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A gift for the Kremlin

Europe's proposed visa restrictions for Russians are fuelling a hostile view of the West — and playing straight into Putin's hands

I travelled to the Baltic states a few weeks ago with some Russian friends who live in Germany. Relatives in the Russian provinces had warned them on no account to speak Russian. That would lead to all kinds of problems with the authorities because of the alleged 'Nazis' among the locals. In reality, the situation on the streets of Riga or Tallinn is not like that at all. Almost half the people working in shops, restaurants or public transport are native Russian speakers. Russian is spoken everywhere.

People living in provincial Russia, however, see a very different picture. Net blocking means that alternative news sources besides the Kremlin-backed media are few and far between. The powers that be in Moscow do everything they can to portray the West – and Europe in particular – in the darkest light.

Closing Europe's doors to Russians

Some reports, however, are very real. The fact that Russian travellers are likely to be largely excluded from the Schengen Area is not the product of Russian propaganda. According to the German Press Agency, Germany backs a more restrictive approach to issuing visas to Russian citizens at the EU level. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen also favours this measure. It was originally envisaged as part of a new sanctions package. The justification was the alleged high number of visas for Russians and short stays in the Schengen Area. Last year, a total of 542 000 visas were issued for all Schengen countries. However, five countries – France, Greece, Hungary, Italy and Spain – have stated their opposition to a tighter visa regime. Adoption of the sanctions package was thus postponed for the time being.

What most central European publications fail to mention, however, is that this figure represents a fall of 86 per cent on the last pre-Covid and pre-war year of 2019. In Germany, indeed, the figure is 90 per cent down,

falling from 325 840 to only 27 300. But the press tends to aggregate the figures for all EU states or even for several years since the war broke out to cultivate the impression of a European flood of Russian shopping tourists.

In fact, virtually no Russians travel to Europe for this reason. There are no direct flights between Russia and the EU, and almost all border crossings are closed. Travel is possible only via time-consuming and awkward detours, for example through Turkey or Central Asia. Russia's Eastern European neighbours largely bar its citizens from entry. Anyone in Russia with the necessary funds for international shopping – a small minority among the elite – finds it much easier and more attractive to visit Dubai or Istanbul, where no visa is required. This numerically small minority is much more salient for German public opinion, however, because the tabloid media used to feature them all the time. But they never accounted for the bulk of issued visas.

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Loyal Russians or those strongly influenced by the Kremlin line, like the relatives mentioned at the start, thus avoid travelling to the West. According to the Russian government, the latter are 'hostile countries' that back the invaded enemy. State media broadcasts sufficient 'horror stories' about them to put people who believe the propaganda off travelling. Civil servants are already banned from visiting the West.

Those who do make it to Europe despite the long journey and the difficulties involved in obtaining a visa generally have a more substantial reason. For example, they may have relatives among the large Russian diaspora in Germany, close friends or a genuine interest in and affection for Europe, notwithstanding the Kremlin's negative propaganda. Russian skilled workers also require Schengen visas to obtain work in the EU, which is pretty much impossible without personal connections. People attempt the journey to the West only if they have good reason. Since the outbreak of war, conditions have got even worse. Schengen visas for Russians are more expensive, more difficult and more time-consuming to obtain. They are scrutinised more closely, are valid for shorter periods and take longer to process. In any case, the notion of 'tourist visa' is misleading. The regular Schengen visa was always the simplest way to enter the EU and was used for a wide variety of purposes.

This is also evident from the fact that even the slightest visa restrictions are immediately headline news for the Russian opposition media in exile. A recent instance of this was the temporary suspension of visa issuance by

the Spanish embassy in Moscow, which is not entirely on board with the isolationist policy. And despite the bans and web blocking, the opposition media reaches not just Russians living abroad, but also younger, more tech-savvy readers still in Russia who by no means follow the Kremlin's line. Many of them feel excluded by the EU's increasingly restrictive approach, even though they personally oppose the war, which puts them in some danger in their own country.

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Spying is another objection often raised against allowing Russians to travel in the EU. However, not only does this express a general suspicion of travellers of all kinds, but it also overlooks the current strategy of the Russian secret services. In Germany, this is based on so-called low-level or 'disposable agents' who already have permanent residence and who engage in espionage either for ideological reasons or for money. Given the close ties between Russian and extreme right-wing actors in Germany and Central Europe, the Kremlin does not lack keen collaborators.

In fact, the Russian government is a beneficiary of the blanket restrictions that Germany has signed up to. The Kremlin can seize on every new travel restriction as proof that the West despises not only the war of aggression against Ukraine but also the Russian people as a whole. Every thwarted journey deprives a Russian of the opportunity to personally experience Western countries and their freedoms — and thus to set their own impressions against state propaganda. In this way, Europe involuntarily conspires in Moscow's active isolation of its own people. This lends further credibility to the demonisation of the West.

The warnings issued by those Russian provincial relatives we mentioned at the start show just how far the image of the West has been blackened. Before the war in Ukraine, Russian tourists were everywhere in the Baltic states. Many Russians were thus able to counterpose their own experiences and impressions to the pervasive state media criticisms of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Indeed, these very countries have since closed their borders to Russians, with the result that scare stories about them can be disseminated in Russia unchecked.

Every additional blanket restriction Europe imposes on Russian citizens only confirms this effect and reinforces the siege mentality that the Kremlin would like to inculcate even in the dissenting part of the population. This opens up space for even more aggressive government action, which can scarcely be in Europe's interests. Germany, in

particular, given its historical responsibilities, should thus avoid unwittingly giving aid and succour to the Kremlin with a policy of collective punishment.



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