EUROPEAN COMMISSION

PRESS RELEASE

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More flexible visa rules to boost growth and job creation

Many non-EU nationals wishing to travel to the EU are often faced with cumbersome, lengthy and costly visa procedures. The proposals presented today will seriously shorten and simplify the procedures for those wanting to come to the EU for short stays, and induce more cost savings and less bureaucracy, whilst maintaining the level of security. Making the access to the Schengen area easier for legitimate travellers will facilitate visiting friends and relatives and doing business. It will boost economic activity and job creation in, for instance, the tourism sector as well as in related activities such as restaurant and transport industries. A recent study shows that in 2012 a total number of 6.6 million potential travellers from six of the countries with the most travellers were 'lost' due to cumbersome visa procedures.[i] It also showed that more flexible and accessible visa rules could lead to an increase in trips to the Schengen area of between 30% and **up to 60%**, only from these six countries.[ii] This could mean as much as **€130 billion** in total direct spending over five years (in accommodation, food and drink, transports, entertainment, shopping, etc.), and could translate into some **1.3 million jobs** in tourism and related sectors.

"Europe needs a smarter visa policy. We need to attract more tourists, business people, researchers, students, artists and culture professionals to our shores. Now, we want to boost our economy and create new jobs by underlining the economic dimension in our visa policy, while keeping a high level of security at our borders. Today's proposals will greatly facilitate the procedures for short stay visitors. Thanks to these proposals we expect a serious increase of travellers in the years to come," said Cecilia Malmström, Commissioner for Home Affairs.

Antonio Tajani, European Commission Vice President responsible for industry and entrepreneurship, added*: "Our proposal will help European tourism industry at a time when international competition is becoming increasingly fierce with a growing number of countries relying on tourism as a factor for growth. The new visa rules are the answer to this challenge. These changes will help the tourism industry to deal with the expected considerable increase of the flows of tourists visiting Europe. Tourism is Europe´s growth engine and has been the most important stronghold of European economy during the recent crisis."*

In order to stimulate the European economy and to facilitate the lives of travellers towards the EU, the European Commission is proposing today important changes in the visa rules. Main elements of this package are:

(1) Reducing the deadline from 15 to 10 days for processing and taking a decision; (2) Making it possible to lodge visa applications in other EU countries consulates if the Member State competent for processing the visa application is neither present nor represented;(3) Substantial facilitations for regular travellers including mandatory issuing of multiple entry visas valid for three years;(4) Simplified application form and allowing for online applications (5) Possibility for Member States to devise special schemes granting visas at the borders for up to 15 days in one Schengen State; (6) Possibility for Member States to facilitate the issuing of visa for visitors attending major events; (7) A new type of visa (Touring-visa) allowing legitimate travellers to circulate in the Schengen area for up to 1 year (without staying in one Member State for more than 90 days in any 180-day period).

- Simplifying short-stay visa applications to meet growing demand. A lot has already been achieved under the existing visa rules, which has contributed to a 68 % increase in the number of visa applications, from 10.2 million in 2009 to 17.2 million in 2013. Yet more can be done towards enhancing the mobility of legitimate travellers. For new 2013 visa statistics, see infographic. Too often, problems obtaining visas limit access and – as a result – reduce the potential economic benefits of tourist attractions. For instance, the Milan World Expo in 2015 may be an opportunity for millions of new visitors to Europe.

Concretely, the Commission now proposes:

- Establishing a clearer set of procedural rules and speeding up the process. It is proposed to reduce the deadline for processing and making a decision on a visa application is reduced from 15 to 10 days. The maximum deadline for lodging an application has been increased from three to six months before the intended trip, to allow travellers to plan ahead and avoid peak seasons.

Furthermore, the list of supporting documents will be simplified and become exhaustive and the enhanced harmonisation of these requirements at local level will ensure equal treatment of visa applicants. The often costly obligatory travel medical insurance will be abolished.

- Boosting consular cooperation. According to the proposal, if the Member State competent for processing the visa application is neither present nor represented in a given third country, the applicant is entitled to apply at any of the consulates present ('mandatory representation').

- Repeated visits will be much easier with the introduction of mandatory criteria for obtaining a multiple entry visa (MEV) valid for three years and subsequently for five years for 'VIS registered regular' travellers. Applicants whose data are registered in the Visa Information System (VIS) and who have previously lawfully used at least two visas within the past 12 month period will benefit from these facilitations. This change of rules is also possible thanks to the roll out of the Visa Information System (VIS), which is expected to be completed in 2015, enabling Member States' consulates to access the visa applicants' 'history'.

As they would be able to travel more spontaneously, travellers in possession of longer validity Multi-Entry Visas are likely to make more trips to the Schengen area than they otherwise would. An increasing number of trips would spur economic growth within the Schengen zone.

- To establish a Touring Visa. This new type of Visa will allow legitimate non-EU nationals entering the Schengen area to circulate for up to 1 year in this zone (without staying in one Member State for more than 90 days in any 180-day period), with the possibility of an extension for up to two years (provided that the applicant does not stay for more than 90 days in any 180-day period in the same Member State). This would for instance, apply to live-performing artists who tour the Schengen area for a prolonged period, but also to individual travellers, such as tourists, researchers and students who wish to spend more time in Europe.

Background

Today's package consists of:

- A Report (*'A smarter Visa Policy for economic growth'*) assessing Member States'; implementation of the Visa Code;

- A proposal for a recast Regulation on the Union Code on Visas (Visa Code);

- A proposal for a Regulation establishing a touring visa;

- An overview of Visa statistics.

Next steps: Both proposals must now be approved by the Council of the European Union and the European Parliament, which can be expected at the earliest in 2015.

Once the proposals enter into force, the changes will apply to all EU Member States applying the common Schengen visa policy in full as well as the four Schengen associated States (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland). It should be noted that Bulgaria, Croatia, Ireland, Cyprus, Romania and the UK do not take part in the visa policy.

Useful Links

MEMO/14/247

Report 'A smarter Visa Policy for economic growth': link

Proposal for a Regulation on the Union Code on Visas (Visa Code): link

Proposal for a Regulation establishing a touring visa: link

An overview of Visa statistics: infographic

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[i] China, India, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa and Ukraine.

[ii] http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/sectors/tourism/files/visas_study_2013/final_report__visa_facilitation_en.pdf