

Ukrainian Mobility: An Opportunity Not a Threat to the EU¹

The EU should act on a proposal from MEPs to grant visa-free travel to Ukrainians to transform a lose-lose situation into a win-win.

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On April 01, it was reported that a group of MEPs, spanning the spectrum of political groupings in the European Parliament, had written to Donald Tusk, President of the European Council, recommending that the EU grant [visa-free travel to Ukrainians](#). It can be hoped that this was not an April fool, as the proposal has the potential to transform the EU-Ukraine mobility regime from lose-lose to win-win. Visa liberalisation is one of the few concrete measures that the EU can take, which would be unambiguously positive for EU-Ukraine relations. Travelling more freely will help Ukrainians enact a key aspect of European belonging, allow them to see EU life for themselves and bring back and adapt the aspects that they like, without increasing risk or threat to the EU. Fears over increased threats from enhanced mobility are ill-founded and the EU should launch this policy at the forthcoming Eastern Partnership summit in Riga.

Analysis: From Lose-Lose to Win-Win

European parliamentarians including Petras Aushryavichyus (ALDE), Rebecca Harms (Greens), Andrej Plenkovic and Michal Boni (EPP), Ana Gomes (S&D) and Mark Demesmaeker (Conservatives and Reformists) sent the letter to President Tusk, stating that “the Riga Summit should send a strong message of solidarity and support to the Ukrainian people. Granting a visa-free regime to Ukraine by the Riga Summit is exactly this kind of message.” Significantly, the letter went on to state that the introduction of a visa free regime “should not be treated only as a matter of technical nature. Its political significance is huge.”

The parliamentarians are right about the political significance of visa free travel, which has long been a key issue in EU-Ukraine relations. The very fact of needing a visa signaled to many Ukrainians that the EU sees them as ‘2nd class’ Europeans, particularly when they are subjected to humiliating or time-consuming procedures that both activists and the Ukrainian MFA were willing to describe as ‘consular sadism’. This has prevented Ukrainians’ from enacting key aspects of European identity, which has negatively impacted on their feelings of belonging in Europe. The novelist Yuri Andrukovych described this akin to being “locked out of the rooms of my own house,” while others noted that they felt like ‘Barbarians’ from a ‘third world country’ rather than ‘real Europeans’.

The EU has long recognized the importance of visa liberalization to Ukrainians, but has only implemented selective visa facilitations, which have created hierarchies of those who are more or less welcome and prevented more Ukrainians from experiencing and emulating the advantages of EU life and governance. Exaggerated security concerns without proper calculation of the benefits of enhanced mobility have contributed to the failure to liberalise mobility, to the detriment of Ukrainian’s sense of European belonging as well as the effectiveness of EU soft power in Ukraine. Local Border Traffic

¹ This European Security Spotlight is based on research conducted by the author between 2011-2015 and involving interviewing, focus groups and participant observation.

Agreements between Poland and Ukraine have allowed freer (although still limited) mobility for those living in the border region, without exposing the EU to additional threat or risk.

Liberalisation would end the current lose-lose situation where the costs of the visa regime exceed the revenues it generates and harms the interests of both Ukrainians and the EU. However, liberalisation would not mean the end of border control and it would only apply to short-term travel, with longer-term movements – for work, study or permanent relocation – still subject to the control of member states. Visa liberalisation would reward Ukrainians' efforts to move closer toward the EU, bolster their sense of European belonging and enhance the effectiveness of EU soft power by deploying one of its key "[Weapons of Mass Attraction](#)."

Outlook: A Question of Confidence

The Riga EAP summit provides the ideal platform for a policy that would positively effect the lives of millions of Ukrainians and bolster the Poroshenko government – the stability of which is critical to European security. Unfortunately there have already been signs from [senior officials](#) that the EU will not seize this chance and is focusing on exactly the technicalities that the MEPs warned may obscure the political aspects of visa liberalisation. This timidity reflects the EU's self-confidence in its traditional ways and means, which has taken a battering from internal economic difficulties since 2008, the questioning of key principles (e.g. free movement) and growing instability in its neighbourhood, where its role is increasingly uncertain.

In the face of these doubts, the EU should draw strength from its peerless history of creating peace and prosperity on the European continent and should stick with its tried and trusted methods – values-driven politics, encouraging the mobility and interaction of Europeans and openness to sharing these benefits with others (e.g., the EU-8). The Union and its member states can capitalise on the sophisticated and highly effective border control protection at the Eastern Schengen Frontier to liberalise mobility without increased security risks. Visa liberalisation would reward the bravery and determination of Ukrainians and recognise their European desires, but would also be a much-needed affirmation of EU values, ways and means.

Recommendations:

- ◆ **The EU and its member states** should embrace the proposal from MEPs and grant visa-free short-term travel to Ukrainians with at the Riga Eastern Partnership Summit in May 2015.
- ◆ **The Visegrad 4** states know all too well the benefits from free movement. Poland has shown the way in lobbying for this to be extended to Ukrainians and the other V4 states would do well to follow its example.
- ◆ **The EU and its member states** should provide targeted travel assistance and support programmes to make travel more accessible to Ukrainians in practice as well as in theory.
- ◆ **Ukraine** should seize the chance presented by free movement to re-commit to improving standards of border management, particularly by rooting out corruption.

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