

## HOW TO AVOID THE IRON CURTAIN BETWEEN THE EU AND BELARUS?

*Policy brief – January 2008*

The EU claims that its priority in relations with Belarus is not to isolate the country despite its harsh policy towards the Lukashenko regime, but instead to “engage with Belarusian society by further strengthening its support for civil society and democratisation” and further, to “intensify and facilitate people-to-people contacts”<sup>1</sup>. Notwithstanding this, after 1 January of 2008, Belarus is paradoxically the only EU Eastern neighbour whose citizens have to pay €60 for a single entry Schengen visa that approximately equals one third of the average monthly salary there. As the current authoritarian regime of Alyaksander Lukashenka has no sincere interest in maintaining good relations with the EU and the country does not even have a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU, it wasn’t possible to enter into negotiations with the former on a visa facilitation, in contrast to Moldova, Russia and the Ukraine which have already signed such agreements.<sup>2</sup> The way in which the EU will address the visa relations with Belarus could well prove to be one of the most important matters concerning the future of Belarus and its citizens.

Freedom of travel is a fundamental issue for future relations between the EU and its neighbours in general. The interpersonal relations built during overseas visits result in mutual bonds as well as in different forms of cooperation. Furthermore, they affect perception of the world and cause reflection on the conditions in one’s own country. At the first half of 90’s, that was true for the former Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland, where after years of the division of Europe into East and West, freedom to travel was one of the main factors which led to democratic change and the establishment of free market economies in these countries. Now, the eastern neighbours of the EU find themselves in a similar situation. Seeking to establish a democratic, pro-European orientation among Belarusian society, not only involves organising activities such as student scholarship programmes or cooperation between NGOs, but also as important is to facilitate opportunities for the ordinary citizens of Belarus to become acquainted with the EU and its Member States. The existence of a wide-open door for interpersonal relations between ordinary citizens is the fundamental issue of an effective EU policy towards Belarus.

Following the accession to the Schengen area of new Member States at the end of 2007, the ease with which citizens of Belarus are able to travel to these countries had definitely diminish. This will affect most strongly the cross border movement between Belarus and its closest western neighbours, i.e. Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia. Until now, the cost of a visa for a new EU Member State was several times lower than for a visa for a Schengen State (with Poland and Lithuania charging €5, the Czech Republic €15 and Latvia granting such visas without charge). Prior to their accession to the Schengen

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<sup>1</sup> General Affairs and External Relations, 2723rd Council Meeting, Luxembourg, 10-11 April 2006 ([http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms\\_Data/docs/pressData/en/gena/89219.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/gena/89219.pdf))

<sup>2</sup> At the beginning of 2007, the price for a Schengen visa was raised from Euro35 to Euro 60. Currently, the new fee applies to the citizens of all the countries that are subject to a visa regime and that did not negotiate with the EU a Visa Facilitation Agreement.

area, Poland, Lithuania and Latvia issued, in total, more than 400,000 visas every year to Belarusian citizens. That is three times more than all the visas granted to them by the old Schengen States combined (before last enlargement) <sup>3</sup>.

This intensity of cross-border movement at the eastern border of the EU is not taken into consideration by the European Commission non-paper “The Impact on Belarus of its Neighbouring States Joining Schengen” (5 November 2007). It claims that “the impact of the Schengen enlargement is not unique to Belarus” and further, that the Schengen enlargement will “have an impact on citizens of all third countries, whether they are a neighbouring country or not”. But what the paper does not make clear is that the intensity of movement between Belarus and its Western neighbours (Poland, Lithuania and Latvia) is extremely high. It also does not clarify the fact that the situation of Belarus is different from that of its other non-EU neighbours, as the undemocratic regime there is not interested in a Visa Facilitation Agreement, in contrast to the governments of countries such as the Ukraine, Russia, Moldova or the Western Balkan States that have already signed one.

The accession to the Schengen area of new EU Member States from Central and Eastern Europe and the resulting significant increase in the cost of obtaining a visa and the introduction of new requirements and additional charges (such as obligatory insurance) could well result in a decrease in the number of Belarusian citizens travelling to the EU, which even now is alarmingly low. According to NISEPI polls, only 26% of Belarusian citizens have ever visited an EU Member State, including a Baltic one or Poland, and 60% of them have not met a foreigner in the past three years<sup>4</sup>. All those citizens of Belarus that have obtained a visa for an EU Member State in 2006 accounted for less than 7% of the total population of the country. As many of those involved, obtained such visa on more than one occasion, the total number of those who visited the EU is definitely lower than 5% of the total population of Belarus.

The EU could pursue several options to deal with this problem.

### **Scenario 1**

The first scenario, which for now seems to be the one being implemented, is unfortunately the least desirable: The EU claims that it wants to support democratisation and to facilitate people-to-people contacts but at the same time it limits these contacts by increasing the cost of a visa to €60 and further, makes clear that no visa facilitation will be possible until Belarus becomes a democratic nation. This argument fits well with the line adopted by the current regime and its propaganda machine, which systematically fights against Western values and claims that Europe “does not care” for Belarus. Special exemptions from payment of the €60 fee for those travelling to the EU to participate in EU-

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<sup>3</sup> Data based on the Council of the European Union document of 12 June 2007: “Exchange of Statistical Information on Uniform Visas Issued by Member States’ Diplomatic Missions and Consular Posts”.

