I. EU-Russia Relations and Visa Developments

The European Parliament adopted a Recommendation to the Council on 2 April 2009 on the new EU-Russia agreement (based on Report A6-0140/2009). In it, the EP asks the Council and the Commission, when pursuing the negotiations, to:

“… ab) insist that the goal of visa-free travel vis-à-vis Russia be pursued in the light of Council Regulation (EC) No 539/2001, which states that exemption from a visa requirement should be subject to a considered assessment of a variety of criteria relating inter alia to illegal immigration, public policy and security and the EU’s external relations with third countries, consideration being also given to the implications of regional cohesion and reciprocity, bearing in mind that relations between the EU and white-listed third countries are typified by a special political dimension requiring those third countries to attain an appropriate level in terms of democratic values and fundamental rights;

c) insist that visa facilitation for students, researchers and businessmen should be a priority in order to promote people-to-people contacts; insist however that any further liberalisation of the visa regime vis-à-vis Russia will be conditional on a corresponding liberalization of the visa arrangements vis-à-vis European Neighbourhood Policy countries, in order to avoid any discrepancies;

d) in accordance with the EU-Russia agreement on facilitation of short-stay visas, request from the Russian authorities a clear commitment to reduce bureaucratic obstacles applied in a non-reciprocal manner with respect to all travellers, such as the need to have an invitation and to register upon arrival; bear in mind that the changes made in Russian visa rules in recent years and its ceasing to issue multiple-entry business visas may have negative consequence on business and commercial links between the EU and Russia; also bear in mind Parliament’s views that facilitated travel for Russian passport holders should be limited to Russian residents only;

ea) urgently address the Kaliningrad transit and visa problem, possibly by providing for the whole of the Kaliningrad Oblast to be covered by the local border traffic regime:…”
The European Council on Foreign Relations (www.ecfr.eu) published, on 16 June, a policy paper by Nicu Popescu and Andrew Wilson, entitled 'The Limits of Enlargement-lite: European and Russian Power in the Troubled Neighbourhood'. The authors argue that:

“...a complacent strategy focusing on slow change rather than pressing crises is losing the EU its battle with Russia for influence in the East...Without the accession carrot, the countries of the Eastern neighbourhood will not naturally gravitate towards the EU, as Brussels policymakers seem all too often to assume...It’s time for the EU to understand that if they do not help Eastern European states to deal with the crises ravaging the region, Russia will... Whereas Russia provides visa-free access and encourages migration, citizens of Ukraine and Moldova can no longer visit Schengen EU without visas.”

In their policy recommendations, the two authors suggest ways of making the EU more attractive to the region:

“...The most powerful way for the EU to boost its image in the neighbourhood would be to liberalise its visa policy. Ukraine and Moldova should be offered “road maps” for visa-free travel for all citizens, coupled with very tough demands for the reform of border management and law enforcement agencies. In the meantime, the Commission should ensure that all Member States fully implement the visa facilitation agreements the EU signed with the two countries in January 2008. In the South Caucasus and Belarus, the EU should pursue visa facilitation for key categories of citizens, such as journalists, businesspeople and students. Visa fees should be waived during negotiations with all neighbourhood states. And immediate attention should be directed towards improving visa application conditions... In order to allay the anxieties of Member States over visa liberalisation, the Swedish EU Presidency should initiate annual EaP “27+6” meetings of ministers of internal affairs and regular working groups on immigration and organized crime.”

II. Crisis in Moldovan-Romanian Relations

Following contested Parliamentary elections on 5 April and intensive domestic infighting, the Moldavian government accused its Romanian counterpart for organizing the civil unrest. In that respect, it reset, on 9 April, visa requirements for Romanian citizens that wished to enter Moldova in clear breach of the agreement with the EU, which required at least a 48 hours prior notification in any change at the entry requirements. The incumbent Communist Party got 60 seats in the new Parliament, one short of the necessary majority to elect its own candidate for the Presidential Office. Following failed attempts in May and June to master the necessary majority, the country is set for elections next month.

