

Civil liberties MEPs back plans to make it easier to suspend visa waivers

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Plans to strengthen the EU's visa suspension mechanism, which enables it to temporarily reintroduce visa requirements for third-country nationals in the event of sudden surges in irregular immigration, unfounded asylum applications or a failure to cooperate with the EU on "readmissions" (i.e. returns), were amended and approved by Civil Liberties Committee MEPs on Thursday. MEPs widened the range of grounds upon which a visa waiver may be suspended.

The new rules will make it easier for member states to notify the EU Commission and each other of a situation in which a visa exemption may have to be suspended - for an initial period of six months - and the procedure for doing so will be faster. The Commission will also be able to trigger the suspension mechanism on its own initiative.

The legislative report, prepared by [Agustín Díaz de Mera \(EPP, ES\)](#), was approved by 42 votes to 9, with 1 abstention.

"We need to equip ourselves with a flexible and sound tool, but it should also include robust safeguards as regards human rights. That is why Parliament is proposing several provisions to make sure that human rights are respected in the countries that benefit from a visa waiver", explained Mr Díaz de Mera after the vote.

Given the current migration crisis and recent visa liberalisation proposals for Georgia, Ukraine, Turkey and Kosovo, the Commission proposed in May to review the suspension mechanism, which was enshrined in EU legislation in 2013, to make it more flexible. Among other changes, it suggested that this tool should be available for use not only in "emergency situations, as a last resort", but also in the event of surges in irregular migration flows, unfounded asylum claims or rejected readmission applications.

MEPs on Thursday backed most of the changes suggested by the Commission and inserted further changes. They broadened the grounds upon which a member state may ask that a visa waiver for a given country be suspended, including "an increase of risks or imminent threat to public policy or internal security" relating to nationals of that country. These risks should be substantiated by "objective, concrete and relevant information" provided by national law enforcement authorities and Europol, they add.

Evaluating the consequences before reintroducing visas

MEPs' amendments stipulate that suspending visa waivers should continue to be "a last resort" option and should be based "on strict and objective data". The Commission will have to report regularly to Parliament and the Council on whether countries whose citizens may travel to the EU visa free continue to fulfil the criteria for the visa liberalisation, particularly in the field of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Before taking any decision to temporarily suspend a visa exemption, the Commission will have to examine the human rights situation in the third country concerned and "take into account the possible consequences" for its citizens of reimposing visa requirements

Press release

Parliament to scrutinise Commission decisions

To balance the need to respond rapidly to sudden changes in third countries with adequate involvement of Parliament and Council, the Commission will have the power to approve suspension decisions by means of a “delegated act”, to which both MEPs and member states may object. Following a notification by a country, or its own report, the Commission will have a month in which to decide whether or not the visa exemption must be suspended.

Visas will be reintroduced for an initial period of six months. Before the end of that period, the Commission would have to present a report to the Parliament and the Council that, if needed, would be accompanied by a legislative proposal for permanently moving the third country back onto the list of countries subject to visa requirements to travel to the EU.

The regulation on the visa suspension mechanism will not apply to the UK or Ireland.

Next steps

The Committee also backed on Thursday, by 42 votes to 9, with 1 abstention, a proposal to open negotiations with the Council, with a view to reaching an agreement at the first reading. The talks will begin next week.

Further information

- Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs:
<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/committees/en/libe/home.html>
- Profile of rapporteur Agustín Díaz de Mera García Consuegra (EPP, ES):
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/28397/AGUSTIN_DIAZ+DE+MERA+GARCIA+CONSUEGRA_home.html
- Procedure file
:
<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?lang=&reference=2016/0142%28COD%29>
- Proposal for review of the visa suspension mechanism (European Commission, 04.05.2016)
: <https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regdoc/rep/1/2016/EN/1-2016-290-EN-F1-1.PDF>

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