

social issues & initiatives

report: October 2006

Isolation Less Splendid

Serbia's hopes of a gradual approach to the EU, which appeared realistic after the end of the Milosević era, the declaration of independence in June 2006 and the separation of Montenegro, have been shattered once more. Serbia has shrunk to a small state in the Balkans. Its many borders (to Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Albania, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina) only make the isolation of the people in this country more evident. For the population of Serbia, strict visa regulations make Europe a distant continent. A report from Belgrade.

Every Serb older than 25 can tell you something about queuing in long lines – a discipline they often had to practice under the rule of the late Slobodan Milosević. They prefer to forget how they had to queue for their money in front of the pyramid-schemed banks. With international sanctions imposed on Serbia for its war effort in Bosnia and Herzegovina, they learned to queue for gasoline, or they had to purchase it on the black market, so they tanked their cars from barrels in dark streets, or in their backyards. They stood in long lines to buy milk, flower, cooking oil or other essentials. They even queued for hours to buy cigarettes during the NATO campaign in 1999. These memories most in Serbia hope to have put behind them when they ousted Slobodan Milošević six years ago, and they usually do not like to be reminded about electricity shortages and long queues. Stark reminders in Belgrade now do not come in front of stores or gas stations but in front of the embassies of the EU countries, where long lines of people waiting for their visas snake.

In these lines you meet the most peculiar mix of people that would normally have little or no chance to be in the same crowd at the same time. An older lady who wants to see her grandchildren who have been growing up abroad rubs shoulders with somebody else's children that are planning to study or work abroad. A researcher stands behind a man who wants to seek a second medical opinion in one European country; others just want to visit friends. Some have already travelled from a faraway town in Serbia. Also, these lines are rare places where Serbs and Albanians meet nowadays in Belgrade, as some Kosovans believe they can more easily get their visas stamped in the old Yugoslav passport than in the UNMIK document. Numbers they have been assigned by embassy officials matter in that line more than their names and ethnic origins. All keep big folders with lots of documents close to themselves, waiting for their turn, while the police keep order. When their number is read, they will be given opportunity to plead their case for the visit before a consular worker. Not only do they have to prove that they really have a good reason to travel, but they must also convince the consular clerk that they plan to return as well, and for that final screening they are armed with all sorts of documents.

But their journey to Canada, the US or any of the Schengen countries did not start in front of the embassy. Most have spent days, weeks even, to assemble all necessary documents officially required for obtaining a visa. "When you take a closer look, the procedure for visa application is no more complicated than, let us say, booking a room in a hotel," says Bernhard Hauer, outgoing Consul General of the German Embassy in Belgrade. "All depends on how you qualify to meet the requests, and they are relatively simple." But Marina, an economist from Belgrade who wanted to visit friends in Amsterdam, replies that she does not know of a hotel that asks for the certificate of

her employment, balance of payments from her bank account for the last three months, M4 form provided by the pension fund, photocopies of all her credit cards, medical insurance for the duration of her stay, together with passport, two fresh pictures and a letter of invitation from her friends, validated beforehand at the police station in Amsterdam. “On top of that, they asked me to write a little essay on a piece of paper on the spot about how I had met my friends and how we are related,” she says. Predrag, who travelled with his wife Nevena and their 10-year-old son Aleksa to Spain this summer for holidays, said they were asked in the embassy to produce a certificate from the school his son is enrolled at, together with verification that the school year had officially ended. “I guess the Spanish authorities really care that Aleksa does not miss any classes in school,” chuckled Predrag when he remembered the ordeal. Most of the documents were needed in Spanish translation, he added, but “having a wife who runs a language centre makes things easier.” Those travelling for business or on invitation by some prominent institution would normally obtain their visas more easily, but that is not always guaranteed. When an internationally renowned journalist from Belgrade was invited by the office of Javier Solana, EU foreign policy chief, to take part in a seminar on European security in Brussels, officials in the Belgian Embassy were not impressed: “We are sorry, but the EU is not a Belgian institution,” was their cold reply. It took some pulling of strings from high places in Brussels to get him into the seminar in time, but he could not stay there even a day longer after the seminar had ended.

