



**EUROPE
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ABOLISHING VISA
REGIME TOGETHER:
EXPERIENCE
OF EaP COUNTRIES





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Відродження
міжнародний фонд
INTERNATIONAL RENAISSANCE FOUNDATION

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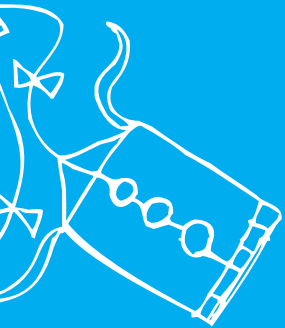
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STRENGTHENING CIVIC EXPERTISE AND ADVOCACY INSTRUMENTS AIMED AT ABOLITION OF VISA REGIMES IN PARTNER COUNTRIES

PROBLEM TO BE ADDRESSED:

Freedom of movement and current migration challenges

PARTICIPANTS:

Visa-Free Europe Coalition, Europe without Barriers, Analytical Centre on Globalization and Regional Cooperation (ACGRC), The Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development Institute for Development and Social Initiatives (IDIS) “Viitorul”, Belarus Watch (ByWatch) — the driving force behind the pro-visa-free regime movement.

For Eastern Partnership countries, civil society is one of the most important engines to advocate freedom of movement since average citizens are the ones who need to go through burdensome procedures to obtain visas to EU and Schengen countries.

Abolishing visa barriers would allow them to explore and tighten contacts with Europe through travels, education, visits to relatives and friends.

HOW COULD THE REPRESENTATIVES OF THE CIVIL SECTOR AND INDEPENDENT EXPERTS CONTRIBUTE?

NGOs can offer its own platform to unite decision-makers into one coordinated force, conduct research based on which to suggest quality expertise of state policies relevant to the Roadmap tasks.

Civic activists and experts are lobbying important issues among European decision-makers and civil society since civil society engagement is often more effective in persuading Europeans than official state representatives.

It is important to keep in mind that stable interpersonal contacts can contribute to EaP countries' EU integration in a more effective way than the state's attempts to integrate institutionally.





INTERNATIONAL VISA-FREE EUROPE COALITION

We, the members of the Coalition, believe that for the security of our continent and for the continued democratic transformation and modernisation in Eastern Europe — a process to which people-to-people contacts are vital — effective action is needed linking the demands for implementation of reforms with a clear perspective of visa abolition.

The coalition will contribute to policy processes leading as quickly as possible towards achieving Visa-free Europe. We welcome the liberalisation of visa requirements for five Western Balkan countries, which underlines both the need for and the real possibility of extending this achievement to the rest of Europe. In our activities we focus on the Eastern Partnership countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine) as well as Russia.

Through numerous engagements in the visa abolition movement at different times, Eastern Partnership countries gained experience of effective visa-free regime advocacy. Yet the Coalition Visa-free Europe remains one of the most successful examples of effort consolidation towards visa-free regime, uniting more than forty organizations and unions throughout Europe.

REFERENCE:

Coalition for the European Continent Undivided by Visa Barriers (International Visa-free Europe Coalition) was launched to reach visa-free regime as soon as possible. The members of the Coalition aim for citizens of Eastern Partnership countries and Russia to travel to EU without visas. The Stefan Batory Foundation is coordinating the activities of Coalition members, most importantly constant monitoring of visa issuance and maintenance of technical requirements by the consular departments of Schengen zone countries.

Visa-free Europe Coalition supports the visa liberalization process which is based on clearly stated technical criteria, demanding though justified. Visa policy liberalization is a winning strategy for both the EU and its neighbours.

One of the Coalition's important spheres of activity is providing systematic monitoring of the criteria for the relevant countries' preparedness to abolish visas with EU within the framework of the Eastern Partnership Visa Liberalization Index project.

The [Eastern Partnership Visa Liberalisation Index](#) is a long-term project aimed at independent civil society monitoring of visa liberalisation processes between the European Union, on the one hand, and the six EaP states (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine), on the other, that serves as an example of evidence-based advocacy.

The [Eastern Partnership Visa Liberalisation Index](#) is implemented by the Visa-free Europe Coalition¹, led by the Stefan Batory Foundation.

Project's website² presents the progress made by EaP states on the way to visa-free regime with the EU in an interactive and accessible way. Containing both graphs and textual description, the [Index](#) was designed to explain the complicated visa liberalisation process to the public and to constitute a professional impartial tool for evidence-based advocacy.

One may ask why monitoring is needed or even why advocacy for visa liberalisation is necessary.

A possible argument to make is that both the European Union and governments of EaP states, with differing levels of enthusiasm and commitment, are working on visa regime liberalization and – in a more long-term perspective – on introducing visa-free regime. That said, the civil society remains an important actor in facilitating and speeding this process.

Visa liberalisation is a goal for the future, but it is subject to conditionality. The states aspiring to be granted visa-free regime with the EU need to meet a number of technical criteria, and in order to do that they need to introduce complex and costly reforms. The whole process may be very protracted. Besides, the political climate in the EU concerning visa-free regime with its neighbouring countries is far from favourable. In an accessible way, the Index shows what has already been done by the Eastern Partnership countries and what still needs to be achieved.

On one hand, it helps to reduce suspicions about visa-free regime by showing how

considerably the EaP states are changing. On the other hand, it helps to boost the pace of reforms in the EaP states by demonstrating what still needs to be done in each of the EaP states as well as by introducing an element of competition.

In other words, it supports and promotes pro-liberalisation developments, raises awareness of visa policy in societies, presents arguments for visa liberalisation and helps to convince the doubtful.

EVIDENCE-BASED ADVOCACY IN A NUTSHELL

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Evidence-based advocacy includes activities aimed at changing policy by presenting evidence. It is "a process based on data and information, integrating otherwise independent data from different sectors: research, policy, action groups, etc³. The term "evidence" requires further clarification, since it is being commonly confused with "data".

1* Partners implementing the project include Analytical Centre for Globalisation and Regional Development (AM); Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development (GE); Centre for Economic and Social Development (AZ); Europe without Barriers (UA); Office for Democratic Belarus (BY/BE); Institute for Development and Social Initiatives (MD).

2* Eastern Partnership Visa Liberalisation Index, <http://monitoring.visa-free-europe.eu/>

3* Evidence-based advocacy for gender in education, a learning guide, East Asia and Pacific Regional UNGEI, Bangkok, p. 10-11.



Photos by Janek Brykczynski, taken from the web page: <http://visa-free-europe.eu/perspectives/visa-free-gallery>

NOTE

“Data” is a compilation of facts that can be used for different purposes, including building “evidence”, meaning “proof”, a substantiation for a hypothesis or theory⁴. So, data becomes evidence when it can justify and support the arguments put forward.

To produce solid evidence, collected data needs to be reliable, valid, timely, interpretable, relevant and applicable⁵. It should also be easily transformable into indicators, presenting relation between reality and a desired state in a specific area (for example: Corruption Perception Index, Human Development Index).

⁴* Evidence-based advocacy for gender in education, a learning guide, East Asia and Pacific Regional UNGEI, Bangkok, p.16.
⁵* Evidence-based advocacy for gender in education, a learning guide, East Asia and Pacific Regional UNGEI, Bangkok, p.17.

In the process of building evidence, the role of data collection and examination should be emphasised. Both quantitative and qualitative methods are applicable.

