

Europe Without Visas

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Arkady Moshes

Finnish Institute of International Affairs

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When Vladimir Putin proposed visa-free travel between Russia and the European Union in August 2002, his initiative seemed to be sailing against the current wave of thinking. The forthcoming EU enlargement not only left a number of aspirant countries with no choice other than to introduce visa regimes vis-à-vis Russia but also confronted one million of Russia's citizens, residing in the Baltic exclave of Kaliningrad, with the requirement of obtaining a visa to travel to their own country by land.

15 months later, however, the situation can be assessed with more optimism. During a summit in Saint Petersburg in May 2003, Moscow and Brussels officially agreed to study the possibility of visa-free travel in the long term, and this was accompanied by several bilateral negotiations on liberalization in issuing visas. Although it is probably futile to determine indicative deadlines at this stage, the argument can be made that if Russia takes the issue seriously, it can succeed.

Arguments For

A list of arguments to support the case may begin by assuming that the issue of visa-free travel within the Schengen zone is likely to become an important foreign policy priority of Putin's second term. It would be very good for the Russian president to demonstrate inside the country that partnership with Europe (and for that matter, with the West more broadly) brings tangible results. It is hard to think about any other issue on the Russia-EU agenda that would be as clear and as close to millions of Russians as freedom to visit EU countries that are increasingly a major destination of Russian travel. Furthermore, the Kremlin does not seem to have many likely success stories in its relations with the EU in the next four years. Russia's WTO entry negotiations are still stalled, largely because of irreconcilable differences in the approaches of Moscow and Brussels to Russian internal energy pricing. Without overcoming this conflict, any discussion of the Common European Economic Space will remain an intellectual or bureaucratic exercise. Security cooperation has not left the declaratory phase and may well remain dormant for a long period of time. So, if Putin wants to enter history as a person who "brought Russia to Europe," destroying the "visa fence" or "paper curtain" is sorely needed.

Second, the agreement on the issue of Kaliningrad transit, concluded in November 2002, is very promising. From a legal point of view, it established the precedent that Russian citizens can cross EU territory and future Schengen-zone states without visas;

they need only facilitated travel documents, which are much easier to obtain. From a political point of view, Moscow, Brussels, and Lithuania demonstrated the ability to find a workable compromise, which was far from guaranteed in early talks as several highly sensitive issues were involved, including Russia's unwillingness to sign a readmission agreement with Lithuania, which covers the mutual return/repatriation of illegal immigrants. That the agreement was implemented quickly leads to the conclusion that, when actors have strong commitments, the technical aspect is not as big of a problem as it is sometimes portrayed to be.

Third, the reshaping, if not the erosion, of the Schengen system is unavoidable. Poland is not interested in sealing off its borders with Ukraine and Belarus; Lithuania does not want to raise barriers to its economic exchanges with Kaliningrad; and Hungary is concerned with maintaining relations with compatriots in the Balkans and elsewhere. The national visa regimes that are now being introduced toward neighboring countries, including Russia, are therefore much more liberal when compared to Schengen rules regarding visa duration, fees, and the presence of privileged categories of people. It is logical to assume that when negotiating their own accession to Schengen four or five years from now, these states will try to keep their special cases, because otherwise they will have to either agree to restrict cross-border movement, or heavily invest in consular infrastructure close to the border, which will be very costly. Lithuania, for example, received 12 million euros from the European Commission within the Kaliningrad transit deal, which appears a minor project compared to what would be required for Poland's eastern border. If preserved, these special cases will provide Russia with an additional argument for demanding a more liberal approach for Russian citizens traveling to the EU.

In addition, the enormous numerical growth—counted in millions—of the Russian-speaking diaspora inside the EU after the entry of the Baltic states and Poland (taking into account the influx of Ukrainian citizens to Poland following the collapse of the Soviet Union) will, eventually, noticeably enlarge the number of people eligible to travel to the EU on the basis of private invitations. This factor alone, of course, will not lead to the weakening of the Schengen regime. However, it will add to the cost of administering the system, while the effectiveness of filtering may decrease if Russia, not encouraged to change anything, continues to provide its citizens with passports that are not machine-readable and falsification-proof.

Fourth, the perception of Russia as the only interested side may change and, to a certain extent, is changing already. Certain sectors of European business now see quite clearly how they could extract profits from visa liberalization. Organizing Russia-bound tourism of all kinds would likely quickly crop up, from cultural visits to “liquor” trips (the latter becoming more attractive after the Baltic states' EU entry restricts the duty-free import of alcohol to the Nordic states), ferry lines, and low-fare airlines. Increasing economic interaction in border areas (for example, the amount of accumulated Finnish investment in Russia in 2002 nearly tripled compared to 2001) and its transformation into a two-way street, as Russia now also invests in Central and Northern Europe, may accelerate the change in perception of Russia as the only state to benefit from a liberal travel regime particularly if Russian growth continues.

