

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).



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.



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.



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.

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.

What is worse, many consulates deliberately issue singly-entry visas valid for several days only. The German consulate is notorious for this.

What is worse, many consulates deliberately issue singly-entry visas valid for several days only. The German consulate is notorious for this. In practise 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 Wspolczesna* 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.

When Will The Madness with Registration of Application Forms in the Polish Embassy End?

"Tell me, what is the system of getting registered at the [Polish] consulate? I went there on 10 September, it said "closed until 30/09". I think, okay, they'll open closer to the end of October, and I'll get registered... I go there – jeez! It's now closed until 31/10! I don't want to miss the next wave... What is their system of work?", a gullible and naive individual who has been trying for some time now to register his application form at the website of the Polish embassy writes on one of Belarusian internet forums. Do you think he will be able to?

The system does not change, and the number of traffickers in the queue keeps growing

The individual is likely to miss the wave again. These waves have long been controlled by skilled "surfers" who want to get increasingly more for their services including registration of online application forms on the website of the Polish embassy: if as recently as in May those who were willing to assist with registration of the application form online were ready to do it for €20 or €25, now the financial appetites of such

"assistants" have clearly grown and sometimes reaches €500.

"The price of registration of the application to the embassy for the Polish visas starts at 100 c.u. [dollars – translator's note]. When will this outrage end?! Why tdoesn't the tax inspector take on these "entrepreneurs"?!", Martha, a Minsk dweller, wrote to TUT.BY recently. According to the reader, an overwhelming number of ad stickers began appearing on lamp posts and entrances to buildings. Although, literally a day later, when Martha went out to take photo snaps of these advertisements at TUT.BY's request, "somebody tore them off".

This kind of dissatisfaction and questions come repeatedly already, but now people are more and more preoccupied by the price. In order to understand how much something costs, one can simply enter a query into Google or the search engine of *Vkontakte* where the number of traffickers is astounding. Now the embassy's web site says that there are no free dates for the Polish Schengen till 31 October. While at the same time somebody else has them. But who are they, these catchers of somebody's happiness and misery at the same time?

Here are some examples of advertisements:

*"We will assist with procurement of any type of visa: we will tell you what type of Schengen visa is the most appropriate in your case, we will help you to prepare the set of documents required by the embassy, **we will fill in the application form, we will put you in the queue in the consulate,** we will explain the application process to you and advise you on what questions you may be asked at the embassy and how you should respond to them in a correct way".*

"Our visa guru's only preoccupation is to help nice folks to apply for and get single- and multiple-entry visas to the Eurozone. Our goal is extremely simple: "To help others as we help our moms and dads".

"Assistance in procurement of Schengen visas (single- and multiple-entry). Minimum set of documents. Full support and assistance during the entire period of the visa application process. Assistance in registration of visa application forms at the Polish consulate".

"I provide services of registration for national and Schengen visas in the Polish consulates in Hrodna, Brest and Minsk. I also advise on all matters regarding the visa procurement process".

"Schengen visas from 150 Euro, Polish one-year visas from 250 Euro".

"Single-entry (visas) 150 Euro, three-month (visas) 260 Euro, six-month (visas) 360 Euro, one-year (visas) 480 Euro.

In some groups, i.e. in the social network *Vkontakte*, the cost of such services is not shown at all. It is understood that the details can be sent to the interested person by a private message. I left messages that I needed the one-year Polish Schengen in a dozen of such groups. In fact, only one person responded: *"100 c.u. – registration at the web site and 20 c.u. an invitation from a store"*.

However, many people are not afraid to give out their phone numbers. Having called the first number I found, I asked a young man (as I could deduct from his voice): "Are you a private person?" Yes, he says. Having called two other numbers, I heard similar answers that the responders were not individual entrepreneurs or travel agencies, *"we just help"*.

Ministry of Taxes and Duties: attacks on the embassy's website make up a small share in the total number of online offences

Mikhail Makhtaduj, head of the office of Internet oversight of the Ministry of Taxes and Duties, told TUT.BY that advertisements regarding assistance to people in procurement of visas and registration of application forms are published

mostly online and not on lampposts.

"As for analysis of such information, the tax authorities are keeping it under their constant control. We carry out evidentiary purchases, and if a violation is found – and most often it is unregistered business activity – we draw up a report which is then transferred to the court", he says.

The court, when taking decision on such matters, takes into account disposition of a person to such activities.

According to the expert, most often students are involved in such business activities, deciding to earn some money this way. However, it is important to understand that the tax authorities are only concerned with identification of such offenders who make revenue and do not pay any taxes from it. *"We do not concern ourselves with hackers for sure", the expert says.*

However, the ministry is also unable to say how many offenders were identified specifically for not paying taxes from their entrepreneurial activities. They refer to the fact that there are many different activities online to be able to isolate attacks at the website of one of the embassies for separate statistics. *"We monitor various freelancers, electronic cash payments, and operations in participatory construction. In any case, it is impossible to send an inspector to each and every offender", the representative of the tax ministry says.*

At the same time, they point out in the ministry, experience has shown that the attacks at embassies' web sites represent a small part in the total number of online offenses.

It is notable that activities in providing assistance in visa procurement are not always illegal. If you do not count the travel agencies, services in this sphere can be provided by individual entrepreneurs. However, there is a problem with statistics here as well. As tax experts told TUT.BY, services in the visa sector are registered by tax authorities as

"miscellaneous". And "miscellaneous" services may include hairdressing, auto repair and funeral services, etc. The tax authorities do not have separate statistics for visa services.

"Today, for example, two individual entrepreneurs are registered as providing services in visa procurement in Minsk. But there students are queuing for you in a real queue. This is their services. Both entrepreneurs are in the Leninski district of Minsk", we were told by the agency.

But they are unable to say how many such individual entrepreneurs there are in the entire country – again, because there is no special reporting for this. Altogether, according to experts, there are few such registered entrepreneurs.

If a person knows that someone "trades" in such activities, *"there is a hotline for these purposes, and any citizen can call it".*

As for services indicated in the statutes of such entrepreneurs, *"they describe the list of their services in their internal documents. This list, as well as their pricing, is an internal matter of the company. The tax authorities are not concerned with it, their only preoccupation is that they pay taxes",* we were also told in the ministry.

By the way, we also came by online advertisements from entrepreneurs. For example:

"An individual entrepreneur provides the following services:

- invitation to get Schengen culture, sport and business visas;*
- registration of application forms at the web site of the consulate;*
- invitation to get Polish and Lithuanian employment visas;*
- invitation from a Polish store to get the shopping visa;*

- assistance in drafting documents;
- answers to your questions;
- insurance".

Legal "hacking". Is it possible in Belarus?

Authority of tax inspectors is limited, and we understand that they are hardly supposed to track hackers. Besides, "we have so many activities – there are individual entrepreneurs, there are business entities, there are people who are engaged in business activities without being registered. The tax authorities have so many fields of activity that it is impossible to embrace everything", the agency acknowledges.

So, if a businessman is going, in addition to other services, to help someone register application forms at a web site, won't anybody ask him how he intends to do it? When we [reported](#) difficulties with registration in May, addressing the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Foreign Ministry, the Investigation Committee and the embassy itself, we did not get a clear answer to the question about who was supposed to solve this issue.

Paweł Marczuk, first counsellor at the embassy of Poland in Belarus told us then that notwithstanding the existing frenzy, Poland still had only three consulates in Belarus. At the same time, the number of applicants for visa grew by 44% in 2011 comparing to 2010. After introduction of separate "shopping" visas in summer of 2011 the number of those wanting to visit the neighbouring country grew even further.

Altogether, during last year about 300,000 visas were issued to Belarusians, and the queues, Marczuk thinks, "could be shortened by increasing the consular staff because the only problem is the number of applicants". According to him, the large number of aspirants would always entail appearance of criminals or people who will speculate on it. "We understand

that it may work against the Polish embassy, and we are aware that there is a possibility of trafficking in the queue positions during online registration. However, we cannot catch criminals in Belarus", he says.

The Interior Ministry then told us that police had studied the issue of the online registration process of the Polish embassy but they did not find any *corpus delicti*. At the same time, if the embassy is aware of any facts of trafficking in the queue positions during the online registration, it should track what IP addresses it comes from. And the Investigation Committee, in their turn, told us that "*first of all, police should get a complaint from the person who became victim of this kind of activities*". So, the task of field services is to identify a specific crime substantiated by proof and then pass it to the Committee where they will decide whether criminal proceedings should be instigated.

The mechanism is clear: nobody complains to police, and accordingly, the Investigation Committee does not receive any materials, and the embassy believes that it is outside of their competence to catch the offenders who hack the web site. But if the price is steadily increasing, it is logical to admit that someone gets good money from their "hacking". However, anyone would hardly complain to the hotline or police – everybody wants to get to Europe, especially for shopping.