The first category is represented by data obtained from official statistics, surveys, polls, etc. while the second group of methods consists of in-depth interviews, focus groups, content-analysis, and analyses of legal acts. Before data is transformed into evidence, it should be carefully examined and re-viewed.

During the whole procedure of data collection, the key to success is a proper methodology. Methodology not only enables researchers to build evidence, but also provides a proof of a reliable, valid and impartial research.

It is crucial that methodology allow presenting the problem from different viewpoints and guarantees that every piece of data is confirmed by at least two separate sources. Sometimes this condition is difficult to be met; for in-

stance, in visa liberalisation monitoring some data is obtained from interviews with officials who share information not yet presented to public and not yet accessible from a different source.

EASTERN PARTNERSHIP VISA LIBERALISATION INDEX

Visa liberalisation between the European Union and the Eastern Partnership is both a political and a technical process. Since visa policy is seen as a safeguard against unlimited and unwanted migration as well as trans-border organised crime, visa-free regime is granted to countries that are deemed safe and well-governed, ensuring security and public order and not being a potential source of undocumented economic migrants or asylum seekers. Thus, visa liberalisation is conditional upon meeting a number of criteria in several policy areas.

The concept of the Index was elaborated when the process of visa liber-

alisation between European Union and Eastern Partnership had just started. By then, two out of six EaP states, namely Moldova and Ukraine, obtained the Visa Liberalisation Action Plan – a list of criteria to be fulfilled before liberalisation of visa regime is possible. Since 2011 one more EaP state has obtained an Action Plan – Georgia in February 2013.

All three documents are very similar and contain a list of criteria grouped into four policy areas: (1) security of documents, including biometrics; (2) migration management, including readmission; (3) public security and order; and (4) external relations and fundamental rights. Additionally, the process was divided into two phases: the legislative phase and the implementation phase. The European Commission first checks the level of legislative and institutional alignment, and only then passes on to the evaluation of how well the introduced legislative and institutional reforms are implemented.

The position of the EU has been clear after that: similar requirements will apply to all states of EaP. The EU-Russia agreement entitled “Common steps towards visa-free short-term travel of Russian and EU citizens”, disclosed on 11 March 2013 upon appeals issued by non-governmental organisations, proves that the European Union adopted a relatively uniformed list of criteria upon which visa-free regime is conditional. To encourage all Eastern Partnership states to approximate their legal system to European acquis

and their law enforcement and human rights practice to Western standards, a complex horizontal assessment was needed. Instead, reports are being issued only on Moldova and Ukraine, and concern only the legislation part.

Irrespective of whether visa liberalisation dialogue has been already started with the EU or not, the reforms in question are on-going in all the six EaP states. All the EaP countries have made progress within past years and are closer to visa-free regime with the EU, including Belarus, which does not have any official dialogue on visa policy with the EU. The Eastern Partnership Visa Liberalisation Index presents the outcome of a research based on the criteria set out in the Action Plans. Legal systems and policies of all EaP states, analysed in the same policy areas, are comparable with official reports issued by the European Commission on states already granted an Action Plan.

INDEX METHODOLOGY

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The development of the Index comprised several stages and led it to combine quantitative and qualitative methods. Information from existing sources is enhanced by empirical data gathered by national experts.

First, the project core team has prepared a questionnaire containing detailed open-ended questions regarding legislative and institutional frameworks as well as the level of implementation of adopted legislation, corresponding to the four broad policy blocks listed in

the Visa Liberalisation Action Plans. The same indicators were applied to all the six countries.

The questionnaires are filled in by national experts and returned to the project core team. In order to collect information, the experts use a variety of resources, including official web-sites of relevant authorities, reports by the European Commission and relevant international organisations, and personal interviews with competent officials and experts.

After reviewing all the questionnaires, the core team prepares descriptions of each policy area on the basis of answers provided. Each Block is divided into several policy issues (see below). Since the goal is to see a broader picture of every policy area, the researchers opted for the evaluation of a whole policy issue by experts on the basis of a zero to ten scale. In order to increase the reliability of assessment, two stages of peer-review have been introduced. Each policy issue for a given country is evaluated by the national expert and, at the same time, by an expert from another country. If there are disagreements over the scores, experts are asked for justifications. Then, the descriptions and scores are additionally checked by independent consultants.

Finally the core team prepares the final assessments on the basis of experts' evaluations and comments. If there is more than one policy area in a Block, the score for the block is the average score of all the policy areas comprising the given Block.

INDEX AS AN EXAMPLE OF EVIDENCE-BASED ADVOCACY TOOL

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Reliable monitoring results are necessary for all stakeholders of liberalisation processes – EaP states' administration, EU's officials, civil society, journalists, and academics.

National level officials in the countries aspiring to obtain visa-free regime need data from an independent source to justify planned actions and activities aimed at fulfilling EU's criteria. The research can often influence an agency's or ministry's expenditures as the administration is more eager to implement expensive solutions in line with European standards when faced with reliable and impartial research results.

The results of civic monitoring, enhanced by official data, EU's reports, interviews with officials, a variety of reports and indexes (transparency, corruption, etc.), can be employed as an important argument in national pro-reformist discourse. EU's officials may find this kind of monitoring projects useful too. Unlike the EC which is restricted by numerous procedures and political decisions the 3rd sector is able to provide a more complex and deep assessment. Due to the objectivity of the assessment (negative tendencies are also highlighted), civic independent monitoring supplements the EU's activity, raises arguments that are omitted in official documents and enables recipients to see a wider perspective, since the whole policy area of interest is being assessed.

Other recipients include civil society organisations, journalists, and academics. Academics and students can be considered as an important pressure group, since the mobility in this part of society is traditionally known to be above average. At the same time, NGOs not involved in monitoring itself but interested in variety of topics related to visa liberalisation (from rule of law to anti-discrimination procedures in public sector) and journalists represent a significant aid in transferring this technical and complicated policy knowledge to the wider public.

Every 4 months, when the new edition of the Index is prepared, the Batory Foundation, on behalf of the Visa-free Europe Coalition, issues a press release and a policy brief on recent developments, which are sent out to approximately 700 recipients all over Europe. In addition, all Coalition Members are asked to forward this message to their networks. Just the additional Batory Foundation's mailing reaches over 500 electronic addresses, including officials of various ranks, journalists, civic activists, academics, i.e. all important target groups.

Links to the project's website are present on the websites of Coalition Members, the EU-Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum and other public actors advocating for a visa-free regime between the EU and EaP. Civil society organisations list the Index in references to their publications and reports, using it as a basis to formulate further recommendations, meanwhile promoting the Index.

NOTE

The methodology is being constantly evaluated and reviewed. Once in about six months the core team meets with experts to discuss methodological problems and to consider whether amendments either to a questionnaire or to the research methodology itself are necessary.



The Index is also presented during public events devoted to the EU visa policy and EU-EaP relations. Conferences, taking place both in the European Union and in Eastern Partnership states, gather representatives of all stakeholders of visa liberalisation and are widely covered in national media, mostly in candidate countries. It helps to compare and discuss the situation in each of the EaP states, showing progress in time, as well as highlighting the areas that still need more attention on behalf of the EaP states' governments.

Feedback on the Index is collected, analysed and used to further improve the Index and the way it is employed for evidence-based advocacy.