Fifth, neither the EU nor the Schengen zone (here it makes sense to emphasize that these are not congruent) can have a single approach to liberalizing travel requirements for Russian citizens, as well as to many other issues. The treatment of individual Russian citizens in visa matters differs so much between Schengen Finland and Germany and between non-Schengen Estonia and Lithuania, that one can doubt their interest in, let alone ability to take a common position. The “no” constituency is visible and will strengthen after the accession to the EU of some countries directly bordering Russia. Its voice will not necessarily prevail, however, as the “maybe” group of southern states (particularly Cyprus, Bulgaria, and Greece), which started to experience financial losses after the reorientation of the Russian tourist flow from these traditional destinations to visa-free Turkey in 2002–2003, will lobby no less energetically. Furthermore, the motivations of “no” group members will not be the same. Therefore, whereas those whose negative views are based on history and a fundamental fear of Russia will not change their positions in the foreseeable future, those who express itemized concerns about their soft security situation can be persuaded to, if given sufficient guarantees.

Finally, in some sense, the “no” campaign is already half lost. The EU promise in the “Wider Europe—Neighborhood” initiative adopted in March 2003 to offer the EU’s neighbors, Russia among them, the freedom of movement of persons, goods, services, and capital in exchange for the implementation of reforms and aligning legislation with EU norms, is, of course, only an invitation to Russia to commit itself to continuing systemic changes. Nevertheless, it provides Russia with the prospect of dismantling the visa regime under certain conditions.

Arguments Against

There are multiple considerations on the EU side that work against establishing a visa-free travel regime with Russia. These factors, however, are not unassailable. First, the EU countries in general and Russia’s immediate neighbors in particular are genuinely concerned that a more liberal entry regime will worsen the criminal situation, increase illegal immigration, and negatively affect the labor market and fiscal interests of states. Analytically, this line of reasoning looks sound, although without even approximate calculations publicly available, the appropriateness of these concerns is difficult to judge. On the level of hypothetical debate, three counter-arguments can be made. Most importantly, absolutely the same concerns were expressed when the German-Polish and other EU borders in Central Europe were opening more than decade ago. Retrospectively, it would be incorrect to deny undesired effects completely, but it would be equally unfair to exaggerate them. Not all Poles moved to Germany, as extremists warned at the time, and not all Russians will come to Finland, as their followers repeat today. Also important is to recognize that today’s visa regime helps contain only a portion of petty crime, whereas big criminal networks penetrate the EU, otherwise all talks about the Russian or any other ethnic mafia in Europe would have ceased long ago. Finally, by saving on consular offices it would be possible to spend more on border and particularly customs control.

The second declared concern is related to apprehensions that Russia, and for that matter Ukraine and Belarus, will stop functioning as a filter on immigrants on their way

to Europe from third countries. Apparently, those who make this argument simply have an inadequate understanding of what is discussed or distort the picture on purpose. Nobody proposes repealing border control, which today causes more complaints regarding Russia's inability to manage the smooth passage of legal travelers and bottlenecks than its unwillingness to intercept illegal traffic, but rather, allowing citizens of the Russian Federation to make short-term trips to the EU, having their passports checked directly on the border. Nobody advocates similar treatment for citizens of third states (concerns are primarily about citizens of the Commonwealth of Independent States). Through readmission agreements currently being negotiated between Moscow and Brussels that would oblige Russia to readmit third-country nationals illegally entering the EU through Russian territory, Russian border guards can be authorized and bound to check for valid EU visas, as airlines now do.

Thus, what one has to deal with in the end is an implicit but nonetheless discernible EU fear of big states, enhanced by particular historical experiences with Russia and the lingering doubt that Russia can become a "normal" state. This fear is difficult to counter as it is based on both rational and irrational grounds, but there are no reasons why Russia should not try.

What Russia Can Do

To prove the seriousness of its intentions, Moscow will have to do at least three things. First, when the debate starts for real, it will have to be technical, not political. Instead of discussing identities—whether Russia is a European or Eurasian power, whether it is "Europe's constituent other" or an inalienable part of the North in the North-South divide—Moscow will have to request an explicit list of requirements and proceed to negotiate programs, funds, and deadlines. The Kaliningrad deal became possible only when Moscow dropped the argument about individuals' rights to visit their country in general and concentrated on how to facilitate the movement of specific people and give necessary guarantees to Lithuania.

Moscow will have to explain to the European public what it is really seeking: ease of travel to Europe for those who have never committed illegal acts there and whose right to enjoy this freedom can be verified by a computer on the border, not in an embassy.

Most important, Moscow will have to prove that its claim is credible, that it is ready to improve the performance of the passport service, to combat corruption in the system of law enforcement, and to make Russia more open and more hospitable for European visitors, the resistance of certain agencies notwithstanding. All of these measures are in Russia's interest anyway, although the involvement of and incentives provided by the EU would make their implementation more likely.

Thus far, it is not possible to speak about introducing visa-free travel for Russians to the EU in much more than conceptual terms, but the idea is feasible in principle.