



2019/0182(NLE)

21.2.2020

OPINION

of the Committee on Foreign Affairs

for the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs

on the draft Council decision on the conclusion of the Agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Belarus on the facilitation of the issuance of visas

(12362/2019 – C9-0013/2020 – 2019/0182(NLE))

Rapporteur for opinion: Petras Auštrevičius

PA_Leg_Consent

SHORT JUSTIFICATION

Intensifying people-to-people contacts, by enhancing mobility in a secure and well-managed environment, is one of the guiding principles of the Eastern Partnership. Visa liberalisation remains a shared objective of individual partner countries and the EU alike for the benefit of the population at large.

The rapporteur welcomes the proposal as a positive development in the EU-Belarus relations and highlights its importance for Belarusian people to engage with the EU citizens and to familiarize with the European realities, culture and way of life. Acknowledges that election processes and political system in Belarus do not adhere to European and international standards and do not secure and protect the universal fundamental freedoms. Parliamentary election in 2019 included significant procedural shortcomings, among which were restrictive measures towards the opposition parties and candidates, and demonstrated no improvement in democracy. Therefore, the visa facilitation agreement should be used for enhancing the grassroots level cooperation and further strengthening and supporting Belarusian civil society.

Already in its Communication on Strengthening the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) of 4 December 2006, the Commission had recommended that negotiations on readmission and visa facilitation should be initiated with Eastern Neighbourhood countries.

The Prague Summit Joint Declaration of 7 May 2009 establishing the Eastern Partnership has underlined the importance of promoting the mobility of citizens in a secure environment, through visa facilitation and readmission agreements. It set visa liberalisation as the long-term objective that has to be accompanied by improvement in security conditions to fight cross border crime and irregular migration. The Warsaw Summit of September 2011 and the Vilnius Summit of November 2013 reconfirmed these objectives, stressing particularly that further cooperation and coordination should include the prevention of and the fight against illegal migration, the promotion of secure and well-managed migration and mobility and integrated border management as a goal. The Brussels Summit of November 2017 insisted that the conclusion of a Visa Facilitation Agreement and Readmission Agreement with Belarus would pave the way for further progress on mobility, while increasing security.

According to the common approach for the development of EU policy on visa facilitation agreed at the level of COREPER by the Member States in December 2005, a visa facilitation agreement shall not be concluded without a readmission agreement being in place.

Over the past four years, there has been progress in EU-Belarus relations. Belarus has been participating in the Eastern Partnership, notably within its multilateral formats. At the initiative of the Belarusian authorities, an annual EU-Belarus Human Rights Dialogue resumed in 2015. A Mobility Partnership was launched in 2016; it turned out to be a key instrument in developing our cooperation on migration, while enhancing the mobility of EU and Belarusian citizens in a well-managed and secure environment. Further, tangible steps by Belarus to respect universal fundamental freedoms, rule of law and human rights, will remain key for the shaping of the EU's future policy vis-à-vis Belarus, in a spirit of "critical engagement".

The proposed decision takes into account and reflects the existing framework for cooperation with Belarus, in particular the aforementioned Mobility Partnership, the Declarations from the

Eastern Partnership Summits, as well as the negotiations on the EU-Belarus Partnership Priorities. Similar agreements have been concluded already with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

The formal authorisation for negotiation of the Agreement on the facilitation of the issuance of visas with Belarus was given by the Council on 28 February 2011. The negotiations began in June 2014 and the agreed text was initialled on 17 June 2019. The European Union and Belarus finally signed the visa facilitation agreement and the readmission agreement on 8 January 2020.

The proposed decision concerning the conclusion of the agreement aims to facilitate, on the basis of reciprocity, the issuance of visas for an intended stay of no more than 90 days in any 180-day period to EU and Belarusian citizens, and sets the visa fee for processing applications at EUR 35. It includes standard elements of EU visa facilitation agreements, establishing the delays for the decision on issuing the visa, the fees and exemptions thereof, the required documentation and the exemptions, as well as simplification of criteria for certain categories of persons. Furthermore, the proposal includes a Joint Declaration on cooperation on travel documents and regular exchange of information on travel document security, as well as a Joint Declaration on the harmonisation of information procedures and documents to be submitted when applying for short-stay visas. The provisions constitute a development of the Schengen *acquis* and do not apply to the United Kingdom, Ireland and the Kingdom of Denmark, which are invited to conclude bilateral visa facilitation agreements, as are the countries non EU Members, but party to the Schengen agreement.

