Why Young Belarusians Go to Russia, Not Europe

Alexander Rumak from the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection declared that the Belarusian labour market would not deteriorate this year. According to official figures, the unemployment rate in Belarus is merely 0.6% of the economically active population. The reality, however, is different from the rosy picture the Government of Belarus is trying to paint.

Thousands of young Belarusians migrate to Russia to escape unemployment and low wages. While Russia is waiting for Belarusian migrants who benefit its economy with open hands, the European Union keeps its doors shut, maintaining the highest visa fees in the region for Belarusian citizens. To balance Russia's influence, the European Union should become more open and offer more education and work experience opportunities for the Belarusian youth if it wants to see Belarus democratic and pro-European in the future.

Economic Reasons for Migration

Belarusians paid dearly for Lukashenka's 2010 election campaign. Just before the presidential elections in December 2010, the average wage in Belarus was more than $500. In November 2011 it was just $280, according to official statistics. Outside Minsk the salaries are even lower. In 2011, Belarus suffered the worst economic crisis since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The policy of printing money just before the 2010 presidential election resulted in the inflation rate of 108% in 2011 and devaluation of the Belarusian rouble by more than 189%.

Most employees in Belarus receive practically equal salaries no matter how much or where they work because of the Soviet-
era wage leveling. Even those who work in the prestigious banking sector, enterprise management or media feel they lack opportunities for professional development and cannot afford a good lifestyle. At the same time, low skill factory and farm workers feel more protected under the current regime. They are the main electorate of Lukashenka and he proclaims “social stability” in favour of them. The lack of career opportunities lead to a brain drain and massive migration of high-skilled workers and talented youth to Russia.

The National Statistical Committee of Belarus keeps insisting that the current unemployment rate in Belarus is just 0.6%. In reality the number is much higher because the Committee only counts the number of people who officially register at employment bureaus. According to some estimates, around 150,000, or 3%, of economically active people leave Belarus annually. This number significantly exceeds the official figures. However, the precise number is impossible to determine because it is difficult to monitor migration flows between Belarus and Russia in the absence of any visas or border control between the two countries.

What do Young Belarusians do in Russia?

Belarusians can work in Russia without visas or additional permissions. They also have the same rights to education as Russian citizens. Their education in Russia is free if they successfully pass entrance exams — where at small regional universities or reputable Moscow State University or the Higher School of Economics. One of the most prestigious Russian universities, Moscow State Institute of International Relations, has become Alma Mater for dozens of Belarusians: 41 of them studied there in 2011.

The majority of graduates of Russian universities do not return to Belarus because of lack of opportunities there. The income difference can be very significant. For example, the entry-level salary in the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign
Affairs is about $100 while in Russia young diplomats start with at least $650. Food, leisure and clothing costs are practically the same in Minsk and in Moscow. Such income disparity naturally motivates Belarusian graduates to stay in Moscow and search for high-paid jobs.

As a result these Belarusians contribute to the prosperity of Russia rather than of Belarus. The effectiveness of any modern economy depends on the level of added value in products and services. It is exactly highly skilled specialists and creative people who increase the added value through innovation. Russia is aware of that and stimulates migration to improve its difficult demographic situation. According to official Russian statistics, in 2009 immigrants almost completely compensated the natural population loss caused by the low birth rate in Russia. Because the Russian language is widely spoken by the urban population of Belarus, they assimilate in Russia much faster than other migrants from the former USSR.

How Can Europe Respond?

The European Union should match Russia's generosity by offering more education opportunities for young Belarusians. Certain steps have already been taken: the Open Europe Scholarship Scheme offered a significant number of scholarships for the education of Belarusians in leading European universities in 2012-2013. However, European policymakers could go further and enable Belarus to join the Bologna process. They should also foster academic exchanges and cooperation such as Erasmus programs to enable the young people of Belarus to live and travel beyond Russia.

The European Union could also increase the number of internships and visiting positions available for Belarusians in European political, economic and education institutions. This would allow more young Belarusian professionals in different fields to develop experience and connections in the
European context. At some point, these young people will rule Belarus.

Direct support of Western-educated Belarusians who want to return to Belarus is also very important. It would prevent a brain drain and help them to adapt to Belarus after their studies. Graduates will be more interested in staying in their native country if there are more suitable employment opportunities inside the country at western companies, NGOs and other institutions. Unfortunately, per capita foreign direct investments in Belarus (which borders three EU countries) are almost three times lower than in Russia. Establishing research projects and other initiatives to be implemented in Belarus is also possible despite difficulties which might be created by the Belarusian government and bureaucracy.

To Distinguish Between People and the Regime

Therefore, the European Union should be more interested in creating favourable education and internship conditions for the Belarusian youth if it wants to play an active role in promoting democracy in Belarus. This kind of youth engagement policy also implies development of direct support schemes for European university graduates in Belarus.

The European Union should also increase its presence in Belarus and foster Belarusian-European contacts at all levels. It can be done without compromising on the issue of human rights, which should also remain part of the agenda. Today, increasing contacts with the Belarusian population is the only way to gain at least some political and economic leverage to influence the situation in Belarus. Ordinary Belarusians should not remain hostages of the Belarusian regime’s reckless policies and human rights abuses.

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