

Is the European Union applying a practical visa policy on Russia? Interview with activist Almut Rochowanski

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Almut Rochowanski is an expert on civil society development, women's empowerment, and human rights, with over 20 years of experience with civil society organizations and activists in the post-Soviet Union. In an interview with Global Voices, she discussed issues ranging from the EU's politics on asylum to the mismatch between Western expectations and civil society's needs in Ukraine, Belarus and Russia. An edited version of the conversation follows.

Global Voices (GV): What are the most pressing needs that civil society organizations are experiencing now in Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus?

Almut Rochowanski (AR): The needs for them are very different.

About Ukraine, I want to focus on one thing that you probably won't hear from other sources. All over the world, we're hearing: "Oh, Ukrainian civil society is so vibrant, and so powerful." And that's true, but Ukrainian civil society is also very diverse — its politics are very diverse. And not all Ukrainian civil society are "pro-government." A lot of people in Ukraine are just ordinary people dealing with their own difficult socio-economic problems, organizing themselves just to do some good things in their community. And we don't hear enough about them. In the Western media we hear a lot of Ukrainian civil society voices, but these are elite voices. And we don't hear those from non-elite groups very much. But of course, the greatest problem right now is a war in the country. And for the next 10-20-30 years, we will have to deal with the consequences of this war.

The greatest problem for Belarus is that, within the country, there's a very high degree of repression. A lot of society leaders and active activists are now outside the country and have very little influence inside the country. My Belarus contacts tell me that their uprising is still ongoing, their revolution is still ongoing. Lukashenko is an illegitimate president for them. But then I recently attended a session with European foreign policy experts. And the way they see it, the uprising is over, and it failed. The question is what to do: to keep engaging or not engaging? Of course, with every new arriving crisis, the previous crisis gets less attention. So there are very few resources and very little support and attention available for Belarusian activists at the international level.

As for Russia. The West is now [essentially] in a war with Russia. Very few Western soldiers are actually fighting in the war. Russia considers itself to be at war with the West. And the West, let's be honest, also considers itself at war with Russia. Western governments have stated that they want Russia to be weakened, militarily and economically and politically on the global stage for a long time. Obviously, Russia considers this an existential threat to itself by the West. So now, for any Westerners, especially representatives of government, or similar political elites, to go out and

endorse and support Russian activists, it's like the kiss of death for activists.

Interestingly almost everybody talks about how the Russian opposition has fled the country. Practically all the Russian human rights activists I know have stayed in Russia and continue to work. The work, of course, is becoming more difficult for them.

GV: The EU has suspended the Visa Facilitation Agreement with Russia and some EU countries prohibited entries for Russian citizens with tourist visas. What is your opinion on these measures?

AR: These measures will not influence the outcome of the war: all they might achieve is that it may be slightly easier for the current Russian government to get support. Also, it makes Russians who oppose their government, who don't want to be mobilized because they oppose the war, feel like the West is against them also. It is not conducive to the kind of political goals that the West has in Russia. I think the West adopts such policies them out of some very ugly belief really close to racism. Essentially, Russians have now been defined as the Other, the enemy. Russians are not really human, not really European, not quite white, not really civilized. And we don't want them here. And so to make a policy that excludes them is always sort of a popular political move.

Some people have argued it's for security purposes. But that's complete nonsense. Because people have also told us that no Muslims should come to the West, because any one of them might be a terrorist. Obviously, that was racist and nonsense. And it's equally nonsense that out of hundreds of thousands of Russians who might want to come to Europe, any one of them is potentially a security risk.

GV: An [LGBTQ+ propaganda law](#) was passed recently in Russia, which puts people in danger. A lot of people from the community used to go to Europe on tourist visas and ask for asylum to become refugees. Do you have any advice for LGBTQ+ people who need to leave Russia?

AR: I've worked with this community, particularly from the North Caucasus. But from the North Caucasus, in the last 20 years, something like 100,000 or 150,000 came to Europe and applied for asylum. This is actually the largest group of Russian citizens to get asylum over the last 20 years.

What this shows is that the vast majority of these people arrived to Europe without a visa, because they would never have been able to get a one. They didn't have all those things that you need to get a visa, like an official job and official income bank accounts, so they didn't even try. They travel illegally, sometimes they pay traffickers, criminal networks to help them make it to Europe. And then they apply for asylum. The vast majority of asylum seekers arriving in Europe from everywhere travel without a visa, because they come from countries where virtually no ordinary people can get visas.

So there is a bit of a problem here because on the one hand, you have people who are being helped by human rights organizations to flee Russia. They are being helped by people like me, activists from human rights organizations, who also work with diplomats. And we're the kind of people who like to do things legally and above the board. I can't call a trafficker and say, "can you traffic this person across the border?" I don't want to do that. And I wouldn't even know who to call, right, I don't have these connections. When I do things, I do them legally.

Sometimes the refugees, especially the LGBTQ+ ones, especially from the Caucasus, try to find and research all sorts of tricks [to escape]. There used to be an option, you could go to Turkey as a Russian citizen, and then you could book a flight to Russia, but through Germany, like on Lufthansa,

for example. In Frankfurt, you would get out of the airport, and instead of taking the flight to Moscow, you would go to the passport control and say “give me asylum” and they have to accept you and then they have to review your case. And maybe at the end they will give you an asylum. I know people who did this, especially women from the Caucasus.

So in theory, Russian citizens do not need a transit visa to go to Europe. And if they want to travel from Istanbul to Moscow via Frankfurt, you could do that. Now you cannot do that because there are no Frankfurt-Moscow flights. That is one reason why this option no longer exists — there just aren’t any flights.

But even in the past, when there were flights to Moscow directly from Europe, I’ve had cases where people were denied boarding on these flights back to Russia with transit in Europe. The thing is, no country openly says, “you know, we’ve had a lot of applications from gay Russians who applied for asylum at our airport, and that’s why we’re now telling our border offices or the airlines to screen them out.” But you can always tell, because it starts happening.

If an airline makes mistakes, like if too many people get into the country that apply for asylum or they don’t have a visa, then they get into trouble. The government can actually fine them or punish them. [The airlines] are the de facto implementers of government immigration policy, because they check for particular features that filter people out.

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