



EU-RUSSIA CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM ГРАЖДАНСКИЙ ФОРУМ ЕС-РОССИЯ

Statement by the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum's Steering Committee On the European Commission Proposal on Amendments to EU Visa Policy

The Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum with great satisfaction welcome the proposal made by the European Commission to introduce amendments liberalising the EU visa policy towards third states, including those in the post-Soviet area.

The proposed amendments are a substantial step towards making EU visa policy more friendly. They are a vital political signal at a time of increased confrontation and fully correspond to demands raised by the EU-Russia CSF. The CSF Visa sub-group has worked out assessments of EU visa policies and submitted detailed recommendations addressed to EU decision-makers.

We fully support proposals presented by the EU on April 1, 2014 to simplify and shorten visa procedures, i.e. establishing clearer procedural rules, privileges for *bona fide* travellers, boosting consular co-operation, and introducing transparent criteria for multiple-entry visas. We are convinced that the new possibility of online visa applications will seriously ease the problem of queues at consulates. Similarly, shortening the list of supporting documents will simplify the application process, just as *bona fide* travellers visiting the EU more frequently will be helped by 3-year multiple entry visas, followed by 5-year visas in the future.

We fully agree with the EU on the positive impact of the proposed amendments to the European economy, especially tourism. We support estimates that the new visa rules could generate extra direct spending up to € 130 bn in the EU in the next five years and create up to 1.3 million new jobs, notably in tourism and related industries. Most important, however, the new rules are a significant political signal underscoring European values such as openness and development of people-to-people contacts at a time of growing tensions between the EU and Russia. To underline this message, we demand that the new rules should include priority treatment for persons taking part in civil society dialogue and co-operation and academic or cultural exchange programmes.

Despite minor shortcomings and a need to make several definitions more precise, the amendments proposed by the Commission should be considered as a substantial step towards making the EU visa policy more friendly and the end goal of abolition of the visa regime with further third countries. At the same time, we encourage the experts gathered in the Forum's visa sub-group to carefully analyse proposed amendments and prepare independent assessment and recommendations for the European Commission.

While welcoming the general outline of the proposed amendments, the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum reserves the right to carefully analyse the new document and continue preparing independent assessments and recommendations for the European Commission with the aim of further facilitating travel and people-to-people contacts with the countries from the post-Soviet area.

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