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UKRAINE, CIVIC INITIATIVE "EUROPE WITHOUT BARRIERS"

Ukrainian experts united by "Europe without Barriers" possess adequate experience in conducting large-scale research projects focused on the policy and practice of visa issuance to citizens of Ukraine by EU consulates after the enlargement of the Schengen zone in 2007 and the coming into force of the Visa Facilitation Agreement between Ukraine and the EU in 2008.





Europe without Barriers (EWB) has been established in 2008 as an independent international civic initiative, based in Ukraine, aimed at liberalization of visa regime with the EU to enhance links between the peoples and individual citizens of Ukraine and EU, and to facilitate temporary migration for all legitimate travelers.

Our ultimate goal is visa-free travel in the whole Europe based on relevant public safety standards.

As a temporary benchmark, EWB provides independent monitoring and advocacy for proper implementation of existent legal norms, such as the [Visa Facilitation Agreements \(VFA\)](#) and the [EU Visa Code](#).

We consider Ukraine a success story in terms of short-term travel regulation, as it has implemented an open country policy model, providing visa-free access for all Council of Europe Member States on the basis of either reciprocity or unilateral asymmetric decision.

WHAT IS VISA ISSUANCE MONITORING?

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It is a complex and systematic analysis of the procedural and administrative requirements that the consulates apply in relation to the applicant.

The study aims to determine the degree of complexity of a particular visa process for applicants as well as the compliance of the consulates with basic regulations.

HOW IS THE RESEARCH CARRIED OUT?

Based on questionnaires, interviews are conducted with visitors of consular institutions who fulfilled all visa procedures for obtaining a Schengen visa themselves.

During the interviews, the interviewers clarify certain objective parameters such as the duration of the visa procedure and its results, the presence of queues at the consulate, list of documents, the amount of money spent, the availability of long-term multiple-entry visas.

An additional component of the interview can serve to show the applicants' perception of some rather subjective (yet important) components of visa procedures, such as the attitude of consular staff, their willingness to help, availability and completeness of information, validity of questions and documentation requirements.

WHY IS IT NECESSARY TO INTERVIEW THE APPLICANTS?

Issuance of visas is a special part of public administration in which applicants are customers that receive a result (visa) for payment (visa fee).



RECOMMENDATIONS

The survey, which generally aims to identify trends, must necessarily be supplemented by case study research, providing deep individual work with applicants who are faced with unusual problems.

Problems arising during the visa application are valid not only for the applicants – customers that are spending their time and money on the long-awaited entry into Schengen countries – but also for consulates themselves since for most consulates customer complaints is the first sign of possible organizational deficiencies and demonstrate the quality of services provided.

Long “real” and “virtual” queues, visitors' complaints about unfriendly treatment by the staff, ambiguous interpretations of existing regulations cause widespread disappointment in visa regime with the EU as well as distorted perception of European organizational and managerial standards of visa issuance by citizens of Ukraine.

Accountability and transparency are key principles of the European governance system and should be applied symmetrically to all participants of the process.

Fight for compliance with all the above-mentioned principles is possible through the creation of ranking based on multifaceted consulate monitoring which would detect discrepancies between the consulates and serve as a strong argument for the necessary adjustments of shortcomings.

RATINGS OF CONSULATES

HOW WERE THE RATINGS GENERATED?

Ratings of consular services are based on the comparison of quantitative data for each parameter of the research. Ratings may be composed according to such criteria as the number of multiple entry visas, long-term and free visas issued, visa processing time and so on. Among the parameters surveyed there are the availability and comprehensiveness of information, conditions on which documents must be submitted and visas issues, grounds for questions asked during the interview, the attitude of consular staff and their readiness to provide assistance.

Ratings may also be formed from the data obtained during the interview: the friendlier the staff, the simpler and clearer its demands, the easier it is to obtain information or advice, the higher the consulate ranks among others. How consulates appear in the ratings is also affected by the visa rejection rate. Since 2012 the European Union issues a statistical report which shows the total number of visas issued by all EU consulates in the world and also the number of rejected applications. Thus it is now possible to calculate the share of visa refusals and compare different countries based on this indicator.

REASONS AND OUTCOMES OF RANKING:

- Ranking of consular services can be viewed as one of the means to encourage the friendliest visa policies applied by the leading countries as well as to motivate others (especially the worst ones) to improve their policies regarding Ukrainian visa applicants.

- The compiled ratings can become an effective instrument for reinforcement of independent expertise and public impact, on the one hand, and promotion of positive practices, on the other.

- The survey's main findings should also serve as a certain benchmark for applicants who need to be better prepared before submitting the documents; it will also be a signal for the authorities in Ukraine and EU concerning the peculiarities of the policy implemented by particular countries.

TYPES OF VISA PRACTICE

In addition to the ratings, visa policy of the EU can be categorized according to the types of visa practices. According to this approach, the consular services of the EU are grouped, without establishing absolute leaders and outsiders, into so-called "baskets", namely "friendly", "neutral" and "problematic" ones. A separate basket is the one with "contrasting" visa practice, i.e. when some features of the "friendly" approach are leveled by "problematic" features in other aspects.

“FRIENDLY” AND “PROBLEMATIC” CONSULATES

Consular services that fall into the “friendly” category show the best overall result for all significant components of visa practice: qualitative characteristics of issued visas (validity and duration of stay), the number of rejections, the number of visas issued without fee, visa procedure duration, number of documents required from applicants. On the other side, “problematic” consulates are the ones having the worst overall result on the above-mentioned parameters.

“CONTRASTING” AND “NEUTRAL” VISA PRACTICES

The «contrasting» or contradictory consular practices are grouped into a separate category. As it was mentioned before, this category includes cases when certain features of the “friendly” approach towards visa issuance are leveled by “problematic” features in other components. For example, a country’s consulate is the fastest to process visa applications, but it requires the greatest number of documents. Other consulates requiring relatively few documents give very few long-term visas.

We consider the visa practice to be «neutral» if it does not approximate extreme indicators (the best or worst).

Apart from the analysis of the current quality of visa practices, we also register existing tendencies. Significant changes of visa practice for better or worse are of utmost importance. Thus, we define “leaders of concern” and “leaders of progress”.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to gain a balanced assessment it is necessary to obtain feedback on visa practice from the consular staff themselves who can reveal general trends on the bottlenecks in dealing with applicants. Also, it is necessary to establish with consulates’ staff the correctness of statistics that appear in the general database of the European Union and may contain some errors.

SIMPLIFICATION IN ACTION: HOW TO EFFECTIVELY APPLY THE PROVISIONS OF THE EU VISA CODE?

In 2010, the normative legal base of the visa and migration direction underwent significant changes and additions as a result of coming into force of [The EU Regulation No. 810/2009](#) that established the [Community Code on visas](#). This document, widely known under the shortened name [EU Visa Code](#), was finally approved by the European Council on July 13, 2009 and came into force on April 5, 2010.

The Visa Code of EU is a unified legal act aimed at the facilitation and harmonization of visa requirements for short-term stay of up to 90 days in a Schengen area country (category C). Since citizens’ awareness of conditions, rules and procedures for obtaining visas significantly increases the chances of visa application success, in particular concerning long-term and multi-entry visas, it is important to carry out the information campaign on effective application of progressive provisions of the Code.



HOW TO IMPROVE THE AWARENESS OF POTENTIAL APPLICANTS?