Kaciaryna Siniuk

This text originally appeared in Russian on [TUT.BY](https://tut.by).

Why the Young Do Not Join the Opposition – Digest of Belarusian Analytics

Belarusian analysts focus on the role and strategy of the Belarusian opposition, the balance of powers before the parliamentary elections, sources of legitimacy of Alexander Lukashenka and Schengen visas for Belarusians.

[Lukashenka and his Opponents Preserved in a Crystal Vessel](#) – Alexander Klaskovsky analyses the age structure of the Belarusian opposition and identifies the lack of the influx of young forces there. As a result almost 18 years of continuous pressure the opposition in Belarus is now assigned a role of whipping boys. Most of the opposition leadership is old and has been there since early 1990s.

The costs of being in the opposition are significant – beatings, arrests, prison sentences, constant pressure by security services and difficulties with earning a living. The benefits of being an opposition activist are very limited because the opposition is not getting any political appointments and is generally excluded from political decision-making in the country. As a result, young people are not interested in joining the opposition which makes it an even less attractive and less competitive force in Belarusian society. The journalist concludes that the opposition naturally degrades along with the formal political system: “Under these conditions, the country simply is rolling down to the level of third world countries and is becoming a de facto colony of the Kremlin”.

[The Balance of Power inside the Opposition Before Parliamentary Elections 2012](#) – Analytical Belarusian Centre published its review dedicated to the upcoming parliamentary

elections. The experts address issues such as the formation of the Belarusian opposition in several streams with a different vision for the transformation of the Belarusian regime and collaboration with existing elites, as well as the participation of the opposition in the last parliamentary campaigns and the issue of the Eastern vector of foreign policy of Belarus.

[The Unity of the Opposition is a Myth, Fetish, Created by Analysts and Journalists](#) – political experts Alexander Feduta, Denis Melyantsou and Yevgeniy Preygerman answer the questions of the ERB and explain what will be the end of the September parliamentary elections, why there is no unity, and how much the boycott costs. The participants generally agree that the opposition should take the opportunity of elections to strengthen their membership base and conduct an effective information campaign. This is one of very few opportunities to do it legally in Belarus.

[How Stable are the Belarusian CSOs?](#) – Vladimir Korzh, chief executive of NGO "ACT" and one of the authors of the annual CSO Sustainability Index in Belarus, speaks in his interview to AMPby.org about the Index's methodology and the results of the assessment of the stability of Belarusian CSOs in 2011. In particular, the expert states that there is some stability and even trends towards improvement in the Belarusian third sector – the last three years consistently Belarus receives 5.9 out of 7 points.

["Third Way" for Belarus](#) – Alexander Avtushko-Sikorski (BISS) analyzes Alexander Lukashenka appeal at the ceremony to celebrate Belarus' Independence Day. The expert notes that the speech keeps a set of "classical" semantic blocks. The main difference of this year is changing in the foreign policy rhetoric, which practically does not affect relations with the West and Russia, and includes a new topic of integration as a special path of development for Belarus.

[The Dilemma of the Fourth Term](#) – Alexei Medvetsky (Agency for Political Studies) discusses the sources of legitimacy of the fourth term of president Lukashenka. Based on the recent events, the expert concludes that the Belarusian president is inclined to opt for the familiar popular support. However, the nomenclature and the power elite are definitely not interested in letting him go "to the people", so they will continue their passive and active fight to the detriment of his credibility.

[Weekly election monitoring report: June 18 – 24](#). The campaign "Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections" released the #1 issue of the weekly analytical report on monitoring results. In particular, the authors note that "the election campaign begins in unfavourable environment, on the background of political repression, in conditions of the pressure on the opposition forces and the civic society."

[Review-Chronicle of Human Rights Violations in Belarus in June 2012](#) (in English) – Human Rights Centre *Viasna* released its monthly review of human rights violations. In particular, the experts see that events in June clearly demonstrated that the Belarusian authorities consider human rights issues only in the dimension of political relations with the EU and other countries of Europe. The focus of these relations was still on the problem of political prisoners.

[Belarusian Yearbook-2011](#). BISS and website of the Belarusian expert community «Nashe Mnenie» ("Our Opinion") published the Belarusian 2011 Yearbook. The book was presented in Minsk's "Ź" Gallery on June 26. Each edition of Belarusian Yearbook (this year has seen its eighth version) is more than just a collection of analytics – it is a chronicle of the country's contemporary history written by impartial unbiased researchers and analysts.

[Analysis of consular statistics of the Schengen countries in 2007-2011](#) – Andrei Eliseev (BISS) explores the dynamics of the Schengen visa issuing in 2007-2011. The expert concludes that

Schengen countries are more open to citizens of Belarus, than for residents of other countries of the Eastern Partnership (EP). In comparison with the countries of EP and Russia, Belarus leads on the following parameters in the ratio of per capita: the total amount of short-term Schengen visas; multiple Schengen visas, and the number of national long-term visas (Category D).

[Recommendations for Privatisation in Belarus](#) – the recommendation report is based on discussion and presentations delivered at the conference “privatisation and private entrepreneurship in Belarus – scope for international assistance” on April 16-17, 2012 in Warsaw. The conference was a part of a new initiative of the European Union towards Belarus “The European dialogue on modernization with Belarusian Society”.

Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials provided by Pact. This digest attempts to give a richer picture of the recent political and civil society events in Belarus. It often goes beyond the hot stories already available in English-language media.

Belarus Plays the Border Security Card with the EU

In response to the EU sanctions policy, Belarus allegedly weakened border control at the Belarus-EU border recently. This puts in doubt Belarus' willingness to implement in the nearest future local border traffic agreements with western neighbours in full.

It makes the prospect of signing a readmission agreement with

the EU even more remote, which in turn makes visa facilitation impossible in short term.

"I can increase the number of border guards and customs posts, but you should be ready to pay", Belarusian ruler Aliaksandr Lukashenka said addressing Europeans in April, making it clear that the move comes as a response to the EU sanctions policy. The migration wave to the EU is the result of the NATO operation in Afghanistan, he added.

Egyptians chose Belarus as a transit country since they were aware of the border control weakening, the official communication explained, and was a clear sign of blackmail

Apparently to demonstrate that illegal immigration is a serious problem, Belarusian state media recently reported the alleged detention of Egyptian terrorists who arrived in Belarus with the intention of illegally entering the EU. A group of five who expected to enter the EU "to join the underground resistance that confronts the public and political order of European states", an official police statement said.

Belarusian state media provided neither their names nor how they arrived to Belarus. Egyptians chose Belarus as a transit country since they were aware of the border control weakening, the official communication explained, and was a clear sign of blackmail.

Belarus has no readmission agreement either with the EU or with any of its member states. That makes a relaxed border policy a more serious problem. Readmission agreements impose legal obligations to readmit own nationals and also, under certain conditions, third country nationals and stateless persons who do not or no longer fulfil the conditions of entry to, presence in or residence in the requesting state.

All the other immediate EU neighbours in the east (Russia, Ukraine, Moldova) have agreed with the EU on readmission.

Among the Eastern partnership countries, Georgia lately signed the readmission agreement, too. EU negotiations with Armenia and Azerbaijan are in progress.

Unpleasant Consequences of Worse Border Management

Belarus does not belong to the club of top transit countries and it never has. The last Frontex annual risk analysis mentions Belarus with regard to the trafficking of petroleum products rather than as a significant transit country for illegal migration.

Indeed, a few hundred illegal immigrants coming from Belarus that EU neighbour states detect annually is not a big deal. To put it into context, the total number of detentions of illegal border-crossing in 2011 was 141 thousand, where Central and Eastern Mediterranean routes' constituted 86%.

the alleged weakening of border control is alarming for Latvia, Lithuania and Poland

However, the alleged weakening border control is alarming for Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. Although the European side has kept quiet so far, such changes in the border policy of official Minsk is surely of concern to her immediate neighbours. At the same time, playing the border (in)security card will surely bring adverse effects to Belarus' security itself. If Minsk keeps promoting the message of porous western frontier it risks becoming a transit hub for illegal immigrants for real, with all the negative effects that it implies.

Belarus' playing with the border issue and its reluctance to agree on readmission creates a clear obstacle for the development of people-to-people contacts and a visa facilitation regime.

First, reorientation of border forces from the western border

to the south indicates that Belarus does not intend to launch long-awaited local border traffic agreements with Lithuania and Poland in the near future. At least, the agreements will not be able to become fully functional, as this requires an intensification of customs and border work, not their reduction. While the local border traffic regime [was launched at Belarus-Latvia border](#) a couple of months ago, similar agreements are stuck with Lithuania and Poland for political reasons.

