

Moldova has met the benchmarks of the EU Visa Liberalisation Action Plan (VLAP)

Kamil Całus, Marta Jaroszewicz

On 15 November the European Commission issued the report on the implementation of the Visa Liberalisation Action Plans (VLAP) with Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia. Moldova is the country whose progress has been assessed in the most positive terms – the European Commission recommended that the Council of the EU and the European Parliament lift the visa requirement for Moldovan citizens holding a biometric passport and entering the EU for up to 90 days. It was also noted that Ukraine had intensified its efforts but that its progress had not been sufficient in order to enter the second phase of the implementation of the VLAP. Georgia was also evaluated as having made successful initial reforms.

Commentary

- What the European Commission has reported on Moldova must be seen as very positive. The commission has determined that Chisinau has met all the benchmarks, including a safe system of issuing biometric passports, the reform of the Ministry of the Interior and improved border checks, particularly in the Transnistrian section (due to co-operation with Ukraine being strengthened and the introduction of additional mobile guards and an Office for Migration and Asylum centres located along the administrative border with Transnistria). By meeting the ambitious VLAP benchmarks within three years, Moldova has achieved an organisational and diplomatic success.
- The European Commission announced that it would make an official recommendation concerning the lifting of the visa requirement following the summit in Vilnius. The Vilnius declaration may already mention this question, though. Among the EU countries there is an overriding reluctance towards a swift liberalisation of the EU visa system, and the final decision will be political. The commission hopes that the EU member states will be more willing to lift the visa requirement if a mechanism allowing a temporary return to a visa regime in exceptional circumstances is introduced in parallel to the EU visa legislation. It is not clear whether the Council of the EU will also demand that the commission present a risk assessment on immigration from Moldova as elements of this have been covered in the report already submitted. Approximately 500,000 Moldovan citizens (out of a total population of 3.9 million, including Transnistria) work abroad, often illegally. On the other hand, approximately 300,000 – 400,000 Moldovans have Romanian citizenship. The percentage of rejected visa applications in consulates in Schengen countries has

gradually been falling (in 2012 it stood at 3.05%).

- The prospect of lifting the visa requirement for Moldovan citizens by the end of 2014 is very important from the point of view of the ruling coalition in Moldova. It offers the possibility to improve the current low indicators of support for the coalition ahead of the parliamentary election scheduled for the turn of 2014 and 2015. The introduction of visa-free travel is also a policy instrument towards Transnistria as it may contribute to enhancing right-bank Moldova's appeal to inhabitants of this separatist region and increasing the number of people in Transnistria holding a Moldovan passport.
- Moldova's progress will most likely mobilise other countries participating in the Eastern Partnership and Russia to intensify efforts in order to liberalise EU visa requirements and it may encourage them to undertake reforms. Ukraine, despite a fundamental intensification of legislative work over the last year, has been asked by the EC to improve its legal regulations concerning the introduction of biometric passports and the adoption of modern anti-discrimination and anti-corruption legislation. Georgia's progress was assessed as satisfactory but the country remains at the beginning of its journey.