NGO “Europe Without Barriers” has not only made an unofficial translation of this document, but has also provided all the necessary comments focusing readers’ attention on the changes implemented by the Code (in comparison with the Common consular instructions and the Visa Facilitation Agreement between Ukraine and the EU). The proposed commentary also contained advices on the practical use of Code provisions in the process of obtaining Schengen visas.

The process of raising awareness of citizens about the peculiarities of visa practice involves the distribution of actual information that explains the specifics of visa-free regime application and refutes the stereotypical statements that often come with it.

Such an information campaign serves primarily as a preventive measure for a possible migratory exodus.

THE BENEFITS OF THE VISA FACILITATION AGREEMENT: HOW TO USE IT PROPERLY?

This bilateral agreement operates in four countries of the Eastern Partnership (Ukraine, Armenia, Moldova, and Georgia) and Russia.

The agreement introduces a number of benefits, yet does not cancel those limitations which are not directly specified in the Agreement, but which exist in line with the Schengen law. Only those categories of citizens who are mentioned in this Agreement can qualify for these benefits.

It is important to understand that the Agreement is only a tool most of the benefits of which are revealed only in the subtle use that requires specific knowledge and skills.

The study of numerous cases of unjustified expectations led us to the conclusion that in most cases, the low efficiency of the Agreement is a result of the fact that most of applicants are not ready to skillfully use its possibilities.



THE KEY MESSAGES TO DISTRIBUTE ARE:

- Visa-free regime implementation is a right for short-term trips for up to 90 days and only for holders of biometric passports.
- Visa-free regime does not give an automatic right to employment in the EU, moreover, right to long-term residence or asylum. However, the abolition of visas enables unhindered access to EU countries with touristic purpose.
- The effective execution of the tasks that will lead to the abolition of EU visas depends not only on the authorities but also on the efforts of civil society that can carry out public campaigns, initiatives, collect signatures etc.

COUNTRIES ON THE "VISA MAP" OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

The analysis of the place that countries occupy on the "visa map" of the EU in comparison to others provides us with a comprehensive picture of the situation with visa issuance in the countries of the Schengen Agreement. In particular, it shows which country receives the greatest number of Schengen visas and whether the political discourse, with its stereotypes about migration threats, has an effect on it.

Official statistics lets one track how many of these visas have a relatively long validity period (from 1 to 5 years), as opposed to formally short-term visas (valid for several days to several months).

In particular, the analysis of complex data allowed the experts to reach a paradoxical conclusion: the dynamics of Schengen visas issuance, the growth of their absolute and relative numbers, the share of multivisas, and the level of visa rejections depend little on the presence or absence of the Visa Facilitation Agreement in the relations of EU and a particular country.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Since further liberalization/abolition of visa regimes will remain an unpopular policy in the EU, and supporters of such a policy mainly are in the minority, the success of future efforts depends on systematic work with the target groups who form public opinion and affect political decisions in EU countries, aiming at ensuring a critical mass of "visa skeptics", those who do not perceive visa as an effective tool of migration control and/or see no threat in the migration capabilities of Eastern European countries, primarily Ukraine.



INTERESTING TO KNOW

(!) Analysis results for 2010, in particular high rates of growth in the number of issued visas in the case of China and a record low rate of visa refusals combined with the highest density of visa issuance per person in the case of Belarus, suggest that a positive outcome can be achieved without application of the Agreement on Visa Facilitation.

(!) The atmosphere of political relations between the EU and third countries, the situation with democracy and human rights in respective countries is a sensitive factor for the EU, but it does not impact significantly the level of visa regime liberalization or, on the contrary, the severity of visa policy. This is clearly evidenced by the situation with EU countries' visas issuance in Russia, Belarus and China.



REFERENCES

The monitoring of the EU visa policy started in 2005 with the research of eight EU visa systems in Kyiv, Chisinau, Minsk and Moscow.

Within the framework of the monitoring, interviews with persons who submitted documents for visas were held. Additionally, in-depth interviews were conducted with individuals who have been denied a visa.

The results provided an answer to the question why the visa procedure is so complicated and whether there is a single system of Schengen visa requirements applied by Member States.

Informing citizens about the peculiarities of visa practice: the translation and commentary of the Visa Code, The Visa Facilitation Agreement, in particular its new provisions.

VLAP MONITORING

Action Plan on Visa Liberalization (VLAP) is a pioneering document in the relations between the EU and its Eastern European neighbors, containing objectives and criteria for the countries to achieve EU standards in certain policy areas in order to establish visa-free regime with the EU. Three EaP countries have received and are implementing VLAPs – Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia.

In order to meet the visa-free regime criteria there is need not only for substantial reforms in such areas as document security, migration policy, border management and public order, but also for professional expertise, consistent public pressure and wide public involvement. Formal approach towards fulfilling the tasks of the Action Plan may lead to low quality policy failing to reach the targets.

EWB believes that independent public expertise, openness, public awareness and mobilization of advocacy efforts made both by Ukrainian and international civil society actors will significantly assist Ukrainian party in reaching relevant benchmarks as well as lower the risks of possible unjustified delays on behalf of the EU, slowing down the entire process.

HOW IS THE ANALYSIS OF VLAP IMPLEMENTATION DONE?

The independent monitoring of the implementation of VLAP 1st phase is conducted in accordance with the customized methodology that does not only take into account the fact of approval (or rejection) of legislative acts but also provides their quality assessment, in particular an assessment of their comprehensiveness and compliance with VLAP goals.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE ASSESSED?

The monitoring analysis is provided by a working group of independent experts that includes experts on different thematic components of VLAP, including document security, anti-corruption policy, human trafficking and discrimination prevention.

The experts study and take into account official documents of the parties: European Commission reports on countries' progress, some draft report papers by thematic (according to VLAP blocks) expert groups of the Eurocommission who have visited the countries with evaluation missions, the reports by

the party that is fulfilling VLAP tasks.

During the first phase the adoption of laws as well as conceptual framework documents (strategies, concepts), adoption of secondary legislation (regulations, directives, orders) necessary for full implementation of adopted laws, development and approval of planning documents (plans of events, action plans) with their direct executors and a timeframe specified, required signing and ratification of international treaties and conventions are evaluated. During the second phase the quality of implementation of previously adopted regulations is assessed.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE?

In order to strengthen professional expertise in specific VLAP directions, leading experts from core NGOs and independent think-tanks should be involved in the monitoring.

They can provide analysis and assess the readiness of those policy areas where there are most risks for VLAP criteria implementation quality and where the government demonstrates insufficient political will.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Detailed monitoring results should be available and regularly updated online.

Example: on "Europewithout barriers" website, link <http://novisa.org.ua/en/monit1/>



IMPORTANT!

VLAP monitoring is aimed to ensure publicity, transparency and accountability of the process.

National authorities responsible for VLAP implementation should involve independent experts at an early stage of development of the National Plan on VLAP or any other document that elaborates the algorithm of activities.

Each country has its own sensitive areas where the shift takes place slowly and not very effectively. It is at these areas of public policy that expert support should be aimed.





GEORGIA, CAUCASUS INSTITUTE FOR PEACE, DEMOCRACY AND DEVELOPMENT, TBILISI, GEORGIA (CIPDD)

NOTA BENE

The Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development (CIPDD) is a public policy think-tank specializing in democracy development. CIPDD, a non-profit, non-governmental organization, was founded in 1992 in Tbilisi, Georgia.

