

Lithuania's illegal actions against the Russian experts

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Lithuanian authorities deliberately impede the activities of the Russian experts, who are critical of some aspects of the foreign policy of this country.

In October 2015 Alexey Kochetkov, president of Public Diplomacy Foundation, flew to Warsaw for personal reasons. He was detained at the airport and spent the night at the police station without food and access of members of the Russian Consulate. Then his Schengen visa was revoked. Border guards explained that Lithuania had issued a ban on his visits to the countries of the Schengen Area, because he “*poses a threat to Lithuania's national security*”. Despite the fact that Mr. Kochetkov hadn't been to Lithuania for thirty years, he was put on a flight to Moscow.

17th February, 2016, political analyst of the International monitoring organization CIS-EMO Stanislav Byshok arrived in Paris airport “Charles de Gaulle” to participate in two international conferences scheduled for the next day. The first one was organized by the Independent Journalists Association for Peace (*Assoziation Journalisten im Kampf um den Freiden e.V.*), the second one was held by Paris Institute of Political Studies, also known as Sciences Po (*Institut d'Études Politiques de Paris*). At both events Mr. Byshok planned to talk about contemporary Ukrainian nationalism and violations of human rights in post-Maidan Ukraine. However, Russian expert was detained at passport control and taken to the police station, where he stayed for six hours. Immigration officer explained that Lithuania had issued a document barring Mr. Byshok from entering the Schengen Area, “*unless he has a residence permit there*”. The immigration officer admitted that it was a weird condition unseen before, and France had no claims to him, because his visa was OK. However, since France is in the Schengen Area and is subject to the laws common to all, the French side was obliged to put Mr. Byshok for a return flight to Moscow. Mr. Byshok had never been to Lithuania in his life.

The attention of Lithuania to two Russian experts can be explained by the fact that Byshok and Kochetkov had published a series of books, videos and expert reports on the Ukrainian crisis. They highlighted a number of negative consequences of the actions of certain EU institutions in Ukraine. These actions caused a severe political crisis, which escalated into a military confrontation with thousands of victims. Byshok and Kochetkov also drew the attention of politicians, journalists, social and human rights activists, and fellow experts to the role of radical Ukrainian nationalists in the Euromaidan uprising and subsequent tragic events. The experts actively presented their works at international venues in Berlin, Brussels, Paris, Vienna, Athens, and here in Warsaw. They were frequent here at OSCE ODIHR conferences.

However, their views were contrary to the position of lobbyists of Ukrainian European integration, the main of which is Lithuania and its president.

Lithuania closed the entire Schengen Area to prevent the activities of the experts. This action seems to have been politically motivated, since Lithuania had no legitimate reason for that.

It is important to note that this is not the first such case. Earlier Lithuania had forbidden entrance to a number of the Russian political scientists, journalists and artists. While Lithuania is in Schengen Area, this country is not formally obliged to explain to other countries their reasons when adding a person to the “black list”. But it is obvious that Lithuania is abusing this right.

Actions of Lithuanian authorities violate a number of basic documents, guaranteeing freedom of speech. In particular, such as:

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)

Article 19

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Document of the Copenhagen Meeting of the Conference on the Human Dimension of the CSCE (1990)

(9.1)

[The participating States reaffirm that] everyone will have the right to freedom of expression including the right to communication. This right will include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers. The exercise of this right may be subject only to such restrictions as are prescribed by law and are consistent with international standards. In particular, no limitation will be imposed on access to, and use of, means of reproducing documents of any kind, while respecting, however, rights relating to intellectual property, including copyright;

(10.1)

[The participating States express their commitment to] respect the right of everyone, individually or in association with others, to seek, receive and impart freely views and information on human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the rights to disseminate and publish such views and information;

(19)

The participating States affirm that freer movement and contacts among their citizens are important in the context of the protection and promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms. They will ensure that their policies concerning entry into their territories are fully consistent with the aims set out in the relevant provisions of the Final Act, the Madrid Concluding Document and the Vienna Concluding Document. While reaffirming their determination not to recede from the commitments contained in CSCE documents, they undertake to implement fully and improve present commitments in the field of human contacts, including on a bilateral and multilateral basis.

Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2000)

Article 11. Freedom of expression and information

1. Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers.

2. The freedom and pluralism of the media shall be respected.

One of the main problems of the current EU-Russia relations is the lack of dialogue. There are only sporadic high-level contacts but constant mutual recriminations in the mainstream media of both sides. Establishing dialogue at the level of civil society could contribute to solving this problem. In this context, activities of international experts could be an example of a respectful dialogue at a civil society level, uniting Russia and European countries, especially Germany, France, Austria, and Poland.

However, the restricting actions of Lithuania effectively sever the possibility of restoration of professional contacts between the representatives of the expert community. One gets the impression that the official Vilnius is not interested in normalization of the EU-Russia relations. It is unlikely that the attitude adopted by Lithuania reflects the long-term interests of the EU.