<sup>4</sup> Drakachrust, J., *Evropa v Belarusi i Belarus v Evrope: beloruskaja politika ES i otnošenje bielorusov k Evropie*, in Manajev, Oleg (ed.), *Belarus i „bolšaja Evropa“: v poiskach geopolitičeskogo samoopredelenija*, Novosibirsk, 2007, pp.52-53.

supported projects, members of the democratic opposition, or employees of NGOs or media, considered currently by the EU as a whole, and some Member States, are a no-option as their introduction will only strengthen the current propaganda claims that only those “paid by western secret services” participate in such programs.

### **Scenario 2**

The second option is to start negotiations on the Visa Facilitation Agreement with the current Belarusian regime. This is problematic as on the one hand, it would give this regime an unconditional legitimacy, and on the other, this regime does not seem to be truly interested in entering into such negotiations as it considers closer contacts between citizens of Belarus and citizens of the EU to be dangerous for its very survival: contrary to those who have never visited any EU Member State, practically everyone who has done so does not believe in regime claims that the living conditions in the EU are worse than those in Belarus.

### **Scenario 3**

**The third, and the only way of avoiding the further isolation of Belarus and its citizens, and further strengthening of authoritarian regime, is for the EU to make the decision unilaterally to reduce the cost of obtaining a visa to no more than €35 for all Belarusian citizens, irrespective of the current relations with the authorities of this country.**

**Common Consular Instructions provide for the option to waive the visa fee “in individual cases”. Yet, even if the European Commission was to encourage the individual “EU Member States to make full use of the flexibilities offered by the *acquis*” it would be difficult to imagine that they would often avail themselves of this option, since they have already declared that they are afraid that if they were to do so more frequently than other Schengen States it could encourage “visa shopping”. Therefore, the visa problem vis-à-vis citizens of Belarus ought to be solved in a way that would be acceptable to all Member States. They should also decide together on a more frequent reliance on Schengen visas with multiple entries, where the citizens of Belarus are concerned.**

Any solution discussed above can only minimise the negative consequences of the enlargement of the Schengen area, including the rise in the cost of obtaining a visa for Belarusian citizens who wish to travel to Latvia, Lithuania or Poland. The EU needs to take further steps towards the facilitation and liberalisation of visa procedures for Belarusian citizens. Only such action can help fulfil the main goal of the EU policy towards Belarus, which is to facilitate and intensify people-to-people contacts and further democratise this country.

*Prepared by:*

**Association for International Affairs, the Czech Republic  
Stefan Batory Foundation, Poland**

*Supported by:*

**Václav Havel**, Former President of the Czech Republic

**Aleksander Kwaśniewski**, Former President of the Republic of Poland

**Lech Wałęsa**, Former President of the Republic of Poland

**Petr Bratský**, Member of Parliament of the Czech Republic, Member of the Committee on European Affairs;

**Jan Hamáček**, Member of Parliament of the Czech Republic, Chamber of Deputies, Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs,

**Kateřina Jacques**, Member of Parliament of the Czech Republic, Chamber of Deputies, Committee on Foreign Affairs

**Ondrej Liška**, Member of Parliament of the Czech Republic, Chamber of Deputies, Chairman of the Committee on European Affairs

**Krzysztof Lisiek**, Member of Parliament of the Republic of Poland, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee

**Janusz Onyszkiewicz**, Member of European Parliament, Vice- Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Member of Delegation for Relations with Belarus

**Jaromír Štětina**, Member of Senate of the Czech Republic, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Security

**Cyril Svoboda**, Member of Parliament, Minister of the Government of the Czech Republic, former Minister of Foreign Affairs

**Jan Ruml**, former Minister of Interior and Vice-President of the Senate of the Czech Republic, President of the Civic Belarus Association

**Amnesty International in Belarus**, Gomel, Belarus

**Angelus Silesius House**, Wrocław, Poland

**Casimir Pulaski Foundation**, Warsaw, Poland

**Centre For Citizenship Education**, Warsaw, Poland

**College of Eastern Europe**, Wrocław, Poland

**Education for Democracy Foundation**, Warsaw, Poland

**Educational Society for Malopolska**, Nowy Sącz, Poland

**Europe for Belarus**, Warsaw, Poland

**Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights**, Warsaw, Poland

**Institute of Public Affairs**, Warsaw, Poland

**International Association Civic Belarus**, Prague, Czech Republic

**Mederi Foundation**, Warsaw, Poland

**Open Society Institute Estonia**, Tallin, Estonia

**People in Need**, Prague, Czech Republic

**Polish Community Association**, Warsaw, Poland

**Polish - U.S. Fulbright Commission**, Warsaw, Poland

**Polish Robert Schuman Foundation**, Warsaw, Poland

**School for Leaders Association**, Warsaw, Poland

**The Other Space Foundation**, Warsaw, Poland