It advocates policy goals such as the development of a vibrant and diverse civil society, effective and accountable public institutions based on the rule of law, and an integrated political community, which at the same time respects and preserves identities of different ethnic and religious communities in Georgia. It also supports Georgia's integration into European and Euro-Atlantic institutions as strategic goals of our society. CIPDD seeks to contribute to the implementation of these goals through producing relevant and high-quality public policy documents, and encouraging a pluralistic and informed public policy debate in Georgia.

GEORGIAN PROSPECTS FOR VISA LIBERALISATION WITH THE EU

POSITIVE TRENDS AND ACHIEVEMENTS IN VISA LIBERALIZATION PROCESS IN GEORGIA

Bilateral cooperation framework between the EU and Eastern Partnership countries, initiated in 2009, offers Georgian citizens the possibility to travel freely to most EU countries in the future. In recent years Georgian officials have widely discussed the EU-Georgia cooperation framework and paid special attention to visa liberalization perspective which was related to implementation of provisions of the agreements signed by the European Union and Georgia on Visa Facilitation and Readmission (in force since 1 March 2011).

On 4 June 2012 Georgia and the European Union advanced their cooperation framework and launched a dialogue on visa liberalization. This was soon followed by a conclusion of negotiations on the visa liberalization action plan (VLAP) which was offered to Georgian government by the EU on 25 February 2013. During the presentation of the document new government officials that entered the service after

October 2012 parliamentary elections re-asserted their goal to intensify cooperation with the EU and proposed to conclude the first phase of VLAP by the Eastern Partnership summit to be held in November 2013 in Vilnius. Civil society and wider public supports political decisions made by the government but faces difficulties to create a clear vision how soon Georgia could achieve the objectives set out in the AP.

The overview of recent reforms undertaken in Georgia in the areas of justice, freedom and security confirms that during the last few years Georgia made good efforts to increase control over migration processes into and out of the country by promoting different policy initiatives that improved institutional efficiencies of governmental agencies, reformed border management system, increased the level of document security, and the overall environment for fighting corruption, organized crime and human trafficking.

Visa facilitation and readmission agreements signed with the EU in 2010 and entered into force in 2011 have been implemented without serious obstacles and complications since then. There has been tangible progress between Georgia and European Union regarding the simplification of the visa application process for the average Georgian citizen.

In the area of migration management Georgian government also took several efficient steps that helped the country to

identify specific migration priorities and adopt the National Strategy on Migration. Besides, in recent years legislation was reviewed and amended that aimed at improving the protection of the rights and obligations of aliens, stateless persons and temporary migrants, integration of selected categories of foreigners, compliance with refugee protection standards, etc.

Georgia signed a cooperation agreement with the FRONTEX in 2008. The Agreement established the framework for FRONTEX to work closely with the Georgian border services, specifically in the areas of forgery detection and irregular migration, strengthening working relations with EU member states. In 2009-2010 Georgia and FRONTEX cooperation ended up in the deportation of illegal immigrants from various EU member states back to Georgia, in particular from Poland, France, Austria and Germany. In October 2010 the Ministry of Internal Affairs signed a two-year Operational Agreement with FRONTEX on cooperation to counter irregular migration and cross-border crime and to strengthen working relations with EU member states. Georgia's reformed Border Police Department contributed significantly to the successful accomplishment of this task.

The Office of the European Union Special Representative (EUSR) for the South Caucasus was also involved in supporting reforms of the Georgian border service from 2005 to 2011, which

NOTA BENE

SOME PROBLEMS ADDRESSED BY GEORGIA NATIONALS ARE RELATED TO THE FOLLOWING FACTS:

- issuance of predominantly short-term visas for Georgian nationals;
- low number of foreign diplomatic missions with consular departments to Georgia;
- high rate of visa refusals.
(Some 60.000 Georgians applied for EU visa (all types) in 2009 of whom 51.200 were granted this document and 17% rejected. In 2011 among 65.000 applications only for only about 55.000 of them, with the rejection rate 15%).

Besides, more than 1795 applications have been submitted by EU member states for readmission of Georgian citizens from 20 EU member states. Approval rate of readmission applications is about 92% (data from 1 March 2011 – 20 March 2013). The difficulties facing Georgian nationals who have been deported according to readmission regulations were related primarily to the problems of reintegration.



appeared to have laid the foundation for further reforms. The EUSR Border Support Team was also responsible for assisting the development and implementation of the Integrated Border Management Strategy of Georgia.

Since 2006 (when Georgian law on human trafficking was adopted), the Georgian government has made serious efforts to tackle the challenge of human trafficking. The government has enacted new legislation and reformed its administrative framework, which created new mechanisms for victims' protection and assistance and improved Georgia's preventive approaches. According to US State Department 10th Annual Report on Trafficking in Persons, Georgia has been maintaining its position among the first tier countries which means that the government fully complies with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking.

Georgia has also shown success in combating organized crime. Since 2005 Georgian government has succeeded in both developing appropriate legislation and taking adequate measures against criminals. Additionally, the reformed police and judiciary have become more cooperative with regard to their European counterparts, leading to successful investigations of large organized crime groups in Spain and Belgium.

As the results of the 2010 Georgian crime survey carried out by the Ministry of Justice indicate, since 2005 public safety in the country has improved, and trust towards the police forces has substantially increased.

In the area of documents security Georgia has made important steps – the Ministry of Justice has been issuing biometric passports since 2010 and electronic identification documents since 2011. Also the Ministry of Justice developed a comprehensive database on citizen's register. Nevertheless, several concerns remain in the system as the very practice could not fully meet European standards on documents security and ensure high ethical code and professionalism of carrier servicemen working in the field (recently several examples were revealed on falsified passports issued by the Ministry of Justice).

GEORGIA'S CHALLENGES IN MEETING THE EU REQUIREMENTS FOR ACHIEVING VISA LIBERA

Despite the wide-scale reforms undertaken, Georgia still faces challenges in areas relevant to the achievement of criteria for visa-free movement. In particular, Georgia must strengthen efforts in fighting corruption, take efficient measures in order to establish the rule of law, ensure human rights protection, judicial independence, interagency cooperation in tackling irregular migration and border security, and develop a functional personal data management system.

On the basis of priorities identified in EU-Georgian VLAP main task for Georgian government is to properly implement the national migration policy document adopted in March

2013. Among Georgia's priority actions there is the need to intensify its efforts in developing institutional mechanisms for monitoring and regulating migration flows in and out of Georgia; establishing better coordination between the institutions/stakeholders which hold migration information, identifying an agency that would manage and coordinate the entire process and create a unified database for monitoring migration processes.

In the area of personal data protection both Georgian and international observers express their concerns about provisions of the law on personal data protection adopted in Georgia in 2011. Criticism relates to the vagueness of the legal provisions which authorize the designated state agency to access special categories of personal data, such as the ones relating to racial and ethnic origin, religious and political beliefs, state of health etc. Besides, it is considered that the level of accountability of the Data Protection Agency to the public remains low as the head of the agency remains accountable to the prime-minister only and not to the parliament.

