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German business circles want the visa regime with Russia to be lifted

The first meeting of a working group consisting of representatives of all parliamentary groupings in the Bundestag, which is to deal with the liberalisation of the visa regime with Russia, was held on 29 June. This group was created partly as a consequence of the strong lobbying by representatives of German business circles who want the German government to change what they consider to be an overly cautious stance on the liberalisation and lifting of the EU's visa regimes with Russia and other Eastern European countries.

The working group includes MPs from all parliamentary groupings who deal with foreign policy, internal security and economic issues. The group's aim is to support the activity of the European Commission and EU member states in determining the timeframe of actions for the liberalisation of the visa regime between the EU and Russia. According to information provided by the group's deputy chairman, the group was created as a consequence of strong lobbying from the Committee on Eastern European Economic Relations (Ostausschuss), an influential union of German firms and associations of exporters and investors active in Eastern Europe. Ostausschuss has been supporting the liberalisation and complete lifting of the visa regime first of all with Russia but also with other Eastern European countries for a long time. Ostausschuss intensified its efforts in this area after Russia imposed stricter visa requirements on German citizens in November 2010. This was a response to similar (long-lasting) German practices and *de facto* a form of pressure on the German government, which has adopted a very cautious stance in visa negotiations between the EU and Russia in Brussels. Ostausschuss also published at the beginning of July a document which analyses the negative consequences (counted in billions of euros) the maintaining of the visa regimes with Eastern European countries has for the German economy. It appeals in this document for the introduction of visa facilitations and a trial lifting of the visa obligation with Russia (in 2014) or Ukraine (in 2012) as well as setting a clear timeframe for all other eastern neighbours of the EU aimed at a complete removal of the visa obligation. Thus, via this parliamentary working group, German business circles want to change the German government's stance on this issue. <jus>