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Visa-free EU travel: passport to peace and prosperity?

Three more post-Soviet states are edging towards EU integration, with two now unfreezing national conflicts

For Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine – three of the six countries linked to the EU since 2009 through the Eastern Partnership (EaP) – the lifting of EU travel visa requirements has often been arduous. Yet all the parties understand that this process brings opportunities and obstacles, both economic and political.

The example of Moldova, which for over three years has enjoyed visa-free travel to 26 Schengen Area countries plus four other European countries, prompts cautious optimism. On 28 April 2014, Moldova became the first EaP country to meet the conditions for relaxing of EU visa requirements. This followed some 40 domestic reforms, including stricter migration and border management, notably the introduction of international biometric passports.

Visa liberalisation had little impact on the direction of migration, but it significantly increased travel to the EU. In 2015, Moldovans made some 108,000 trips to the Schengen Area, up more than 20,000 compared to 2013. From 2013 to 2015, their main European destinations were Bulgaria, Greece, and Romania.

Relaxation of the EU visa requirements for Moldova highlighted the geographical, linguistic and cultural affinity of Moldovans and Romanians. From a Moldovan population of 3.5 million, one million today have a biometric passport for visits to the EU without a visa. Just over half a million Moldovan nationals hold a Romanian passport. As Romania is an EU country and a Schengen Agreement signatory, this guarantees them free movement and the right to employment across the EU.

Georgia's quest for EU visa-free travel is more politically motivated. Its leaders supported the process through political campaigning and saw it as a way to distance Georgia from Russia. Visa liberalisation started in June

2012, was approved by the European Parliament in February 2017 and came into force a month later.

Ukraine started its visa talks back in 2008, waiting seven years for a green light. On 11 June 2017, its citizens became entitled to visa-free travel to the EU. Thousands celebrated in Kiev. Waving a new biometric passport, President Petro Poroshenko declared it symbolised the "fall of a paper curtain" between Ukraine and Europe.

Where is this 'Europe without visas and borders'?

Many EU countries doubted the advisability and necessity of extending the visa-free space eastwards. Their biggest concerns were an increase in irregular migrants and the influx of criminal elements. In the April 2016 Dutch referendum, 61 percent voted against ratifying the Ukraine-EU Associated Agreement, which included an action plan for lifting visa requirements.

One of the EU's main fears was that visa-free travel would encourage 'criminal kingpins' from former USSR countries to set up shop across the bloc. According to the German Federal Criminal Police (BKA) Office, Georgian nationals with a rich criminal past have been coming to Germany via Austria and the Czech Republic for years. They use any legal loophole to qualify for a short or long stay in the EU, such as by filing asylum applications.

In 2013, German law enforcers investigated some 4,740 Georgian nationals with a view to halting their criminal activities in the country. Two years later, in the German city of Luneburg, Russian and Georgian nationals were prosecuted for membership of an organised criminal group. Proceedings dragged on for six months, running up huge costs for translators and experts. Suddenly Germans were familiar with the strange and unsavoury world of the criminal kingpin.

Public disquiet grew in 2015, after the arrest of crowned criminal kingpin Zviad Darsadze, from Kutaisi in Georgia. His 'business interests' extended across France, Germany and Spain. A year later Europol forces, alongside the Spanish, French and Georgian police, arrested over 100 members of a Georgian organised criminal group in Spain during Operation Aikon. The defendants face charges of robbery, theft and kidnapping in numerous major Spanish cities.

The second stumbling block to visa-liberalisation talks, especially for

Moldova and Ukraine, centred round irregular migrants. EU countries worried they would take advantage of visa-free travel and, in breach of the bloc's migration rules, pose a threat to their rule of law.

Such fears are unwarranted, according to a 2015 study by the Batory Foundation. It concludes that "if the conditions set by the EU are met, as they were in the case of Moldova, and are also being done in the cases of Ukraine and Georgia, visa liberalisation does not represent a danger to the European Union." So there is unlikely to be a worrying increase in the number of irregular migrants or asylum-seekers.

The upsides of visa abolition

Both sides can in fact benefit from visa-free travel. Moldova is shifting towards modern European governance standards. The EU can then work with a more reliable partner, thanks to Moldovan reforms of everything from migration to anti-corruption and money-laundering.

Nonetheless the EU recently decided to shield itself better against any visa-free travel problems. In early 2017, the European Parliament approved a new mechanism for suspending the EU's visa regime for non-EU countries. This 'visa brake' can be triggered by any EU Member State or the European Commission, suspending visa-free travel of specific third-country nationals for up to nine months or 18 months at most. However this only applies in specific circumstances, among them a major increase in irregular migrants or unfounded asylum requests.

Melting the frozen conflicts

Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine all face tricky territorial disputes/conflicts that originated in the USSR's collapse. By chance or design, visa liberalisation opens avenues for tackling these 'states with limited recognition' – specifically Transnistria in Moldova, the self-proclaimed republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, and the Lugansk and Donetsk regions of Ukraine.

After decades without progress, Moldova is now unifying the country through EU visa liberalisation. In the first 12 months, over 27,000 residents of Transnistria applied for citizenship of Moldova. Today around 77,000 of these residents hold a Moldovan biometric passport offering visa-free entry into 30 European countries – comprising all EU countries, besides the UK and Ireland, plus Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland as non-EU members of Schengen.

This Moldovan success story is unlikely to be repeated in Ukraine. Firstly because Ukraine is grappling with institutional challenges and still has fighting forces in the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Lugansk. By contrast, Moldova's visa-free regime was introduced a quarter of a century after the active phase of the conflict in Transnistria.

Secondly, Moldova has always maintained economic ties with Transnistria. After Moldova signed the EU Association Agreement, Transnistrian businesses were invited to use quotas for exporting products from Transnistria to the EU, but only if the businesses officially re-registered in Moldova.

In 2010, the Georgian authorities adopted a similar approach, announcing the 'Strategy on Occupied Territories: Engagement Through Cooperation' to cover education, provision of medical services, economic integration, information exchange, the prevention of natural and man-made disasters, and human rights protection. The strategy even extended to supporting and preserving the cultural values of both peoples, such as the Abkhazian language.

Georgia also runs a number of citizen-support programmes and provides high-quality medical assistance to the residents of Abkhazia and Ossetia. No wonder residents of these two breakaway republics are so eager to access medical care and other services in Georgia.

Having severed social and economic ties with its occupied territories, including Crimea – annexed by Russia in 2014, Ukrainian authorities may be unable to emulate this Georgian geopolitical advantage. Time is therefore Ukraine's best ally and greatest enemy, when it comes to reintegration.

Ultimately, EU visa liberalisation is simply a tool. As shown by the advances and setbacks in Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine, the extensive process can become a huge help or headache for each party to an agreement.



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