Foreign analysts and Georgian civil society representatives have identified some challenges in anti-crime and anti-corruption measures implemented throughout 2006-2010. For example, although the Georgian crime survey indicated that public trust towards enforcement agencies is high, many victims refrained from reporting their victim-





izations to the police. The results raised questions about dissatisfaction of the victims with the treatment they receive and the efficiency of the long-term effects of the legal norms enforced. Additionally, the anti-corruption steps taken were sometimes quasi-legal, demonstrated disrespect for the rule of law, and were not subject to supervision by public or non-governmental bodies. The GRECO and Transparency International reports from 2009-2010 confirmed these findings. Both GRECO and Transparency International observed that Georgia's privatization process was conducted in such a manner that it remained unclear to whom this property has been transferred or sold and whether anyone apart from the state benefited from these transfers.

All studies confirmed that corruption has been widely eradicated from the daily life of most citizens. However, many representatives from civil society and international organizations (EU among them) believe that Georgia has failed to sufficiently combat its high level of corruption. Transparency International, for example, has ranked Georgia as the 68th most corrupted country in the world (out of 178 countries, Transparency International Corruption Perception Index 2010). According to the statements made by the EU officials, Georgia must address institutional corruption if it wants to move closer to the EU.

The EU considers Georgia's ability to reform its judicial system as highly impor-

tant. Anti-corruption and anti-crime measures could be addressed by improving and increasing judicial independence and impartiality. Current surveys indicated that the rate of acquittals in criminal cases is less than 1% in Georgian courts. Consequently, the U.S. State Department Human Rights Report has identified Georgia's judicial system as one of the country's greatest weaknesses, which in turn hampers the state's democratic transition as a whole.

A final complication has been the demarcation and delimitation of Georgian borders with its neighbors, namely Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia, an issue that has yet to be adequately resolved. During 2009-2010, Georgia continued to negotiate with Azerbaijan and Armenia for a definite border agreement despite continued disagreements over several parts of the border. The absence of a clear demarcation of the Russian-Georgian border poses a serious challenge for the Georgian government because Georgia and Russia do not have official diplomatic relations and, therefore, no negotiations on establishing the official borderline is likely to occur in the near future. Unfortunately, the existence of Russian occupied territories within Georgia continues to leave the Russian-Georgian border volatile and prone to future complications.

CONCLUSIONS

Georgia must make great strides in judicial reform, crime prevention, anti-corruption reform, development of anti-discrimination legislation before its citizens are allowed to enjoy visa-free travel to the EU member states. The Georgian government has made substantial improvements in the areas of border management by easing the burden of the visa process for the average Georgian citizen, by addressing human trafficking and through the issuance of biometric passports.

Currently Georgian government admits that it is planning to complete the first phase of VLAP implementation by November 2013.

Once reforms are begun, both civil society and the media must be allowed to monitor the process and thereby contribute to the building of belief among the citizens that visa-free travel is possible.

Until now⁶ the VLAP has not been opened for public, and many analysts argue that the absence of public openness could hamper successful implementation of the VLAP in Georgia. Currently poor public awareness coexists with a wide debate in the media on the EU visa regime. However, there remains little informed debate and analysis on the current state of affairs on visa liberalization, public understanding of the progress made by Georgia to date as well as its future challenges is limited.

It is essential that the government ensure active engagement of the public in policy debate on implementation of VLAP in order to receive support for reforms needed to achieve liberalized visa regime with the EU member states.





THE ANALYTICAL CENTRE ON GLOBALIZATION AND REGIONAL COOPERATION (ACGRC)

was established in 2002. It works as both a think-tank and an advocacy group, aiming to promotion of democratic values, strengthening of civil society and the rule of law in Armenia, development of free market economy, regional integration and peaceful resolution of regional conflicts.

ACGRC supports public sector reforms and development of good practices in local governance, disseminates knowledge on legal issues, produces expert assessments and analysis of conflict transformation and regional cooperation issues, and supports initiatives that aim towards forming an atmosphere of trust and stable peace in the South Caucasus.

ACGRC RESEARCH INTERESTS

ACGRC study activities include research on globalization issues, study of global processes and their influence on regional cooperation, protection of human rights within the globalisation processes.

ACGRC has been one of the active supporters of the process of normalization of relations with Turkey.

Among other activities ACGRC's regularly organizes Schools on Human Rights and European Integration. Aiming to dissemination of knowledge about human rights among Armenian students and youth activists, the courses are organised in cooperation with the UNESCO Chair on Human Rights, Democracy and European Studies of Yerevan State Linguistic University. The schools have covered such topics as history and philosophy of human rights, constitutionalism, international covenants on human rights, anti-discrimination laws and so forth.

The other crucial study focus of the Analytical centre is promotion of the visa liberalization and facilitation processes in Armenia through the active involvement in the Eastern Partnership Initiative activities and its Civil Society Forum platform on visa liberalization issues.

HOW THE INSTITUTIONAL WORK WITH EASTERN PARTNERSHIP INITIATIVE IS STRUCTURED IN ARMENIAN GOVERNMENT

SEVERAL GOVERNMENT AGENCIES ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR DIFFERENT ASPECTS RELATED TO THE EaP. THE FOLLOWING BODIES ARE INVOLVED IN COORDINATION:

- the Committee for Coordination of Cooperation between Armenia and EU institutions (headed by the President), which acts as the general coordinator in the field of cooperation with the Council of Europe, EU and NATO; the National Council and Coordination Committee for EU-Armenia Cooperation for the Purposes of Implementation of the ENP EU-Armenia Action Plan, chaired by the Prime Minister (the National Council includes civil society stakeholders, discusses and assesses the performance progress of implementing the ENP Action Plan, while the Coordination Committee is responsible for developing the policy and strategy directions for EU-Armenia integration);
- the Inter-agency Committee chaired by the Secretary of the National Security Council, which coordinates the activities of state institutions and implementation of the ENP Action Plan;
- the Ministry of Economy is responsible for monitoring of ENP Action Plan implementation, implements projects under TACIS and ENPI, and is also responsible for the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA), part of the Association Agreement,

as it implements the political coordination of the DCFTA negotiation process, manages the activities of DCFTA Inter-Agency Commission, and conducts the DCFTA negotiations; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (European Department) is the main coordinator for the political and cultural relations with the European countries and European institutions, it leads the negotiation process about the EU-Armenia Association Agreement, and the Consular department deals with readmission issues;

- the Ministry of Justice heads the Armenian side of the subcommittee on Justice, Freedom and Security, in this respect also having an active role in Association Agreement negotiation process, and is responsible for coordinating the work on approximation of legal provisions and practices with the EU acquis related to the visa process;

- the Passport and Visa Department of the Police and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (which is responsible for issuing visas) will cover the security of travel documents and visa issues, while the process is technically implemented by the E-Governance Infrastructure Implementation Unit chaired by the Minister of Economy of Armenia;

- the Police also has a Division of Combating Illegal Migration and International Cooperation, and a Division on Combating Human Trafficking in its structure, and is also responsible for the fight against organised crime and money laundering, as well as for drafting legal

acts related to data protection;

- the State Migration Service under the Ministry of Territorial Administration is coordinating migration-related issues, including development of migration policy and legislation, deals with the problems of refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced persons;

- the National Security Service is co-responsible for the control over illegal migration, and is in charge of border management and control.

NON-GOVERNMENTAL VISA FACILITATION PROCESS SUPPORT: A VIEW FROM ARMENIA

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Apart of providing Armenian Government with a policy recommendations on the reforms needed to be implemented in order to liberalize visa relations between Armenia and European Union the ACGRC is also actively involved in the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum' Working Groups activities (EaPCSF). Thus visa liberalization and facilitation processes in the Eastern Partnership countries', including Armenia is regularly discussed during the working groups meetings.

