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Guest post: the EU should extend visa-free travel to Ukraine

By Dalibor Rohac

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Can the European Union help Ukrainians get their country back on track? Notwithstanding the threat the country faces from the east, the bulk of Ukraine's problems are domestic: lack of economic growth and employment opportunities, rampant corruption, mismanagement of public funds and burdensome regulation.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s the prospect of EU membership served as an impetus for radical reforms across central and eastern Europe. A credible timeline for joining the Union would certainly improve the prospects for similar reforms in Ukraine. On the other hand, given the EU's internal problems and the current state of disarray in Ukraine, European leaders are not keen to rush into accession talks.

Yet, if Europeans are serious about helping the Ukrainian transition, they have one easy policy option which could be exercised immediately and which would buy a lot of goodwill in Ukraine, while helping the EU's struggling economies. That option is the introduction of visa-free travel to the Schengen area and the gradual opening of access to EU labour markets to Ukrainian citizens.

Ukrainians are currently the second most frequent recipients of Schengen visas, after Russians. In 2012, more than 1.3m C-category (short-stay) visas were issued to Ukrainians, and the refusal rate has been low. Since 2008, there has been a 'visa dialogue' between the EU and Ukraine to examine the conditions for visa-free travel to the Schengen zone but progress has been painfully slow.

The visas impose a burden on Ukrainians. Most importantly, they involve a trip to the nearest consulate of the Schengen country of destination, which may well be far away in Kyiv or Lviv. The fee itself, reduced to €35, does not seem like much, but one has to bear in mind that in some regions of Ukraine the average monthly wage is barely €150.

In the meantime, the EU has already introduced visa-free travel for citizens of Albania, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Moldova. True, these countries are much smaller in size than Ukraine, but there is no indication of any adverse effects following visa liberalisation. And just as in the other cases, to prevent criminal activity, the visa-free travel of Ukrainians could be made conditional on the use of biometric passports.

Besides making life easier for ordinary Ukrainians, visa-free travel would be a tangible proof that the EU can do more than just talk. Research by economists Robert Lawson and Saurav Roychoudhury shows that the gains from eliminating tourist visas are large, as a visa requirement tends to reduce inbound tourism by roughly 70 per cent.

Besides being a boost for Ukrainian tourism in the Schengen area, a greater exposure to life in the EU would likely strengthen the domestic pressures for reform and imitate best practices from the west.

And if European leaders want to be more ambitious in helping Ukraine – while helping their own economies – they should think about a liberalisation of access to the EU's labour markets. Many Ukrainians already work in the EU, particularly in the new member states of central and eastern Europe. Some of them might be there illegally but many fill important gaps in the job market, for example in the medical profession.

In Slovakia, from where many local doctors and nurses have departed for more lucrative positions in wealthier EU countries, there is a growing number of Ukrainian medical professionals working in health care. In fact, Ukrainians already represent the largest group of doctors from outside the EU working in Slovakia.

In many western European countries, such as the UK, there is a growing hysteria over eastern European immigration. In reality, according to various studies – most prominently the work done by UCL's Centre for Research and Analysis of Migration – immigrants have been a boon for the UK economy. It is only reasonable to expect the workers from Ukraine to generate sizeable economic benefits for European economies with shrinking working-age populations.

Contrary to the anti-immigration rhetoric pervasive in Europe, immigrants do not 'steal' jobs – rather, they help create new ones, thus helping the local economies. It is now high time for European leaders to stand up to populism and do what is right both for the European economy as well as for western engagement with Ukraine.

Dalibor Rohac is a policy analyst at the Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity at the Cato Institute.