

Selling Schengen Visas to Belarusians

On 12 April, Filip Kaczmarek, the chairman of the European Parliament Delegation for relations with Belarus, stated that the EU can make Schengen visas more available for ordinary Belarusians even now.

MEPs often say good things but unfortunately they have little real power to implement them.

Unlike talks on the dialogue or the sanctions, visa relations of Belarus and the EU concern most Belarusians. The price and the procedure of getting a visa remains an important factor affecting how people perceive the EU.

Although Belarus remains the world's Schengen visa champion with regard to the number of visas per citizen, these visas come at a great cost to them. The Belarusian civil society is trying to convince the EU of the necessity for the unilateral visa liberalisation. However, as the liberalisation prospects remain bleak, Belarusians should also press Belarus authorities to start talks on visa simplification.

Not as Isolated as You Think

As the first sight, Belarus looks far from being isolated. More than that – it remains to be the world's [Schengen visa champion](#). In 2012 Belarusians got 703,479 visas. This means, 74 visas per 1,000 citizens. In comparison, this index is twice less in Russia.

Also, EU member states consulates which work in Belarus try to simplify the procedure or to abolish consular fees for national visas. For example, right after the election-2010, Poland abolished consular fees for getting a Polish national visa as an action of solidarity with Belarusians. Lithuania

also issues many visas for free.

In addition, Poland and Lithuania are hoping to implement [agreements on local border traffic](#). If implemented, people who live up to 30 km away from the border would be able to go visa-free in both directions.

The EU member states consulates increase the number of issued visas annually, while the percentage of visa denials remains at a very low level. Poland, Lithuania and Germany remain the leaders with regard to the number of visas, granted to Belarusian citizens.

Schengen State	Total A and C visas issued	Total A and C visas applied for	Total A and C visas not issued	Not issued rate for A and C visas
Czech Republic	15 428	15 960	532	3,33 %
Estonia	25 906	26 772	865	3,23 %
France	19 558	19 712	151	0,77 %
Germany	65 789	66 016	227	0,34 %
Hungary	11 284	11 296	12	0,11 %
Italy	31 001	31 166	165	0,53 %
Latvia	32 009	33 400	182	0,54 %
Lithuania	193 129	193 700	337	0,17 %
Poland	291 822	292 860	1 038	0,35 %
Slovakia	4 296	4 291	4	0,09 %
Sweden	3 203	3 235	22	0,68 %

Source: European Commission

What is the Problem?

But most visas come at a great cost to Belarusians – both in terms of money and required efforts. Despite the high number of issued visas, the procedure remains one of the [most complicated in the world](#).

It often takes months for Belarusian citizens to get a visa for an EU country. This includes waiting for an appointment, preparing thick packages of documents, and spending many hours queuing outside the consulate regardless of the weather. The procedure is expensive too – a simple visa costs €60 – the highest price in Europe. To put it into context, the [average monthly salary](#) in Belarus is around €370.

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What is worse, many consulates deliberately issue singly-entry visas valid for several days only. The German consulate is notorious for this. In practice this means that Belarusian nationals have to undergo this humiliating and expensive procedure again and again. No wonder that the pro-rata number of Schengen visas issued for Belarusians is the highest in the world.

[Belarus lingers introduction](#) of the local border traffic with Lithuania and Poland. Belarusian authorities understand that expanding of the people-to-people contacts may facilitate pro-European moods in the society and may also create an economic problem. Belarusian goods would be non-competitive in comparison with the cheaper and better-quality goods from the West.

Officially, the Belarusian authorities stand for visa regime simplification with the EU, but refuse to negotiate because of the EU policy of sanctions. Also, the Belarusian authorities are not willing to sign readmission agreements. In case foreign citizens get to the territory of the EU through Belarus, the European states governments will send them back to Belarus. No problem if they are Russian citizens. However, if the illegal immigrants come from Southeast Asia, Belarus will have to deport them at its own cost.

Is the Visa Regime Simplification Real?

The Belarusian civil society undertakes serious effort to

lobby the visa abolishment among the European officials. However, it appears that the EU is not going to simplify, let alone abolish, the visa regime unilaterally. The *acquis communautaire* does not provide such an opportunity, and Belarus does not look an exception, worth changing the existing rules.

Moreover, not all the countries of the European Union want to simplify the visa regime with Belarus. If Poland and Lithuania consider this their interest, many Western European countries do not really want such liberalisation.

Even if Belarus and the EU come to adopt an agreement on simplified visa regime, the simplification will not be that significant. At this stage, the liberalisation means decrease of consular fees down to €35 and provision of an opportunity to get free visas for some categories of citizens. Citizens of Russia, Moldova and Ukraine already benefit from simplified procedures.

The Belarusian authorities are not worried about high visa costs for their citizens. According to Andrei Yeliseyev of the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies in several years Russians and Ukrainians go to the EU without visas but Belarusians will still pay €60 per visa. The Belarusian authorities cannot explain this paradox.

Belarusians should demand more confident steps towards the visa regime liberalisation from their own government, as the agreement on simplified visa regime will signify only a minor change. But given the absence of proper democratic procedures in Belarus, this may prove to be a difficult task.

