

EU-Georgia: delay in the visa liberalisation process

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On 8 June, the Committee of the EU's Permanent Representatives decided, at the initiative of Germany supported by France and Italy among others, to defer the abolition of short-term Schengen visas to Georgia. This decision is primarily connected with the ongoing debate in the EU on the introduction of visa-free travel for Turkey, Kosovo and Ukraine. Germany has made its consent in the case of Georgia and Ukraine conditional on the European Union introducing a mechanism suspending visa-free travel if necessary, and another monitoring whether the state permitted visa-free travel is meeting the criteria.

This delay to the process of abolishing visas may also apply to Ukraine, which like Georgia has met all the EU's conditions. Postponing the introduction of visa-free travel would increase disappointment with the EU in those countries. This is of particular importance in the case of Georgia, where Eurosceptic sentiments are strengthening. Parliamentary elections will be held there in October, and the lack of a decision by the EU on the visa issue will likely lead to an increase in support for the pro-Russian parties. For Ukraine, this would be another move – after the Netherlands blocked the ratification of the Association Agreement in April – which inhibits the process of its moving closer to the EU.

The liberalisation process

Visa liberalisation is one of the most important elements of the integration process with the EU for the Eastern Partnership countries. The most important element is the abolition of short-term Schengen visas (up to 90 days). The EU's final decision on this matter does not only depend on the partner countries meeting the technical and political conditions, but above all on the political consent of the member states. Moldova obtained the right to visa-free travel in April 2014; the decision to abolish visas for nationals of that state was a manifestation of support for Chisinau's pro-EU aspirations in the context of the parliamentary elections, and also of Russian aggression towards Ukraine and Moscow's pressure on Moldova.

Georgia and Ukraine fulfilled their obligations in December 2015, after which the European Commission requested the abolition of visas for these countries' nationals in March and April respectively. The European Parliament also strongly supported the abolition without delay of short-stay visas for citizens of the two countries in January this year. However, Germany appealed for this decision in relations with Georgia to be postponed, and received the support of France, Italy, Belgium and others, which are wary of rapid visa liberalisation for the states of the EU's eastern neighbourhood. As a result, the decision to abolish visas for citizens of Georgia was blocked at the meeting of the Committee of Permanent

Representatives on 8 June, and at the meeting of the Justice and Home Affairs Council on 10 June.

Germany's motives

The German government has officially justified its decision to delay visa liberalisation for Georgia by the high level activity of criminal groups formed by nationals of that state in Germany. However, this argument should be regarded as tactical, as part of the shaping of the EU's whole visa policy, as well as the discussions on visa liberalisation for Turkey, Kosovo and Ukraine. In fact, the matter of visas for Georgians has fallen hostage to the policies of Germany and the EU towards Turkey, for whom the abolition of visas is a prerequisite for their increased cooperation with the EU to resolve the migration crisis.

The decision to abolish visas for Georgians could complicate the position of Germany and the EU in their negotiations with Turkey, as well as Ukraine and Kosovo. It is important for Germany that the European Parliament adopts a suspension mechanism for visa-free travel at the request of an EU member state or the European Commission if there should be too many violations of the regulations, an excessive increase in the number of asylum applications, or if the state concerned decreases cooperation on readmission. Berlin also insists that a monitoring mechanism be introduced to ensure that the criteria for visa-free travel are met by the member states covered by it. Germany had made its agreement to visa liberalisation for citizens of Georgia conditional on these mechanisms being introduced.

Domestic considerations have had a significant influence on Germany's position on the issue of visa liberalisation. The government of Chancellor Angela Merkel is under pressure from part of the German public who are unenthusiastic about its existing policy in response to the wave of migration from outside Europe, and are resolutely opposed to the abolition of visas for the countries neighbouring the EU. The greatest emotions have been aroused by the prospect of agreement with Turkey; 62% of Germans are opposed to the abolition of visas for Turkish citizens. Resistance to the loosening of visa policy is also found among the political class, for example, the junior coalition partner to Merkel's CDU party, the CSU party, which is adopting a decidedly reluctant position. Germany's harder line on visa liberalisation for Georgia is thus calculated to strengthen the credibility of its policy within Germany itself.

The consequences for Georgia – rising pro-Russian sentiment

The visa issue has had a great impact on the attitude of the public and the elites in Georgia towards the EU and the West. In this regard, disappointment is rising among the Georgian people, caused among others by a lack of improvement in the financial situation among the public after the signing of the Association Agreement in 2014. Thanks to the assurances of their government, but also many Western politicians, until recently Georgians had been convinced that integration with the European Union and NATO was a foregone conclusion and would only be a matter of time. However, the understanding has begun to form within Georgian society that this is a very unrealistic scenario. A signal of the rise of anti-Western sentiment is the increased popularity of pro-Russian groupings, which have a great chance of achieving good results in the elections that will be held on 8 October. The largest pro-Russian grouping, the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia, reported on 10 June that it had formed

an electoral coalition with six other parties. It cannot be ruled out that the pro-Russian bloc will win several per cent of the votes, and that the currently ruling Georgian Dream party will have to enter into coalition with it in order to retain power. If such a situation occurred, Moscow would have the ability to directly influence the government in Tbilisi for the first time since the 'rose revolution' in 2003.

Georgia is an example of successful European reforms within the post-Soviet region, including in the fields of the fight against corruption, reforming the police, and introducing reforms to the economy and the state administration. A delay in visa liberalisation will favour Russia's policy toward Georgia; Moscow, by using soft measures, is avoiding conflicts and implementing activities aimed at increasing Georgian disillusionment with the West.

The prospects for visa liberalisation

Blocking or delaying the process of visa liberalisation will have serious repercussions in the case of Ukraine, where this issue is of vital importance for the public and pro-European political groupings. After the suspension of the ratification of the Association Agreement by the Dutch referendum in April, delaying visa-free travel would be another step in slowing down the process of Ukraine moving closer to the EU.

If the EU Council accepts the decision to lift visa requirements, it must be adopted by the European Parliament. Meanwhile, Germany's request for the EP to adopt a suspension mechanism for visa-free travel cannot be put to the vote before September at the earliest; so, the abolition of visas for Georgians and Ukrainians will not happen any earlier than autumn, and it is possible that the process will not be complete before the end of 2016.