Second, visa facilitation agreements are linked to the readmission agreements. Without the latter, the EU cannot proceed with visa facilitation. There was not a single case of unilateral reduction of visa fees and facilitated procedures introduced by the EU for third country nationals without readmission agreement in force.

Creating a precedent of unilateral visa facilitation for Belarusians will cause problems in the negotiations with other countries like Armenia and Azerbaijan

Currently the so-called EU Visa Code stipulates all the procedures and conditions for issuing short-stay visas. Creating a precedent of unilateral visa facilitation for Belarusians will cause problems in the negotiations with other countries like Armenia and Azerbaijan whose citizens go through the same burdensome visa procedures when applying for a Schengen visa.

Those countries that already went through painful negotiations on visa facilitation and readmission, including Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova, would not be happy with EU double standards and more favourable attitude towards their sluggish EaP partner either.

EU Pushes for Negotiations, Belarus Remains Indifferent

In June 2011, the EU Commission sent a letter to Minsk

inviting them to start negotiations. Almost a year has passed with no response. During the last few months, the Council recalled its invitation twice. Belarus' procrastination with the negotiations seems ridiculous, as for many years Minsk has been claiming the visa facilitation with the EU countries to be its priority.

Belarus worries that "thousands, if not tens of thousand" of illegal migrants would be re-admitted and gather in Belarus if a readmission agreement comes into force

Belarus worries that "thousands, if not tens of thousand" of illegal migrants would be re-admitted and gather in Belarus if a readmission agreement comes into force, Belarusian MFA press-officer Savinykh explained the sluggishness in starting the negotiations.

The readmission issue may be solved either in the framework of Customs Union between Belarus, Russia and Kazakhstan, or by concluding readmission agreements with EU member states first, he suggested.

Removing a third countries nationals clause from the readmission agreement with Belarus would make Minsk concerns over illegal migrants utterly meaningless. However, such a generous move regarding illegal migration, especially towards an immediate neighbour, holds little value for the EU. Therefore, visa facilitation is a hostage of an apparent gridlock over the readmission agreement.

But how well-founded Belarusian concerns over the readmission agreement are? It turns out, they are greatly exaggerated. First, available statistics on readmission between EU and other countries show that fears about excessive numbers of re-admitted migrants are groundless. In 2010, some 867 persons were readmitted by Ukraine, out of whom 469 were its own nationals (55%).

Second, reports from Belarus and EU member states indicate that Georgians constitute the biggest number of migrants

arriving in Belarus with the intention of illegally entering the EU. The current visa-free regime between Belarus and Georgia significantly facilitates their entry. Introduction of visa regime and stricter reviews of visa applications by Belarus' consular service would reduce the number of Georgian nationals that illegally go to the EU via Belarus.

a real figure of re-admitted third country nationals is unlikely to exceed a couple of hundred persons a year

With this in mind, a real figure of re-admitted third country nationals is unlikely to exceed a couple of hundred persons a year, that is much fewer than an official assumption of "thousands, if not tens of thousands' migrants.

Benefits for the population at large from enhanced people-to-people contacts and better border control would seem to highly exceed the potential costs. The only significant cost would be supporting dozens of illegal migrants at a detention centre while seeking for their further deportation to their countries of origin.

The question remains: how sincere is the willingness of Minsk to introduce a facilitated visa regime for Belarusians?..

Andrei Yeliseyeu

**European Dialogue on
Modernization: Last Chance to**

Reform Belarus?

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka highlighted the need to modernise the Belarusian economy in his annual speech for the national Parliament on 8 May. These words coincide with a goal of the new EU project "Dialogue on Modernization for Belarus". But the two sides see the process of modernization quite differently. Minsk wants to avoid any political reforms while the EU is ready to provide financial assistance only after the release of all political prisoners.

Despite Lukashenka's bravura rhetoric, reforms in Belarus are inevitable as the country will be forced to become a WTO member soon. Moreover, Russia guaranteed Belarus beneficial oil and gas supplies only for the next 3-4 years. It means that the country may be approaching its last chance to conduct necessary reforms before another deep crisis hits its Soviet-style economy in 2015-2016.

Prepared Reforms for Faster Transition

The EU launched a new initiative for Belarus called "Dialogue on Modernization" at the end of March 2012. It is supposed to help lay the foundation for a successful transition of authoritarian Belarus to liberal democracy and market economy. Four key areas are subject to reforms: political system, people-to-people contacts, economic policies and trade reform. The real content of this reforms is unclear at this point.

Polish diplomats who played an important role in the establishment of the dialogue want to see "a catalogue of reforms" as a result of the process. They note that Leszek Balcerowicz's reforms in Poland were successful because they had been prepared beforehand and were implemented in the first 90 days of transition.

At the initial stage, experts and civil society

representatives will be the main participants from Belarus. European officials hope to see the preparation of reforms with their help before the parliamentary elections in September. They also hope that Belarusian authorities will [release all remaining political prisoners](#) before then, which will allow the EU to start high-level political negotiations.

if political prisoners remain in custody, the road maps for reforms will be not used and become obsolete

However, observers fear that if political prisoners remain in custody, the road maps for reforms will be not used and become obsolete. Besides, it is hardly possible that Belarus will change its geopolitical orientation if the EU does not promise concrete investments and aid.

Should Belarus Authorities Participate?

Opposition leaders Anatol Lebedzka and Siarhei Kaliakin were recently unable to attend a large conference on privatisation in Warsaw due to a [travel ban](#) imposed on them by Belarusian authorities. This illustrates the possible implications of ignoring the authorities in the dialogue. They will just create all kinds of obstacles for the Belarusian opposition leaders and experts, leaving the EU face-to-face with a failure of their new project.

Unfortunately, today the EU can talk only with a very small group of Belarusians. Opposition leaders do not have communication channels with the wider Belarusian society. Thus it could be reasonable to normalise relations with Belarusian authorities in order to transmit the European message through state-owned mass media that have a greater audience. Analyst Yury Chavusau says that the dialogue should involve those state officials that possess information about the real situation in the state.

Rent-Seeking State Forced to Modernise

At the same time, it is not the EU to be blamed for the lack of reforms in Belarus. Belarusian authorities are reluctant to conduct political and economic liberalisation because they fear losing power. Moreover, they do not have any strategic vision of Belarus' future and prefer to make ad hoc decisions.

one does not have to be a genius to sell natural resources

What is more important, the EU should understand that Belarus is an export-oriented rent-seeking state. Petrochemicals and potash fertilisers constituted 83,8% of its export in January 2012. The share of other exported goods is just 16,2%. This is why Belarusian authorities do not care much about modernization: one does not have to be a genius to sell natural resources.

Despite that, modernization of Belarus is inevitable. Belarus is a part of the Single Economic Space launched this year with Russia and Kazakhstan. After Russian accession to the WTO, Belarusian trade with other states will be [regulated according to the WTO rules](#). It means that Belarus will be forced to start active negotiations on its WTO accession soon. Otherwise, it will be not beneficial to trade with foreign partners and Belarusian goods will be less competitive in the world market.

In addition to that, Russia does not guarantee that its [generous subsidized oil and gas supplies](#) to Belarus will last forever. They may stop in 3-4 years and Belarus will face another economic collapse similar to that in May-July 2011. Moreover, Belarus' neighbours [are increasingly integrating into the Single European Market](#) through Free Trade Area agreements. There are no more opportunities to live in Lukashenka's dreamworld of a post-Soviet reality and only ensure the continued isolation of the country.

Critical Engagement

The EU should inform Belarusian authorities of its readiness to provide Belarus with adequate financial assistance for large-scale reforms, because they will not be cheap. If it manages to convince them that this money may be allocated even under Lukashenka, they may show more willingness to participate in the process.

After the release of all political prisoners, the EU should also [restore full contacts](#) with Belarusian authorities and engage in a dialogue with businessmen and other major stakeholders of the regime. They may lack democratic aspirations, but they decide on what is going on in the country. Real modernization is impossible without their involvement.

The dialogue is especially necessary with government and liberal ministries in charge of finance and the economy. State experts should participate in seminars and conferences on the EU territory. Experience of the Office For a Democratic Belarus in Brussels shows that it may be quite efficient. Civil servants should be ready to govern the state properly during reforms.

Support for Belarusian Society Is a Key to Pro-European Reforms

Modernization is a long-term project that will definitely fail if it changes continuously depending on street actions or detentions in Minsk

Even if EU-Belarus relations are restored after the parliamentary election, the modernization programme should not depend too much on political situation inside Belarus. Modernization is a long-term project that will definitely fail if it changes continuously and is dependent upon street actions or detentions in Minsk. Multilateral cooperation within the Eastern Partnership framework has been significantly undermined due to the EU's inconsistent approach

towards authoritarian Belarus.