Belarus Wants to Keep Its

Western Border Locked Shut

Last week a spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that Belarus was not ready to implement an agreement on local border traffic with Poland.

The reason given was 'the anti-Belarusian position of the Polish government'. Although both sides have already signed the agreement and the parliaments ratified it in 2010, Minsk is clearly not in a hurry to implement it despite the clear potential benefits to its citizens.

Lithuania has a similar story to tell. In 2011 both the Lithuanian and Belarusian parliaments ratified an agreement, but it was destined to share the same fate as the Polish initiative. Perhaps Vilnius has more realistic chances of concluding such an agreement with Belarus than Poland does. Latvia was the first and the only country to manage to implement a local border traffic agreement with Belarus, in 2012.

Last week's announcement by the Belarusian Foreign Ministry could be another attempt to divide EU neighbours over Belarus. The regime may be worried that local border traffic with any EU country will open the door to the West for Belarusians.

History of the Belarus-Poland Agreement

The goal of the agreement is to facilitate the cross-border movement of people who live in an area up to about 30 km from the border. Instead of visas, a special document would prove the right to cross the border on a much more relaxed and cheaper basis.

The Polish initiative on local border traffic with Belarus dates back to 2008. Two years later both the

Polish and Belarusian parliaments ratified the agreement. In 2010 the heads of each state, Alexander Lukashenka and Bronislaw Komorowski, signed the document. Warsaw has officially declared its readiness to implement it.

However, the agreement seems to have remained in a stack on Lukashenka's desk. An exchange of diplomatic notes between Warsaw and Minsk remains the final missing stage. The recent message by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs makes clear to thousands of those living on both sides of the border that Minsk has no political will to deal with the issue in the near future.

Last October, Andrej Savynych sent a similar message regarding the future of local border traffic with Poland to the one received last week. "The politics of the Polish establishment in bilateral relations with Belarus creates a highly unfavourable climate" – he said, explaining the reasons for delay in the implementation of local border traffic on Belarus' side.

In his words, Poland's support for EU sanctions towards Belarus appeared to be the primary cause of Minsk's reaction. On the other occasion, the Belarusian consul in Bialystok said that in addition to the political motives, technical difficulties related to the lack of special printing devices were also hindering implementation of the procedure.

Cross-Border Reality: Trade is the Main Driver

As data from the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs shows, around 1.1 million Belarusians from the Hrodna and Brest regions might receive permission for non-visa movement. On the Polish side, implementation of such an agreement can benefit around 600,000 Poles. Looking at these figures only, Belarus would gain significantly more from implementing the agreement.

In addition, as the table below demonstrates, the overwhelming majority of those who cross the Belarus-Poland border do not have Polish passports. In other words, Belarusian citizens would benefit from simplification of cross-border movement much more than Poles.

Table 1. Crossing of the Belarus-Poland border in the fourth quarter of 2012.

Voivodeship	Cross-Border Movement (thousands of People)	
	Polish Citizens	Foreign Citizens
Lubelskie	142,7	903,9
Podlaskie	97,7	1116,8

Source: Poland's Central Statistical Office (2013)

Poland's Central Statistical Office reports that over two million Belarusians came to Poland last year. According to estimates of Poland's Customs Chamber, the majority of the foreigners who purchased consumer goods in Poland were Belarusians. Foreigners in the Belarus-Poland borderland claimed over 750,000 tax-free documents. A majority of them crossed the border in the Podlaskie region of Poland.

Both Belarusians and Poles cross the border mainly for shopping (82.5% of Poles and 73% of Belarusians). Consumer electronics, food, chemicals and fuel are the goods in highest demand. As has been true for many years, trade and business allow many in the borderlands to survive.

Opera Tickets in Exchange for Visas

Poland's institutions and businesses are clearly interested in seeing more Belarusian visitors. The Opera House in Bialystok sells tickets for musical performances to Belarusians in a package deal that includes a visa, accommodation in a hotel and a city tour. The price is cheaper

than the cost of a tourist visa itself. According to the opera's director, Robert Skolimowski, 13,000 Belarusians have already booked tickets for this year's performances. The cultural element is important here as well, and can truly bring both nations closer together, but it serves another function too – it contributes to Bialystok's budget.

Bialystok's local newspaper *Gazeta Współczesna* notes that 'almost 2 million people on both sides of the border are waiting for it to go through'. Another Polish outlet, *Kurier Poranny*, reports on Sokolka, a town near the border, for which local border traffic appears to be crucial for more dynamic economic development of local businesses.

The queues in the Polish consulates in Belarus prove that many Belarusians have an interest in coming to Poland and going further West. Last year three Polish consulates issued 350,000 visas to Belarusians. Poland is overwhelmed with visa applications and Latvia has offered its support with issuing visas to Poland. Beginning on 18 March 2013, Belarusian citizens may also apply for Schengen visas to Poland at Latvian consulates in Belarus.

Certainly, the absence of easier means of crossing the Belarus – Poland border efficiently hinders the development of these border regions. But for now the population of the border regions in Poland and in Belarus remain hostages of high-level politics.