The EU response can be seen at the Council Conclusions on the Republic of Moldova, of the General Affairs Council meeting on 15 June 2009, which adopted a mandate for future Moldova-EU agreement. In it:

“...The Council recalls its strong commitment to further deepening the relationship between the EU and the Republic of Moldova, on the basis of shared values and
principles...The Council welcomes in this context the Commission’s intention to launch a comprehensive package for democracy support in the Republic of Moldova...Against this background, the Council has adopted the EU’s negotiating directives for a new, comprehensive EU-Republic of Moldova agreement which will go beyond the current Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. The Council expresses its willingness to start negotiations as soon as circumstances allow. In this context and in order to facilitate the start of the negotiations, the Council calls on the Republic of Moldova to ensure equal treatment to all EU citizens in its visa policy and underlines the importance of the principle of good-neighbourly relations. At the same time, the Council expresses serious concern over the human rights abuses that took place after the 5 April parliamentary elections in the Republic of Moldova...”

III. Joint Declaration of the Prague Eastern Partnership Summit (07/05/09)

On 7 May 2007 the EU, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine launched the Eastern Partnership initiative. Point 7 of the Joint Declaration states that:

“...Supporting mobility of citizens and visa liberalization in a secure environment is another important aspect of the Eastern Partnership. It will promote mobility of citizens of the partner countries through visa facilitation and readmission agreements; the EU, in line with its Global Approach to Migration, will also take gradual steps towards full visa liberalization as a long term goal for individual partner countries on a case-by-case basis provided that conditions for well-managed and secure mobility are in place...”

In parallel to the Summit the Czech Presidency organized an international conference (Prague, May 5-6), entitled ‘Eastern Partnership: Towards Civil Society Forum’, with the participation of NGOs, research institutes and academic institutions, which among other themes dealt in several sessions also with the prospects of visa facilitation.

IV. Visa Liberalization for Western Balkans

On 4 April, the foreign ministers of Estonia, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia urged the Commission and the Czech Presidency to accelerate decision-making in the visa liberalization process for the Western Balkans, with a view to ensuring visa-free travel to the EU by early 2010. Earlier, on 11 March, the foreign ministers of Italy and Slovenia had asked the Czech Presidency in a joint letter to push forward the Western Balkans enlargement prospects, highlighting the importance of liberalizing the visa regime in 2009.

On 24 April, the EP adopted a Resolution on “Consolidating stability and prosperity in the Western Balkans”, with 305 votes in favour, 23 against and 12 abstentions. Among other things, in the Resolution, the EP:
“…17. Stresses the importance of a liberalization of the Schengen visa regime for the citizens of the countries of the Western Balkans as a means of acquainting the people of the region with the European Union; welcomes the dialogue on visa liberalization and urges the Council and the Commission to conduct the process in as transparent a manner as possible and with clearly defined benchmarks, in order to facilitate external monitoring and increase public accountability of the process;
18. Points out that a cumbersome visa procedure, compounded by the understaffing of consulates and embassies in the region, is liable to generate hostility towards the EU among the people of the region, at a time when the Union’s popularity is implicitly the biggest stimulus to reform;
19. Encourages the countries of the Western Balkans to accelerate their efforts to fulfil the requirements set out in the individual roadmaps, so as to ensure the removal of the visa regime for their countries as rapidly as possible; believes that the fulfilment of these conditions is crucial to accelerating the process of accession to the European Union; is in this context of the opinion that the IPA [Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance] should support the efforts made by the beneficiary countries to meet the requirements laid down in the roadmap for visa liberalization.”

On 18 May, the Commission delivered its assessments on the progress of the five Western Balkan countries in meeting the visa roadmap requirements (see the ESI document codifying the assessments; source: www.esiweb.org).

The first assessments, in November 2008, were based on ‘readiness reports’ submitted by the Western Balkan countries. The second ones used updated information but also field missions conducted by EU national experts between January and March 2009, around three in each country, verifying on the ground the situation with regard to document security, border control, migration management, organized crime, corruption and illegal migration. According to the ESI classification (subsequently reproduced in several written and electronic media), the May 2009 assessments conclude that FYROM meets the conditions for visa-free travel, Montenegro and Serbia meet most of the conditions, and that Bosnia-Herzegovina and Albania do not yet meet the conditions.

In the Justice and Home Affairs Council, on 4-5 June, the Commission presented the draft reports and Commissioner J. Barrot announced that the final reports would be sent back to the Western Balkan countries in July.