Modernization should also be accepted by Belarusian society. According to recent opinion polls, Belarusians show [higher support for Russia](#) by 10% than support for the EU. This is in contrast with the geopolitical choice registered one year ago, when 60.5% of Belarusians were ready to integrate with the EU. The EU may increase pro-European sentiments through easier access to [Schengen visas for Belarusians](#), including unilateral abolishment of the application fee.

Finally, education is a key to bringing Belarus closer to Europe. The EU should continue to support such initiatives as the Open Europe Scholarship Scheme and promote internships for government officials and young professionals in different spheres. It is hardly possible to expect much from Soviet-educated politicians and economists. The more people with European values and education in Belarus, the more changes will be possible.

Germany and Belarus: Why People's Diplomacy Doesn't Work

The argument for loosening the visa regime for Belarusian citizen is that people to people contacts must improve. At a time when the official diplomatic relations are at [an all-time low](#), it seems that the exchange between ordinary people offers a glimpse of hope. It might prevent the Belarusian citizen from total isolation. However, looking at the German-Belarusian informal relations, it gets clear that it may not work. Here is why.

The EU and many support programmes aim at bringing together civil society actors. In their opinion, young people, politically interested actors and activists of non-governmental organisations should meet. Belarusians would consequently understand how democracy works and the Westerners would see themselves that Belarus is a country worth visiting. But this is a somehow naïve vision of things.



If you look at those who are actually travelling to and from Belarus and Germany, you can dress the following list:

- **Women tourists:** men who think “Belarus” is the name of a high gloss catalogue with beautiful women. Choose any you like. A German private television network is now broadcasting a series showing a middle-aged man who comes to Minsk to meet girls he met through an agency in the search of the love of his life. TV shows like this strengthen the image of Belarus as a country where beautiful women are waiting for allegedly rich men coming to marry them and offer a better life in Germany.
- **Businessmen.** They take direct flights from Frankfurt or Berlin and stay in top class hotels. Neither has any of them as ever been to the sleeping districts where Belarusians actually live nor are they sincerely interested in going there or experiencing the “real” Belarus.
- **Members of partnership and aid committees.** Those people are working in German- Belarusian friendship associations. They bring clothes and food to Belarus. If you tell them that people in Minsk are neither starving nor walking around in rags, they will be very astonished to hear that. In their opinion, every child living in Belarus is a “child of Chernobyl”. It is very common to

read in German newspapers that “20 children have arrived to Germany to recover from the Chernobyl catastrophe”.

Belarusians who want to go to Germany have to show an official invitation letter. As a consequence, the groups of people travelling West are the following:

- **Chernobyl children.** Those children invited by the friendship associations.
- **Students with a grant** from one of the many organisations offering scholarships to Belarusian students.
- **Women who are going to get married** to Germans.
- **Men who want to buy a car.** This was an especially big group last year before the customs tariff for the import of cars rose. There were many thousands of men going to Germany in order to buy second-hand cars.

No Contacts at Grassroots Level

The problem is that those groups of people have totally different expectations when they meet. Consequently, there are no eye-to-eye meetings between the German and the Belarusian civil society.

The meetings of friendship associations and partnership committees are based on the assumption that Belarus is an underdeveloped country that needs material support. People collect old clothes and tinned food in Germany in order to send it to Belarusian towns. Most of them have not been to Belarus for several years, otherwise they would know by now that nowadays it is difficult to distinguish a German teenager from a Belarusian one by their appearance. Smartphones, flat screens and modern public transport is a part of the everyday life in the Belarusian cities.

The partnership committee members think they are doing the

Belarusians a favour by sending them their old clothes. However, none of them is looking at the meetings with people from Belarus the other way round: That Belarus is a great country and Belarusians are on a par with them. Of course the living standards here is not as high as it is in Germany, but there are still things that Germans can learn from their Belarusian friends.

✘ On the other hand, Belarusians often look down at their German acquaintances. They go to Germany with a feeling of "Germany is a great country, only that there are too many Germans living there". They think the country is well-organised and approve of the efficiency of their German friends. Then, however, they deplore that things are different than in Belarus: people are coldhearted and they generally lack solidarity with each other.

How to Stop Supporting Stereotypes

If those partnership committees concentrated on working against stereotypes on both sides, this would be a big step forward in German- Belarusian relations. As it is now, the old scheme of donor and recipient is maintained. No evolution of the work of those committees has happened since the Chernobyl disaster. Only if meetings take place at an equal level, there will benefit Belarus' transformation.

It is true that some German and Belarusian NGOs do try to cooperate. Those NGOs that are really doing efficient work in Belarus are not registered here. Unfortunately, German donors shy away from cooperating with non-registered NGOs and try to work with those few that are officially accepted by the Belarusian government. If the international and German donors changed their opinion on this point and took the (manageable) risk to cooperate with an organisation regardless of its formal status, money and energy could finally go to those projects where people meet as equals.

Belarus is a great country. It is time to stop seeing it as an exporter of beautiful but will-less women who are happy to get donations from Germany. Belarusian children should go to Germany and take part in exchanges without being labelled "children of Chernobyl". They are not pale impoverished children but smart young people who know mathematics ten times better than the German children they meet.

And: Germany is a great country, too. Germans are not as bad as their reputation.

How the EU and Lukashenka Keep Belarusians Out of Europe

Belarusians are the most travel-restricted nation in Europe. Both their own government and the European Union seem to be determined not to let them out.

The Belarusian authorities prevent leading opposition activists, students and state bureaucrats from travelling to the neighbouring EU states. The European Union also restricts Belarusian citizens by keeping the most restrictive visa policy in Europe and blacklisting top Belarusian officials and businessmen.

The malicious motivation of the Belarusian authorities is not surprising. Why the European Union keeps its visa rules so strict is much more difficult to understand.

Belarusian Authorities v the Opposition

Following the last round of EU sanctions in February 2012, the Belarusian authorities banned over a dozen opposition activists from travelling to the EU. The authorities say that this is their response to EU sanctions. Perhaps they also hope that some activists will decide not to come back to Belarus to avoid future problems. The more political refugees abroad, the safer they feel at home.

In the past Belarusian opposition activists could travel to the West via Russia. There is no border control between Belarus and Russia which makes it easy. But last week the head of the Russian Border Service pledged not to prevent Belarusian citizens blacklisted by their own government from leaving Russia. If this threat materialises, many activists would be kept within the borders of the so-called Union State of Belarus and Russia.

Belarusian Authorities v Students

Another group which the Belarusian authorities want to keep a close eye on is students. Full-time students can travel abroad during term periods only if they get permission. In the past, they had to seek permission from the Minister of Education. Now it is enough to secure permission at a university level.

In the Soviet Union the harshness of laws was balanced by their non-compulsory nature. This is also true for Belarus today – most students can travel abroad without any problems and their universities know about it. However, the student travel ban can sometimes be used as a pretext to expel politically active students as it has been used to do so in the past. That was the case with politically active students Tatsiana Khoma in 2005 and Tatsiana Shaputska in 2009.

Belarusian Authorities v Belarusian Officials

A number of categories of state employees are unable to travel abroad without special permission. For instance, most officers of the Belarusian police or KGB have to seek permission from

their superiors when they want to travel abroad.

According to Moscow-based website *Belaruski Partyzan*, this April the Presidential Administration issued a new classified instruction in which senior officers of KGB and police were asked not to approve requests to travel abroad. It is was presented as a "temporary measure" but it did not specify how long it would last.

Belarusian legislation also prohibits those who have access to "state secrets" from travelling abroad without special permission. In the era of the internet, this restriction seems obsolete but it still makes the lives of some people more complicated.

European Union v Belarusian Officials

Some Belarusian officials suffer not only from their own bosses but also from EU sanctions. In other words, they are under a dual travel ban.

In February 2012, EU foreign ministers added 21 Belarusian citizens to their travel ban list, bringing the total number to more than 200 individuals. The list includes judges, prosecutors, senior police officers and those responsible for the falsification of elections. This year the EU also began adding the most influential businessmen who, in their view, support the Lukashenka regime.

But some of the blacklisted officials can still travel to the European Union to attend official meetings of various international organisations. In January 2012 Minister of Interior Arkady Kuliashou travelled without any problems to attend an Interpol meeting in Lyon. In March the KGB chief Vadzim Zaitsev reportedly travelled to Rome as part of an official delegation.

European Union v Belarusian Citizens

In any event, the restrictions discussed above affect only a limited number of people. The travel restrictions imposed by the EU on millions of Belarusian nationals are a much more serious problem.

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 very 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 €270.

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.

Consulates of EU countries in Belarus are overloaded with visa applicants who cannot get long-term visas. According to the Coalition for EU-Belarus Visa-Free Movement, EU regulations allow visas to be issued for a period of up to five years.

Why So Many Restrictions?

