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VISA-FREE PERSPECTIVES FOR MOLDOVA: A NEVER ENDING STORY OR AN ACCOMPLISHABLE TASK?

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Moldova's Foreign Policy Statewatch represents a series of brief analyses, written by local and foreign experts, dedicated to the most topical subjects related to the foreign policy of Moldova, major developments in the Black Sea Region, cooperation with international organizations and peace building activities in the region. It aims to create a common platform for discussion and to bring together experts, commentators, officials and diplomats who are concerned with the perspectives of European Integration of Moldova. It is also pertaining to offer to Moldova's diplomats and analysts a valuable tribune for debating the most interesting and controversial points of view which could help Moldova to find its path to EU.

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The visa-free travel is very important for Moldova in the context of reintegration and geographical links, but also in the context of implementing reforms. Learning from the Balkan states that undergone through such reforms, the Moldovan government is seriously focusing on resolving issues related to security of breeder documents, border check control on the transnistrian perimeter and combating corruption. Nevertheless, these efforts are not yet officially monitored due to the absence of a visa-free liberalization roadmap.

Background

Moldova is trying to look at the Balkans and their experience in approaching to the EU; so far, there are many lessons to be learned in almost all the fields that Moldova has to implement for getting closer to what EU standards mean. Currently, among others, the visa issue is the top priority of the Moldovan foreign and internal policy. Having signed the visa facilitation and readmission agreements in 2007, the Moldovan government is upgrading its relations now by negotiating the Association Agreement with the EU, while the most important process for the ordinary Moldovans already started on 15th June, that is called the EU-Moldova visa dialogue. This process is important because visa-free would significantly help Moldova to become attractive to Transnistria and very important for historical and very tighten links between Moldova and Romania, but also other countries.

Moldova's current strategy

EU's neighbouring states have tended to approach visa free talks with the EU by building up barrages of criticism towards the EU, accusation of a Schengen wall, discrimination, mentioning EU enlargement to the east meant introductions of visas by the new member states and heavy lobbying with EU friends to push for visa free. Such a strategy has not taken EU's neighbours far. EU colossus, especially its ministries of interior are refusing to yield. But Moldova is trying a different approach, that of pre-emptive implementation, that is also showing the political will, and seems to be the key of Moldovan success that was already noticed by Commissioner for Enlargement and ENP, Stefan Fule, that said, "Amazing how much has been achieved". Although a part of these reforms began few years ago, many of them under the Mobility Partnership, the current government significantly boosted the intensity and spread the palette of the work, covering most of the issues that are related to visa-free perspective. It learns the lessons of the Balkans, who have gone through such a process and countries like Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro that already achieved visa-free travel. In this context, Moldova understood that requests without reforms have not taken them far and a different approach is needed.

At this moment, Moldova as a point of reference for deploying the reforms uses the visa liberalization roadmaps for Balkans consisting of four blocks: (1) Document Security, (2) Illegal Migration, (3) Public Order and Security, and (4) External Relations and Fundamental Rights, Moldova is operating changes in all these fields. From 2008, the Ministry of Information Technology is already optionally issuing biometric passports and beginning with January 1, 2011, Moldova will issue only biometric passports that are fully complying with ICAO standards. In addition to this, the Integrated Border Management System is already being implemented and will be fully accomplished at the beginning of 2012. A Visa Taskforce led by the minister of foreign affairs, Iurie Leanca, closely follows all these processes.

The visa wall effects and the reasons for advancing

The visa wall seriously undermines the image of EU in Moldova, even if, out of all Eastern Partnership countries, the Moldova's population support for EU is the highest. Besides this, the isolation of the country is generating opposite effects. The people who have never been in the EU are not exposed to socializing and they don't know what is the EU about. Although the visa refusal rate is very low for Moldovans, and about 80% of Moldovan emigrants that are long-term workers are legal and hold working contracts, the EU member states are still issuing very few multiple-entry visas, even for those who have positive visa history.

Granting visa-free for Moldova will not affect the EU; example could serve Macedonia, which after receiving the visa liberalization did not face an exodus of people. In the case of Moldova the situation would be the same: who can leave the country if the labour force that was willing to leave is already in the EU? According to some estimation, the number of people who can eventually migrate is around 100.000 people, while Moldovan authorities expect that many Moldovans, especially those who are illegal, will come back to Moldova. Besides this, many Moldovans are already holding Romanian (Bulgarian as well) passports and lots of them requested Romanian citizenship. But these are political arguments. The real reason for offering visa liberalization is mostly technical. Moldova should receive the visa-free travel because it started to implement the technical criteria. And here appears the problem; the EU says that Moldova should first comply with the EU criteria, and Moldova observes that it did not receive the visa liberalization roadmap where the criteria are set. Receiving the roadmap (in the case of EaP will be probably called differently) should be the priority, besides implementing reforms, of the Moldovan government. The European Commission should be put in the situation to assess the progress, because the process should become measurable and thus, the game will become fair, otherwise the reforms will not be noticed. The other part of the coin is the interest of EU to offer visa-free. This results from the reason that the EU observed that is better to manage migration and to hold the data then to close the borders. Although Moldova will pass through elections this fall, it would be of utmost importance for Moldova to receive the benchmarks (criteria) in the autumn and so, Moldovan population will truly believe the EU officials that they want to help Moldova in achieving visa-free. Postponing this issue might be misleading for Moldovan government and especially for Moldovan citizens that might think that EU is reluctant to the idea of visa-free for Moldova.

Problems

At this stage there are still many small inconsistencies and few problems that should be settled. First would be the security of breeder documents that is an important issue, especially taking into account the challenges that come from Transnistria. However, this is a matter of time. Moldovan authorities are already implementing a project that

will allow the Cross Border Points to be well equipped (CCTV, infra-red detectors, fiber-optic dedicated internet line, Interpol connection), with the support of EU, and with the breakaway region should be signed a technical agreement of cooperation on issuing the high-protected breeder documents, model that it is currently working on the issue of exchange of data related to crimes. Second important issue would be the settlement of the so-called border mobile units that would check randomly the suspect vehicles and individuals. This aspect would significantly increase the security of borders and decrease the smuggling. Finally, the corruption issue cannot be overlooked. Training for people that are dealing with the process of issuing breeder documents and passports, for border guards service and ministry of interior employees should take place. These people should be exposed to socialization and involved in exchange of best practices.

Conclusions and recommendations

The important and general conclusion on the visa process is that together with the beginning of the Visa Dialogue, that what was called before a long-term goal might become soon a mid-term goal, this would be the case if Moldova will focus and implement the above-mentioned reforms.

Moldova should persuade the EU to receive as soon as possible the evaluation benchmarks, but at the same time, should continue the implementation of the reforms even without having them, because bearing in mind that the visa-free process is less political and more technical issue will help Moldova to handle the process properly. In the same context, the authorities should make public the information on evaluation and progress and largely advocate this information.

Also, the government should continue discussing with reluctant states that are actually against the visa liberalization for Moldova because they lack trustful information on the ongoing reforms and progress. That is why inviting officials from other states, or at least ambassadors of these states, to familiarize them with border, document or migration issues would increase the confidence in Moldova.



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