ACGRC become a member of the visa liberalization subgroup where the state of play in the Eastern Partnership countries on visa issues and future working plan of the visa group and its recommendations were developed together with the other Forum participants from Eastern Partnership countries.

**DURING THE PANELS' DISCUSSIONS,
SEPARATE EVENT ON VISA ISSUES TOOK PLACE,
WHERE IT WAS ADMITTED THAT IT IS IMPORTANT TO:**

- to follow the work of other thematic groups of the EaPCSF which deals with crossthematic issues like academic exchange and migration but also human rights and anti-corruption;
- reinforce our actions through emphasis on visa-related problems and linkage with other areas;
- introduce a new arena for discussion of cross-sectional issues.

Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum is an important innovation tool, since it lets to use the potential existing in Eastern Partnership countries. It also provided conditions for the multilateral dialogue – government, civil society and EU, and for cooperation between Eastern Partnership countries and their European integration.

The issue of visa liberalization and facilitation process was also touched upon by the ACGRC at the joint public hearings on ["The impact of the Visa Facilitation Agreement between the Republic of Armenia and European Union"](#) and on ["Protocol of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the European Communities and their Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Armenia, of the other part, on a Framework Agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Armenia on general principles for the participation of the Republic of Armenia in Union programmes"](#). The event took place on November 4, 2013 and was organized by the RA NA Standing Committees on Foreign Relations and European Integration within the context of development of the RA-EU relations.



NA deputies, members of the Government, representatives from the international organizations and NGOs and Yerevan State University and experts were taking part in the public hearings.

EU representatives who took part in the hearings accentuated that the goal of the EU visa policy was to reach a decent balance between the inner security and external stability. That is why a range of reforms are needed to be done in order to ensure this balance.

On the part of civil society it has been highlighted the significance of ratification of the agreement on [Visa Facilitation](#) and making the awareness campaign of the public on its content.

Also it has been stressed that [visa facilitation](#) would promote the activation of contacts between the people.

As a result of consistent advocacy efforts made by the ACGRC the Visa Facilitation Agreement between the EU and Armenia was signed on 17 December 2012 came into force on January, 1, 2014. Also the EU-Armenia readmission agreement was signed on 19 April 2013.

VISA LIBERALIZATION PROCESSES IN ARMENIA

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Analytical Centre on Globalization and Regional Cooperation (ACGRC) with the support of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Czech Republic launches a project: [“Contacts between people: EU visa policies and Eastern Partnership countries: Prospects and barriers for visa-liberalization”](#). Liberalization of people-to-people contacts via visa free travel with the EU is one of the main political priorities for the Eastern Partnership countries as well as it is the issue of high importance for the societies. The implementation of specific components of Visa Liberalization process has already started in the Eastern Partnership states; however it is stated that the [big distance remains between different partner states in their progress towards the visa free travel for their citizens](#).



In this regards on 12 October, 2013 the Analytical Centre on Globalisation and Regional Cooperation held a conference entitled “[Contacts between people: EU visa policies towards the Eastern Partnership countries](#)”. The event was organised in cooperation with the Stefan Batory Foundation (Poland) and the Coalition for the European Continent Undivided by Visa Barriers and was supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic. During the conference successes and challenges of the EU Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative together with the prospects and barriers for visa facilitation and liberalisation for the EaP countries were presented and discussed. The event gathered experts from both EU and Eastern Partnership countries, Armenian students, media and civil society representatives.

In the first session discussion focused on the impact of the EaP initiative and the transformation processes occurring in the EaP countries in their aspiration to approximate to European standards and values. The need for simplification of the visa regime between the EU and the EaP countries was the focus of the second panel discussion. According to the experts, simplification of the visa regime and even its complete abolition in terms of short-term stay in Europe, will contribute to the further development of bilateral relations, especially in the sphere of science and student exchange. In addition, the rigid framework of the current visa regime with the

EU, humiliates citizens of EaP countries which, in turn, contributes to tension and frustration in the perception of Europe in those countries.

ACGRC is also a part of the team of the project: Eastern Partnership Visa Liberalization Index which shows the progress made by all the Eastern Partnership countries – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine – on the way to visa-free travel with the European Union. ACGRC experts conduct the evaluation assessments of the reforms undergoing in Armenia in the frame of visa facilitation and liberalization processes with the EU.

ARMENIA IN EUROPE’ DISCOURSE

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A conference co-organized by the Armenian National Platform of The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum and The Center of European Studies defining mutual EU-Armenia relations and cooperation took place on 4 July 2012 in Yerevan. The keynote speaker was President of the European Council Herman Van Rompuy.

The Session “[Visa Facilitation as an Important Step towards Integration](#)” was organized by the Analytical Centre on Globalization and Regional Cooperation (One of the founding members of the Coalition for the European Continent Undivided by Visa Barriers).

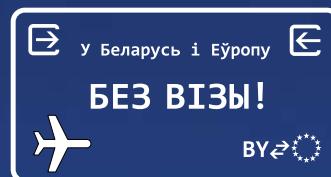
During the conference President of the European Council Herman Van

Rompuy pointed out that Armenia will be brought closer to Europe when the process is perceived by large sections of the country's population, President of the European Council Herman Van Rompuy stated at the Armenia in Europe conference in Yerevan, Armenia.

Civil society must be consistent in supervising the government honoring its commitments to implement reforms, he said. Civil society should be active in performing the following three functions: monitoring the reforms, demanding reports and gaining experience. This activity must be carried out in all the areas of Armenia's life, said Herman Van Rompuy.







**VISA-FREE
TRAVEL CAMPAIGN
GO EUROPE!
GO BELARUS!
(VISA-FREE!)**



WHY?

Belarus obviously lags behind the other Eastern Partnership countries and Russia when it comes to visa relations and is running a risk of becoming a complete outsider in this matter during the next few years, when the countries of the region have already made significant progress towards visa-free relations with the EU.

Formally, Belarusian authorities are committed to visa regime facilitation and the visa facilitation issue is listed as a priority in the European vector of Belarus foreign policy. However, the Belarusian government has been unwilling to take steps towards visa facilitation and Visa-free small border movement, leave alone full-fledged visa liberalization process. The authorities have been repeatedly connecting the freedom of movement issues with an issue of the EU visa ban for the regime officials and businessmen. Visa Facilitation Agreement with the EU is not even negotiated, although in the end of November, 2013, the foreign minister of Belarus said Belarus is ready to start negotiations (by that time, 912 days have passed since the EU invited Belarus to start negotiations).

It is very important for the civil society of Belarus to undertake a long-term approach towards promotion of Visa-free movement.

WHAT DO WE STAND FOR?

NGO Belarus Watch has initiated the Visa-Free Travel Campaign Go Europe! Go Belarus! in 2011.

We stand up for the idea of visa-free travels between Belarus and other European countries (namely Schengen countries);

We believe that visa system has not been successful in fighting against undocumented migration and organized crime, but has been a great obstacle for kindred, economic, cultural and other connections;

We encourage Belarusian society to push Belarusian authorities to finally start visa facilitation process.

VISA-FREE VOLUNTEERS – THE DRIVING FORCE OF THE CAMPAIGN

Visa-free! started to recruit volunteers in the end of 2011. So far, more than one hundred people were trained to be volunteers. Volunteers are the driving force of the campaign inside Belarus. Belarusian government may not hear what NGO says, but voices of own citizens can not be ignored.