One can understand why the Belarusian authorities want to keep their citizens locked inside the country. Lukashenka and other top officials are already on the EU travel ban list and have no desire to help their fellow citizens. In January 2012, the spokesman for the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs admitted that the main reason why visa prices were so high was because Belarus was unwilling to sign a visa facilitation agreement with the EU.

It is more difficult to rationally explain why the EU treats Belarusian citizens so badly in terms of visas.

Is this policy a useful tool to keep away potential illegal immigrants? No. Issuing short-term one-entry expensive visas does not help. Even a one-day visa would be enough to enable a potential illegal immigrant to stay in the host country.

Is it a legal requirement to give visas only for several days? There is no such requirement. Each consulate is different in their treatment of Schengen visa applicants. For instance, Polish consulates often issue multiple entry visas for six or twelve months, while the German consulate in Minsk more often issues one-entry visas valid for a few days only.

Perhaps consulates of EU countries are just interested in earning money by charging €60 for a little passport sticker? That sounds like a possible but immoral explanation. Belarusians already have one the lowest salaries in Europe. It is wrong to make those who already suffer from the most repressive political regime in the region to pay the highest visa fee in Europe.

Time to Introduce "White Lists"

It is time for the European Union to adopt not only blacklists for "bad Belarusians" but also whitelists for "good Belarusians". The whitelisted categories of Belarusian nationals should be entitled to long-term, multiple-entry visas free of charge.

These whitelists should go beyond the opposition leaders and include thousands of Belarusians: students, academics and teachers, political and human rights activists, those working for NGOs and various community initiatives.

When Belarusians travel abroad, the benefits of democracy and market economy speak for themselves. These people would become the best advocates of European values in their own country.

Rather than hoping for a [quick regime change](#) in Belarus, the West should patiently work to integrate rather than isolate

Belarusian citizens from the rest of Europe.

If Europe wants to have a stable and democratic neighbour tomorrow, it needs to plant the seeds of change today.

Belarus-Lithuania Relations: Pragmatism Despite Politics

Belarusians and Lithuanians have a long common history which started long before the Grand Duchy of Lithuania 500 years ago. Two nations followed clearly divergent paths only after the collapse of the Soviet Union. When Lukashenka came to power, he recognised the state border of Lithuania and thus prevented the main source of possible tension between two countries.

Lithuania hosts many Belarusian exile organisations including the European Humanities University but remains cautious about economic sanctions. It supports the liberalisation of the visa regime for Belarusians but was guilty of leaking information to Belarusian authorities which led to the imprisonment of human rights activist Ales' Bialiatski. Two countries cannot agree on several issues, including Belarusian nuclear power plants, but overall their relations remain remarkably pragmatic.

History of Peaceful Coexistence

For more than a half of millennium, Belarusian and Lithuanian people have peacefully lived together in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. This experience of coexistence continued after the Russian Empire

had annexed their lands, with many Belarusians studying at the Vilnius University.

After the 1917 revolution the Bolsheviks united the Lithuanian SSR and Belarusian SSR into a short-lived single state called Litbel that collapsed due to the Polish-Soviet war. In 1940 Soviet troops occupied Lithuania in compliance with the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact and transferred Vilnius to a newly established Lithuanian SSR.

After the 1917 revolution the Bolsheviks united the Lithuanian SSR and Belarusian SSR into a short-lived single state called Litbel.

Only at the end of the 20th century did these countries go their different ways. Lithuania decided to become a member of the European Union and NATO. At the same time Lukashenka as a leader of Belarus stated that he would not lead his country to a civilised world and built a Soviet-style authoritarian "market socialism".

But it was probably a good choice for Lithuania, because Lukashenka agreed on the existing border between the two countries and did not make any claims to the disputed Vilnius region. In 2007 Belarus and Lithuania finished demarcation of the common border. This year they should allow people living in territories adjacent to the state border to travel without visas a distance of no farther than 50 km.

Why Lithuania Resists EU Sanctions Against Belarus

In 2005 former Lithuanian president Valdas Adamkus made a controversial statement that Lukashenka "might attack Lithuania" whereas Belarusian state TV channels broadcasted anti-Lithuanian propaganda. Bilateral relations significantly improved when Dalia Grybauskaitė came to power in 2009. At that time the EU started an engagement policy towards Belarus and Grybauskaitė invited Lukashenka to visit Vilnius for the

first time since 1997.

The trade turnover between two nations increased by 162% in 2011.

Lithuania advocates for Belarus in the EU, because it has substantial economic interests in this country. The trade turnover between two nations increased by 162% and exceeded \$1bn in 2011. Moreover, Belarusian companies, especially Belkali and GrodnoAzot, are responsible for more than 30% of the cargo at Lithuanian Klaipeda port on the Baltic sea that wants to be their main partner instead of the Latvian Ventspils port.

Earlier Minsk stimulated their competition when it was choosing which port should become a dock for tankers carrying oil from Venezuela to Belarusian oil refineries. This was a part of the ambitious project on the creation of [the Eurasian oil transport corridor](#) between the Caspian Sea and the Baltic Sea. However, when Russia promised to Lukashenka [extremely beneficial prices for oil and gas](#), he stopped his attempts to diversify hydrocarbon supplies.

Lithuania's need for economic cooperation with its bigger Eastern neighbour explains why it opposes comprehensive EU sanctions against Minsk. On 5 March Grybauskaitė said in an interview for Agence France-Presse that economic sanctions would only further push Belarus into Russia's sphere of influence.

Lithuania as Second Home for Belarusian Civil Society

Strategic interests do not impede Lithuania to stay one of the most active supporters of Belarusian civil society. Since 2004 Vilnius has become second home for the European Humanities University that Belarusian authorities expelled from Minsk. Nearly 1500 Belarusian students study full-time in the arts and social sciences at the university and the overwhelming

majority of them are against the Belarusian regime. Besides, the Belarusian Human Rights House has existed there for several years and the Belarusian opposition will likely open the United Belarus House in Vilnius soon.

Only 170 km separate Minsk and Vilnius thus making it the closest EU capital to Belarus. The 2 million residents of the Belarusian capital need only three hours and \$10 to see how Europeans live, work and relax. Belarus has nearly three times more consumers than Lithuania, that is why local businesses are truly interested in their visits. Many large Lithuanian shopping malls depend on Belarusian customers. Unfortunately, there is a big obstacle for Belarusians – [the Schengen visa regime](#).

In November 2007 Lithuania had to increase the visa application from €5 to €60 on the demand of EU institutions and the number of Belarusians tourists significantly decreased.

In November 2007 Lithuania had to increase the visa application from €5 to €60 on the demand of EU institutions and the number of Belarusians tourists significantly dropped. Only recently the cross-border movement has intensified again. In 2011 Lithuania issued approximately 150,000 Schengen visas for Belarusians which is higher by 59% in comparison with the previous year.

Lithuania refuses only 0.17% of Belarusian applications and actively supports the idea of reducing the visa fee for Belarusians. The Lithuanian Foreign Minister Audronius Ažubalis declared this March that Lithuania plans to issue no-fee long-term national visas for citizens of Belarus.

Bialiatski Case and EU Conflict

The imprisonment of Ales' Bialiatski, a prominent Belarusian human rights activist, reduced Lithuanian officials' trust in

Belarusian authorities. The then Lithuanian Department of Justice provided information about his bank accounts to their Belarusian counterparts within the framework of the official procedures established for the combat against organised crime.

Only months later did they understand that Belarusian intelligence services would use the received information for repressing Bialiatski. As a result, the Belarusian court sentenced him to 4.5 years in prison. Consequently, it undermined Lithuania's image as a country that defends human rights.

Another point of tension is competition between Lithuania, Belarus and Russia on the construction of nuclear power plants in the region. Lithuania opposes the plans of Belarusian authorities to build [nuclear power plant in Ostrovets](#) situated very close to the Lithuanian capital. At the same time Belarus considers the Lithuanian project for the construction of a power plant in Visaginas as ineffective. Moreover, Belarus does not want to extradite former general Vladimir Uskhopchik who allegedly participated in the Soviet troops' bloody assault on the Vilnius' TV tower in 1991.

Successful cooperation between Belarus and Lithuania depends on the future of the EU-Belarus dialogue. More than a month ago Head of the EU External Action Catherine Ashton [recalled all EU ambassadors from Minsk](#) in a sign of solidarity against the deterioration of the human rights situation in the country. This move will definitely not foster common projects and puts prospects of political dialogue between Minsk and Vilnius in doubt.

But despite the diplomatic conflict and the Schengen visa wall Belarusians and Lithuanians manage to maintain healthy economic cooperation and historically close ties.

