

# **For Schengen Outsiders, A New Isolation**

## **Radio Free Europe**

By Claire Bigg

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HRODNA, Belarus -- A woman stands in a bustling train station in this Belarusian border town, laden with parcels. Fresh from a short jaunt to Poland, she recounts the highlights of a successful shopping run.

"I brought Christmas trees for the celebrations. I've also brought tangerines and pears," she says breathlessly. "Tangerines in Poland cost 90 zloty. That's about 1,800 rubles in our currency. In Belarus they cost 4,000 rubles."

Cross-border shopping is a time-honored tradition in Hrodna, located just 15 kilometers from Poland and 30 kilometers from Lithuania.

With both Poland and Lithuania joining Europe's travel-free Schengen zone on December 21, Belarusian shoppers are rushing across the border to stock up on cheap goods.

"The trains are packed -- not with people, but with goods," said a man returning from a trip to Poland. "I was surprised to see that many were carrying car tires; I hadn't come across that before. The carriages look like cargo trains. People shift their merchandise, count it, hide things in their clothes. Everyone buys vodka and cigarettes in duty-free shops, hides them and transports them into Poland. People act as though it were their last chance."

In some ways, it is.

The December 21 expansion of the Schengen zone brings visa-free travel up to the very border of the former Soviet Union. For people inside the zone, there are numerous benefits. For people outside, however, the new system may feel like a new Iron Curtain slamming down.

### **Out Of Line**

The enlarged Schengen zone will include nine of the youngest European countries -- Hungary, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia. For many, joining Schengen marks a symbolic step in their transition from oppressed Communist states to full-fledged EU nations. Membership also comes with major perks -- unhindered travel and free circulation of goods throughout the 15 other Schengen member states, from Portugal to Greece to Finland.

But countries lying on the other side of the new Schengen border are far from thrilled. Many Belarusians, Ukrainians, and Russians worry that this expansion will translate into fresh travel restrictions to Europe.

Friso Roscam Abbing, a spokesman for EU Justice and Security Commissioner Franco Frattini, says the European Union's newest borders have certainly been tightened over the past few years. "This has been very carefully planned," Abbing says. "For years and years, [EU] member states have invested, with the support from us, from the European

Commission, hundreds of millions of euros in enhancing the external border security control."

In Ukraine, one result of the Schengen zone's expansion is the cancellation of previous bilateral agreements that allowed Ukrainians to obtain free-of-charge visas to Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary. The price of visas to all Schengen member states, on the other hand, will be cut by more than half. Some categories of Ukrainians -- such as those with family in Europe -- will also soon enjoy a simplified visa regime to the Schengen zone.

Borys Bazilyevskiy, the head of the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry's consular office in Kyiv, says the new visa rules will come into force with or without approval from the parliament, the Verkhovna Rada. "The Ukrainian president has submitted the visa agreement to the Verkhovna Rada for ratification as a priority issue," Bazilyevskiy says. "We also informed the European Commission that we have completed the process of implementing the agreement in Ukraine. As the European Commission has decided, this pact will enter force on January 1."

These concessions come at a cost for Ukraine. In exchange for a preferential visa regime, it has signed a readmission agreement with Schengen countries. This means all migrants illegally entering the Schengen zone via Ukraine will be deported back to Ukraine -- regardless of their country of origin.

### **Migration Fears**

Russia, too, has pledged to accept all migrants reaching Europe via its territory without proper documents within the next three years. Authoritarian Belarus has yet to pen such a deal with its Western neighbors.

In Belarus, like in Ukraine and Russia, there are fears that Schengen's expansion will open the floodgates to a new wave of illegal migrants and asylum seekers pouring in from a range of troubled regions -- such as Iraq and Afghanistan -- on their way to Europe. Belarusian officials have lambasted the European Union for what they denounce as its failure to help Belarus handle this migration flow.

"The European Union is not helping us," says Alyaksey Begun, the deputy director of the Belarusian Interior Ministry's migration department. "We sent a letter this year to the European Union calling for increased cooperation in combating illegal migration and human trafficking. As far as I know, this letter has yet to be answered. The Belarusian migration organization does carry out programs with EU assistance. But there are no agreements between countries. The European Union is not paying Belarus enough attention."

The readmission agreements currently being penned along what will soon become Schengen's eastern border have also raised concerns. Human rights watchdogs have pointed to the danger of effectively placing a country like Ukraine on the frontline of the fight against illegal migration and human trafficking toward Europe.

In a report published two years ago, Human Rights Watch documented widespread violations against migrants and asylum-seekers stranded in Ukrainian border camps, ranging from overcrowding to physical abuse and extortion.

(RFE/RL's Ukrainian and Belarusian services contributed to this report)