



## **Where Nobody Cares for the Law. Experiences of an Ukrainian Applying for a Polish Visa**

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From January 1, 2008 the biggest western neighbor of Ukraine – Poland – will enter the visa regime of the Schengen zone. It is clear that it will in its turn complicate the already complex procedure of obtaining entry visas for this country by our citizens. However, the root of the problem does not lie as much in the procedure of obtaining visas, as in the way this procedure is followed and implemented. In fact, during the last year I faced some peculiarities of getting entry visas for the Republic of Poland at the Consulate General in Lviv firsthand.

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At first sight everything looks quite simple and does not seem to require much time. First of all, one has to fill out a registration application form on the official website of the Consulate General of the Republic of Poland in Lviv. In this application form, you type in your passport information and indicate the time of your stay in the country and the type of visa you want to obtain. After that you print out a registration card that indicates the date of submitting documents and your number in the line. On the indicated day you come to the Consulate General bringing the filled-out application for getting a visa, original and a copy of your foreign passport and identification number. The procedure of accepting documents starts at 9 am, and at 4 pm they go on to issue passports with visas. There is also a simplified system of submitting documents that does not require any prior registration. It is available for students, business people, scientists and all those that have an official letter of request from Polish establishments for an urgent visa. Thus, as you can see, this procedure is not complicated per se at all. However, in practice, unfortunately, people have no other way but to deal with the negligence of the Consulate employees who at times ignore procedural norms, and these are not random cases. Moreover, neglecting duties has already become a norm.

As I have already mentioned at the beginning of the article, during the last year I had to go to the Consulate General to obtain an entry visa for Poland a few times. Alongside getting a visa, each time I also got to see new sides of the work of the Consulate employees, though somehow those were only negative ones. As I am a stipend holder of the Master's Specialized Eastern Europe Studies at University in Warsaw, I do not have to go through a prior registration, which means I am eligible for a

simplified procedure of submitting documents. As a rule, there are not many people like that – about 10 to 50 a day.

One can enter the Consulate building only with the ‘kind’ permission of the Polish guardsmen who once too often forget that they work with people, not trash. Therefore, the first thing you deal with even before you enter the gate is (without any exaggeration) the rude behavior and attitude of the Consulate guardsmen. Sometimes they even ignore the fact that you have a personal permit signed by the Consul himself that allows you to cut in line and enter the building out of turn. In fact, the guardsmen decide who to let in first and who to kick out. Moreover, while doing this, they dare make various comments like:

- *Having such documents, you don't have any chance of getting a visa;*
- *Why did you come today if you live in Lviv? You can come tomorrow. You don't need to go far;*
- *Why don't you have the original of your personal identification number? (while the original is not required, only its copy);*
- *If you say one more word, I just won't let anyone in. Period.*
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One young man who officially studies at a university in Przeszów had to spend three days standing in front of the Consulate gate, even though he had all the necessary documents. What is more, it was not even explained to him why he was not allowed to enter the Consulate the first two days. It was just a guardsman's decision or whim, while the young man had an urgent need to go to Przeszów on the first day as at that time he was meant to take exams at his educational institution. Mind you, it is a guardsman's duty to let in all people who have corresponding documents, while deciding on who is eligible for a visa and who is not is not within their competence.

Officially, the Consulate starts its work at 9 am. However, even if you come at 9 am sharp, the gate will not necessarily be open. Sometimes, people have to wait for 2-5 hours, be it out in the scorching sun or in the pouring rain or – worse – in the bitter frost. Even so, they do not have any guarantee that they will make it with submitting documents as at times the guardsmen do not come out - making people wait for ten minutes or more. I personally had to stand in such a line for 5 ½ hours before I was allowed to enter the Consulate building. The area around the gate is not adapted for such long waiting. There is not even a single bench to sit on. That is why you have to be up on your feet and hope that you will manage to stand this test without any harm to your health.

While waiting so long in a line, you can hear a lot about some peculiarities of the work of the Consulate General of the Republic of Poland in Lviv. You can hear about how difficult or sometimes impossible it is to call the Consulate and receive information. And you cannot get the Consulate on the phone for two reasons: either no one answers your calls, or the line is busy all the time. One lady was so lucky as to get the Consulate on the phone and make an appointment with the Consul. However, when she came at the appointed time, she was told that no one had called them about the meeting, thus, it was out of the question. And only after making a big scene was she allowed to have a meeting with the Consul.

On-line registration is far from being perfect as well. An elderly lady that was standing in a line with me told me that for \$30 one can register on-line and get to choose any day for submitting documents to get a visa. The matter is that registration takes place 2-3 months in advance. It means that if you fill out the registration card in July, you will be able to submit your documents no sooner than in October. With all this going on, it is a frequent case that you cannot register on-line at all as the Consulate (for whatever reason) temporarily cancels such registration.

Besides, while standing in a line, I also heard that for \$ 30 you can enter the Consulate out of your turn without any prior registration or official letters:

- *If you need to get in urgently, there is a man over there who for \$ 30 will help you enter the Consulate in five minutes.*

Unfortunately, I did not find out who that man was and how he did it, as I was convinced that I could do it myself without any problems.

After long pangs of waiting when you finally get to the cherished window where documents are accepted, there are new tests in store for you. You never know whether they will open a multi-entry visa for you for the period of time indicated. For example, students only usually get visas for three months with the right of one entry and one exit. The Consulate employees justify this by the fact that students do not need a multi-entry visa as they are obliged to get a card of stay in Poland, although it is rather a right, not an obligation, especially if studies last for a year or two or are coming to an end.

A conversation with the Consulate employee who accepts documents cannot be called polite or nice either. You can be cursed and shouted at for one little mistake in your application form. After that in a better case you will have to rewrite the application on the spot, or in a worse situation they will make you come the next day and wait for hours again.

However, this is not it yet. Even when you have valid and grounded reasons and an official letter of request from the Polish side for granting you a visa from the date indicated, you might not get it anyway. For instance, one of my acquaintances was supposed to go to an international research conference at Warsaw University that was to start on July 15. She submitted documents for obtaining a visa on July 3, but they opened her a visa only as of July 16 without any sound argument.

The last stage of this epic is issuing visas. As it has been mentioned before, issuing passports with visas is supposed to start at 4 pm. However, it is not a rare case when this small detail is forgotten (perhaps, the Consulate employees spend too much time lunching). And again exhausted people have to stand out under the open sky for an hour or so, waiting to get a visa that they have suffered so much for.

It remains unclear why in practice the procedure of obtaining visas at the Consulate General of the Polish Republic in Lviv is so complicated. I personally explain it by a negligent attitude of the Consulate employees to their duties as well as by a shabby and patronising attitude towards people who come to the Consulate to get a visa. Thus, after new procedural norms for obtaining a visa for Poland have been introduced, we (most probably) will face new “daily, mundane procedures”, as the

current work of the Consulate General of the Polish Republic in Lviv does not evoke any feelings of optimism in me.