



To: European Commissioner for Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement, Olivér Várhelyi

Brussels, 1 April 2021

Dear Commissioner,

With this letter, we, the undersigned Members of the European Parliament, seek to bring your attention to the importance of deepening people to people contacts between citizens of Belarus and the EU Member States and voice the urgent need to lower the EU visa fee for the Belarusian people.

Last year, just a month before fraudulent 2020 Presidential election in Belarus, we welcomed a visa facilitation agreement and a readmission agreement with Belarus. Back then, we shared our concern that a 35 euros fee for processing visa application for the Belarusian people with a minimum salary of less than 200 euros is a challenge. The current circumstances, which include brutalities and persecution by the Lukashenka regime in many cases resulting in termination of working relations, removal of students from educational institutions and imposing heavy fines or even prison sentences for supporting the pro-democratic protests, has further strengthened our conviction. The existing EU visa fee for Belarusians seeking to maintain their ties with the EU is too high and should be reduced to a symbolic amount.

According to the Eastern Partnership Index LINKAGE 2018-2019¹, the Belarusian citizens, if to compare with citizens of other Eastern Partnership countries, are receiving the highest number of Schengen visas per capita. However, the number of visas issued to Belarusians has been decreasing for the past 2-3 years. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and political measures taken by Lukashenka to close the Belarusian borders for passenger movement with the EU Member States: Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, the future prognosis are not optimistic.

We ask you to address the risk of declining people-to-people contacts and take active measures to maintain and strengthen economic, cultural and scientific ties of the Belarusian people with their EU counterparts. The reduction of the EU visa fee to a symbolic amount in the light of deteriorating living standards in Belarus would send a strong signal of EU support to the Belarusian people and their struggle for democracy. It would also rebuff propaganda of Lukashenka's regime against the EU.

Sincerely,

Petras Auštrevičius, Renew Europe, Lithuania
Radosław Sikorski, EPP, Poland
Robert Biedroń, S&D, Poland
Viola von Cramon-Taubadel, Greens/EFA, Germany
Miriam Lexmann, EPP, Slovakia
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¹ Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, *Eastern Partnership Index LINKAGE 2018-2019*, https://eap-csf.eu/wp-content/uploads/EaP-Index_Linkage-2018-2019.pdf