Various public events in Belarus were organized by/with the help of volunteers. Among these events are festivals, concerts, discussions, film-screenings, etc. The map of visa-free events covered Minsk, Brest, Hrodna, Mahiliow, Maladzyechna, Polatsk and Navapolatsk.

At the moment 50 volunteers are working hard to achieve their great aim – get rid of visas for Belarusians.



WHAT WE DO**RAISING AWARENESS**

- Regular appearance in media
- Development of www.novisa.by web page and presence in social networks (Facebook, Vkontakte, Twitter)
- More than 2000 campaign t-shirts and other promo materials spread in Belarus
- Visa-free concerts
- Photo action

RESEARCH AND LOBBYING

- Written appeals to Belarusian authorities
- Written appeals to EU authorities
- Meetings with ambassadors of Schengen countries in Belarus
- Cooperation with the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS) in conducting researches on visa issues
- Conference in Minsk in to present results of researches on visa regime in cooperation with BISS



SOME EXAMPLES

CULTURE	EDUCATION	CIVIC ENGAGEMENT
<p>VISA-FREE CONCERTS</p> <p>Visa-free concerts serve as a good tool for raising awareness on visa issue. The biggest Visa-free concert took place in the centre of Minsk in June, 2013. More than 600 people attended the concert to listen to popular Belarusian bands Akute and Clover Club.</p>	<p>EDUCATIONAL BUS TRIPS IN BELARUS</p> <p>Educational bus trips to different towns near the border with Schengen countries are open for visa-free volunteers and common people from different cities of Belarus who share ideas of the campaign. During an educational bus trip participant received information about visa regime and possible scenarios for visa liberalization. Visa-free volunteers use educational bus trips as an opportunity to talk to people in regions about visa regime and problems it brings.</p>	<p>APPEAL TO BELARUSIAN AUTHORITIES</p> <p>Citizens of Belarus are encouraged to send written appeal to Belarusian authorities asking them different questions related to visa issue. There is a brief instruction on the website www.novisa.by on how to send the appeal and sample text. The appeal serves as a tool for Belarusian citizens to express their concern about current situation when Belarusians are forced to pay the biggest price for Schengen visa in comparison with other Eastern Partnership countries.</p>
<p>ANNUAL FESTIVAL SAMACHOD</p> <p>The festival Samachod is a two-day event which includes workshops, discussion, concerts, performances and public lectures. The Samachod aims at raising awareness about visa issue in an attractive way.</p>	<p>TRAININGS FOR VOLUNTEERS</p> <p>New volunteers are invited for one day kick-off training where they receive basic knowledge about visa regime and Visa-free campaign. Later on they may join the Club of Visa-free volunteers to learn more about project management, civic engagement and possibilities to talk to the government on visa issue.</p>	<p>THE CLUB OF VISA-FREE VOLUNTEERS</p> <p>Active volunteers have established the Club of Visa-free volunteers. The Club serves as a platform for civic educations and activism. Volunteers share their ideas and plan various public activities to raise awareness about visa regime.</p>





**REPUBLIC
OF MOLDOVA,
INSTITUTE FOR
DEVELOPMENT
AND SOCIAL
INITIATIVES (IDIS)
"VIITORUL"**

MONITORING THE VISA LIBERALIZATION PROCESS IN MOLDOVA AND ADVOCACY EFFORTS

Republic of Moldova, until this moment, had an overall positive experience in implementing the Visa Liberalization Action Plan. The same is largely valid for civil society that is assisting the process since the very beginning, and its contribution has been instrumental to the achievements of the government.

Although civil society knew very little about the visa liberalization process when the EU started the visa dialogue with Moldova, the first ones have quickly looked at the Balkan experience.

Together with the support of several European organizations such as Policy Association for an Open Society or European Stability Initiative, the civil society in Moldova imported and adapted the methodology which was used in the Balkans for measuring progress, but also learned how the countries in the Balkans mobilized support for reforms related to visa liberalization process.

The outcomes of the monitoring process were always made public and generated serious debates about Moldova's progress and shortcomings. Given that the media was very interested in the issue, the monitoring results were getting good media coverage and thus high pressure on authorities to deliver results, but also on the EU side to be fair in its assessment. Mol-

dovan civil society organizations which were monitoring the visa liberalization process were making collations in order to better articulate the message and to get greater influence over the decision-makers. It was often happening that organizations were giving press conferences together.

In addition to this, some of the most powerful think tanks implemented the "National Convention on EU" which was regularly gathering decision makers, experts, media, development partners and simply active citizens. Each meeting was focused on a particular issue of the visa liberalization process which made it possible to have in-depth expert discussions about the ongoing reforms but also raised the level of media professionalism about the visa liberalization issue. Moreover, several seminars for journalists were carried out where the latter learned profoundly from the experts and decision makers about the visa liberalization in order to be prepared to issue high quality journalistic materials and to reflect news in a non-biased manner. Additionally, seminars were conducted for heads of Public Communication departments of the institutions involved in the process. Thus, given the above-described actions, it was ensured that everybody understands the process in the same manner and everyone knows what one has to do in order to achieve the Action Plan objectives.

The positive dimension of the political class is that all the major political

parties were supporting the process, despite the fact that the opposition party (Communist party) was frequently criticizing the government on being too optimistic about the deadlines of possible visa liberalization. Despite the political consensus and largely well-coordinated process, some institutions were not as involved as they should have been.

For example, the Visa Liberalization Task Force, which was coordinating and planning the implementation of reforms from the Action Plan, was not including the representative of the parliament. Despite this, some institutions, mainly Ministry for Foreign Affairs and European Integration were cooperating very closely with civil society. For example, civil society representatives were invited several times to take part in the so-called Extended format of the Visa Liberalization Task Force. Moreover, the government itself was organizing advocacy events in order to demonstrate progress. For instance, EU ambassadors and representatives of the international organizations, alongside with civil society organizations dealing with the visa liberalization issues were invited to the Border Police office for a demonstration on how the data are processed and the central system is organized. Moreover, the government organized for all the above-mentioned groups an "excursion" to the border with Romania in order to demonstrate that Moldova is already applying an integrated border management system.

Despite putting the issue of visa lib-





eralization on the national agenda for boosting the reforms, the civil society has been quite successful in raising the profile of visa liberalization in the EU and its member states in regard to the progress and shortcomings of the process in Moldova. For instance, it was often that experts from monitoring missions of EU were meeting Moldovan civil society leaders in order to form an alternative opinion about the pace of reforms. Moreover, such research instruments as the Eastern Partnership Visa Liberalization Index of the Batory Foundation or the European Integration Index for Eastern Partnership Countries of the Open Society Foundation have been excellent tools, on the one hand, to prompt local authorities to perform better and deliver results, and on the other hand, to inform EU institutions and EU member states about the progress achieved.

Last but not least, for a successful implementation one has to create partnerships with all interested parties. For instance, the issue of the anti-discrimination law was and is still quite controversial in the Moldovan society and therefore, it was quite difficult to adopt it due to the hostility from the opposition, church and a considerable part of the population. However, due to a constant dialogue between the government, church, civil society and EU opinion leaders that was thoroughly reflected in the media, the law was adopted and the first steps for its implementation are made.



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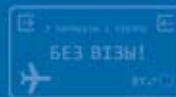
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