



## **The tourist industry and visas. Interview with a director of a tourist agency in Lviv**

Iryna Mala is a director of the tourist agency Trident in Lviv, Ukraine. She explains that her company is obliged to arrange visas for its clients and she speaks about some difficulties connected with this. The tourist agency has to obtain and keep the trust of consulates, it has to investigate its clients and it has to be prepared for some economic losses. There are two consulates in Lviv: the Czech and the Polish. At the Czech consulate there are problems with the limit on the amount of visa applications per week. At the Polish consulate it is difficult to arrange the exact date of holidays that would be suitable for the client because of the character of the registration system. After all, the problems connected with getting Schengen or non-Schengen visas contribute to the fact that Ukrainians prefer to go to destinations where they do not need a visa.

**Can you introduce the work of your tourist agency in terms of arranging visas for your clients?**

Besides other activities, we organise various tours for tourists, including the arrangement of visas. Travel agencies have to hold an accreditation to arrange visas for tourists. The Trident Travel Company has been working in the travel market for ten years. We are accredited in almost all European consulates.

**What is your experience with arranging Czech and Polish visas?**

Concerning visas for Ukrainians, the most difficult consulate is the Polish one. To get a Czech visa is hard as well. Although both destinations are very popular for Ukrainians they are not easy to reach.

For example: in the winter, Ukrainians like to go to Zakopane, a ski resort in Poland. However, this winter we had hardly any business, because of the Polish visa procedure. To get a Polish visa you have to enter the web page of the Polish consulate, fill in an application form and look for the correct date that you can bring your passport. However, this date is unpredictable. It could take two weeks, but it could take up to four weeks. Therefore, making plans is impossible, both for us and for the tourists. In the past, especially here in the western part of Ukraine, it was common practice to go to Poland quickly and often, as Poland is really close. Nowadays things are different. Many people came to us in November or December and asked us to arrange their trips to ski resorts. Then we have to ask these people to come back with their passport and check the available date at the Polish consulate. There the conversation is usually as follows; “When do you want to go?” “About the 20<sup>th</sup> of January.” “I am sorry, but the closest available date for a visa is the 10<sup>th</sup> of February.” “Well, then I am not interested, because I can only have holidays around the 20<sup>th</sup> January.” Consequently, we, as a travel company, are in the unfortunate position that we cannot help these people, and thus, do not have a deal. This is very unproductive. We had a lot of meetings with ambassadors which are, unfortunately, without results.

In regards to the Czech consulate, it is slightly better, as there, things are more in order. As far as I’m concerned, I do not understand why it is so complicated with these two consulates. For example, in Austrian, Swiss or Spanish consulates, it only takes a few days to apply for a visa. They have specific days when accredited travel agencies can bring the passports of their clients to the consulates.

**Does it mean that the Polish internet system is not adequate enough for your tourist agency?**

The internet system is not helpful at all. The number of available dates is very limited and those available are usually too late for our clients. It would be much easier if we could bring the passports of our clients on a certain day and if we could rely on having the visas arranged within two or three weeks.

**I would like to return to your experiences with the Czech consulate in Lviv.**

It seems like the Czech consulate is snowed under with work. This spring and summer we were asked by the Czech consul not to apply for visas for larger groups. He told us that they would not have the capacity to arrange visas for bigger groups quickly enough. Of course, this harmed the interest of our travel agency, as we used to organise a tour for fifty or sixty people to Prague. To organise such a trip now, we have to apply many weeks in advance. We were also informed about a weekly limit: ten applications for visas per week.

**How does this situation influence your business?**

We have some regular customers which we persuaded to visit elsewhere rather than Prague. The situation with the visa process makes it very difficult. We have even experienced a situation where a bus with people was ready to leave, but we did not get the passports from the consulate on time. We had to cancel the trip and pay all the cancellation fees to hotels etc. Therefore now, we only organise trips to the Czech Republic for groups of up to five people.

**Could you compare this situation with the situation in previous years?**

While the Polish visa procedure has changed for the worse, the Czech consulate is just not able to cope with the number of visa applications. The number of applications rises every year, but the number of employees remains the same.

**What are your expectations in regards to the enlargement of Schengen to Czech Republic, Poland and other countries?**

It might bring positive things. Hopefully, the consulates will get more money for improving internal processes or increasing the number of employees. Maybe it will become easier to get a visa like in Austria for example; we have certain days, on which we can apply for visas, and in the winter, when there are more applications due to skiing holidays, it is no problem to apply for more visas.

**How important is it to keep trust of the consulates? Consulates may be afraid of the fact that some people who have a tourist visa may wish to stay in the country and work there.**

Yes, it is very important for our company, because without the trust we would lose our accreditation. First of all, we check their passports. We have a rule – if we have someone without a previous Schengen visa in their passport then we do not even give passports to the consulates. But Czechs do not have such strong demands in regards to having a previous Czech visa. All our clients must pay the price of the tour in advance and I have to say that our tours are not cheap at all. We offer three or four-star hotels in Prague or in Karlovy Vary. This also helps us to find out if the tourist intends to come back to Ukraine.

**Do the visas for Ukrainian citizens represent a big obstacle for the tourist business?**

Sometimes we have the feeling that tourism is nothing but a struggle for visas. Especially this year; it is simply terrible. Our office in Kiev, the capital, where most of the consulates are based, often has problems. When people book a tour, they pay in advance and then we arrange visas for them. In case the visa is not issued, there are usually very high cancellation fees, ranging from 1000 - 2000 Euro. Often our customers do not know why their visa had been refused. Then we have to explain to them that it is not the fault of our travel agency and that we do not have any influence over the consulate. It is hard to explain that we do not know why the person did not get the visa. This is also a reason why the most popular destinations for Ukrainians are Turkey, Egypt and Thailand - countries where Ukrainians do not need a visa.