Opposition Activists Face Travel Restrictions – Digest of Belarusian Politics

Belarusian authorities create problems for opposition activists who are crossing Belarusian borders. Isolation of the country is increasing. Following the departure of EU ambassadors, the IMF decided not to have any resident representative in Belarus and the country's representatives were missing at an Eastern Partnership meeting in Prague.

Anatoly Lebedko not allowed to leave Belarus. On 7 March, United Civil Party leader Anatoly Lebedko [was not allowed](#) to leave the territory of the European Union on the Belarusian-Lithuanian border. According to the politician, he was detained at the border checkpoint Kamenny Loh under restriction to leave Belarus. Two other opposition leaders – Siarhei Kaliakin and Viktor Karnienka were not allowed to cross the border. They subsequently managed to get to Lithuania, presumably through Russia.

Belarusian customs detained Alexander Dobrovolsky. On 7 March, the United Civil Party member [Alexander Dobrovolsky](#) was detained at the border with Lithuania. Dobrovolsky went to Minsk from a working meeting in Vilnius. Belarusian customs invited him to a separate customs control, resulting in Dobrovolsky having to wait overnight for the next train to Minsk.

Syarhey Kavalenka set to continue his hunger strike until he is released. [Syarhey Kavalenka](#) is determined to continue his hunger strike until he is released. The opposition activist is

currently in a prison hospital in Minsk, since the beginning of his hunger strike he lost 30 kilo. On 24 February, a district judge in Vitsyebsk sentenced Kavalenka to two years and one month in a low security correctional institution on a charge of violating probation rules.

Young opposition activist Ivan Shyla to spend 22 days in jail. Young opposition activist [Ivan Shyla](#) has been placed in the detention centre on Akrestsina Street for 22 days to serve earlier imposed jail terms. The deputy chairperson of a Czech-registered youth group called Malady Front was arrested in Minsk on February 14 near the office of the Belarusian PEN Centre, where Malady Front activists were scheduled to present the "I Love Belarus" award.

BAJ urges to abolish warnings to its members. On 2 March, the Belarusian Association of Journalists [submitted](#) an official letter to the Hrodna regional prosecutor, Viktor Marozau, in which the difference between freelance journalists and foreign media journalists is explained. The reason for the letter was a series of warnings to BAJ members Mikalai Dziachenia, Aliaksandr Dzianisau, Viktor Parfionenka and Hrazhyna Shalkevich for work with foreign media without official accreditation.

Ministry of Justice refused to register BCD. Ministry of Justice took a final decision [to deny registration](#) to the Belarusian Christian Democracy party (BCD). Considering the BCD documents, the Ministry of Justice has found a number of inconsistencies and contradictions. BCD also announced that on February 17 all party [websites were blocked](#).

Foreign Affairs

Appeal to LT Foreign Minister. [VISA-FREE Coalition](#) "Go Europe! Go Belarus!" appealed to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania Audronius Ažubalis to support further steps to promote people-to-people contacts and facilitation of ties

between Lithuania and Belarus. The Coalition proposes to amend the legislation of Lithuania to allow the consular offices of the country to regularly issue short-term multi-entry Schengen visas with a validity of five years, rather than one year, as is still provided. The appeal was signed by NGOs, initiatives and campaigns from Lithuania, Belarus and other countries.

U.S. supports expansion of the European Union sanctions against Belarus. This was [stated](#) by the U.S. representative to the OSCE, Ian Kelly, during a video conference on 2 March. He says that sanctions, being far not the main instrument of influence on official Minsk, should demonstrate the Belarusian authorities that they have chosen the wrong path of self-isolation.

Lukashenka warns EU of harsh response to sanctions. On 4 March, [speaking](#) on the sidelines of an annual ski race involving top government officials, Lukashenka described as "absolute hysteria" the European Union's latest move to extend the list of Belarusian citizens subject to entry bans and asset freezes. Lukashenka went so far as to apparently mock the sexuality of openly gay German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle. "It's better to be a dictator than gay," he said.

National Platform Statement. On 2 March, Belarusian National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum [adopted a Statement](#) in which expressed their deep concern at the diplomatic conflict between the authorities of Belarus and the European Union. NP urged the leaders of Belarus and the European Union to hold from further conflict escalation and transforming it into an exchange of blows according to the principle "an eye for an eye".

Belarus absent at Eastern Partnership meeting in Prague. No representatives of Belarus arrived in Prague to attend a 5 March [meeting of the foreign ministers](#) of the Visegrad Group and Eastern Partnership countries. Vit Kolar, spokesman for the Czech foreign ministry, said that Belarus had been invited

to send a deputy foreign minister to the meeting.

IMF Won't Replace Resident Representative in Belarus. [The International Monetary Fund](#) will not replace its representative in Belarus after April, suggesting that having a resident in place was having little impact in the crisis-hit former Soviet republic.

KGB chairman to travel to Rome despite EU entry ban. [Vadzim Zaytsev](#), chairman of the Committee for State Security (KGB) who is subject to the European Union's entry ban, is expected to travel to Rome for an official meeting.

Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials provided by Pact. This digest attempts to give a richer picture of the recent political and civil society events in Belarus. It often goes beyond the hot stories already available in English-language media.

The Logic of Sanctions and Engagement

The recent pull-out of EU ambassadors from Minsk signals the deeply troubled relations between Belarus and the West. The amended and updated Belarus Democracy and Human Rights Act of 2011 that was signed by US President Barack Obama in January outlines the official policy and maintains sanctions that have been in place for several years.

The proposed goals of the West, however, remain largely unfulfilled. The increased isolation has affected Belarus as a whole and despite the clear messages sent to denounce violations of human rights and democratic norms, civil society remains very weak and Belarus' economy has become even more anchored to Russian subsidies. In the months ahead a clear

strategy must be developed that goes beyond sanctions and intimidation.

The EU Exits Belarus

On 27 February, the EU passed further sanctions through blacklisting an additional 21 individuals, all of whom are Minsk city officials. In response the Belarusian regime promptly requested the EU's delegation leader in Belarus Maira Mora and the Polish ambassador Leszek Szarepka to leave. That escalated into a wholesale withdrawal of all EU ambassadors from Minsk.

The fresh EU sanctions are meant to renew pressure on Belarus to release its political prisoners, many of whom were detained as a result of their involvement in the protests following the December 2010 presidential elections. UK Foreign Secretary William Hague reasserted this point and the position of the EU. The United States made statement of solidarity with the EU shortly thereafter. The bottom line: release all political prisoners and allow civil society to flourish.

In the wake of their withdrawal, EU officials have taken a hard-line in response to Belarus' accusations of its 'hysterical' reaction. Hungarian Ambassador Ferentz Contra stated that he personally felt that a condition of their return would be, 'the release of political prisoners and their rehabilitation.' The foreign ministers of Germany, France and Poland demanded the same and also said they would consider introducing further sanctions. Lithuanian foreign minister echoed the position of other EU nations stating that 'normalisation of relations between the EU and Belarus is in the hands of Belarus.'

It is clear that the EU is frustrated with the situation in Belarus. Little progress has been made from their perspective. Previous sanctions have worked to further isolate Belarus. The removal of its diplomatic missions, which appear to be

temporary at the moment, shows a deep commitment to this policy. This fatigued policy, however, does not appear to be strengthening civil society nor democratic freedoms in Belarus.

The addition of 21 officials to a list of 200 is a symbolic gesture, as is the withdrawal of the EU member-state ambassadors. Similar actions in the past have done little to serve civil society, nor strengthen the democratic institutions of Belarus. The absence of any western diplomatic mission ahead of the parliamentary elections due to take place this fall surely cannot be the best means of supporting Belarusian civil society.

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Therefore any continuation of this policy would have to be coupled with new approaches.

The Role of Russia

As painful as it may be for the EU and the US, Russia is and will remain a very important entity in Belarus. Western diplomats often admit to being exasperated with the Kremlin, but including Russia in talks in reforming Belarus are long overdue. The question that remains is how to do so.

There are certain areas that Russia is already cooperating with the West on and will likely continue to do so. The most prominent examples of this cooperation are the US and Russia signing of a new START treaty ratified in 2010, the EU-Russia energy partnership, and the efforts between the US, EU and Russia to accelerate Russia's WTO ascension.

On the other hand, discussions revolving political prisoners and the health of Belarus' democracy are clearly off the

table. Russia keeps the Belarusian economy alive with generous subsidies which undermine the Western pressure to reform. Russia is in the midst of its own war with what Putin has deemed 'foreign interests', the West, trying to interfere in Russia's domestic affairs. Similar critiques from the West towards Belarus simply reinforce the Kremlin's message.

Engaging Belarusians

The most vital and overlooked component to creating a more democratic and free Belarus is the citizenry itself. Numerous official decrees from the West state their solidarity with the Belarusian people time and time again. However, the simple fact that most of Belarusians know nothing of the speeches of foreign presidents or ministers. The West should not only devise new sanctions against the regime or help the opposition but also take steps for more direct engagement with the people of Belarus.