The External Relations Council meeting on 15 June, adopted the following conclusions:

“…The Council restates its support for the dialogue on visa liberalization with Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia, based on the roadmaps containing clear and realistic benchmarks and on a country-by-country assessment. The Council recalls that the countries concerned should continue to focus on full implementation of these benchmarks.
In this regard, the Council welcomes the updated assessment reports presented by the European Commission on the progress in the visa liberalisation dialogues with these countries. The reports reflect the clear progress made by these countries in meeting the benchmarks set out in the visa liberalisation roadmaps. In this context, the
Council encourages the European Commission to present as soon as possible a legislative proposal amending Regulation 539/2001, as it applies to the Member States, in order to achieve a visa free regime ideally by the end of 2009 with those countries that will have met all the benchmarks.

Acknowledging the significance of visa liberalization for the Western Balkans region, the Council underlines the importance of all the countries concerned achieving a visa free regime by their own merits. Therefore, the Council welcomes the progress achieved so far and calls for the countries in the region to further accelerate and implement reforms to fulfil soon the necessary benchmarks.”

Following the progress assessments, Commissioner Olli Rehn said at a press conference on 15 June that the Commission will come up with a legislative proposal before its summer break to provide for Schengen visa-free travel for citizens of Western Balkans countries that meet the criteria. He was speaking after Czech foreign minister Jan Kohout announced that EU foreign ministers had agreed to encourage the EC to come up with proposals so that all Western Balkans countries meeting the criteria should be allowed access to a liberalised visa system “ideally” by the end of 2009. If the visa system is eased, in the case of frontrunner FYROM, the change could be made already on January 1, 2010 at the earliest and March 1 at the latest.

V. Chisinău Summit of the South East European Cooperation Process (05/07/09)

The Summit of the South East European Cooperation Process (SEECP), held in Chisinău, on 5 June, with the participation of the Heads of State of the South East European countries, adopted the Chisinău Political Declaration and the Joint Statement, expressing full support to the work of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and its Secretary General and endorsing the 2009-2010 RCC Strategic Work Programme and the Annual Report of the organization’s Secretary General. They simultaneously called upon the RCC to establish a high-level expert panel to stimulate in-depth discussion on economic and financial measures in response to the economic crisis.

The Summit participants pledged partnership for cooperation, development, prosperity, European integration, and strengthening of the rule of law. They reaffirmed that the accession to the EU remains key regional goal.

The summit marked the end of the SEECP Chairmanship-in-Office (CiO) of the Republic of Moldova and the beginning of the Turkish CiO over the next year.

In the Declaration, among others:

“20. [The SEE countries] welcomed the implementation of the visa facilitation and readmission Agreements between EU and six Participating States, underlining the need to further facilitate the visa proceedings, observing the spirit of the Agreements in force. Additionally, [they] welcomed the recent progress in the visa liberalisation dialogue with five Participating States and [they] expressed hope that by the end of 2009 the EU would take decision regarding the establishment of the visa free travel regime with those that will meet the EU requirements. [They] also welcomed the results of the Meeting of Heads of the Consular Services of the SEECP Participating
States held in Chisinau on 24 April 2009, as a part of the process aiming to contribute to a more simplified visa regime within the region;

21. [They] expressed hope that soon EU and one Participating State will start the dialogue on visa liberalization in order to identify and implement the EU requirements to fulfill the necessary criteria.”

VI. Belarus – Russia/Kalinigrad and Visa Developments

The European Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighbourhood Policy, Benita Ferrero-Waldner, expressed support for lowering Schengen visa price, down to EUR35 for the citizens of Belarus, although it is still too early to speak for a possible abolition of visa requirements (22 June 2009).

The Lithuanian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Vygaudas Usackas, discussed with the Vice-President of the European Commission responsible for Justice, Freedom and Security, Jacques Barrot, the EU visa policy with regard to Belarus and the Kaliningrad region in Russia (22 June 2009). According to a press release from the Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Usackas spoke up for a visa-free or simpler Schengen visa regime with all the countries in the Baltic Sea region. He also stressed the need to find flexible solutions, which would provide an opportunity for as much of free movement for residents of Russia’s Kaliningrad region and the citizens of Lithuania as possible, and to cut visa cost for the citizens of Belarus. Barrot and Usackas discussed the agreements that have been concluded regarding the travelling of border residents of Lithuania, Belarus and Russia, and said that they could provide a possibility for border residents to enter the border territory of another country without visas, but with special permits.

