



EU-RUSSIA CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM  
ГРАЖДАНСКИЙ ФОРУМ ЕС-РОССИЯ

# Policy paper

**Working Group “Democratic Structures and Processes”  
Visa Policy Facilitation and Liberalisation**

EU-Russia Civil Society Forum  
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## Visa Policy Facilitation and Liberalisation

People-to-people contacts are vital for the exchange of ideas, know-how and knowledge. They help broaden our horizons, bust national myths and stereotypes and build mutual trust between people of different countries. Visa regime is an enormous physical and mental barrier in these contacts. Visa requirement also limits economic growth and development, making contacts between people considerably more difficult. The business community also often draws attention to the losses brought about by visa barriers in the shape of lost contracts, failure to attend important meetings, etc. Moreover, under the current visa-regime, the EU potential as a tourist destination for Russian citizens as well as Russia for the EU states citizens is considerably limited. Thus, visa policy instead of being a true safeguard against illegal migration and organised crime serves as a discouragement for ordinary citizens willing to take a short trip abroad

Visa dialogue between the European Union and Russian Federation started four years ago. Visa-free regime has become a matter of foreseeable future. We strongly encourage the formal approval of the List of Common Steps opening the road to visa liberalisation between the European Union and the Russian Federation during the EU-Russia Summit. We also support early conclusion of the agreement between Russia and Poland on local border traffic. But also before the ultimate goal of visa-free regime is achieved, much can be done in order to improve the process of visa issuance.

- **Long-term multiple visas for applicants with “good visa history”.** We strongly recommend that all EU and Russian citizens with „good visa history” – i.e. who in the past two years have been granted two visas and used them according to the rules – would be granted 5-year long-term visas. At the very least, civil society representatives should be added to the list of categories of citizens who can enjoy facilitated visa regime between the EU and Russia. Especially this should apply to human rights defenders, as for them multi-entry long-term visas are also a matter of protection in case of immediate risk, and the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders provide for this.
- **Risk of overstaying vs. purpose of visit.** The current visa issuance practice is focused on the purpose of one’s visit. However, in order for the visa policy to serve its function, it would make more sense to focus on whether an applicant is likely to overstay the declared visit or poses a threat to security of the target country. Thus it is more important to focus on the ties of a visa applicant to their home state and not on the purpose of their visit to the target country. This would also help serve the problem of incompatibility of different purposes of visits.
- **Better implementation of existing agreements and unification of visa issuance practice.** We would like to draw the attention of the EU leaders to the need for better implementation of the Schengen Visa Code, the EU-Russian Visa Facilitation Agreement as well as further harmonisation and unification of the visa issuance practice by participating states consulates.
- **Electronic submission system.** We strongly recommend that all participating states introduce electronic systems of submission of applications and supporting documents as scanned attachments in order to limit the number of visits to the consulate to one and thus reduce administrative barriers

and hidden costs.

- **Written justification of visa refusal as well as the possibility to appeal against refusal.**

Written explanations on the grounds of refusal in granting visas should be given by consulates and the procedure of appealing against a negative decision should be in place. The Schengen Visa Code already provides for the need to give written justification of refusal as well as a possibility to appeal. We appeal for adhering to this rule by all EU consulates and introducing similar practices by Russian consulates. We also draw attention to the practice of the Russian Federation services of creating “blacklists”, lists of persons who are not to be admitted to the Russian Federation. The actual reason for the ban is never disclosed to the person concerned. This creates obstacles to the mobility of human rights defenders, journalists and other civil society representatives due to their professional activities, which contradicts international obligations of the Russian Federation undertaken under the UN and the OSCE framework.

- **Transparency of visa liberalisation process.** The visa dialogue between the EU and Russia should be carried out in a transparent manner and should be subject to monitoring by local civil society. Full access to information is essential: all key documents including the list of common steps and following evaluations should be immediately accessible on the websites of EU and Russian institutions.

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