

EU-Georgia: visas abolished – what next?

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On 28 March, the European Union's decision to abolish short-term visas for Georgian citizens came into force. Politically, this is an undoubted success for Georgia on its way to joining the Euro-Atlantic structures. Visa-free travel, and before that the coming into force of the Association Agreement and the free-trade area agreement (DCFTA), are synonymous with the implementation of the Eastern Partnership's main objectives in relation to Georgia. The pursuit of these goals was the driving force behind domestic reforms in the country. However, in the current political situation in Europe, there is no prospect of Tbilisi being offered EU or NATO membership. Therefore, Georgia's continued path towards the West may be called into question; in fact, there is now no clearly defined end-goal. This means there is a risk that Georgia, which has been the leader of reform in the post-Soviet area, will remain in Europe's 'waiting room', which could lead to a crisis in the country's pro-Western foreign policy as well as domestic disturbance. Russia is counting on this kind of scenario; while it is aware of these conditions, it does not view Georgia's current move towards the EU as a serious threat to its own interests in the region.

More for more in practice

As of 28 March, Georgians can travel to the Schengen countries and stay there for up to 90 days within any six-month period, if they possess biometric passports. This will not give them the ability to work there legally. They will have to justify their travel to the Schengen area and document the purpose of their visit, show a return ticket and prove they have sufficient funds to cover the cost of their stay. Due to the difficult economic situation in the country, we can expect increased migratory pressure from Georgian citizens immediately after visas are abolished. However, there is no indication that the influx of Georgian migrants will be large enough to cause internal problems within the Schengen-zone states; similar agreements with Moldova in 2014 did not cause any difficulties.

The abolition of visas is the culmination of the road Georgia has travelled towards Europe since the Rose Revolution of 2003. The most important stages along the way were Georgia's joining the European Neighbourhood Policy (2005), the Eastern Partnership (2009), the establishment of the EUMM (European Union Monitoring Mission) mission after the war with Russia (2008), and finally the signing of the Association Agreement and the DCFTA (2014). During this period, despite numerous internal and external disturbances, Georgia has made a giant civilisational leap from a failed to a functional state, and has implemented a programme of deep internal reforms, meeting the recommendations of the European Union and NATO. The introduction of visa-free travel is thus an application in

practice of the *more for more* principle, which is one of the fundamental principles of the Eastern Partnership. Georgia's pro-Western course and the public's predominantly pro-Western mood were not disturbed either by the war with Russia, the loss of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, or the change of ruling elite in 2012 (when President Mikheil Saakashvili's team was replaced by Georgian Dream).

Georgia had already met the conditions for Schengen-area visas in December 2015, although the introduction of visa-free travel was delayed because of the refugee crisis in Europe. This caused the EU to adopt a simplified mechanism restoring the visa requirement for countries whose citizens posed a migratory danger to the EU.

Visas abolished – what next?

The abolition of visas means that the last measurable objective which the EU and Georgia set themselves within the framework of the Eastern Partnership has now been implemented. That marks the end of a particular stage in their relationship, and raises the question of whether and how Georgia continues its pro-Western policies, and what Brussels' policy towards Tbilisi will now be.

In the view of both the previous and the current Georgian governments, all the previous stages of their country's approach to the West (in the form of the EU and NATO) were just steps towards the ultimate goal – accession to both of these institutions. Meanwhile, with regard to the EU's further expansion, the deepening internal problems in the European Union, the migration crisis and an adverse political climate (both at the EU-wide level as well as in most of the member states) make talk of membership prospects for Georgia seem like a political utopia today. The lack of such prospects, indeed of any designated steps, may consequently lead to frustration, lack of motivation, and a crisis in the westwards path of Georgia's foreign policy, and *in extremis* to a reversal of internal reforms.

An additional challenge is the fact that, although the Georgian public appreciates the reforms implemented since 2003 (the effective fight against corruption, the restoration of the functionality of state institutions, etc.), it also has large, still unmet expectations when it comes to standards of living, which have been linked with European integration. The ability to travel freely in the Schengen area is very helpful, as are the Association Agreement and the DCFTA. However, these do not translate significantly into an improvement of the economic situation in Georgia or of its inhabitants' living standards (high unemployment, low wages, etc.). A real improvement in the situation could be brought about by foreign investment, the development of domestic production, increasing exports (including onto EU markets), and finally by opening up the EU's labour market to Georgians. However, this is not a realistic scenario, due to the unattractiveness of the Georgian market, the lack of local investments in developing production, the lack of competitiveness (including non-compliance with EU standards) of the majority of Georgian products, as well as the lack of prospects for opening the EU's market up to Georgian citizens. Moldova is in a similar situation; its association with the EU and the introduction of visa-free travel have not led to an improvement of the economic situation, the acceleration of internal reforms, or successes in the fight against corruption. Moreover, recent times have actually seen an increase in pro-Russian and Eurosceptic sentiments.

Russia's suspicious silence

During the negotiations between the EU and Georgia on visa-free travel, it seemed that Russia might take steps to impede this process, or at least to neutralise the positive effect of the abolition of visas, for example by attempting to destabilise the internal situation in Georgia, or by abolishing visas for Georgians travelling to Russia. The fact that Moscow has ignored the introduction of visa-free travel, as well as Georgia's signing of the Association Agreement with the EU, shows that it does not see these processes as posing a significant threat to its interests in the Caucasus. Russia is aware that they will have little influence on the balance of geopolitical power in the region, and also that Georgia has little chance of obtaining membership in the Euro-Atlantic structures.

Another good example illustrating Russian policy in that dimension is that of Armenia. In 2013, for a couple of months before the Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius, Russia blocked Armenia's signing of the Association Agreement with the EU and forced Yerevan to join the Eurasian Union. Since then, however, Russia has not undertaken any action aimed at sabotaging the new EU-Armenian agreement (the EU-Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement), which is to be signed in May this year. In 2013, the aim was to stop Ukraine signing its Association Agreement with the EU, and Yerevan was being used instrumentally in that process. Currently, however, Moscow does not see closer EU-Armenian relations as a threat, as it realises that Armenia is fundamentally dependent on Russia. Russia's attitude to Georgia's pro-European aspirations can be seen in a similar light.