(source: The Baltic Times, 22 June 2009)

On April 16, a round table on ‘Schengen visa liberalisation policy towards Belarus and Belarus-EU cooperation in the field of tourism’ took place in the European Parliament, bringing together EP and Commission representatives, the Group of National Travel Agents’ and Tour Operators’ Association within the EU (ECTAA), the Association of Latvian Travel Agents (ALTA), directors of several Belarusian travel agencies, the chairman of the board of the National Association of Tourist Organizations of Belarus, journalists and other interested parties.

Delegates from Belarus described difficulties faced by Belarusians when obtaining a Schengen visa. They spoke about a very long list of documents requested by embassies for the visa application, an excessively long period it takes for a visa to be issued, and a high visa fee which amounts to a sustainable part of an average salary in the country. Olga Stuzhinskaya, director of the Office for a Democratic Belarus, added that Belarus is the only country on the EU Eastern neighbourhood, whose citizens pay 60 euro fee for a Schengen visa while Russians and Ukrainians pay only 35 euro.

Representatives of Belarusian travel agencies offered data that has been collected by the National Association of Tourist Organisations of Belarus showing the negative consequences of the Schengen area expansion on the tourism sector. Belarusian travel agencies stressed
that the current EU visa policy causes great losses also to the EU tourism and service businesses affecting mostly the new EU member states.

The Commission expressed the hope that the situation would improve with the recently adopted new visa code. According to the document, visa application fees would be cut by 50% for 6- to 12-year-old children; visa fees would be waived for certain categories of citizens, including students; multiple entry visas would be issued more often for frequent travellers. EU authorities also plan to introduce standardised application documents, with collected biometric and digital data remaining valid for 5 years, and a common Schengen visa information system.

Mr Michel de Blust, Secretary General of the Group of National Travel Agents’ and Tour Operators’ Association within the EU (ECTAA) spoke about the negative impact of the strict Schengen visa policy on tourism industry and gave examples from different countries presenting not only the case of Belarus but also that of other countries, such as India. He explained that member states focus mostly on security and illegal migration issues and there is lack of real impact assessment from the tourist industry perspective.

Participants of the round table agreed to send a joint letter to the governments of all 25 states signatories to the Schengen agreement and EU institutions. The letter should explain the current situation with visas and request changes in the visa policy. Travel associations of various European countries will be requested to support the appeal.

Participants of the meeting agreed to organize the next expert gathering in Minsk in the coming months.

VII. Belarus and Ukraine to sign new visa-free agreement (03/04/09)

The President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko approved as a negotiation basis a draft visa-free travels agreement between the Republic of Belarus and Ukraine. At present, the mutual travels of Belarusian and Ukrainian citizens are regulated by the bilateral agreement signed on December 17, 1992.

Unlike the current agreement, the draft document defines a list of documents the citizens of Belarus and Ukraine have to present to be able to enter, leave and stay in the other country visa-free. The document spells out the rules regulating the travels of minors and the return of citizens who lost their documents. Under the new agreement, the period of stay in the other country is up to 90 days during 180 days since the first entry. If the citizens of the other country have a migration card, they do not have to get registered in the host country provided their period of stay does not exceed 30 days.

(source: Cross-border cooperation/ Söderköping process (CBCP), http://soderkoping.org.ua/)
VIII. **Sweden and Ukraine discuss migration and visa issues (19/05/09)**

The discussion focused on the priorities of the Swedish EU Presidency in the second half of 2009, with special attention given to migration, the visa dialogue between Ukraine and the EU, the practical implementation of the new foreign policy initiative of the Eastern Partnership, as well as the progress in the Association Agreement negotiations. The Ukrainian side highly appreciated the recent Strategy of the Government of Sweden on cooperation with Ukraine in 2009-2013 and expressed expectations for its effective implementation.