The most vital and overlooked component to creating a more democratic and free Belarus is the citizenry itself.

What is missing are some concrete and highly visible positive policies directed at Belarusians themselves. Extending support and funding for programmes already in existence in western nations to Belarus is the most obvious option.

Belarusian youth needs more opportunities to study outside of Belarus. Although new initiatives such as the Open Europe Scholarship Scheme emerge, most of the programmes currently in place have either reduced their funding or have ceased to operate in Belarus. Those still working receive far more qualified applicants than can possibly be accepted. By providing a substantial increase in funding for opportunities through scholarships and research grants for Belarusians to study in western universities at the undergraduate and postgraduate level is a clear investment in the future of Belarus.

Volunteering and professional exchange programmes exist in almost every western nation. Individual EU member states and EU institutions can create such programmes operating in Belarus and in western countries for Belarusians. These programmes would ideally come at no cost to its participants, be open to everyone interested and last a month or longer, depending on the needs of the communities being served.

The introduction of Working Holiday residence permits that would allow recent university graduates to work in a country of their choosing for up to a year. Again, this already exists in many EU countries, but need to be extended to Belarusians.

The most powerful and meaningful policy, however, would be the introduction of a visa-free regime for Belarusians to travel throughout Europe. The high visa fees and complicated procedures currently in place limits on the movement of a majority of Belarusians. They also virtually eliminate their ability to interact with the European community.

All of these initiatives directly connect the Belarusian public and the rest of Europe bypassing the regime in Minsk. They involve very few political risks, are relatively inexpensive, and clearly demonstrate the West's interest in Belarus and its people.

Devin Ackles

Devin Ackles is a Fulbright fellow in Kyiv, Ukraine.

Belarus is The World's

Schengen Visa Champion

On January 23 Lithuanian Foreign Minister Audronis Ažubalis stated that the EU should be more open towards ordinary Belarusians and increase pressure on the Belarusian regime. A year ago EU Commissioner Štefan Füle announced a “balanced approach” to overcome the harsh consequences of the 2010 post-election opposition crackdown in Belarus. However, in practice the EU [imposes](#) additional sanctions against Belarusian officials, but fails to offer new positive incentives to bring Belarusians significantly closer to the rest of Europe.

Belarusian citizens have to undergo the most cumbersome and expensive procedure in Europe when they apply for EU visas. This is ironic because according to recently released data from the European Commission, in 2010 Belarus was the absolute world leader in the per capita number of Schengen visas. That would seem like a good reason to trust Belarusians in visa matters and to abolish the EU visa regime completely or at least to dramatically liberalize it.

Champion Despite Difficulties

The recently published data show that the EU countries issued 428,000 C-type short-term Schengen visas for Belarusian citizens in 2010. In comparative perspective, Indians, a population of 1 billion, received only 406,000 Schengen visas. Turkish nationals obtained 522,000 visas despite the population of Turkey being seven times greater than that of Belarus. Moreover, every third Schengen visa issued to Belarusians was for multiple entry. If the EU trusts Belarusians so much, what is the purpose of imposing on them the toughest and the most expensive visa regime in the whole of Europe?

In order to obtain a EU visa, Belarusians must pay a €60 non-refundable fee and prove that they have a good reason to visit

the EU. In most cases they first need to obtain a special written invitation from an EU citizen or organization. Moreover, if the invitation does not contain information about the financial sources of the applicant, they must prepare official documents to show they have at least €40 per day for their stay in the EU. Not every family in Belarus is ready to confirm the availability of €240 in order to spend two days with a child in Vilnius, a city situated just 170 km from Minsk.

Belarusian applicants need to bring official documents showing that they have a stable job and good income. They also have to purchase health insurance, book and pay for tickets and accommodation in advance, and persuade visa officers that they plan to go back to Belarus. Many consider collecting such a huge pile of documents not only meaningless but also humiliating.



Submitting a visa application is still much more difficult than receiving a positive decision on the visa. New PACE President Jean-Claude Mignon recently stated that “for Europeans to obtain the Belarusian visa is as difficult as the flight on the Moon”. Many ordinary Belarusians have the same feelings about EU visas.

Given that the average monthly salary in Belarus is now about €190, the €60 fee and other conditions for obtaining a EU visa look truly draconian. In comparison, Russia and Ukraine finalized their negotiations with the EU on the facilitation of the visa regime in 2007-2008 and now their citizens pay only €35 for each visa, the number of documents they need to submit is much more reasonable and the percentage of multiple entry visas is much higher.

Free Visas = More Democracy?

Belarus refused to conduct negotiations with the EU on visa liberalization. They refer to misunderstandings on the conclusion of the readmission agreement as the main reason for that. On January 23 the Belarusian MFA spokesman Andrei Savinykh clarified the government's position, saying that Belarus does not want to accept other countries' illegal migrants which have come to the EU from the Belarusian territory.

Nevertheless, many experts doubt that this is the frank reason for refusal and say that the Belarusian authorities are just trying to isolate the country from western influence. Member of the Lithuanian Sejm Foreign Committee Piatras Austriavicius shares this point of view. He thinks that the impact of an open Belarus-EU border on the democratization of the country would be far greater than the effect of hundreds of seminars organized for this purpose.

When Belarusians travel to European countries, they can see the real life of other Europeans and clear their minds of the TV propaganda that constantly brainwashes them about the alleged serious problems in the new EU countries such as Poland and Lithuania. Propagandists forget to inform Belarusians that the average monthly salary has reached €620 in Lithuania and €1300 in Poland, while the level of living costs is almost the same in these countries as in Belarus.

Lots of Discussions Without Concrete Improvements

Belarusian civil society campaigning and lobbying in Brussels and other European capitals started a widespread public discussion on the issue. Unfortunately, the visa regime has not yet been facilitated. Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Poland and Germany began to issue no-fee national visas for Belarusians in accordance with Fule's approach after the presidential election in 2010. But Belarusians only very rarely request this type of visas; this measure therefore looks like a symbolic gesture. Besides, other EU countries

have not joined the pioneers.

Lithuania, Poland and Germany grant more than 99% of Belarusian applications for EU visas. Lithuania refuses only 0.17% of Belarusian applications – quite logical, given that residents of the 2 million Belarusian capital Minsk can travel to Vilnius in just 2 hours for \$10 and shop in local supermarkets such as Akropolis. Belarus has nearly three times more consumers than Lithuania, Belarusian shoppers can significantly benefit the Lithuanian economy.

Towards Europe Undivided by Visa Barriers

Even if the European Union hesitates to unilaterally abolish visas for Belarusians, official Minsk's plans to allow visa-free entry for EU citizens in 2013 as an experiment before the 2014 World Ice Hockey Championship could be a good starting point for successful negotiations.

As a response, the EU could begin by reducing the visa fee for Belarusians to the same level as for Russians and Ukrainians (€35). Then it could accelerate visa proceedings (from 10 days to 5 days as in Russia) and simplify the procedure of applying for a visa. The next step could be to remove visas altogether.

Many citizens of non-democratic countries have a right to enter the Schengen area for 90 days without visas. Nationals of countries like Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Venezuela benefit from this right. These countries are not particularly democratic and much more poor than Belarus. If nationals of Albania can travel visa-free in Europe, why can't Belarusians?

By taking simple visa liberalization steps, the EU can assure Belarusians that they have a European alternative to the Eurasian Union. And the complete abolition of the EU visa regime with Belarus would more effectively facilitate openness and democracy in Belarus than another round of declarations and visa sanctions from Europe.

Sanctions, Solidarity and the Crises of the Command Economy – Digest of Belarusian Analytics

In the first month of 2012 Belarusian experts actively discuss the effectiveness of the European sanctions, the changing nature of political activities in Belarus and reflect on the most important economic events of 2011.

Foreign Policy

[Where do the European Sanctions Lead?](#) Dzianis Melyantsou of the Belarusian Institute of Strategic Studies (BISS) questions the effectiveness of EU sanctions towards Belarus. He points that over the last 15 years of sanctions the situation has not improved but continued to deteriorate. Melyantsou suggests to expand cooperation with Belarus in all areas and increase Western investments. He thinks that Europe should increase collaboration and communication on various levels of society and particularly with reform-oriented officials and young people in the framework of the Bologna process. He calls to enable Belarusians to travel without visas to the European Union to show that Europe actually cares about them and not hiding behind the wall of visas and sanctions.

[The future of the EU-Belarus relations](#) – Olga Stuzhinskaya, the director of the Office for a Democratic Belarus (Brussels)

spoke on the prospective of the EU-Belarus relations to euobserver.com. Stuzhinskaya noted that one can observe the disappearance of the remaining 'European islands' in Belarus. The EU is not on the agenda of the Belarusian government. Instead, there are new agreements signed with Russia leading to more political and economic integration of the two countries.

