

UKRAINE: Visa Inequality

Written by OCCRP

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Ukrainian passport

Businesses in Ukraine flourish that say they can skirt the system and help get visas, residence permits, second citizenships and even honorary consulates, but just getting to travel to Europe for ordinary citizens is nothing short of an ordeal.

That ordeal can come at very unexpected times. Hennadiy Zvyahintsev, the art director of Smerechyna Folk Ensemble from a mountain town in western Ukraine said he got an invitation for the group to perform at North East England's Billingham International Folklore Festival in the summer. He launched the visa process, confident of success because the troupe had traveled and performed in many countries, including Austria, Italy and Romania, all EU members.

But, he said, he was told there would be no visa when he went to the British Consulate in Kiev.

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Having paid for the trip, the group tried to persuade consulate officials that all 45 performers, young and old, had no intentions to stay in England and they showed consulate employees photos, videos and awards for past performances.

When nothing persuaded them to grant a visa, Smerechyna (Silver Fir Tree) performers tried a final tactic, performing in front of the Embassy's doors. It had worked before, in 2007, when a children's dance group performed for three hours in front of the French consulate and got their visas granted.

Silver Fir Tree dancers were not so lucky, even though he was invited inside. A man who, from behind a bullet-proof glass window, introduced himself as the consul, but said no.

Now, Zvyahintsev is less confident about the spring season, because having a UK refusal stamp in a passport raises suspicions at other consulates.

UK Ambassador Leigh Turner, however, did not share the doubts of his consular officer. In a special entry in his web-diary, he wrote about the incident, saying he had no doubts that the dancers were real performers but that the "system simply wouldn't work if someone had the power to arbitrarily overturn [their] decision."

A Pair of No-Comments

The Embassy's press office refused any additional comment. And it also refused comment on another, quite different aspect of the visa process—a major consulting agency that makes things like visas happen for those with enough money.

The tough and often humiliating procedure that ordinary Ukrainians have to undergo to get visas provides a huge window of opportunity to the numerous consulting agencies that serve as intermediaries between applicants and the consulates.

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