The improvement of mobility will facilitate people-to-people contacts, an essential element for development of economic, commercial, social, cultural and other ties. It is thus a key for the realisation of Eastern Partnership, recalling that the long-term objective is full visa liberalisation.

The agreement on visa facilitation should enter into force simultaneously with the readmission agreement, since the two agreements are linked.

The Committee on Foreign Affairs calls on the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs, as the committee responsible, to recommend approval of the draft Council decision on the conclusion of the Agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Belarus on the facilitation of the issuance of visas.

PROCEDURE – COMMITTEE ASKED FOR OPINION

Title	Conclusion of the Agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Belarus on the facilitation of the issuance of visas						
References	12362/2019 – C9-0013/2020 – 2019/0182(NLE)						
Committee responsible	LIBE						
Opinion by Date announced in plenary	AFET 29.1.2020						
Rapporteur Date appointed	Petras Auštrevičius 30.9.2019						
Date adopted	19.2.2020						
Result of final vote	<table> <tr> <td>+: </td><td>57</td></tr> <tr> <td>–: </td><td>3</td></tr> <tr> <td>0: </td><td>0</td></tr> </table>	+:	57	–:	3	0:	0
+:	57						
–:	3						
0:	0						
Members present for the final vote	Alviina Alametsä, Maria Arena, Petras Auštrevičius, Traian Băsescu, Lars Patrick Berg, Anna Bonfrisco, Fabio Massimo Castaldo, Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz, Katalin Cseh, Tanja Fajon, Anna Fotyga, Michael Gahler, Kinga Gál, Sunčana Glavak, Klemen Grošelj, Sandra Kalniete, Dietmar Köster, Stelios Kouloglou, Ilhan Kyuchyuk, Miriam Lexmann, Nathalie Loiseau, Jaak Madison, Thierry Mariani, David McAllister, Vangelis Meimarakis, Sven Mikser, Francisco José Millán Mon, Javier Nart, Urmas Paet, Demetris Papadakis, Kostas Papadakis, Tonino Picula, Kati Piri, Giuliano Pisapia, Jérôme Rivière, Nacho Sánchez Amor, Andreas Schieder, Radosław Sikorski, Sergei Stanishev, Hermann Tertsch, Hilde Vautmans, Harald Vilimsky, Thomas Waitz, Witold Jan Waszczykowski, Charlie Weimers, Isabel Wiseler-Lima, Salima Yenbou						
Substitutes present for the final vote	Arnaud Danjean, Özlem Demirel, Engin Eroglu, Evin Incir, Andrey Kovatchev, Sergey Lagodinsky, Katrin Langensiepen, Gabriel Mato, Kris Peeters, Paulo Rangel, Nils Ušakovs, Mick Wallace						
Substitutes under Rule 209(7) present for the final vote	Tudor Ciuhodaru						

FINAL VOTE BY ROLL CALL IN COMMITTEE ASKED FOR OPINION

57	+
ECR	Anna Fotyga, Hermann Tertsch, Witold Jan Waszczykowski, Charlie Weimers
GUE/NGL	Özlem Demirel, Stelios Kouloglou, Mick Wallace
ID	Anna Bonfrisco, Thierry Mariani, Jérôme Rivière
NI	Fabio Massimo Castaldo, Kostas Papadakis
PPE	Traian Băsescu, Arnaud Danjean, Michael Gahler, Kinga Gál, Sunčana Glavak, Sandra Kalniete, Andrey Kovatchev, Miriam Lexmann, David McAllister, Gabriel Mato, Vangelis Meimarakis, Francisco José Millán Mon, Kris Peeters, Paulo Rangel, Radosław Sikorski, Isabel Wiseler-Lima
RENEW	Petras Auštrevičius, Katalin Cseh, Engin Eroglu, Klemen Grošelj, Ilhan Kyuchyuk, Nathalie Loiseau, Javier Nart, Urmas Paet, Hilde Vautmans
S&D	Maria Arena, Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz, Tudor Ciuhodaru, Tanja Fajon, Evin Incir, Dietmar Köster, Sven Mikser, Demetris Papadakis, Tonino Picula, Kati Piri, Giuliano Pisapia, Nacho Sánchez Amor, Andreas Schieder, Sergei Stanishev, Nils Ušakovs
VERTS/ALE	Alviina Alametsä, Sergey Lagodinsky, Katrin Langensiepen, Thomas Waitz, Salima Yenbou

3	-
ID	Lars Patrick Berg, Jaak Madison, Harald Vilimsky

0	0

Key to symbols:

+ : in favour

- : against

0 : abstention