[Belarus' Foreign Policy Index #5](#) – BISS presents a new issue of Belarus' Foreign Policy Index, which covers November and December 2011 as well as summarize of 2011 year. The last two months of 2010 were marked by the Eurasian integration, which has more tied Belarus to Russia. The European direction for the year evolved from a deep conflict last winter via an attempt to normalize at the end of summer to the "freezing" of relations at the level of rhetorical conflict in autumn 2011. The most stable relationship was fixed with developing countries, China and Ukraine.

[Warsaw was not able to jump above the head](#) – political analyst Dmitry Kukhlej, summing up the presidency of Poland in the EU, says that the official Warsaw failed to resolve the "Belarusian question" largely because of the return of generous Russia's subsidies and the financial crisis in the Eurozone. During the Danish presidency in the next six months EU attention to its Eastern neighbors, particularly to Belarus, will decrease, as the EU mostly deals with a decision of pan-European economic issues.

Solidarity

[... And will continue to press one by one](#) – Gomel activist Pyotr Kuznetsov reflects on the failure of solidarity attempts of Mogilev bricklayers and believes that in such circumstances, the opposition should work day after day to build communities: "It is necessary to communicate with people, motivate them, to gain credibility and respect among them". The author believes that now such work is carried out only by a couple of national politicized

NGOs, as well as dozens of youth initiatives in social networks; political parties and leaders are not seen in this work.

[Revolution of friends and followers](#) – journalist Arkady Nesterenko, summing up the year, says that in Belarus the political activity passes or has already moved to the networking initiatives (e.g., Revolution through the social network and STOP-Benzin). The author believes that the political agenda for the coming year should be formed based on the features of the new active audience: "If there is a revolution in Belarus, it will be a revolution of friends and followers, those who will just decide to go offline out of inner emigration."

[Six of the facts on Ales Byalyatski](#) case. – In response to the official propaganda campaign against human rights activist Ales Byalyatski human rights Center Viasna publishes facts about him ignored or distorted by state media. The official propaganda is trying to portray Byalyatski as a wealthy grant-seeking misusing Western funds. Defenders point out that Byalyatski's well is not greater than that of average Belarusians. Viasna emphasizes that unlike the official propaganda tales, the facts presented on their web site are confirmed by official documents, which are in the criminal case and were articulated in the trial.

Economy

[IPM Research Center predicts GDP drop in the first quarter of 2012](#) – Research Center of the Institute of Privatization and Management released a short-term forecast for Belarusian economy. According to the analysis, GDP is expected to drop in the first quarter of 2012 by 1.9-2.4%. The analysis also suggests upcoming stabilization and improvement of situation related to access to financial resources and for companies working in the real sector of the economy.

[Belarus In the maze of economic identity.](#) Belarusian economists Leonid Zaika and Yaroslav Romanchuk presented a new book "Belarus 20/20. In the maze of economic identity." They argue that 2011 became the threshold year which clearly demonstrated the failure of Belarusian planned economy. According to the authors, the sale of Beltransgaz, creation of the Single Economic Space with Russia, ruining of the Belarusian car market and beginning of the Belarusian nuclear plant station were the most significant events in 2011. Coincidentally, the title of the book is exactly the same as the title of a new campaign under preparation to explain Belarusians what kind of reforms the country realistically can opt for.

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Border Forever: Minsk Restricts Local Border Traffic with EU States

On December 1, Belarus and Latvia took a new step toward opening up their common border. They signed a local border traffic agreement allowing their residents to visit each other's border regions for up to 90 days every six months without visas.

One could argue the achievement is modest: the eligible regions span no more than 30-50 km and visitors cannot travel to other parts of the host country or work there. Belarus gains little when compared to the Eastern European states that joined the EU and now enjoy Brussels' regulatory and funding support.

However, the agreement with Latvia is significant in other ways. Given Belarus's difficult experience with Europe, it represents a small step towards establishing normal communication with neighboring countries. More importantly, Lukashenka's ambivalent attitude toward local border traffic agreements underlines their broader political significance.

Who Wants Belarus Out of Europe?

For the residents of Belarus border regions, the border traffic agreement allows reestablishing old commercial and family ties disrupted by the more recent creation of national borders. The frontier with Poland dates back to the late 1940s, while the Lithuanian and Latvian borders only came into existence in the 1990s.

Unfortunately, broader political interests often obscure the Eastern European natural borders. The severity of EU visa requirements implies Belarusians somehow pose a danger to the EU security or economic interests. Such measures only exacerbate tensions with the Lukashenka regime which benefits politically from the country's closure. At the same time, European attempts to use visa restrictions as a means to force internal liberalization only serve to increase Minsk's resolve.

The peculiar nature of this dispute was captured in a December 7 statement by Štefan Füle, the EU Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy. Mr Füle expressed his dissatisfaction that the Belarusian authorities have expressed no interest in the border issue. He

said: “[W]e waited for Belarusian authorities to respond to our request to conclude such agreements for many months now [...] When such an agreement is concluded, there is no reason why we cannot move further towards a non-visa regime as our ultimate goal.” But Mr Füle's assumption – that Belarusian regime wants to remove visa barriers and open up the country – may be completely wrong.

Like the EU visa situation, agreements on local border traffic illustrate that the Belarusian regime is not keen to remove borders anytime soon. Ukraine has already ratified and implemented a well-functioning local border traffic regime with some EU members. Belarus, by contrast, is trying to use such agreements as an instrument to confront the EU. Besides Latvia, Belarus has signed local border traffic agreements with two other neighboring EU nations – Lithuania and Poland. Officials and diplomats of these countries insist, however, that the Belarusian government delays further implementation.

On November 25, Lithuanian foreign minister Audronius *Ažubalis* said Lithuania could already have launched its local border traffic mechanism with Belarus in November if Minsk had not hampered the process. More frankly, Polish diplomats stated in November that Belarus had ignored ratification for more than 14 months. The Polish ambassador to Belarus even alleged that Lukashenka had signed the agreement in December 2010 yet Belarusian government was technically unprepared to implement it.

Polish Fears of the Belarusian Regime

There is some logic behind Minsk's divergent approaches to opening its borders with neighbors. The agreement with Latvia, first of all, is most amenable to the Lukashenka regime because Latvia has not exerted much diplomatic pressure on Minsk in recent years. Indeed, Latvia has even supported Belarus in some of its disputes with the EU. Moreover, the Belarusian area bordering Latvia is sparsely populated, so the

actual effect of the agreement is insignificant.

Border traffic agreements with Lithuania and Poland, however, are a different story. In the former, approximately 800,000 Lithuanians and 600,000 Belarusians would be allowed to visit each other without visas. Some major cities on both sides of the border would be affected – Hrodna, Lida, Ashmiany and Pastavy in Belarus, and Vilna, Ignalina, Varana, and Druskininkai in Lithuania. Even more dramatic would be the effect on border traffic between Belarus and Poland, covering a larger swathe of Belarus, including the provincial centers Hrodna and Brest, and encompassing around two million people on both sides of the border.

But the Belarusian regime has its reasons for delaying the agreements with Vilnius and Warsaw. Relations with Poland are tense because of its resolute support for Lukashenka's opponents. Although relations with Lithuania are in much better shape, the country hosts numerous Belarusian opposition groups and events. Over the past decade, Vilnius has become for Lukashenka's opponents what Miami has always been for the opponents of Cuban dictators – a safe haven next door to the home country.

Second, Belarusian authorities maintain a Soviet era attitude to controlling borders. In the Soviet Union, entire regions along the borders were considered to be border security zones. They were strictly patrolled by KGB, and even Soviet citizens needed special documents to enter them. In early 2009, the Belarusian government finally reduced the size of border zones and abolished the special documents required for its own citizens to enter these areas. But old attitudes die hard.

Third, Lukashenka has always been suspicious of the 400,000-strong Polish ethnic minority in Belarus. For years, police and security agencies have led a coordinated struggle against the independent leadership of the Polish minority union. In this context, local border traffic could be suspected as a

channel to strengthen potential opposition movements among ethnic Poles in Belarus.

Opening the European Union to Belarusians

The very best sanction against Lukashenka's regime would be a unilateral opening of the European Union to Belarusian citizens. This would be a positive policy not linked to any bargaining game with the Lukashenka regime. Visa-free travel would be much more effective than border traffic agreements, which ultimately are just half-baked measures.

Without this, Belarus will remain closed to the West – its rulers are not at all interested in establishing more links with the rest of Europe, which they consider a threat to their own survival. The absence of freedom of movement to the West carries adverse geopolitical consequences not only for Belarus, but for Europe as a whole.

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