The Swedish diplomats reiterated the readiness of the Swedish side to develop a constructive dialogue with Ukraine during its EU Presidency, to support European aspirations of Ukraine as well as to provide practical assistance in the comprehensive rapprochement of Ukraine with the EU.

(source: Cross-border cooperation/ Söderköping process (CBCP), http://soderkoping.org.ua/)

IX. **Second meeting of the EU-Georgia Sub-Committee on Justice, Freedom and Security, second meeting (03/06/09)**

The meeting focused on issues of legal and illegal migration, border management, fight against organized crime, terrorism and judicial cooperation all in view of potential visa liberalization.

(source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, www.mfa.gov.ge )

X. **EU-Ukraine Troika meeting (03/06/09) and 13th Meeting of EU-Ukraine Cooperation Council (16/06/09)**

Luxembourg hosted the Troika meeting of Justice and Interior Ministers of the European Union and Ukraine, with the agenda comprising the fight against corruption and organized crime (drugs, trafficking in human beings, money laundering), migration and asylum, and visa policy.

On the latter, the EU and Ukraine agreed on the need to pursue their dialogue the aim of which is to create conditions for a visa-waiver scheme for Ukrainian citizens when travelling to the European Union. The ministers were debriefed on the conclusions of the high-level meeting summing up the current state-of-play of the visa dialogue in all four sections and outlining further steps to take in this area.

The meeting highlighted the importance of proper implementation of agreements on readmission and visa facilitation. Despite certain drawbacks, these agreements constitute an instrument conducive to the development of contacts between people and contributing to the fight against illegal migration.

(source: Cross-border cooperation/ Söderköping process (CBCP), http://soderkoping.org.ua/)
The Cooperation Council emphasised, among others, the importance of the launch of the visa dialogue in October 2008 and took note of the relevant technical progress and future prospects.

(source: Luxembourg 16 June 2009, EU Press Release 11051/09)

XI. Armenia: Introduction of a new shorter-stay visa for guests (15/06/009)

Armenia has introduced a new shorter-stay visa for guests. Until recently, most visitors to the country could only obtain a 120-day visa at a cost of around US$40. The new legislation means that 21-day visas can also be obtained upon arrival at a cost of AMD 3000 or just over US$8.

(source: Armenian Tourism Development Agency (ATDA))

XII. Ukraine and Serbia to establish free visa regime (19/06/09)

Ukraine and Serbia are about to establish a free visa regime, according to the President of Ukraine, Victor Yushchenko. After meeting with his Serbia counterpart Boris Tadic in Novi Sad city, V. Yushchenko noted that a range of bilateral agreements are currently under preparation, among which there is an agreement on free visa regime.

(source: Cross-border cooperation/ Söderköping process (CBCP), http://soderkoping.org.ua/)

XIII. Launch of the ‘Kyiv Initiative’ (24/06/09)

Within the framework of the Eastern Partnership, Ukraine, Poland, and Belarus have announced an initiative of closer trilateral cooperation on a number of issues, in particular in the economic and political spheres. The first meeting between the heads of working groups to be created after the Kyiv meeting will be held in September 2009.

XIV. Other Visa Developments:

i. Signature of short-stay visa waiver agreement between the European Community and Antigua and Barbuda, The Bahamas, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Mauritius, Barbados and Seychelles (28 May 2009).

ii. UK considers joining Schengen visa system. The UK is considering reforming its existing visitor visa scheme in order to entice more Chinese and other visitors to its shores. Currently Chinese and certain other overseas visitors to Europe are required to obtain separate visas for add on trips to the UK. Tour operators and the wider tourism industry however have argued that the requirements to obtain an additional visa and the rising costs and procedures involved in processing a UK visa have acted as a disincentive to include short visits to the UK in tours majoring on continental
Europe. The Foreign Office is therefore examining the feasibility of the UK entering
the Schengen visa system.
(source: www.migrationexpert.com, 12 June 2009)

iii. Italy to suspend Schengen Agreement from June 18 to July 15, 2009 for the
upcoming G8 meeting.
(source: abs-cbnNEWS.com, 12 June 2009)

iv. Finland has been criticized at the June Council of Justice and Home Affairs for being
too lenient on visas issued to Russian citizens.
(source: St Petersburg Times, 19 June 2009)

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