

Sex Tours Save the Belarusian Tourist Industry

"We do not cultivate the idea of sex tourism in Belarus. But if [*a foreign tourist*] has an interest, let him look for it, meet girls and marry".

This is how the deputy Minister of Sports and Tourism Cheslau Shulha recently answered a question about the growing sex industry in Belarus on a state TV channel.

While the Belarusian authorities are talking about the prospects of sex tourism, the inflow of foreign tourists in general remains low. Belarus mostly attracts Russian citizens who come to rest at health resorts or gamble in casinos. Western tourists are still very rare. They do not want to pay for expensive visas only to find the lack of appropriate tourist infrastructure.

In 2014 Belarus will host the ice hockey World Championship. This high-profile event can boost the country's tourist industry, as the authorities promise visa-free travel for all Westerners. But without proper deregulation of this sector of the economy the boost will not be sustainable and nothing but sex industry will remain the country's tourist brand.

Why Westerners are Rare in Belarus

Belarus boasts a favourable geographical location. It lies on the crossroads of major international routes from Germany and Poland to Russia and from the Black Sea to the Baltic Sea. This location makes it a potentially convenient destination for tourists from neighbouring and far-away countries.

However, the statistics show that the country receives miserable numbers of visitors. Because of the uncontrolled

border with Russia it is difficult to assess the exact number of tourists that come to Belarus, but the estimate for 2011 is around 750,000. To put it in a comparative perspective, the capital of Lithuania, Vilnius – a relatively small city with the population of 540,000 – alone annually attracts more than 1.5 million tourists.

According to the director of the tourist company BelarusTurService Hennadzi Leushyn, about 80 per cent of tourists come from Russia. This is not surprising, since Belarus has an open border with its eastern neighbour and even no passport control. Moreover, the Russians, unlike Westerners, have no language problems in Belarus, where the majority of the population speak Russian as their first language.

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After the Russian authorities outlawed casinos across almost the whole country, Belarus was quick to offer its service. Many Russians come to Belarus to use its growing gambling industry.

Only 20 per cent of tourists (about 150,000) came from the rest of the world in 2011. Even fewer come from western countries. According to the Belarusian Statistics Committee, in 2011 the highest numbers of western tourists were from Turkey, Lithuania, New Zealand and Poland. Their absolute numbers were very small, varying between 2,000 and 3,000.

Abundant Talk but Little Result

Tourism is a regular issue on the government's agenda. Several years ago Alexander Lukashenka demanded that Belarus should become a popular destination for tourists from around the world who would bring in lots of hard currency. After that his ministers began to implement various state projects to boost

the attractiveness of Belarus for incoming tourists.

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One of them was the development of agro-ecotourism. The authorities were hoping that Belarusian villages, with their rural traditions and beautiful nature, would appeal to hundreds of thousands of foreigners who prefer quiet rest to city sightseeing. They provided tax and other incentives for those entrepreneurs who wanted to invest in agro-ecotourism.

As a result, in 2011 1576 so-called agro-manors stood ready to accommodate agro-tourists. But the data of the Belarusian Statistics Committee show that this project is not as successful as the authorities had expected. Only 15 per cent of visitors of all the agro-manors in 2011 were from abroad. In the majority of cases (85 per cent) Belarusians themselves use them for holding weddings or other celebrations.

Despite frequent declarations, the government have failed to create even basic tourist infrastructure in Belarus. For example, there are only 34 hotels in the whole country that are certified according to international standards. Only two of them have 5 stars (hotels Europe and Crowne Plaza in Minsk) and three have 4 stars (hotels Minsk and Victoria in Minsk and hotel Luchesa in Vitebsk). At the same time there are very few low-cost hostels anywhere in the country (only in Minsk and Brest).

The command of foreign languages among employees of Belarusian hotels, resorts, agro-manors and transport (railway and coach) companies remains very poor. Their websites often do not have English language sections. Furthermore, there are almost no signs in English, even in the capital – all are in Cyrillic alphabet which most Westerners cannot read.

The Visa Wall

Another Achilles heel of the Belarusian tourist industry is the “visa wall”. Visa regimes considerably complicate both incoming and outgoing tourism. Interestingly, nationals of only 19 states can enter Belarus without visas (however, there are specific regulations for each state). These states are the following:

- 10 member states of the Commonwealth of Independent States (excluding Turkmenistan);
- Georgia;
- Cuba;
- Qatar;
- Serbia;
- Montenegro;
- Mongolia;
- Venezuela;
- Macedonia;
- China

For the rest of the world Belarusian visas are quite costly. For example, a single entry short-stay visa for an American citizen costs \$160. A UK national will have to pay 75 pounds for the same type of Belarusian visa. And a German national €60.

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Moreover, on 31 May the government amended the national visa rules. They further complicated the visa procedure. Previously, all foreigners could get visas upon arrival at Minsk-2 airport. It was more expensive than receiving visas at Belarusian consulates abroad, but it saved lots of time. Now that the amendments are in force only residents of the countries with no Belarusian consulates can apply for visas after they arrive at Minsk-2 airport.

If the authorities really want to turn Belarus into a popular tourist destination the latest visa amendments look utterly strange.

Sex Tourism Develops Despite Anything

Perhaps the only sort of incoming tourism from western countries that is developing in Belarus despite any difficulties is sex tourism. Bad infrastructure and visa routine do not stop sex visitors.

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Officially, Belarusian legislation prohibits prostitution. And from time to time the police crackdown on networks of the sex business. However, the industry thrives. Everyone who has money and wishes for some sexual entertainment knows where to look for it. This kind of service is available for tourists in most hotels as well as in a number of special clubs. According to some insider sources, special sex tours to Belarus are regularly organised from certain Western European states and Turkey.

Sex tourism in Belarus is, of course, not as flourishing as in Ukraine. But it is definitely becoming a sizeable business. And it is not surprising, therefore, that even officials have started talking about this business in public, like a deputy Minister of Sports and Tourism did on state television a week ago.

World Cup Stimulus

In 2014 Belarus will host the World Ice Hockey Championship. It will be the most high-profile sporting event in the country's sovereign history. No doubt, it will give a boost to the tourist industry. To benefit from this event the government should liberalise the tourist industry and free creativity of entrepreneurs from bureaucratic bondage.

Otherwise Belarus will largely remain a sex sanctuary for westerners and a gambling destination for Russians.