All this discourages many to travel at all. Some surveys show that at least 70 per cent of students have never been abroad, not even in the four neighbouring countries that do not yet require visas for Serbian citizens – Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia and Bulgaria – three of them being former Yugoslav republics. It is getting increasingly difficult to travel even within the region, as Serbia’s neighbours, pressured to meet the requirements from Brussels, imposed a visa regime. Hungary and Romania were the first, and Bulgaria is tentatively announcing that she, too, will be forced to follow suit. Apparently half of the population does not even have a passport (still bearing the name of FR Yugoslavia, the country that no longer exists) deeming it a redundant document under these circumstances. They either do not have the money or friends abroad, or neither. Or they remember with nostalgia the times during the Cold War when they travelled visa free east or west with their Yugoslav passports. “It seems that not all of the bricks from the Berlin wall ended up in museums,” laments Goran Svilanovic, the first foreign minister in post-Milosević Serbia. “Some have been used to reinforce the Fortress Europe with another wall, the Schengen Wall. This wall now polarizes Europe more than the Berlin Wall used to do before,” writes Svilanovic, now the Stability Pact official, in his blog. Coupled with sluggish economic reform and the fact that talks with the EU are being suspended due to Belgrade’s failure to meet its obligations towards the Hague Tribunal, this “Schengen wall” generates a sense of prolonged isolation of Serbia. A survey by the Serbian government office for European integration in late 2005 showed that up to 70 per cent of citizens associated the EU with freedom of movement. “Murderers and criminals are travelling freely throughout the Schengen zone,” notes Svilanovic, “while ordinary Serbian citizens cannot do the same.” Dejan Milenkovic “Bugsy”, accused of conspiracy to kill the Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic, was arrested last summer on a valid Greek visa in Greece. The sense of isolation already gave rise to Euroscepticism in Serbia and public support for Serbia’s EU membership is sagging, while the right-wing populist parties are more than happy to exploit that mood. This mood has caused some deal of concern in European capitals as well. To improve its image in Serbia Brussels proposed to relax the visa regime for students, scientific researchers, politicians and businessmen and to offer some of them multiple-entry visas. This initiative has recently been strongly endorsed by Doris Pack, Head of the Delegation for South Eastern Europe in

the European Parliament. However, many believe that the move has “come too late” and that it will affect only a faction of the population. But it takes two to tango, and Belgrade should worry more about improving Serbia’s image in Brussels as well. It needs to update its technical and security-related border management and regulate its handling of asylum seekers coming from the Third World, to name just a few steps Romania and Bulgaria took in order to get on a “white” Schengen list. Meanwhile, most people in Serbia will have to reconcile with the fact that they will see more of foreign countries in glossy magazines, travel programs on TV, or on the Internet. Raymond Babineau, an American psychiatrist who served the US Army hospital in Berlin during the Cold War, had opportunity to study many “compulsive border crossers” – restless souls who repeatedly made dangerous journeys over the Iron Curtain “in order to be rid of one psychological state and catapulted into a newer and better one”. Such cases are not detected here. Or not just yet.

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Essential Requirements for Austria

personal application by the person requesting the visa

valid passport + copy of the first two pages of this passport

presentation of the previous passport

current passport photograph

application form filled out completely by the visa applicant in German or English, using Latin letters and signed (in the case of visa applicants who are still minors the signature of a legal guardian is required)

in the case of minors travelling alone: parental permission certified by a court or notary as well as a birth certificate

- a sickness and accident insurance policy that fulfils the following criteria:

The sum covered by the policy must be at least EUR 30,000

The policy must be valid in all Schengen states (validity for Austria alone is not sufficient)

The period for which the insurance policy is valid must match the validity period of the visa

The headquarters of the insurance company must be in Austria or in another EU state

All documents in the Serbian language must be pre-sented with a typewritten German translation!

Depending upon the type of visa the following are also required

e.g. a) Visitor’s visa (processing period: 7 days)

- original of the formal obligation by the host, certified by a court or notary, with the telephone number of the court or notary – current proof of income of the host (original or certified copy) copy of the passport (or proof of citizenship) of the host; if the host is a foreign citizen, also a copy of the host’s Austrian visa

copy of the host’s rental contract with proof of the housing costs or copy of the purchase contract/ex-tract from the cadastral register

in the case of visiting relatives: proof of relationship (documents)

confirmation of employment by the employer

work book + copy

confirmation of the length of holidays

confirmation of wages, pension or other income