional family".